



Voices on Power



Complementary Report to

Partos Shift-the-Power Lab 2.0 – Action 1 Discussion Paper: Recommendations for a More Power Balanced and Effective Policy Framework Strengthening Civil Society

September 2023

Colophon

Voices on Power is a Complementary Report to Partos Shift-the-Power Lab 2.0 – Action 1 Discussion Paper: Recommendations for a More Power Balanced and Effective Policy Framework Strengthening Civil Society. 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.

Shift-the-Power Lab 2.0

For multiple years Partos 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.

Author: Marijke Priester

Cover Illustration: Izabela Markova

Editorial design: Soonhwa Kang

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<u>5</u>	Introduction
<u>7</u>	Interviews Power of Voices partnerships
<u>8</u>	Benkadi Sylvestre Tiemtoré - Benkadi partnership
<u>11</u>	Count me in! Alma Magana, Nikita Patodia – Just Associates
<u>15</u>	Fair for All Yao Graham – Third World Network
<u>19</u>	Fair Green Global Alliance Anita Gurumurthy - IT for Change
<u>23</u>	Free to be Me Richard Lusimbo – Uganda Key Populations Consortium
<u>27</u>	Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action Carla Lopez Cabrera, Claudia Samcam – Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres
<u>30</u>	Generation G Kinda Majari – ABAAD
<u>33</u>	Giving for Change Caesar Ngule – Kenya Community Development Foundation
<u>37</u>	Green Livelihoods Alliance Ruth Canlas – Non-Timber Forest Products-Exchange Programme Philippines
<u>40</u>	Joint Initiative on Strategic Religious Action Judy Amove – Faith to Action Network
<u>43</u>	Just Future Alliance Niagalé Bagayoko, Eboe Hutchful – African Security Sector Network
<u>46</u>	Our Voices, Our Futures Anuradha Chatterji – CREA
<u>49</u>	Power of Dialogue Eunice Musiime – Akina Mama wa Afrika
<u>52</u>	Power of Pride Henry Koh, Khine Su Win – ILGA Asia

- 55 **Reclaim Sustainability**
Isaac Gyamfi – Solidaridad West-Africa
- 58 **Right2Grow**
Nhlanhla Ndlovu – Centre for Economic Governance and Accountability
- 62 **She Leads**
Esther Nyawira – FEMNET
- 66 **STITCH**
Gopinath Parakuni- Cividep
- 69 **Strengthening Civil Courage**
Memory Bandera – DefendDefenders
- 73 **Voices for Just Climate Action**
Josh Ogada – SouthSouthNorth
- 77 **We are Able!**
Shuaib Chalklen – African Disability Forum
- 80 **Interviews SRHR Fund partnerships**
- 81 **Break Free**
Jonathan Gunthorp – SRHR Africa Trust
- 85 **Love Alliance**
Georgina Caswell – GNP+ Global Network of People living with HIV
- 88 **Make Way**
Telesia Musili – The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians – Kenya
- 91 **Masarouna**
Hayat Mirshad – FEMALE
- 94 **Power to Youth**
George Kimathi – Amref Institute of Capacity Development
- 97 **Right Here Right Now**
Rajendra Maharjan – YUWA
- 101 **We Lead**
Charles Owekmeno – SRHR Alliance Uganda
- 104 **Some Topics worth a Good Conversation**
- 110 **Information on the Partnerships**

Introduction

Why this complementary report to the Partos Discussion Paper?

The Paper is a critical reflection on the Dutch Policy Framework for Strengthening Civil Society. Focus is on limitations in the current Framework to achieve more balanced power relations between the Global South and Global North, and on finding new ways to work towards more equitable partnerships in the next Framework (expected from 2026-2030).

Given the topic of power relations, the writing group noted that recommendations of CSOs from the Global South to the Discussion Paper would be key. However, efforts to involve Southern organisations, for instance by organising online consultation meetings, turned out to be insufficient to allow a meaningful contribution of Southern organisations.

Therefore, it was decided to complement the Paper with a separate report, comprising in-depth interviews with representatives of Global South organisations, participating in one of the 21 Power of Voices partnerships, and in one of the 7 partnerships under the SRHR Partnership Fund. Power of Voices and the SRHR Partnership Fund are two substantial grant instruments under the overarching Dutch Policy Framework for Strengthening Civil Society.

The lead organisations of the 28 partnerships were asked to put forward the organisation and person to be interviewed. The interviewees were not asked to give a representational view of the partnership, but to give their own views, based on their experiences in the partnerships. Many of them are involved in the partnerships as a consortium member, others participate from the position of country host. In the case of the two Southern-led partnerships, both interviews took place with the lead organisation. Geographically, the number of interviews with persons from organisations based in Africa is twice the number of that in Asia, including West-Asia (Middle East). One interview is with a representative of an organisation in Latin America, and one is with representatives of a global organisation.

So far, there have not been many publications in which perspectives from the Global South are shared on the practice of grant instruments like the Power of Voices partnerships and the SRHR Partnership Fund. The interviews in this report give an interesting insight from a daily lived reality. The interviewees speak directly to the reader. The reader cannot talk back, but just has to listen. One by one they share food for thought from their own specific context. The reader will find views on recurrent topics, like the themes selected in the Discussion Paper: Agenda and Priority Setting, Risk, Accountability and Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning. Also, opinions on the meaning of Southern leadership come along, as well as the desirability of Southern-led partnerships, and suggestions for the next Policy Framework. Power dynamics in the consortiums were often discussed. The message may not always be comfortable, but is fair and necessary, given the intention of the Northern organisations to look for new ways to balance power relations.

The report concludes with a section called 'Some Topics worth a Good Conversation'. The section captures a selection of observations and suggestions of the interviewees. We are confident that

this anthology will trigger 'fast' readers to scroll back and attentively 'listen' to the full story each interviewee has to tell. We draw no final conclusions, but hope the complementary report will be an incentive for many further conversations.

Our deep appreciation goes to the 28 representatives of the Southern organisations who were willing to share their insights, ideas and concerns in an open, thoughtful way. Together they show the richness and variety of civil society strengthening all over the world, and the common engagement to continue and improve the Dutch Policy Framework for Strengthening Civil Society, together with the Ministry and the Dutch CSOs.

Interviews

**Power of Voices
partnerships**

Power of Voices partnership

BENKADI

Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali

Organisation Benkadi partnership

Interviewee Sylvestre Tiemtoré, Regional Director Partnership

BENKADI strengthens the position of vulnerable groups and communities in Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and Mali when it comes to the effects of climate change.

“Benkadi has a history that goes back years before it started as a programme in Power of Voices in 2021. It was 2008 when Woord en Daad, the Dutch NGO in the partnership, supported SPONG, the platform of NGOs in Burkina Faso, during an institutional crisis with a 1-year grant. In these days I was recruited as the national coordinator of SPONG. Between 2008 and 2019 SPONG successfully raised other funding and grew extensively. In 2019 we were challenged by Woord en Daad again to put an idea on the table from the South which could mobilize more people. We had a dream and looked for ways to realise it. Our dream was to start civil society capacity building and influence civic space. We presented them our dream and they liked it. They suggested to share it with NGO platforms in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali, which we did. Together we, the four NGO platforms and Woord en Daad, worked out the plan. Then the Call on Power of Voices was released. By that time, we already had our plan well thought. The Dutch Ministry (MoFA) requested a thematic perspective, we opted for climate change in relation to civil society strengthening.

Participating in the Consortium

The relationship with Woord en Daad evolved during that process, from beneficiary-donor to partners raising funds together. For the first time a Northern partner accepted its Southern partner to take a management position. Decision making is done together. The only area where decision making cannot yet be shared fully is Finance. MoFA procedures request the Northern partner, Woord en Daad, to take final responsibility and this necessitates that Woord en Daad needs to have the final say in financial decisions when risk is involved. When that responsibility would be shared by all of us, decision making would be entirely on equal terms. Donors often request financial procedures to meet their standards and these are hard to meet by Southern organisations. The Benkadi consortium found a way to share financial decision making to the extent possible within the MoFA rules by setting up the Financial Shared Services Centre (FSSC)

When we prepared the proposal, we had a discussion till deep in the night with Woord en Daad about the lead on finance. In the end we agreed in a ‘gentlemen’s agreement’, between the Programme Lead in the South and Woord en Daad that Woord en Daad would cover more responsibilities through the Financial Shared Services Centre, because the conditions MoFA formulated on things like track record were not feasible for the Southern NGOs. So, Woord en Daad covers

the financial risk. But in the Steering Committee every member has an equal voice in approving technical and financial matters and in decision making.

The role of Woord en Daad is to support where it is needed, for instance in the beginning we had some gaps in policy documents when we did due diligence assessment. Woord en Daad supported the countries to fill that capacity. They also support the process of due diligence, so that the platform can raise its capacity. And Woord en Daad connects the platform to international advocacy (Dutch parliamentarians, EU). They are the contact person to MoFA. That works well. We are not acquainted with the Dutch context, and there is the issue of language. We have to go back and forth all the time between French and English, and sometimes even Dutch is needed.

In Benkadi we met some challenges in working with MoFA. An example: from the beginning there has been no clear procedure towards the partners, for instance what is expected in terms of reporting. Frequently new rules have appeared. The procedures should be clear from the beginning and shouldn't be changed during the match, if we want a good cooperation, a partnership. Another challenge is the frequent change of contact persons at the Ministry, which causes long delays, for instance in giving feedback on reports. I would say, if you want to be a partner, as MoFA intends, then do it together. The Embassies in the countries are differently involved, but they made clear what we can expect.

Agenda and Priority Setting

'Power of Voices' works with thematic priorities. In that sense the ownership of Southern organisations is limited: you need to align with the MoFA priorities. It would be different if the organisations in the countries defined the thematic priorities themselves. Now there is strengthening in one thematic area for five years, but it is unclear if it can be continued in a next period, since the thematic priorities may change. Here the framework seems not to align with MoFA's narrative of 'ownership' and 'leadership'.

Next Policy Framework

Our advice for a next framework is that working on civil society strengthening in Southern countries could be more effective, if the priorities are based on a context analysis of civil society in the country (what are the dynamics, what is already there, what works, what doesn't work), and that a programme enables alignment and involvement in national processes. Such an approach offers also more opportunities to hold national and local government responsible.

Another thing is that the focus on advocacy alone is not adequate to reach our goals of civil society strengthening. Successful advocacy for change needs to be followed by action to effectuate the change on the ground. Without a connected follow-up the advocacy result risks to remain up in the air. This asks for flexibility to bring in activities additional to advocacy, like services. Because telling African states hit by insecurity to take certain political decisions is like telling a father of a poor family that he must feed his children. He knows it, but he doesn't have the resources for it. We have to do things differently. Taking the work beyond advocacy implies also a longer implementation period.

Advocacy is important, but let's not forget that there is still so much to do at the level of basic needs. In a next Policy Framework more localization at field level should be key. That comes with a different way of working. Most money stays now downtown, transfer it to the local level. At the local level there are no offices, no laptops. In fact, this is just the plea of the Paris Declaration: facilitate local organisations, align to national procedures.

Also, the security situation in our region plays a role. Governments devote a large percentage of their national budgets to fighting terrorism. For budgeting the social sector they refer to foreign donors. MoFA should take into account that more fragile states risk to emerge in this region in the coming years.

Should there be a direct transfer from MoFA to Africa? I don't think that's necessary. There is added value if Dutch organisations keep involved. We don't talk so easily directly to MoFA. The Dutch organisations are better positioned to monitor the decision making in MoFA and EU. We can also still make use of Northern capacity building, and act in partnership. The world is interdependent, we need to work together. But the role of each actor must be well defined beforehand."

Power of Voices partnership

COUNT ME IN!

26 countries in Latin America, Asia, Africa

Organisation Just Associates (JASS), Consortium Member

Interviewees Alma Magana, Strategic Partnership Coordinator; Nikita Patodia, Resource Mobilisation Director

The objective of COUNT ME IN! is that political and societal actors and donors at local, national, regional and global levels take action to recognise, protect and fulfil the human rights of all women, girls, and non-binary, gender non-conforming, trans and intersex people. We aim to achieve this through strong and autonomous feminist movements holding them to account.

“Maybe it’s good to start explaining a bit about the context in which we work in the COUNT ME IN! (CMI) consortium. This is the second phase of the Consortium, and we are building on the work done in the first five years.

As a strategic partner of the Dutch MoFA, CMI is a partnership of feminist funds like Mama Cash, AWID, Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights, Urgent Action Fund Africa, as well as feminist movement building organisations like Just Associates (JASS), and CREA. We also have two strategic partners - Red Umbrella Fund (first Sex-worker led fund in the world), and the Dutch Gender Platform WO=MEN. Collectively we form a unique and strategic global feminist network.

As JASS we work with women in communities to build, mobilise, and transform collective power through the medium of feminist popular education. We work in three regions, Southeast Asia, Meso America and Southern Africa. JASS emerged from the community. We understand our role as part of a wider movement infrastructure, which we also participate in strengthening.

It is important to challenge the NGO-ization of issues, often as a response to donor demands. This is where philanthropy can do a disservice to long-term social change by fragmenting lived experience into issues tied to funding streams. As part of our donor influencing work, we also challenge the institutionalisation, depoliticization of discourses and practices of social movements.

Participating in the Consortium

In the CMI programme, all partners work in diverse contexts through several mechanisms to forward feminist agendas, and we are connected in our feminist values and principles. Within the Consortium, we work in a participatory way and collectively plan and take decisions towards our work plans and advocacy agendas, in line with our narrative in which feminist principles and action come together.

We also have several working groups with people across different roles in the organisations, on issues like donor influencing, opposition, and feminist economic realities. We share the power in practice by being aware and mindful of the inequality and injustice around us, in civil society, and

among our member organisations. We think of mechanisms to address it. For instance, the fact that we were in different time zones influences our process of decision making. We often have quick turnarounds on statements that have to go out, but everyone is given time to read and sign off, whether you're in Mexico or India. Similarly, we are mindful about language and that English is not everyone's first language. We build this into our work in terms of pace and also translations wherever required.

Mama Cash, the Dutch-based organisation, is the lead. In CMI, it doesn't mean that this role comes with having more power, but rather is seen as serving the whole Consortium. As lead Mama Cash gives support to all the CMI partners and enables their CMI-work as much as possible. The CMI coordinator is hosted by Mama Cash and supports the entire Consortium.

Being CMI-lead is a coordinating role to create the most participatory ways for collaborative work, and to hold us close to our feminist values. And Mama Cash holds responsibility and accountability to the funder.

Agenda and Priority Setting

We agree with the Partos document that this is absolutely a limiting start. When the consultation on policy priorities has not been built from the ground up, it creates silos and top-down priorities instead of taking ground realities and building policies that respond to those. We know from feminist movement building that informing social change needs to be intersectional, not issue-based.

A policy framework also needs flexibility. Only lobby and advocacy are not enough, and even within that a limited understanding of lobby and advocacy as only responding to Global North mechanisms is further limiting. Such a limitation breaks the dynamics. It makes community leaders constrained. They cannot advance at a certain point. So, lived realities and inequalities on the ground should be the starting point, the policy focus should be adapted to them and not the other way around. Then a Southern leadership perspective is embraced.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

When a policy is co-designed with civil society, there could be feedback learning loops: what works, what doesn't. In case it is not, the limitations of a top-down approach are reflected in other elements of the framework, like the monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) system, stringently adhering to predefined policy priorities. A consequence is the extra burden on our MEL partners on the ground, who already have scarce capacity.

This goes deep and is tied to colonial practices of knowledge building. What is understood as knowledge by the Global North is rooted in colonial ideas of a community, people, culture and change. The donor practices of coding programmes, emphasis on certain language of mapping knowledge and change, methods of validation, and basic understanding of needs for strengthening capacities like MEL, without starting from the point of what a community already knows, are all practices with colonial roots.

We agree on the criticism against IATI in the Partos paper. IATI doesn't allow you to see your own work. It doesn't cover the movement perspective and the predominant vision on how you reach

social change: for example, we may not work with new groups every year, but rather at times strategically on a long-term basis with the similar groups of women creating networks. This is essential to movement building, strengthening, and supporting. Accompaniment is a deeply political process of movement building. Working long-term within communities to accompany groups instead of a rigid merely numbers focused outreach approach is important to prioritise, as this is central to movement building. Creating spaces sustainably generates a better ripple effect of solidarity and change.

Quality and intersectionality at ground level will take us to equality. Social change will not come with merely ticking the boxes or aiming for purely quantitative “outreach” figures. Scale is good and works, but is not the only measure of lasting change, as we have seen since the Beijing Platform for Action till now.

Risk and Accountability

Due diligence and transparency need not be a problem. But we think of other risks, for instance we cannot always report everything in IATI. In our work communities are regularly confronted with real life-threatening risks. We don't want to take the risk that reporting in IATI can bring more surveillance at country levels which can lead to life-threatening risks for people on the ground. So, MEL is also deeply political and linked to safety issues.

Next Policy Framework

We need policy makers and funders to navigate with us to carry out power analyses. Even funders who finance feminist work and have feminist foreign policies, rarely understand power structures and their own role in reproducing it. There needs to be more trust between us, and for them to create flexibility to truly realise social change.

The Dutch ministry has been one of these groundbreaking funders in enabling the strategic partnerships. They rightly earn a lot of credit for that. Looking at the next Policy Framework, they can be champions again. Some suggestions:

- Think of identifying breathing spaces with groundbreaking partnerships like CMI, the JASS-led consortium Power Up!, Leading from the South, and others who are working with feminist movements in the Global South directly. Where we can take our lived realities and come to solutions together. Let's have brave conversations about them with the ministry, so that they understand.
- Be aware of the value of intrinsic feminist organisations, who worked already for decades on realising equality on the ground. Due to the changes in the funding landscape and adopting a feminist language not necessarily reflected in their practices, many organisations run the risk of adopting a feminist narrative. But their practices and values don't align with feminist change which centres shifting power, not only resources. Funders need to be aware of this gap while taking funding decisions around long term actors for feminist social change: other, newer -largely Global North based- INGOs may use the narrative for positioning.

- Realise more long-term, core, and flexible funding going directly to self-led Global South feminist organisations working on the ground, instead of intermediary organisations. Sign partnerships for 10-20 years and fund us every 5 years with regular reviews. Be bold! We can accomplish so much more when we don't have to worry about funding cycles ending before change can be truly realised. This also keeps us in a starvation cycle while inequality and fundamentalisms increase, creating newer threats
- Don't pull the agenda forward without incorporating feedback from feminist partners and then see if organisations can follow you, but work trust-based with organisations who know the lived realities on the ground."

Power of Voices partnership

FAIR FOR ALL

Brazil, Cambodia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, Occupied Palestinian Territory, South Africa, Uganda, Vietnam

Organisation Third World Network (TWN) – Africa, Consortium Member

Interviewee Yao Graham, Co-ordinator/Executive Director

FAIR FOR ALL (F4A) seeks to strengthen civil society to demand and contribute to more inclusive and sustainable trade and value-chains, where actors respect human rights, protect the environment and promote women's economic empowerment.

"I am the Co-ordinator (Executive Director) of TWN-Africa, a leading policy and advocacy organisation on political-economic issues affecting Africa and Africa's position on the globe. We have been around for 30 years. This is the first time we are participating in a Dutch partnership. We have quite some experience with multiple funding sources, but engaging in this operational framework is a new learning process. The framework makes sense if you take it within its own logic. If you step outside the logic, it raises some questions. It is good to see that the Partos Discussion Paper addresses both.

Agenda and Priority Setting

The suggestion to invert the agenda setting is interesting, but how would it work? Would there be something like a prequalification process? Where do you start then, given the diversity of civil society? Civic space is situated in communities, at national, regional and global level. And when we talk about communities, what is the definition? Is it geographically or socially defined?

Depending on the quality of the organisational form in Southern countries and the quality of the civic space, how can this appealing idea be operationalised? It is about legitimacy and representation. Take national NGO-umbrellas, they are representational, but often more focused on process than on substance. And the most influential kind of organisations may be the ones that are not found to be representational by governments. How to tackle this? It needs a lot of thinking.

As someone in the South, who is very interested in politics, I observe that the power dynamics around this Policy Framework go beyond the North-South dynamic. The issue of legitimacy implies more than that the issues should be of interest to the Global South. There is the legitimacy of the policy choice of the Dutch government as well, which has to address Dutch domestic political and constituency sensitivities. There is a tension between the two.

With a strong lobby of tax payers and those demanding value for money, Dutch government must have a strong constituency within the electorate, to support the choice it makes for continuing programmes, benefitting the people in the South. Particularly when politics drive to the right as is happening now in Europe. The paper seems to take for granted that a strong progressive domestic constituency force will be there. However, apparent stability in society can rapidly change, think of Brexit and Trump.

Participating in the Consortium

The application process itself was not without power dynamics. When we started working with Oxfam Novib on the proposal, the Ministry suddenly changed the terms of the process. Things were reissued, implying a shorter time for us to react. Such a process reinforces the Ministry's power, because the less response time, the more power is concentrated in the Ministry. In the middle of all this, one of our key African partners came along, saying: 'why don't we pull together an all-African consortium?' To be honest, the little I had learned by then about the process requirements of applying, despite our years of fundraising, didn't make me feel having the experience and knowledge to pull everything together and submit. So, it is also the way the application process is set up. It reminded me of the joke of someone coming in the US Internal Revenue Service, saying: 'We have a crisis. A simple farmer in the Mid-West has just managed to fill in his tax returns without any mistake.' In our case: without the Dutch colleagues, it would have been difficult in that first instance. They know how it functions from past experience. Ultimately, the origin of this exercise is Dutch. Based on the experience of being part of the F4A consortium, TWN-Africa has a much better understanding.

We have had to learn and understand the dimensions and workings of this type of more structured partnership, which also involves the Dutch government, compared to how we worked together with partners in the past. The point of convergence is really in how we all contribute to the shared agreed outcomes. We made a substantial contribution to the theory of change, participated fully in thinking about the substance of the programme and designed our component, aligned to our existing track of work. Although, looking back, if we had understood how these partnerships work, we probably would have designed something which was more efficient and beneficial for us. So, I agree completely on the proposal for an inception period, after the funding is granted. It is crucial. Because once you start implementing, things can become very hard when they are not properly thought out, and this was definitely an experience we had. Now there is more consciousness about working together, as clarity has come. We needed that, because we don't have a prior history of working together with all the Consortium members.

Southern leadership

Let's go back to Southern leadership. There is a responsibility for it to work more effectively. Southern organisations get to the point where they can lead these applications and get Northern partners to work with them. It would make certain functions of the INGOs redundant over time. If it is about working in solidarity and co-creating, Northern organisations should campaign more in their own countries on issues affecting the South than they do now. We had quite some moments that we asked Northern colleagues: 'can you pick this up with your parliament?', but they are still very heavily organised to intervene in the South. It is vital that platforms are created for people from the South to express themselves directly in the North. It will require a different design of partnerships. The Ministry needs to take this into account.

Accountability

The suggestion in the paper for strengthening Southern leadership is very critical. Then you affirm

rights and equality. Now we often talk about sharing money, while it should be about relationships. The way accountability is set up, reinforces that. We contributed revisions to the F4A consortium agreement to improve the power relations between the lead partner and the rest. Even with Consortium partners, Oxfam colleagues not surprisingly exhibited some of the reflexes of a donor organisation, refracting the lead partner role through this culture. The accountability and risk mechanism of the Ministry reinforce this problem.

The duration of five years is better than compared to other grants. It enabled us to do things we wanted to do already for a long time. Still, the paper rightly asks for a longer period to make actual strengthening more durable.

The F4A consortium provided more resources than any past grant, enabling us to strengthen existing relationships and create new ones underpinned by resources for working together. So, definitely there is a benefit, but it is process-heavy. And there is this danger that good partnership relations are now affected by client-contractor dynamics. For instance, take the country partners we already work with, for a long time: our relationship was essential egalitarian even if there was always a transactional dimension that the programme needs of all of us were advanced. However, it was a simple collaboration.

Where contracting was involved, it was a fairly basic contract, allowing to account to the back donor. But under the framework of Power of Voices we have become a grantor to partners we used to work with as co-implementers. Even for working in the Power of Voices more simple contracting could be adequate. Now we got a material benefit, but there is a downside in its effect on these old relationships.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Before the Power of Voices programme, we benefitted from development cooperation funding, primarily from the Netherlands and Canada which came through grants from INGOs. So, we had some distance from the direct government aid conditionalities, unlike in the current case of being a consortium partner. I agree what the paper mentions about IATI, it is such an aid conditionality that comes with the package. It's like eating fish, the bones come with it.

In terms of learning, the notion of capacity strengthening should have a higher profile in the design of these programmes rather than being an outflow of the process of implementation.

In terms of process, I'm still trying to wrap up my mind how the midterm evaluation that we are doing now, can run parallel to an evaluation of the Ministry itself on the work done in the partnerships.

Next Policy Framework

What should be key? It's a difficult one, given the diversity of civil society. Strengthening relates to engagement. It could be worth a discussion to see how the constellation of actors in a partnership could be broadened. Maybe we could reflect with the Ministry on the mix of actors and its effectiveness in each context. An example: not many CSOs work with trade unions. Yet they are so important for people's rights, especially given the growing informalisation of work and insecurity in the workplace. Farmer organisations don't get much support either.

Would this be movement building? It depends on what paradigm you take to define civil society dynamics. In many contexts there is a continuum of organisations and movements, particularly Latin America and parts of Asia. This continuum is weaker in Africa. Definitely things that contribute to movement building would have some strength, because you're building a base in society which is much wider than a target group of CSOs. It is important to ask what is exactly meant by social movement.

On the whole, including more organisations that reflect the associational life of citizens will contribute to broadening the ambit of the partnerships in a next Policy Framework."

Power of Voices partnership

FAIR GREEN GLOBAL ALLIANCE

Global Programme, 7 focus countries: Bangladesh, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Philippines, Uganda

Organisation IT for Change, Alliance Partner

Interviewee Anita Gurumurthy, Executive Director

The FAIR GREEN GLOBAL ALLIANCE links local realities to national and global policy processes, and challenges existing rules and regulations that maintain or exacerbate the power imbalances that characterise our current economic system. The focus is on three main areas: improved corporate conduct, improved international trade and investment, and improved financial and tax systems.

“The Alliance is in its third round. For us, it is the first time. We are in the Alliance with two Southern and six Dutch-based organisations. The two Southern organisations are - my organisation, IT for Change, based in India, and Samdhana, working with indigenous people in South-East Asia on land rights and people’s control over natural resources. IT for Change works on digital technologies contributing to human rights, social justice and equity.

Agenda and Priority Setting

The Partos paper is really a work of art, capturing complex issues. With respect to the agenda setting, we have to recognise that every government has certain strategic priorities in its international development policy, coming from its worldviews and societal values, but also, from geo-political and geo-economic interests. We cannot wish away this impetus in development cooperation.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Our focus is on high-level outcomes, based on a coherent process of annual stocktaking every year. It allows us to plan and report with great flexibility and address details without losing sight of the overall aim of changing the global economic system in favour of more equal power relations. So, there is a lot of autonomy to take on actual pressing issues, rather than having to follow a rigid logframe. If you want to expand civic space, the autonomy to act with agility is vital. To counter corporate power, we are able to deal with a priority agenda, based on the context. We move with the times in defining issues, mobilising and campaigning, and hit when the iron is hot.

I think we should compliment the Dutch government for the Power of Voices programme. Civic power is diminishing the world over. Our modus operandi allows us in the Alliance to work globally, focusing as needed, also on specific countries. We are able to navigate our work, responding to how the wind is blowing. All the same, to meet the parameters of the programme and the Dutch ministry, our internal organization skilfully monitors the programme with a group of anchors throughout the year.

Participating in the Alliance

When we came in, almost three years ago, it was clear that the Dutch Alliance members were already informed in their own learning and vision by organisations from the Global South. They work 'with' rather than 'for' the Global South. The governance of the Alliance is not a funnelling mechanism for budgets to the Southern organisations. It is an articulation of the collaboration from a powershift perspective. It is quite impressive that there is a fair degree of ownership, autonomy and openness despite the efficiency and time-bound way of working, and that the value of our North-South collaboration is much appreciated. Let me give an example. Last month the Alliance coordinators had organised a learning session at the Dutch ministry on digitalisation. The session was led by us. I was one of the resource persons. Our expertise was considered important by the Ministry. This is a great testimony to how the Alliance secured a role for us as a Southern organisation to dialogue with the Ministry, on an important agenda. We were able to feed into the development and trade policy of the Ministry. I think we could do it, as Southern and Northern organisations, having the heart in the same place, despite different positionalities. That is how we work together.

The governance is nested and built around a Steering Committee (SC), a Programme Committee (PC), anchors, and several working groups. The PC works on the big parts, makes sure things are moving. Not only in implementation, but also in setting the agenda and scanning the horizon for opportune interventions into policies at Dutch, EU or global level. They escalate the topic to the SC, and working groups strategically take on issues. At every layer, Northern and Southern staff members collaborate. It is a well-orchestrated web of actors who committedly work together in varying compositions.

The centralised accountancy and compliance are well managed. And, a special quality is that across the Alliance there is an extraordinary amount of trust.

Global approach

The possibility not to go very specific into countries allows us to map important global development moments that should be converted into an opportunity for civil society voices. Think of the EU trade agreements. When negotiations are on with a certain country, say India, we work with civil society in India, and scrutinise the trade agreement in terms of labour rights, supply chain implications, tariffs and so on.

You have to be flexible to work globally. If you focus your activities in a country context, you may not be able to grasp unfolding opportunities. Our Alliance is able to demonstrate agility because depending on the opportunity, we mobilise different members in different combinations from civil society in a country. So, we have committed relationships with organisations at the national level, and substantial resources devoted to dealing with global ideas.

Another example: when we started the programme, the UN had not announced the forthcoming Global Digital Compact. Because the issue of global corporate power of tech companies controlling international development today is so relevant, we decided to work on the issue and devote time and resources to it. That is the way our synergy works.

Leading from the South

Given the history of coloniality, it has become manifest that we have to deal with the mess that is left behind. In the past 60-70 years, the Bretton Woods institutions, and the subsequent ideas of reparation and development cooperation can be seen as a method to compensate. But we know that in a world that is globalised and unified by technology, where the price we pay and the gains we enjoy arise out of co-implication, we really need a new framework.

We have to understand that co-dependence is the writing on the wall. Our future is dependent on the way we embrace co-dependence. I think leading from the South is a way to show a mirror to actors who don't mind keeping the economic and political status quo intact. Showing them the mirror tells them, you cannot go too far with that. Exploitative frameworks of trade and environment or disregard of the situation of women in the Global South, will simply catch up with you sooner or later.

Leading from the South is basically to take on the responsibility and embrace the privilege of alerting those who invest in international development, that there are many dots to join, that implicate North and South together.

The way in which we work has to be very cognisant, to not just pay lip service to the ideas of inclusion and power sharing, but see for example how the left hand and the right hand of the Ministry can actually find some coherence in its trade and development policies. Also, when EU officials tell me they make EU foreign policy feminist, I often say: 'kudos to you, but making it feminist goes beyond recognising all genders. It means taking into account employment, social protection, care for everybody'. The success of Southern leadership is in being able to convey the message that structural justice is for everybody.

Southern leads in the Programmes

Actually, I think there are arguments on both sides. Leadership is a positionality issue. If the ED of Both Ends is better positioned to talk to the Dutch embassy in Delhi, she can lead, and I can lead on something else. The feminist ethos is that you trust and operate from a coherent vision. I trust my interlocutor completely. And in the current context of a difficult context in many parts of the Global South, I'm happy to have a bridge, because it allows me much more flexibility to think about strategizing towards the future.

It is extremely comforting that Both Ends as lead organisation is handling all the vital interfaces with the Ministry. It's not easy. We have to be accountable, but it takes a lot in terms of processes and institutional systems.

I am aware of the current exclusionary factors for Southern organisations to lead. Still, it is very important that there is a Dutch CSO to interface, even if there would be two lead agencies, one from the South and one from the North. You need a finger on the pulse of the Dutch government.

Next Policy Framework

Politics in certain European countries take a regressive turn, as in most of the world. Polarisation seems on the rise. Still, we should be conscious of the fact that The Netherlands in the OECD is constantly held up as a very important development cooperation funder for its support of civic

space and diversity and social inclusion. So, we can be critical towards the Dutch government, but we can also say 'we are with you', and see how we can best manoeuvre with the government in the political endeavour to move civil society forward.

It is key to continue the work on civic power and civic voice. Civic power is simply being suffocated. In the immediate term I don't see progressive changes towards for economic and social justice. By continuing the current focus of the framework on civic voices, more than half of the battle will be won.

Global value chains also remain very important, because value in the new economy that is powered by AI, or blind corporate greed, really requires some kind of civic and state checks and balances. In terms of approaches, there should be ample space for taking global approaches. They are necessary, because they go beyond the level of country issues, and allow you to ask attention for the systemic factors. Now we can act as a voice with a membership of around 2000 organisations around the world. However, a global approach is above all required to be able to galvanise like-minded citizens from the South and the North to act decisively on economic, social and climate justice."

Power of Voices partnership

FREE TO BE ME

14 countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia

Organisation Uganda Key Populations Consortium (UKPC), Country Host Uganda

Interviewee Richard Lusimbo, Director General

FREE TO BE ME paves the way for targeted lobby and advocacy to get (perceived) sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) issues mainstreamed in economic development programmes. Although a disproportional number of LGBTIQ+ people are poor, unemployed and economically disadvantaged, few actors have addressed this either sporadically or structurally. FREE TO BE ME aims to fill this gap through a combination of national-level approaches and foundational work at the global level.

“FREE TO BE ME is an Alliance of six partners, led by the Dutch organisation Hivos. The Alliance works in 14 countries. In each country a national network coordinates and supports the grass-root movement. My organisation Uganda Key Populations Consortium (UKPC) comes in as the coordinating entity in Uganda. The Alliance gives us as a national organisation the opportunity to have a say, but also provides the opportunity to give a voice to the community organisations in the country, to sit at the table.

Usually grass roots organisations are not able to meet the criteria for funding by international funders, because of all the different levels.

Therefore, it is important that we, as UKPC, act as a host organisation at national level. We have put a couple of things in place. UKPC is a registered entity, we have annual reports, financial audits, can meet the international requirements. It makes it much easier for the community organisations to receive funding. And it makes it possible that the planning and agenda at country level can be done by the community itself. We bring together the community to review the programme, look at the areas of change and whether the indicators and outcomes are still valid or that we adapt, depending on the situation we are in. Then we articulate their views and the direction they want to take to Hivos and the other Alliance partners. They discuss it, and the decision on plans and budgets is made and received by us.

In the country we also do regranting. There is the Uganda Localisation Grants Committee, that is able to decide on grants the community organisations have applied for.

Participating in the Alliance

It is quite a multi-layered governance system. I am acquainted with that, because I worked in other alliances and in the Pan African ILGA network, where I had the privilege and power of working at alliance level. So, coming now to the national level I understand the power dynamics. And I also know how to push for what the community needs. Both experiences have things in common:

they are about relationships between and among different structural parts. These relationships are in constant communication, and need to be maintained as much as possible. That is how we have been working with the community organisations and with the Hivos team and the other Alliance partners.

It is crucial that an organisation like Hivos, with its regionalised infrastructure, together with the other Alliance partners, connects with the community organisations at grass roots level. It will help to create change also within these big organisations, when they have an interface with the communities. If we all sit together, instead of sending reports, the Alliance partners can listen to the communities about what is really happening, so that we can quickly push for the best programming for the community.

Agenda and Priority Setting

I totally agree with what is written in the Partos Discussion Paper, because even the setting of who is in the Alliance is dictated from the relationships that the North has with the South. This principle leaves out so many entities that could actually have benefitted and could bring something new and unique on the table.

I think it is really important, that this changes, but it will only happen when there is more time, and less competition, so that organisations from the Global South and North can really work together on the best programming.

Regarding advocacy as a main strategy in the framework, I would say that advocacy is a game changer. However, we should also look at other drivers that make advocacy successful. I will explain this, taking Uganda as an example: We are dealing with an ever-changing society. When we started with Free to be Me in 2021, we didn't know we would have a law in 2023 that would make us need to go to courts, and focus on safety and security.

So, I think there is really a need to look at what advocacy can do and what could come out of it. We are facing this backlash, because the community is visible. That is good, but it is also bad, because it affects the community. What we need to do is when the success of advocacy comes to the limelight, and gives us negative results like this law, we should be able to shift action in time to ensure that no harm is done. Now that is usually not taken into account.

So, advocacy cannot be done alone. We should be able to do more and shift. Take the example of the framework where emphasis is on advocacy and not service delivery. Getting a lawyer is a service. I can tell you, as advocates we need legal representation, because otherwise we really get into trouble in the current context. So, it is absolutely necessary that we need to think what some of the other things are, that come with advocacy. It is crucial.

Risk, Accountability and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

The reporting we have to do, is a bit too much. We spend too much time writing reports instead of actually doing the real work. I think we can be creative in the way we report and actually show

impact. There is a need to rethink. Some things in the work of community organisations require human resources, but the funding that is given, does not cover that. It is very unfortunate. It needs to change.

Not so much time is given to learning, because we have no time, and budgets are limited. We do not have moments where we can say 'ok let's meet with activists from Ghana, let them come here'. So, it depends on the moments when the Alliance partners organise learning events, which is usually only once every one or two years. It limits the whole learning process.

Southern leads in the Partnerships

Regarding Southern organisations taking the lead in the partnerships, I would say I'm in favour of that, but I'm also in favour of a Dutch organisation taking that role. I will speak here on the value of having a Dutch organisation. The Dutch organisation is close to the Ministry. It's easy for the Dutch organisation to go to the Hague. And, while this is not often publicly said, having a Dutch organisation involved, gives many people the assurance that the Dutch money is sure. And they are right to feel so. However, it is important that Southern organisations grow in taking leading roles. I think the concept of the hosting organisations in countries is important, they can play a substantial role in the learning processes, but also in securing systems of safety and security for the community.

The beauty of a Dutch partnership with the Global South, lies in the transferring of the learning, so that over time the Southern organisations are also able to build the infrastructure. For that to happen, the power and the resources need to be distributed evenly. For example, if we have a partnership of a Dutch organisation with Southern organisations, and those organisations focus on a specific area, they should subgrant in their area of expertise. Now the Dutch organisation is often seen as the donor, and the others are at another level. The power should be distributed.

Next Policy Framework

In terms of Southern leadership, I think where national organisations in the South have done well, it is important that they are elevated to another level and become part of the alliance or consortium. It is not just the organisation that is being lifted, it is also lifting the entire movement. I think that if we are going to build a strong civil society in the Global South, we also need to have strong entities at the national level that can take the lead. They can become an example and can share their learnings with other organisations in the country. These kind of processes could be included in a next framework.

Another suggestion I would like to give, is on the duration of the programmes. I appreciate what the Dutch ministry has done over the years, but we need start thinking long term. I remember being part of a previous partnership called PITCH. It was an excellent working programme, and then it just died. It created a lot of challenges for us in Uganda. Every five years we start well, we engage partners, we are making headway, and then the resources dry up. And before we know it, we have no voice anymore.

We need to rethink the programming. If a programme really makes progress that towards the end of the programme period the Ministry could decide for a renewal, and thereby bring a bit of stability.

In the current situation we now already have to think of a new cycle. It is impacting the programmes, but also the communities, because there is no stability. "

Power of Voices partnership

GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR GREEN AND GENDER ACTION (GAGGA)

more than 30 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe (Georgia), Latin America, Pacific

Organisation Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres (FCAM), Lead Organisation

Interviewees Carla Lopez, Executive Director; Claudia Samcam, Development and Alliances Coordinator

GAGGA sets out to strengthen and unify the capabilities of community-based women's rights and environmental justice groups and movements so that they have the support and capacities they need to achieve the political agendas they have defined as priority, and so that their work is aligned and building on each other's strengths.

"Before we discuss the Partos document let's tell something about women's funds. Because that is what FCAM is into. It will help to understand how we work, also in this partnership. FCAM is a funding organisation, organised by activists, feminist activists. These funds were often created following the concept of Mama Cash. We are funders who don't have rich people behind us, we look for funding like any NGO. FCAM was created when international funding to Latin America drastically decreased. Our approach is different from other funders. We go for a Global Southern feminist perspective. This shapes our input to the Partos Discussion Paper.

We are a Southern-led partnership with two Dutch-based CSOs, Mama Cash and Both Ends. This is our second partnership together (GAGGA 2). We started under Dialogue and Dissent with GAGGA 1, and we could continue the work under Power of Voices. When the Power of Voices call was released, we were in the evaluation process of the first stage of GAGGA. We took this opportunity to consult with partners and review and adapt our Theory of Change (ToC). So, we didn't have to rush to design a new ToC, a programme, find our partners, etc.

Important is that our collaboration is not only based on the funding opportunity. We only accept to work with others when our own work is strengthened and our priorities are shared. In the partnership we are the lead, but we have collective leadership. We know this can be different in other partnerships where the lead imposes decisions, but we believe that everyone brings expertise to the table and that we can learn from each other. Each of us has her own role and we all do a lot of influencing in our own spheres. We work along the principle of collective ownership among GAGGA partners. It's a lot of work, but the only way you can build commitment, needed for change.

We commend Partos for this exercise. The document raises many important issues. But it needs to be complemented by knowledge and experiences from the Global South. You mention four issues you want to highlight. We agree on them and will give our insights and experiences on them. But one issue is definitely missing and that is an open communication channel with the Ministry.

The document states that Dutch organisations have better access to the Ministry, but if the Ministry really wants to support Southern leadership, they should accommodate Southern access. We took the lead role for the first time under Dialogue and Dissent. Then we were the only Southern lead, now we are two. Still, it was easier for us in Dialogue and Dissent. Why? We worked with the Civil Society Department, but were also linked to the Gender Taskforce in the Ministry. We knew the Gender Task force well and worked closely together. Now the Ministry changed that, and we relate to a Department working on Climate Change. So, we miss the link now with women's human rights, which is key for us, in connection to climate change. This new Department has not so much experience with Southern organisations, focal persons come and go. We sent our annual report to a handful of email addresses, hoping one of them will pick it up. I'm pretty sure this will not happen to Dutch organisations. It makes it hard for us to fulfil our role as Southern lead. It illustrates that 'shifting the power' is not only an intention, but needs institutional commitment.

As we said, communication channels with the Global North are important, we try to participate in processes to give a Southern perspective. But it needs commitment. An example: there was a soundboard meeting of Partos on the Discussion Paper. But it was in the morning. That's mid-night here. These things limit our participation.

Agenda and Priority Setting

We are not always confronted to the same extent with constraints as Northern-based organisations. For instance, when you look at the topic of Agenda and Priority Setting, we, as Southern-led partnership, are in a different position. We are close to organisations in the Global South. We work in what we call the GAGGA ecosystem with environmental justice funds, CBOs, NGOs. We know already the needs of the movements on the ground we want to support. That makes it easy for us to define the agenda and the priorities in a programme.

Risk and Accountability

We totally understand and agree on the compliance when such big programmes are involved. But we question if that needs to be translated in a relationship that is purely contractual. Where is the partnership perspective? Take the way risk is handled. It is defined by a Northern donor perspective focusing on legal aspects, reputation, audits. The Ministry wants us to avoid risks as much as possible. The people we work with are seen as a risk, a risk to lose money. But as funders we want to stand up for human rights of these people, who live in a daily risky context. So, it means we need to take risks.

In the Discussion Paper risk is also treated as a contractual thing, but that is not all. As Global South organisation risk implies other things, and is connected to living and working. We work every day in a risk context, which is a trend in countries in the Global South, such as Nicaragua, El Salvador, India, and others. We deal with it in such a way that it has no consequences for the implementation of the programme, because we don't want that to happen. Then you talk about completely other concepts like solidarity, companionship, close communication.

But it is made difficult in this programme. The risk management that is put on the shoulders of us, as the lead, can easily influence the relationship with our partners into a contractual one. It is so contradictory to the intentions the Ministry has with the programme. The emphasis on compliance, financial accountability, it is all to prevent that the other party does something wrong, but that is not how we want to work. So, we address this with transparency and close communications with our partners. We take care of each other and look together how we can achieve the things we want to realise. Of course, we don't put FCAM and the programme at risk, but at the same time we don't want a contractual relationship with our partners. It helps a lot that we already built trust with them in the previous partnership. Trust is an essential part of the relationship. In that sense a financed inception phase as the Discussion Paper proposes, is important.

We would like to ask attention for these aspects of partnership and trust in relation to risk in the Discussion Paper. 'Shifting the power' requires such thinking, beyond financial aspects.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

We agree on the criticism of IATI and the limited space for learning. MEL serves accountability, and lacks space for learning, not only on the programme, but also on meaningful collaboration with the Ministry, between partners. So many opportunities!

A lot is missed from the richness of what is happening in the countries. In the indicators an intersectional approach is missing, the thinking is in silos. We've noticed it as well in the development process around the Dutch Feminist Foreign Policy. Also, advocacy should be approached more intersectionally.

Next Policy Framework

What the Ministry should realise is that advocacy at community level is very difficult to separate from other actions, they are closely linked. Think of forest restoration, water management, livelihoods. It is not only service provision that is closely linked to advocacy, as the Discussion Paper mentions.

And advocacy in the Global South cannot be done in the same way as in the Global North, we have to deal with a context of weakened democracies. Advocacy at community level with its immediate action is not always perceived as advocacy in the Northern thinking. We have to broaden the concepts. Inclusion is usually limited to including youth, without mentioning other identities like people who have been historically overseen. The focus is on individual CSOs, not on evolving movements. There is a project approach, not a process approach.

And finally, the Ministry sees sustainability as financial, but political sustainability is also important; keep the fire going! That is what can be done when you think in movement building. Partners should be seen as part of movements, not as individual actors."

Power of Voices partnership

Generation G

Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda

Organisation ABAAD, Consortium Member

Interviewee Kinda Majari, Programme Coordinator

The GENERATION G partnership strives towards gender-just and violence-free societies with and for young men and women in their full diversity.

“I work in ABAAD, a CSO based in Lebanon. We are part of the Generation G(ender) consortium. The youth we work with is often very ambitious in the kind of change they want to effectuate in their communities. The big thing is always how to do that. You need a long period and you need advocacy tools to empower them. Both aspects are in this programme, that’s very positive. We need time to build trust with the groups we work with: youth, women, communities. And we need to develop specific tools with the groups, for instance on youth engagement. Only then can we obtain sustainable change. That’s at national and local level.

The global level of all the countries involved in the partnership is more complex. Their contexts are quite different. Despite our similar themes, the country context can lead to specific interventions. Joint advocacy can then be a bit tricky, but we do it. It would be great though, if identifying opportunities for global advocacy could be further facilitated or endorsed by our funding partner, the Dutch ministry.

Agenda and Priority Setting

The seven countries in Generation G are so different: different needs, nuances, risks. You could ask what the rationale in linking between the countries is. For sure, there are common trends, but sometimes priorities seem to be imposed in the programme design, without really taking the context into account. Take the priority of SRHR in Lebanon, a context where we have to be so nuanced. How do we contextualize this priority area when we bring it into the programme design phase? In the end it is to address different needs in a way that makes sense to the context. What we did to bring the countries more together under one rationale was a revision of the theory of change. That helped. At the same time, you have to be realistic and understand the thinking behind agenda and priority setting in these frameworks. There may be a priority that seems to be a priority of the funding party, but not necessarily a priority in the contexts of the programme countries. It’s good to flag this.

Generation G has been proven quite successful in working with the different contexts, because organisations have their mandates. Rutgers, the Dutch-based lead, did an incredible job to bring everything together and initiate joint efforts. A big plus was that spaces for exchange were created. They allow understanding each other’s work and scope, and bring opportunities for change nearer.

Risk and Accountability

It is important to have compliance and risk mechanisms in place, especially in the contexts we work in. Accountability is not necessarily a negative thing, although I think that in comparison to other programmes we have a quite strict due diligence in our partnership. It provides a solid foundation for monitoring and creates a good framework for contextual effective risk management. When we report we provide risk assessments that are not only financial, but very contextual, with mitigating strategies to ensure that the programme's impact is sustained.

What still could be done is create an overarching frame to understand how the different contexts in which we operate can be tied together: similar emerging risks, similar trends etcetera, which could be an opportunity for joint advocacy as well.

The burden however of providing mitigation is on the organisations in the countries. Given the volatile context, projections are difficult to make. Accordingly, timelines and rates of expenditure can vary. Factors come in that are outside our control.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Sometimes I have the idea that the ambitions of the Dutch ministry for the programme are too high, given the time it takes to realise for instance a policy change in a country. Such an objective cannot be reported in six months. We can report the progress made in six months, but it can also be the case that there is no progress, although we worked very hard on it. And for youth to impact their community, it is the same: a lot of preparatory work has to be done: a baseline, capacitate youth, develop interventions, before impact in the community can happen. That work should be recognised. In this respect it is important to note the support that Rutgers provides us when needed to push back on some of those expectations.

An M&E framework can focus too much on just ticking the boxes. There is also quite some emphasis on numbers, but quality elements in advocacy are hugely important: our goal is to influence behaviours, perceptions around very conceptual topics like gender. It is good that the Ministry introduced outcome harvesting. It is a way for them to start thinking more in terms of progressive impact. Because that is what we do. Rutgers also took the initiative to revamp the indicator framework as much as possible following our recommendations. We often do a lot of smaller activities that lead in the end to an outcome, but all these activities are not visible in the M&E framework. That can be frustrating.

So far, we haven't had any direct exchange with the Ministry. We see it as a missing link, in terms of transparency, but also to be able to communicate openly for a better understanding. A recent example is that when we completed our midterm review, we were informed by the Ministry that they were conducting another midterm of all the strategic partnerships. Kind of duplicating the work. We have the impression that this missing link also exists between the Ministry and the funding portfolio of the Embassies. We don't have the idea that there is much communication between them. As far as the Embassy in Lebanon is concerned, they are familiar with the programme, but not continuously involved.

On learning I already referred to the linking and learning we do with all the countries, once or twice a year. We really benefit from each other's expertise. We build in mutual capacity building among the partners. The lead organisation, who has a long track record on capacity strengthening participates as well: on an equal footing, instead of providing capacity strengthening in a linear way. The mutual capacity building is a very positive thing. We learn from each other's expertise. It neutralises the power balance and helps to identify more contextual similarity.

Participating in the Partnership

Another huge contribution to neutralise power dynamics is the Youth Board: it gives youth representatives from the countries a say in the governance of the programme. And we are preparing a research on power and privilege in the programme. All these things make Generation G more horizontal than other programmes. The lead is in a position of power, when it comes to programme requirements and reporting, but is very conscious to neutralise its power and keep the balance in the partnership. There is no monopoly of decision making from above. We have a governance with teams having complementary roles, taking decisions at different levels of working in the programmes. Everyone has a say based on the expertise one has.

Looking back at the start there is a completely evolved partnership since 2021, because of the changed context. Space has been given to seek out the best scenario for the partnership given the country context. There is flexibility, adaptability, agile programmatic thinking. It would be good if there was space in the partnership to think together on the period after the five years. How can we build on the sustained change we have established? Do we go for a second round?

Next Policy Framework

My suggestion for a new framework for civil society strengthening would be to focus on designing cross-cutting interventions, that are adaptable and respond to several different needs and contexts.

Interventions need to be intersectional all the time. Let's take gender as an example: we shouldn't treat gender as a disconnected topic, it doesn't exist in a bubble. We need to relate it to the aspects of development or the humanitarian setting.

If we learned one thing from the communities, it is that they are tired of being involved in programmes working on issues like gender in a repetitive, stand-alone way. They don't want another gender training. They want a holistic intervention."

Power of Voices partnership

GIVING FOR CHANGE

Brazil, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Palestine, Uganda

Organisation Kenya Community Development Foundation (KCDF), Consortium Member

Interviewee Caesar Ngule, Programmes Director

GIVING FOR CHANGE is aimed to foster local giving as an expression of voice, civic participation, solidarity and dissent. The programme will build evidence around new thinking, approaches and leadership that support community philanthropy development.

“KCDF began around 1997 with a group of professionals in Kenya, with experience in civil society, government and the private sector. They had been experiencing top-down development approaches for a long time. KCDF started on the premise that if you want to control development, you have to control the grant-making, so we built an endowment fund and continued to fundraise in Kenya and outside for less restrictive funding. We provide capacity building in the way our founders envisioned and anchored us, respecting the priorities of our communities. It is about giving and working together for a prosperous community. This narrative still shapes who we are as KCDF and individuals.

Participating in the Consortium

There are three African-based partners in the Consortium and one Dutch partner, who is also the lead. We all fitted in easily, because we knew each other already, and some of us worked together before. It is good to mention this. Consortiums many times come together for the money, but we came together, because we had a shared vision.

I feel free to challenge the other Consortium members, sometimes I'm not listened to, but that is ok, because I can push back until I am heard. We have discussions based on equality.

Southern leads in the consortiums

The Discussion Paper mentions there are not so many Southern leads in the consortiums, but if you want me to compete and act at that level, I need to be positioned and empowered.

Wilde Ganzen takes the lead role in our Consortium. They ask us to take things up as well, but we have our limitations. It would need a gradual approach. If the compliance requirements do not change, and since we operate from the South, KCDF will need a lot of funding for extra technical staff. I wonder where KCDF will get it from, and once we get it, I am conflicted to invest it in compliance, when communities still have so many development needs.

Also, we are in Kenya and Wilde Ganzen is in The Netherlands. They are so much nearer to the Dutch ministry, than we are. Online platforms cannot replace that.

I don't think our financial systems are inadequate, but many funders want things in their own way with little awareness of the power they hold. Funders rarely take the Southern systems as a point

of reference, or existing compliance mechanism won't allow them. Funders could be more open to aligning their systems to ours for areas that function well, and adapt to Southern-generated reporting templates and indicators of success. Sometimes it doesn't have to be so complicated to be effective. It allows Southern actors to be more in charge.

Agenda and Priority Setting

In terms of agenda-setting, the reality is that the funding is still in the Global North. If the North is prepared to contribute to the empowerment of the Global South, for instance by allowing endowment funds to flourish in the South besides other less restrictive funding mechanisms, we could also set the agenda.

The transition won't happen as long as Southern actors are only engaged in writing a proposal or a concept note and utilise the rest of the time towards reporting and other compliance demands. You cannot expect us to set the agenda, if there is no corresponding capacity and resourcing. Then the system is going to cheat itself further. INGOs are already registering as national organisations in the Global South and they will call it 'local'. With support and a generous budget of their global offices, they out-compete many flourishing local actors. Ultimately, the agenda will be set by the mother organisations, while the national organisations will have nothing to say.

We have this long history of a top-down approach where the song of the funder is the song everyone sings. So, what you find, is that many of us in the South are continuously busy to get grants by second guessing and regurgitating the lyrics as written in the guidelines, that are often drawn up without input from the Global South. The assessors use the same lyric to mark and score. Where is the ground for a genuine Southern-led conversation? It is a well-known weakness on both sides that we never address, due to lack of trust in the system. So, during many years of top-down approaches we have learned the tricks of telling the North what they want to hear, as opposed to telling the truth. In that sense, we don't necessarily help ourselves.

At KCDF we work on a different kind of development approach, building financial resilience. As we develop capacity to raise resources in Kenya, we begin developing new accountability mechanisms. Local cooperations have different sets of demands. There is more demand for peer and downward accountability, anchored on trust. Funding from outside should come in to complement what we already do, without changing the agenda and the complexities around it. This, I call true localisation.

Risk and Accountability

Looking at the Discussion Paper and the elements of risk, accountability, and monitoring & evaluation (M&E), it is 'trust' that is key to all of them. The funding architecture has created a big net around trust.

Regarding risk it is important that the funder has a risk-sharing appetite. We have experience, with another funder, where we shared information on risk. The funding was terminated, without giving us the opportunity to make them understand how we saw it. There was no trust. Next time we will keep quiet.

Let's talk about risk when the practice is right. Otherwise, the practice will never be right, because it will only serve the accountability and risk management needs of funders.

With the resources, there needs to come a certain level of confidence. I remember 2011, when we talked about local fundraising in Kenya. One funder came in and supported our fundraising unit so that we were able to start fundraising. And today our fundraising is increasingly local. It makes a difference when funders go beyond funding projects to helping nurture strong sustainable Southern civil society actors.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

There is generally little learning, whilst genuine learning should be the driving force for M&E. In an ideal system, M&E should tell us what is not working and how we could get it right. I often wondered, why we need all these Northern systems. Now we have to do a lot of M&E for the sake of accountability. Think of IATI, it takes loads of time to insert the data. And globally how many people understand and appreciate IATI, especially from the Global South? How many people in Kenya consume the data posted thereof? I don't think they are many. We do it for the funders.

Before the funding from the primary donor reaches the communities, a lot of jargon, systems and tools come in, obscuring the purity of the work we want to do as humans, caring for other humans. We can be humans without these systems. We asked attention for this in the Consortium: do we really need to deal with these complicated M&E systems towards the communities? In the end, we came to a point where we said, that as long as the broad theme is agreed upon, people do what they want. And that is what we measure. We recognise and appreciate the diversity of things we are doing, people on the ground measure success differently from the highest level. The only restriction is where we have to satisfy the Dutch ministry.

I don't know to attribute it to the Dutch ministry or to the Consortium, but this example shows, that Giving for Change is the most flexible funding I've seen recently. It is like heaven, compared to other fundings we have had.

In the end, we should receive unrestricted funding. I can speak here for all the Consortium members. That is also why we have elevated the role of philanthropy in the Consortium, so that people can begin to appreciate that they can make their own choices and contribute resources towards those choices. My big dream is that there will be increasingly unrestricted funding, so that when I retire 50% of the funding will be unrestricted. Then I will be the happiest person.

Next Policy Framework

In a next Policy Framework, it will be good to continue the narrative of leading from the South, and at the same time to cushion Southern actors from rigid accountability and M&E.

We need to build spaces of trust. The Dutch ministry could consider mainstreaming the approach we took with GIVING FOR CHANGE. We were funded on the fringes, because our focus includes African/ Global South philanthropy. We try to influence better funding practices amongst Northern funders/ philanthropic entities. Advocacy and human rights are an important element in this and the main goal, but they are not the main entrance.

Philanthropy brings the political conversations and the engagement of citizens to the table. Such an approach where some funding is raised locally, challenges the Northern dominance, often leading to greater accountability, better risk-sharing, correct targeting, and greater chances of success. Our programme shows that it works. We matched the Dutch funding with locally raised funds and ultimately ensured that the same was invested in solutions identified by communities on the ground. In other words: you can build the paths for people, or you can see where people are passing, and then you pave these passings. This should set the tone, also in a next Policy Framework.”

Power of Voices partnership

GREEN LIVELIHOODS ALLIANCE

11 countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia

Organisation Non-Timber Forest Products – Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP), Alliance Partner

Interviewee Ruth Canlas, Executive Director NTFP-EP Philippines

The GREEN LIVELIHOODS ALLIANCE (GLA) aims to ensure that tropical forests and forest landscapes are sustainably and inclusively governed to mitigate and adapt to climate change, fulfil human rights and safeguard local livelihoods.

“We were part of GLA, when it started in the previous Dutch-funded programme of Dialogue and Dissent. In this first phase we were essentially implementing partners and not part of any decision making. So, there was really a change in terms of ‘Southern leadership’, as you call it, when we entered the second phase under the Power of Voices programme.

Southern leadership

I think it was a laudable initiative of the Dutch ministry to pay attention to Southern leadership. The question is how prepared the Southern partners were to be part of the leadership. It can be a problem when you are suddenly part of the application process, if the preparedness is not there. We are used to being receivers, not to decide on the programme.

There are three Dutch partners in GLA: Milieudefensie, Tropenbos International and IUCN Netherlands. What they did, was to look for one of their Southern partners that could step up to an Alliance partner. We were the first one who was invited. I guess it was important that we are, as NTFP, a regional organisation in South-East Asia, not just a country organisation. We are bringing different countries to be part of the Alliance. We were and still are partners of IUCN Netherlands, they are our contact when it comes to the funding from the Ministry. One of the other organisations, Gaia Amazonas, came in new. I guess it’s quite difficult for them to come in completely new. Looking back, it’s my view that if you do such a move, and you want it to be done on an equal footing, certain capacity building is needed for the Southern partners.

Being in a decision making position now, means more work and taking on different hats, because we also still implement. In our new role as Alliance partner, we need to step up and look beyond the implementation with more objective eyes, assessing what we do and if it’s going into the right direction. It can be quite challenging. We participate in the governance structure with all the meetings, which are in our case nightly meetings. It is working hard to keep up, but it is really a step ahead. We grow in relationships with other donor agencies as well. I think over time we would consider the role of lead organisation, if we fully understood how the Dutch government works. We would take it, if we knew.

Agenda and Priority Setting

I recognise what is mentioned in the Partos Discussion Paper, that the agenda and priority setting is done largely in the North. I think we really haven't been consulted enough. Although we may have the same agenda as the Dutch partners, I think our voices need more to be heard and listened to.

It is very important for us to hear: 'ok, we took your suggestions.' It is empowering to be recognised and hear that our inputs are valid. We know what is happening in the countries, because we are there. And that is what the Dutch government also recognises by making the move to Southern leadership.

The duration of the framework is five years, which is quite long, but it is not enough. Change doesn't happen quickly. So, ten years, as the Paper proposes, would be much better. In GLA we have now, with the second phase, ten years, although the set-up changed. We are now partners in the Alliance, and now we can speed up. It is really like an engine you start: you cannot go fast immediately. There are birthing pains.

Because of the new set-up we sorely missed an inception phase. I think it was even more required than in the first phase. In the new position as an Alliance partner, we needed to come up with a theory of change per country, a baseline, and at the same time we needed to implement. We had to do it all. And we had to get the consent of the communities we're working with. If we miss that, we are not true to what we want. Because of the missing inception phase, worsened by COVID, prohibiting us to go to the communities, we haven't done it to the extent that was needed. We immediately had to implement and come up with things in our reports.

In terms of agenda-setting it is important to globally connect the work in the Global South with the work in the Global North. Actually, we started in GLA already to do this by the Dutch organisations, bringing in their work concerning the Dutch Forest Strategy and our common work on EU deforestation, linked with producer countries like Indonesia. Also, the court case by Milieudefensie against Shell, is a clear tie-up between a Dutch organisation and Southern organisations. The importance is reflected in the fact that we considered that the country reports should include a report on The Netherlands.

Risk

Of course, the Ministry is concerned about financial risks. That's why we are as transparent as possible, including doing organisational assessments of ourselves and all our partners. But beyond that, there are also security risks in terms of us, implementing. Our work is carried out by environmental rights defenders, so yes, there are risks. Real security risks. I don't know if that is really on the agenda of the ministry. We explain the risks to them, but what they can do, is limited. All they can do, is talk to the government. Could they do more? They offer solutions, like that people can leave the country. But in terms of court cases against communities, including NGO staff, it is not enough. Could the Ministry consider a separate window for quick response funding that we could access for such cases? I know it could have implications, when you take this to the diplomatic level, but it is also about sharing risks with the Dutch ministry in a Dutch-funded programme.

It would be good to know what the possibilities are, then we also know how we can be accountable. It is easier to comply if you know.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

The Ministry focuses a lot on quantity in the monitoring. We had to put in the basket indicators, because it came from the Ministry. Now we count country hectares and that kind of things.

I think it should not be limited so much to quantity. Quality is very important. For instance, 40,000 hectares of land to the indigenous people, even if you have such numbers, what does that say in the end about the life of the communities? It seems that the method decides the change, but the change should decide the method. So what, if you train 1000 people? What does it say about the change in people's lives? These are just activities going on. They tell us not what in the end really leads to an improvement in the lives of people. I don't know if the Ministry gets it. We addressed it earlier, but we needed to fit in.

We still do some 'outcome harvesting' and work with 'the most significant change' tool, but we have to add it on top of, that's the problem. The Ministry is not fond of outcome harvesting, because it is not clearly aligned to quantitative indicators. They neither accept Stories of Change as a tool, while these tools worked so well for us to understand how positive change in the lives of people can be obtained. We should measure the work we do, but not just the numbers.

Next Policy Framework

I hope the idea of leading from the Global South will be taken further in a next framework.

I would like to mention two more suggestions, apart from the suggestions I already made earlier

Maybe the Ministry could also consider some criteria in terms of the ratio between number of Southern and Northern alliance partners. In GLA we pushed for three Southern Alliance partners in the second phase, because there were already three Dutch organisations at that level. The ratio does count, it should never be a token representation.

A last topic I would like to ask attention for, is the budget. We didn't get a big amount really. The three Dutch parties got the same amount of budget as in the first phase. We, as three coming in Southern Alliance partners, divided the remaining equally among the three of us.

I fully understand it is also difficult for the Dutch organisations. They are used to their own way of working with the earlier budget in mind. If they would have substantial less budget, it could be difficult for them to make the necessary adjustments. And we're only coming in.

The Ministry encouraged to include Southern partners at the same level, from the idea of Southern leadership. Bringing in more partners means providing more budget. We understand that some costs, like salaries here and in The Netherlands, are not the same, but we are taking now also other roles, not only the implementing role. There should be budget for that. Now, because of limited budgets, we have to take on different hats.

I would say, if the Ministry values more Southern ownership, and if they want to empower Southern organisations, they should add more budget. It is needed, because the Southern organisations take up these new roles at decision making alliance level and need accompanying capacity building to fulfil these roles adequately."

Power of Voices partnership

JOINT INITIATIVE FOR STRATEGIC RELIGIOUS ACTION

Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda

Organisation Faith to Action Network, Consortium Member

Interviewee Judy Amoke, Programme Manager

JOINT INITIATIVE FOR STRATEGIC RELIGIOUS ACTION (JISRA) supports faith-based communities in their social role and their potential to contribute to the promotion of Freedom of Religion and Belief and the fight against (religious) violence and discrimination. This is done by entering inter-faith coalitions, and thereby showing that different religious traditions can come together in their vision of a better and more just society.

"I honestly loved to read the Discussion Paper, it reflected many of the feelings I had since we started the partnership. I'm happy to share them, in a mix of organisational and personal views.

It was the first Dutch-funded Strengthening Civil Society (SCS) partnership we are into as an organisation, and even for myself, this was the first time I worked on such a multi-country SCS framework. It has been eye opening. Reading the Paper I felt, this is really spot on. It makes sense. Some parts were not clear to me, they could have had more background to it. Parts on how the Ministry will actively use this information needs to be made clear.

We really need brave conversations when we start talking about 'shifting the power'. It will be uncomfortable now and then. Outside this current partnership, in another platform, we participated in a discussion around the localisation agenda. Of importance during the conversation was the challenge of Global North offices coming to the South and assuming the position of being Southern-led. The headquarter registers an office in the Global South, employs local staff and they suddenly become a Southern organisation, but are they really Southern-led? That's another key conversation to have.

In my opinion, we can also take a moment to recognise that in 'shifting the power', we have seen the strengthening of local CSOs and more opportunities for grassroots activists to engage with policy makers and decision makers in the last few years. The Discussion Paper is a good start, I hope some action can come out of it.

Agenda and Priority Setting

When we were invited to be part of the Consortium and started the design of the programme, there was a lot co-creation with the Consortium partners. We were in it together, although we went into it with an already fixed agenda, defining which topics would be included in the final proposal, and in some cases, our local partners had to fit their strategic objectives and goals into this agenda.

I remember that we worked such long hours on the proposal. It felt not really fair that not all of

our original ideas could come through given the intense proposal development process. The competitiveness of the call was leading from the Ministry. We had to shape our ideas in such a way that we would have the highest chances to interest the Ministry. From this, I see an opportunity for the Ministry to first engage with communities to understand their needs before setting their agenda.

Participating in the Partnership

Regarding the Dutch ministry's involvement and partnership, I see a disjointed approach. The Ministry should certainly be appreciated for paying attention to Southern leadership, but as a Global South organisation, where do we meet the Ministry? Are there available platforms where Southern-led organisations can meet directly with the Ministry?

I appreciate that our Consortium lead does organise policy dialogues, but you cannot bring 50 local partners into the dialogue at the global level. Also, we do advocacy actions at national level, but where is the voice of the Dutch ministry? We are in a partnership, so the Ministry should come in, when we hold our governments accountable. Some Embassies are quite active, but often they have their own agenda and priorities and won't really engage with your agenda. We're operating in a kind of vacuum. The Ministry is with you and is not with you. They should be an ally in our lobby and advocacy work.

Our Consortium acts as a conduit to the Ministry, and our lead organisation really tried to open that channel of communication, so that we could directly interact with them. It's crucial. It resulted in a direct policy dialogue we had with the Ministry, which was great. It is something that is not possible in every partnership. The lead has to give you this room and space.

In the partnership, at a surface level we have a kind of equal relationship, there is some joint decision making. We have a governance structure that brings in national partners to take decisions with the consortium lead at a national level. That was new for some partners. They said: 'this is the first time that we've been asked to approve a budget or a strategy'. I could tell in many instances, that from this level of trust and confidence, they increased their effectiveness and efficiency. We also have a strategy on participatory grant-making in the partnership, really motivating to encourage grassroots organisations to implement community-centred activities.

So, at surface level there was some equal footing. But when I look at a deeper level, I see that the funding is still with the Northern organisations. Isn't there a way to give this funding directly to the implementing parties? When we were invited to become a partner in the partnership, it kept ringing in my mind: is there a necessity that the funding of the Ministry goes to the Northern organisations? If the Northern organisations receive the funding and subgrant it to us, we don't really shift the power. Why is this? This could have had more background in the Paper.

Southern leads in the Partnerships

I'm excited to hear now that there are two Southern leads in Power of Voices. I didn't know that

was the case. I hope we can share on this. More needs to be done to encourage Southern leadership in taking these positions, but sometimes you shy away to take a first step, given all the requirements it takes to apply for funding. And the leads in the partnerships have a heavy burden in terms of accountability. They take the brutal part.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

The M&E part in the Discussion Paper completely resonates with me. It is hardly possible to describe the pressure we feel, especially on this IATI platform. I agree with the Paper that it has no value, it is a bottleneck to our implementation. They say it is about transparency, but it is no more than a monitoring tool on what national and local partners do. In that sense it can even be used in a malicious way. We had a recent experience where IATI information on some of our partners was used in an article on a discussion they were not involved in. I felt sad: someone went into IATI, took information without understanding it, and IATI became a tool to attack these partners. It was really hard for them.

And we spent too much time on IATI. It requires substantial resources to complete it. We only hear something back from the Ministry, when we 've done something wrong. And in another programme, financing was put on hold because the delivered IATI information was not correct. It delays the actual work on the ground. As a national partner we don't push this pressure down to our local partners, we bear the burden ourselves and do the IATI part on their behalf.

Next to this M&E support, we give support to the local partners on financial matters, on certain strategies like faith engagement, etc. Our partners also strengthen capacity among each other. As a national partner we feel sometimes disadvantaged to other Consortium partners, who have big offices and large resources. We don't have the same capacity to offer support to our local partners as the Northern Consortium members have. We were created by our local partners and in principle we are a conduit: we get funds and push them to the partners. When it comes to learning, we miss the opportunities for learning with the Ministry, where is the intersectionality in learning? I know there is Power of Learning, but it is just in a few countries. What happens in the other countries? Our intersectional learnings should inform a next Policy Framework.

Next Policy Framework

What should be in a next Policy Framework on civil society strengthening? This question can best be answered by the people working on the ground. They know the issues, they are the implementers. But what certainly should stay, is attention for holding governments accountable, attention for gender justice, SRHR, youth (youth decision making, youth employment), attention for conflict and displaced persons in East African countries, creating room for freedom of religion and belief. Every context is different. More engagement is needed with the religious communities. A conversation is needed at national level, so there should be no prescribed agenda."

Power of Voices partnership

Just Future Alliance (JFA)

Afghanistan, Burundi, DRC, Mali, Niger South Sudan

Organisation African Security Sector Network (ASSN), Consortium Member

Interviewees Niagalé Bagayoko, Chair; Eboe Hutchful, Executive Secretary and ASSN Coordinator for JFA

The JUST FUTURE ALLIANCE aims to strengthen the capacity of civil society in fragile contexts to demand more accessible, responsive and accountable security and justice institutions, and more inclusive political governance and peace-making, from the local and national level, to the regional and international arena.

“Let’s start by saying that we enjoyed very much reading the Partos document. It captures almost all the structural issues, dynamics and relationships that are part of the framework. It underlines that there is a legitimate interest of the Dutch ministry in strengthening civil society in the Global South, but it also identifies the obstacles and pitfalls to enable this with the people on the ground.

The question is how can we overcome these barriers and shape modalities of implementation that are not conflictual and do not defeat Southern leadership?

The current Policy Framework offers space for a Southern leadership approach and calls for ownership for CSOs and partnerships on an equal footing. We commend the Dutch government for demonstrating this laudable engagement by launching the Policy of Voices framework (2021-2026) in which the Just Future Alliance participates. The five-year commitment calling for ‘more control and ownership for civil society organisations as a major step towards establishing relationships on an equal footing’ is rolled out in a time when most development partners are shrinking their support.

In this context we would like to share some of our experiences on the introduction of the concept of ‘Southern leadership’ in the Just Future Alliance (JFA). JFA works with civil society and communities to demand more responsive and accountable security and justice institutions, like police and courts, as well as public decision making and peace processes that include the voices of all people—especially women, young people and internally displaced persons (IDPs), who are most often excluded.

We think ‘Southern leadership’ is a concept that will probably be discussed in many Power of Voices partnerships, given its importance and timeliness. Sharing experiences on Southern leadership now, may generate relevant learnings for a future Policy Framework on civil society strengthening.

Some observations on Southern leadership

A first observation is that the concept came to us from the North. Undoubtedly, the idea behind introducing it, was to reduce power imbalances in the programme and in the Consortium. However, we think the complexity of Southern leadership in international development can easily be understated, risking to cause conflictual relationships and frustration.

Let's dive a bit deeper into the complexity. It is difficult to understand for us as a Southern consortium partner, working at regional and international level, and even more for CSOs working on the ground, what 'Southern leadership' means, if vital elements to create space for ownership and leadership are missing. For instance, it is important that Southern partners are from the beginning involved in a programme design. In the case of JFA most of the Southern, specifically local, partners were brought on board after the basic direction of the project had already been set. Hence, more time and resources could have been invested at the very beginning of the project in bringing them up to speed and giving them a sense of shared ownership of the project.

This also resonates with the suggestion in the Partos Paper to have an inception period at the very beginning of the programme. In our view, the first quarter—even first two quarters—should have been devoted to explaining the objectives and contractual and operational modalities of the project, co-creating the framework, structures and tools, and building trust.

As it was, probably not sufficient time was devoted to mentoring, socialization, genuine partnership-building and co-creation, at the beginning of the project. It gave ample space for the impression and experience of a top-down process, with a steady stream of rules, guidelines, novel tools and (M&E) methodologies, issuing from the Just Future International Secretariat (JFIS). Irksomely mainly in English rather than the language of the majority of our local partners, French.

At the same time the process was visibly taxing the two Northern organisations, including the lead organisation, as they struggled to put the initial framework in place, precipitating a high staff turnover.

In this demanding context, increased by the COVID pandemic, it was assumed that the first year of the programme would be experimental, and that significant retooling might be required thereafter. This process however took a longer time, until September 2022, when the first in-person international planning meeting took place in Accra. Here the collaboration between Consortium partners was candidly discussed and a number of initiatives were explicitly taken up, such as the learning & linking agendas, the quarterly reflection meetings and the Sahel policy group, to ensure greater North-South as well as South-South collaboration.

In the meantime, we had expressed our concerns as Southern CSOs in the Alliance, in terms of lack of meaningful involvement and lack of transparency in things like disparities between Northern and Southern budgets, delayed decisions by the lead on allocating additional funding opportunities, absence of strategic co-decision making for instance on programme revision or strategic opportunities in international advocacy.

Another concern relates to the valuing of the local context. We know from experience that the local context is leading for the programme. Local knowledge of the context in the countries we work in, is crucial. This includes local development of tools, based on this knowledge. It concerns also carrying out research by local experts on the specific context in the countries where the programme is implemented. All this expertise is present in the Consortium. However, it is our observation that such a perspective was up till now not always sufficiently appreciated by the Northern Consortium members. An example is that in repeated instances the impression was conveyed, that there was more focus on publicising the research work of Northern rather than Southern partners.

And in retrospect, it was probably a mistake, even if expedient, to begin with the Northern CSOs hosting the national secretariats in the countries, instead of them playing a mentorship role. It has led to a situation, in which more progress appears to have been made in some countries than others, in terms of transferring the national secretariat to local partners. Simultaneously, Southern CSOs shouldn't feel pressured to 'take Southern leadership' in hosting the secretariats, if they are not convinced they have now all the instruments to lead, or that transparency is lacking of what the consequences of the hosting will imply in the long run.

It is our impression however that there is overall commitment from the Northern and Southern CSOs to address these initial drawbacks. The Accra meeting marked the beginning of a new phase in the programme, which will be followed up by the organising of a special session this summer on 'Southern leadership' in one of the countries, where experiences will be shared.

Leading from the South

The way we look now at the journey towards 'Southern leadership' is that the concept itself should be disaggregated, beginning with the low-hanging fruit—viz, tapping into local knowledge, needs, and understanding of context dynamics in order to properly, and realistically orient the programme—while building and mentoring the administrative and technical capacity of local partners over time to take on more responsibilities for managing the programme.

We are convinced that the Just Future programme can benefit substantially from a different commitment of the Northern Consortium members, taking explicitly the strength and expertise of the Southern CSOs and networks as point of departure. Relationships based on trust and transparency can replace contractual relationships. It will pave the way for even more potential for the programme and the CSOs participating in it."

Power of Voices partnership

OUR VOICES OUR FUTURES (OVOF)

Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Sudan, Uganda

Organisation CREA, lead organisation

Interviewee Anuradha Chatterji, Director Resource Mobilisation

OUR VOICES OUR FUTURES will amplify voices and increase visibility of structurally silenced women, resulting in structurally silenced women taking their rightful places in civic space and participating across three key spaces: online space, physical public space and legal and policy space.

“This Consortium is built on a collaboration of partners who worked already for a long time together, extended with some new partners. So overall, our association is long, very long. We know each other very well, including each other’s pitfalls and strengths. And we already have a long history with Dutch funding. Technically it is a consortium, but in spirit we are an alliance. We participated in the previous framework of Dialogue and Dissent, and now we are in our second phase, in the Power of Voices framework.

When the Power of Voices call came out, it excited us. For CREA specifically, the initial push to go for the call was the situation in India. We very much saw the urgency of advocacy and people raising their voice. We were already working on the issue of creating space and changing movements using art and creative media, and we thought this was a good moment to expand working on it with partners in several countries. So, we came together with the partners. The process of proposal writing was facilitated by MDF, a Dutch agency. They have known us for a long time and have supported us as a group earlier to receive granting for another Dutch-funded consortium led by CREA. Familiarity helps. They facilitated the process for 2 or 3 months. We looked together where we would work and had already footprints. We brought it together in the proposal. It was very much a common exercise.

Southern leads in the Programmes

Southern organisations ask us sometimes how we manage to take the lead, when there are so many requirements from the funder, as in the case of Power of Voices. And it is true, there are not many Southern leads. In Dialogue and Dissent we were the only one, in Power of Voices there are two Southern leads.

What I can say, is that it is the collective bonding that we as three core organisations have. That gives CREA the strength. We started being the lead with a smaller Dutch funding, and once you have done that, you are not so scared anymore. You get to know the Dutch funder better and then you want to take a next step and try a bigger funding. Why not? And I must say it helps that the Dutch government encourages organisations from the Global South.

Still, the compliance requirements were very tough, but at the same time these processes strengthen the organisation, and thankfully CREA had developed already systems. That helped. All the due

diligence we go through with the Ministry, it has been a lot. But we never had any difficulty. I think the Dutch ministry is one of the best government funders, they are very good listeners, which is important. When you ask me if there have been changes over the years, I would say that there is some difference between Dialogue & Dissent and Power of Voices, in a sense that the times are different now. Under Dialogue & Dissent it was more organic, there was a bit more excitement, now there appears to be more pressure in society, in parliament and that may influence the Ministry as well. The compliance, IATI, it all seems a bit stricter now.

Agenda and Priority Setting

For sure, local perspectives are really key. The agenda can be set more from a Southern perspective, local lived realities should come forward, but there is also a risk in this push to the Global South. Because how do you set an agenda when one half is not included? You should do it in some way together.

A complete absence of the Global North will not be effective. The Global North should know what the agenda means, especially for the people on the ground. So, it should start from the South, but not be limited to the South. The North also has a role to play, they are also in the game. Otherwise, you will create the polarisation that you are now fighting, and you end up where you started. The North can be a great strategic partner when they understand the problem and are with you. When you don't involve them, you limit your own work. So, you should go for the best of both.

Risk and Accountability

The Ministry certainly wants to know about the risks we encounter in our programme. We give context, so that they understand and are interested. It is legitimate that the Ministry is strict on financial risks. We are accountable for the money we receive, so we should manage the risks properly.

It does not mean that everything needs to be a success, but it should be accounted for.

One should not undermine financial risk, because your next funding is dependent on it. At the same time carrying the risk as lead organisation, influences the relationships in the consortium. Also, or maybe even more, when you know each other already for a long time. It can create tensions and then you have to come together to make it work. As a lead you have a responsibility regarding the budget distribution, partners want to take up things, but as a lead you have to take into account things like their absorptive capacity. So, it is all about how you manage the partners in the consortium to realise that you do what you want to do. How do you convince them? How do you balance the different interests of partners? It is a special responsibility of the lead. And yes, there are times that is really difficult.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

We pay a lot of attention to learning in our Consortium. At the moment the midterm review is taking place. We developed some learning questions that we incorporated in the review. After the midterm we will come together and discuss what learnings these questions have raised.

On IATI we want to base some learnings as well. What worked, what didn't work? We have regularly reflection meetings, based on feedback we collect on our activities in the programme.

This is all about thematic learning, but there is also the learning of the process that is very important. For instance, we use the 'Alliance Thermometer' with indicators to get insights into what we did together, how often we did it, how it was perceived and what the key challenges and opportunities were.

Our exchange with other consortia is with those programmes to which we are connected. CREA is lead in another consortium, outside Power of Voices, and we are part of COUNT ME IN! within Power of Voices. And sometimes Embassies organise exchanges. We are not involved in the Power of Learning, the learning programme in Power of Voices, but we would like to know more about it.

Next Policy Framework

What should be included in a next Policy Framework? I would like to mention three perspectives that are key, as far as I'm concerned: firstly, focus on structurally silenced people, not only different categories of women, but include people in an intersectional approach.

Be aware that you definitely have to work very context-specific and really go deep to work effectively on including the structurally silenced. Secondly, continue to work on fighting civic shrinking space. And finally, address the anti-rights narrative that is globally gaining ground.

Regarding civil society strengthening, it is good to mention that as CREA, we go beyond working with civil society organisations. We aim to change the way people think, so that they can act differently. But that needn't be done in an organisation like an NGO. We think more in 'cohort building' of individuals. All kind of groups in civil society are working on changing the setting, you can bring the individuals into these groups. It could be independent artists, activists, practitioners.

It may be easier to work with organisations, but then you don't have the flexibility to reach out to individuals, work with them, connect with their base. Taking such an approach also changes the way you look at impact. A next framework could explicitly pay attention to a wide spectrum of people working on change."

Power of Voices partnership

POWER OF DIALOGUE

Burkina Faso, Colombia Ethiopia, Guatemala, Iraq, Jordan, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique Myanmar Niger, Senegal, Sudan, Tunisia Uganda

Organisation Akina Mama wa Afrika, Consortium Member

Interviewee Eunice Musiime, Executive Director

The POWER OF DIALOGUE consortium focuses on empowering women, youth and other marginalized groups to effectively influence and participate in political processes. This will help to build more sustainable and inclusive societies.

“Akina Mama wa Afrika is part of three Power of Voices consortiums. For this interview I focus on the Power of Dialogue.

Participating in the Consortium

When you ask me, what worked really well in this Consortium is, that there was a lot of consultation among the Consortium partners to co-design the programme. It was important to do this together and get to know each other. In that sense, I agree on the importance of an inception period, as mentioned in the Partos Discussion Paper, especially to go beyond the consortium partners, and come to a common understanding with all the partners. Still, it may be good to mention that this has already been practised in earlier partnerships. At the time we were part of a partnership led by Hivos, we had a whole year for inception. It allowed that we, unlike now, were brought on board as implementing partners to co-create the programme.

We haven't achieved to bring in all the partners in the Power of Dialogue partnership, partly because of COVID. Partnerships were this time in a rush to get going. Still, we did a lot in Power of Dialogue to ensure that the Theory of Change spoke to the needs of the different organisations. It was also an advantage that NIMD, the Dutch-based lead organisation, had worked with certain partners before, so there was already a commonality in the way of working. For us, as Akina Mama, it was the first time in this Consortium. It helped us, as a feminist organisation, that there was a shared value among the Consortium members of advancing gender justice. What isn't shared yet in the Consortium however, is the 'how': how to get to gender justice in practice.

It was really good is that we commissioned an independent review at the beginning on decision making power in the Consortium, so that we knew where we were as consortium on the ladder towards equal decision making. I don't think many consortiums have done that so far. At least we had the aspiration to check ourselves. What is also positive is that the EDs of the four Consortium partners are able to meet. That is not in every consortium the case.

Something we had quite a debate about in the Consortium, were the approaches we brought with us as individual organisations. We all came with strong approaches. NIMD with its approach of

dialogue, we came with a strong approach of feminist analysis and approaches. The others with their approach on respectively youth participation and peace building. So, we needed time to understand the different perspectives and to reconcile the approaches. For example, gender is always trivialised, democracy and political parties are then considered to be the big issues, without recognising how they are connected to gender justice.

Partos Discussion Paper

I very much liked the Discussion Paper. It is well thought out and was refreshing to read.

I felt heard, seen and validated by that paper. At the moment the midterm review is taking place, I think this Discussion Paper is an important input for the review, because a lot of the partnerships will be assessing the topic of leadership from the South. I also recognise the points made about Agenda & Priority Setting, and Risk & Accountability.

Regarding Monitoring & Evaluation: it is quite overwhelming for organisations without strong M&E systems. But I must admit that the lead partner has done its part to make sure that the other partners can grow in their systems. Learning has stayed behind, also due to COVID, as physical meeting and exchange was limited.

What would enhance the value of the Partos Discussion Paper is to link it to the Paris Declaration and development effectiveness. The Paris Declaration had given headway to what development effectiveness could look like, but lost its momentum, and has been overtaken by other things. I wonder if it could still help us to shift some of the conversations, because it addressed the reducing of requirements. I refer here to the requirements that make us extremely accountable to the funder, while we want to be especially accountable to our constituencies, the feminist movement. The Paris Declaration could bring us back to a must needed conversation about development effectiveness.

The Discussion Paper mentions concepts like 'shifting the power', 'sharing the power' and 'leading from the South'. However, the terminology is not clarified and the Discussion Paper does not position itself in relation to the concepts. It could have helped further discussion if a clarification had taken place.

In one of the other consortiums Akina Mama participates in, we decided to commission a paper to clarify what 'leading from the South' would look like. It was the outcome of a heated discussion on the different concepts, specifically which of the concepts we should take as starting point. In the end we agreed to focus on 'leading from the South', because it was not seen as confrontational as 'shift the power'.

Balancing power relations in the Partnerships

When you ask me about other impediments that should be taken into account, to balance power relations in the context of the partnerships, I would differentiate between operational or practical hindrances and strategic ones.

In terms of operational impediments, I would say that lead organisations are best placed in The Hague, where they can have closer relationships with the Ministry. People can have tea together,

are often in the same community, sometimes already attended school together. They gather inside knowledge and skills, something the Southern organisations do not gain at this level. People tend to get along with people who are similar to them.

Another practical hindrance is related to resources, The lead gets more budget to hire staff, which means that they are better positioned to attend the many meetings that are there. The Southern organisations are not able to do that, which can be constraining. Not being able to attend a meeting creates a form of power imbalance.

A strategic impediment is that the question of power always puts all of us on the defence. For instance, when the conversation is tough, one should be able to question the power dynamics in the room, and identify unconscious biases, like when people say they couldn't find a female panelist, while they had no problem finding all the male panelists.

Overall, the balance in power relations in the partnerships is more difficult to keep when one partner has less resources than the other.

Next Policy Framework

I really love that the framework focuses on the strengthening of civil society, because for a long time civil society was not seen as a critical actor in processes of change. Too many expectations were raised in relation to civil society, without any inputs for strengthening. Civil society was simply classified as weak. That is not the case in this frame work, neither should it be in the next one. I'm also excited that, although still upcoming, civil society is moving beyond NGOs towards social movement building. That will certainly strengthen civil society. Currently, we are still a bunch of NGOs. But think of worker unions, other forms of organisations, religious entities. For instance in another consortium we are in, we have a Circle of Concerned Theologians. They are a group of academicians, concerned about justice from a faith-based organization. Such a group is important for the work we do on SRHR. They are a new civil society actor, going beyond the usual suspects. All these new formations should be brought on board.

For a new framework we also need to think through the leadership from the South. We need models that can be scaled up. It is a journey in which we can grow. And if we do that, there will be also an opportunity to share power with the Northern organisations. Think of all the things that Northern NGOs can do in their own states. We see a growing right-wing leadership in Europe. That needs to be addressed, because it has implications for the whole world. So, I do believe there is a place for all of us. We need to continue defining what is the most appropriate role for each partner to play. “

Power of Voices partnership

POWER OF PRIDE

22 countries in regions of Africa and Asia

Organisation ILGA Asia, Consortium Member

Interviewees Henry Koh, Executive Director; Khine Su Win, Strategic Development Director

POWER OF PRIDE is based on strengthening LGBTI communities and civil society, and engaging in LGBTI lobbying and advocacy for laws and policies respectful of sexual and gender diversity.

“It is the first time that we, as ILGA Asia, are in a Dutch-funded partnership. The partnership has three Consortium members. Next to ILGA Asia there is ILGA Africa and there is COC Netherlands. COC is the lead organisation of Power of Pride. We already had a longer relationship with COC. Earlier COC subgranted us, but now we are engaged in the entire five-year programme, starting from proposal writing.

ILGA Asia, with 197 member organisations, has always been a conference-based network. Only from 2019 the secretariat was extended with programme staff, and financial and communication staff. We started partnering with COC after a Euro-Asian conference, where we developed a human rights training mechanism (Training of Trainers) for activists, which became an annual event. Around 2020 we were asked by COC to submit a proposal with them and with ILGA Africa for the Power of Voices partnerships.

It is good to mention that we do not subgrant local partners, it is COC who does. The reason behind this, is that COC already has funding relationships with these organisations, and we have to prevent double fundings. So, we are not involved in funding partners in country programmes, we frame our work at the regional level. Still, we are invited to national meetings to think along with the local partners on their part in the Power of Pride programme. The issue of double funding restricts sometimes the collaborations we would like to start, for instance with organisations with whom other Power of Voices partnerships already have funding relationships.

On the Partos discussion paper we would like to bring in the following.

Agenda and Priority Setting

We are really grateful for the high-level policy dialogue we’re having with the Dutch ministry on issues connected to LGBTIQ, although it is quite exclusive in terms of representation from our side. Only the Executive Directors of ILGA Asia and Pan Africa ILGA, and the coordinator of Power of Pride from COC are invited. Together we discuss the challenges regarding the LGBTIQ community. But a similar dialogue regarding programmatic and operational matters is not there. As ILGA Asia, we never have had direct interaction with the Dutch ministry. We would appreciate more contact at this level, because it would enable us to learn more on the programme requirements.

Risk and Accountability

Regarding risk and accountability, we had some difficulties understanding the financial requirements. However, COC is doing a great job as coordinator, and we are learning. Things go already smoother than in the first year. Our systems are also strengthened. So, we are sure that after five years we will have more confidence to work in such a partnership.

There is a gap in information for us, to understand to what degree we can be flexible and adapt to the evolving needs of the people we work with. An example is the situation after COVID. Globally there is a lot of discussion on PRET, Preparedness and Resilience for Emerging Threats. But in the Global South we are still grappling with the ramifications of the post pandemic situation. So, having a focused dialogue on how flexible we can work, taking into account the specific context we are in, and use resources adequately, would really help us.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

We have been now for more than two years in the partnership. Reflecting on the first phase we see pros and cons. The partnership has a sound framework, but there could be at some points more joint decision making, especially on monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). Here we agree very much with the Partos Paper.

Taking decisions together, allows each partner in the Alliance from the beginning to make better progress. When we developed the proposal, it seemed that there was already a path we had to follow. It was also visible in the MEL system. The system had the basket indicators, that were leading. We had to find the connection between the Power of Pride programme and our strategy plan as ILGA Asia, as much as the local partners had to do that with the country programmes. The alignment with the basket indicators was not always easy. Some of the things we do as ILGA Asia do not directly relate to these indicators. And other things, mentioned in the basket indicators, are not so prominent in our work. This holds true for our work at regional level, but also for the in-country work that is coordinated by COC. So, the reporting in the Power of Pride programme can be quite a challenge. It would help us a lot if we could have more consultation on how to tackle this.

Regarding learning, there are online sessions organised by the Dutch ministry for their strategic partners on topics such as advocacy and MEL, but it could be more. There should be ongoing learning, also between partnerships or alliances. It would really help to perform better in the programmes. Now the ongoing learning is within the Alliance: in the Programme Team and in the working groups. In this respect it is good to mention that we have developed the concept of Community of Practice (CoP). We will have CoPs on different themes, like mental health. We will have the first CoP operational this year. CoP members will be selected on criteria in relation to geography, gender identity, age. Another topic we will elaborate on is 'safe space'. What do the local partners mean by 'safe space'?

Over time we will bring the learnings of the CoPs into conferences.

Participating in the Consortium

All in all, we have a good basic structure and a governance representing the subregions and the diversity in our communities. They are a solid starting point for our work. Good track is kept of where everybody's work leads to. We do our own things in different parts of the world, but it is all aimed at the same goal. There is a strong accountability mechanism in all that we do, and we wish to continue that. With the current funding through COC we have an opportunity to learn and develop ourselves, also organisationally, and we can become more confident in mobilising resources.

This model works for us, we join forces with COC and Pan Africa ILGA. Together we do high-level UN advocacy, and we do advisory leadership in the countries in our region. There is trust and understanding in the Alliance, and we have effective South-South relations and capacity building. COC is a fantastic coordinator. We walk together already for a long time. They know how the Dutch systems work and how to bring information to their partners.

Next Policy Framework

The Dutch ministry should be encouraged to maintain its unique position of being a globally recognised committed government donor on global LGBTIQ funding, by continuing the partnerships with LGBTIQ organisations in a next framework.

In a new framework for civil society strengthening, there should be space to enable that the needs and priorities of LGBTIQ individuals and communities are addressed in country-specific ways, to ensure they are culturally appropriate and effective in addressing the unique challenges.

A new framework should also facilitate and strengthen engagement with partnerships working on women's rights, climate justice, youth empowerment, and disability inclusion to address cross-cutting issues. This intersectional approach recognizes that different social identities intersect and impact each other in complex ways, and that social justice movements should be able to address the underlying systemic issues that contribute to inequality and discrimination.

A relatively new element to integrate in the next framework is the promotion of mental health and well-being of LGBTI human rights defenders at the programmatic level. This recognizes that human rights defenders often face significant risks and challenges, including harassment, violence, and burnout, which can negatively impact their mental health and well-being."

Power of Voices partnership

RECLAIM Sustainability!

17 countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America

Organisation Solidaridad West Africa

Interviewee Isaac Gyamfi, Regional Director and Chair of the Partnership Steering Committee

RECLAIM Sustainability! works on amplifying the voices of producers and civil society in the South, in the value chains of cocoa, coffee, tea, palm oil, cotton & textiles, and gold; with a special focus on local food systems in Africa.

“Our partnership is well organised and there is 100% transparency. I would say it is open and equal. As prime contractor we have specific activity-based agreements with each partner, also on budget. This information, also on the prime contractor, is shared among all partners.

Having a Southern or a Northern lead: in my strongest opinion it wouldn't make a difference, as long as the internal management systems are very robust. I'm not against Southern leadership, but the organisations should have these robust systems.

If there is fear for inequality in a partnership you could decide to have a governing charter, to which all consortium members subscribe, addressing what everyone's mandate and accountabilities are. It can be a flexible agreement, open for review before the implementation process commences. It is not so important then, who is the lead once all parties are focused on deliverables and the ultimate goal to be achieved. So far for our partnership, let's go over to the Discussion Paper.

Partos Discussion Paper

It is an interesting document. Relevant issues for working bottom-up and on an equal footing are captured comprehensively. I asked myself: 'what can I add?'

Well, what I find important to consider, in terms of power balance, is the role of national governments in the Global South. How do they perceive the role of the CSOs in their country?

We see that at times governments make inroads into CSOs to use them for their own propaganda, so that CSOs become their mouthpiece. And governments do not always see civil society as a leverage force to fulfil the needs of the people, but instead as a countervailing force that opposes them.

When we did a mapping for the proposal of 'Reclaim Sustainability' we observed the closing of civic spaces, instead of more openings. This is related to the missing appreciation by governments on the contributory role of civil society. There is a fear that CSOs serve the interests of Northern governments and at times private companies, instead rather holding these accountable. We need to work on transparency and build trust with Southern governments to open civic spaces again. I suggest to add that dimension to the Discussion Paper.

Agenda and Priority Setting

The agenda in this kind of funding is generally set by the North. When the funding comes from

a government, it is usually the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ministry defines the agenda from their policy priorities, be it immigration, or topics like trade and investment.

So, although the best preference is to work bottom-up, it will be difficult, even if the Northern organisations ask the CSOs in the South what the agenda should be. In recent times we managed programmes in West Africa with Danish government funding. Overarching goal was to develop stronger sector trade and investment partnerships with the Danish government.

So, the agenda is set. It is not different from the Netherlands. The Ministry looks for opportunities for more Dutch business in Africa, for more export after value is added in the South to raw materials.

Of course, this means that jobs are created. I won't deny that there are these benefits, but it should be realized that the cost of labour is cheaper in West Africa than in the North. The ultimate benefit is, that the Dutch government takes advantage of the low cost of energy and labour in Africa.

This resonates in the subtle thinking of the Global North that we are dealing here with taxpayer's money, even the Northern institutions feel that way: 'you just cannot use my money, I must have a say in this.' In addressing the power balance we need to be mindful of these realities.

It is the long-term external linkage with the Dutch economy that is the key thing. Take the cocoa sector. Over the centuries the Netherlands was involved in cocoa. The biggest cocoa port is in Amsterdam. Every investment of the Dutch government is supposed to make sure that the backward linkage to the Dutch economy is strengthened. Its policy will never be to invariably develop the capacities of the southern countries just for the sake of it. There must be mutual benefits. The economic goal prevails. Despite this background it is still good that the paper calls for Southern agenda setting.

Another thing is that the time needed to elicit input from the people on the ground is always too short, and the cost of consultation is never factored in.

In a new framework the Northern CSOs must first understand and appreciate the Southern CSOs' perspective of what the needs are, thereby creating a level playing field. When the Southern CSOs share their perspective and analysis with the Northern CSOs, it will tell that the Global South has something to add, or that there are assumptions that need to be reviewed. This must be tested and context-specific: if you do an analysis how to intervene in Côte d'Ivoire and how in Ghana, you have to take history into account. The French system of assimilation worked out differently than the British system of devolution of power. The difference is still visible when it comes to the extent to which there is room for opening up civic spaces or to take certain civic actions.

Accountability

Accountability is only paid to the North. There is no balance. It will continue that way until the national governments in the South will also become involved.

This will happen when they begin to appreciate that the development investments to CSOs serve not only Northern interests, but contribute to their own national and local agenda. In our quest to

support local government in contributing value to the role of CSOs, the Southern CSOs, and their fellow Northern CSOs, should come to appreciate to work with the Southern governments, unless it is about certain rights issues where they cannot align.

We need to build that bridge, wherever possible. Northern investors, like the Ministry, should hold the Southern governments accountable on the CSO work, to see if it aligns also with the national and local priorities in the South. There is a dual need for accountability to the North and to the South. Currently, commitment of Southern governments to important Southern CSO activities, like responding to new EU mandatory due diligence on human rights and deforestation, is lacking. But our governments cannot sit running parallel programmes. We, as CSOs, should be at the government table to align efforts. There should be triangulation on accountability, in a shared responsibility of Northern and Southern governments.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Monitoring and Evaluation serve more accountability objectives, but the learning is crucial to inform future planning. We need an institutional learning mechanism to feed these learnings into policy and related actions, not in an ad hoc manner, but very structured.

It could shape the opportunity that governments are brought to the level where they see 'that strong institutions underpin democratic governance', to quote a former US-president. There are now farmers' organisations that exist in name, but not in action. If you want to strengthen the voices of farmers' organisations, you have to engage with governments for support.

Next Policy Framework

Let me summarize the two main topics from my side.

The first one is the importance of an adequate time frame to understand the dynamics in the different political spaces that will be part of the implementation. This analysis will inform the design and should be validated with the net beneficiaries.

The second one is: relate to Southern governments! They are the regulators of political spaces. Pay attention to get their wholeheartedly acceptance of strengthening civil society. We need them to move from rhetoric to real action.

The vertical accountability between Global South and North, can then become cyclical, with national and local governments in the South being connected to northern governments. In this way we can make sure that the needs of the people are addressed.

I understand that it is not always easy for Dutch government to relate to Southern governments, especially in countries where government institutions are weak or only exist in name, but we need to fire on all cylinders. Otherwise, we end up in a lopsided development, which is not sustainable.

You need government to be included. It will need time, patience and effort, but over a time it will come."

Power of Voices partnership

RIGHT2GROW

Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mali, South Sudan, Uganda

Organisation

Centre for Economic Governance and Accountability in Africa (CEGAA), Consortium Member

Interviewee Nhlanhla Ndlovu, Executive Director

RIGHT2GROW is aimed at getting to zero undernutrition, and zero people without access to basic WASH services. The Right2Grow Consortium believes that sustainable progress can only be achieved by working with local communities, especially women and other marginalised groups in a people-centred and community-led approach, with a strong emphasis on the most vulnerable and difficult to reach.

“In a way I felt I was already interviewed, because I agreed with so many of the recommendations in the Partos Discussion Paper. However, it made me also think of some additional suggestions to the Ministry, inspired by my work with CEGAA and the Right2Grow Consortium. I’m happy to share them here.

Agenda and Priority Setting

The view expressed in the paper that the agenda setting seems top-down, resonates with me. The priorities are set at the Dutch government level, then they are cascaded to the global CSOs taking the lead, basically in setting a management structure for the whole programme. And then they arrive at the level of Global South partners, who are asked to come in with specific interventions.

When we, as CEGAA, were invited to become part of the Right2Grow consortium, there were already five global Consortium partners, discussing the conceptualisation. We were the sixth and last Consortium partner, and the only Global South partner.

We were then given the opportunity to make our input to see how we could strengthen the Consortium. Given our special niche on budget accountability, it was easy for us to fit in, and say: ‘well, this is missing in the Consortium and this is what we can contribute’.

Soon we were also able to inform other discussions, and that’s how we became part of the entire proposal development cycle. We were also involved in country workshops to conceptualise with the partners, so that their country priorities were reflected in the proposal.

So, despite the top-down start we could have considerable input.

Still, the agenda and priority setting should be initiated by the national and local organisations in the Global South, after which the funding agencies should respond. Now there was already a box created within which you had to fit. In that respect I actually wondered if the Dutch government could involve its Embassies more, for example to get the Embassies to identify local issues, and then make sure that the policy framework considers these issues brought in by the Embassies. It

could also reduce the bureaucracy and flatten the hierarchy, and allow the Embassies to be more in charge. Stakeholders at the local level could take the decisions. The global CSOs could take on another role, as is also mentioned in the Discussion Paper. The most appropriate global CSOs could be invited to give technical support, where needed. I also like the idea that they will take up activities in the North and then become local CSOs in their country, just like the CSOs in the South.

Accountability

I would like to add some reflections on the need for accountability and the importance that this need is widely understood and recognised. Reflecting on the 'shift the power' concept, we all would say that all partners should share ownership, and that everyone should raise their voice in decision making. However, we can share as much power as we want, but at the end of the day, we need to be compliant and accountable to each other. This is important, because we use tax money from the Dutch population and we have to account for each and every cent that has been given to us.

If we don't account to each other, we will fail to account to the donor. So, accountability needs to start from within. It needs to be an ongoing discussion: do we address the communities' needs, are we playing our respective roles well to bring change in children's needs, is our spending worth the outputs, are we contributing? By asking ourselves these questions, we focus also intentionally on the downward accountability to the children and communities with whom we are working.

It is important in terms of understanding accountability, that partners get the skills to analyse budgets, also public budgets, to develop sound budget advocacy messages, connect with budget decision makers and even bring on board communities, so that community members can start talking the budget language. In Right2Grow we pay explicitly attention to budget advocacy. We also have a task team in the global governance structure that looks specifically at this. Our country partners are leading, but it is our responsibility as global or Consortium partners that we deliver on the objectives we set for budget advocacy in the programme. So, we keep track with our country partners. If necessary, we provide additional trainings and support to them.

There is this belief that you have to be highly educated to talk about budget, but that's not true. Our objective is to demystify the budget and break it down, saying: if you are able to buy a bread on a daily basis, you are already funding government expenditure. And because you are funding government, you can ask government to account for the money you paid. People say 'we didn't realise, we thought government is just doing us a favour'. No, government money is also coming from your money, so you can demand that it is used according to your needs as well.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Five years is not long, we need to make inroads on where within the five years we can start some change. It shows why M&E is so important, because we need to take well-informed decisions. And you need a consortium member to take the lead, be in control and pull everything together. In our case it is The Hunger Project. Additionally, we now have a second facilitator at the global level in my organisation, to work together with the facilitator of the Consortium lead.

We need to be sure that all the action is coordinated and that everybody is on the same page, be it at the global or the local level. The two co-facilitators have responsibility at the global level, but should not interfere at the country level, unless there are impediments that have to be solved. It can be really hard to coordinate, facilitate and make sure that people account. So, you need strict rules for reporting on the progress you make.

Next Policy Framework

It would be great if the Dutch ministry could have a clear understanding of the issues at stake at the local level, before constructing the Policy Framework.

A suggestion could be that the Ministry would be informed by the different Embassies around the globe. And the local organisations could add their specifics to this.

Anyway, the Ministry should be flexible in their understanding of how the issues are defined by the local organisations. Maybe the Dutch government could also consider to have discussions at bilateral level with the different governments in the Global South to be able to finetune their policy decisions.

In relation to advocacy, I wonder if the Dutch government is funding advocacy with an assumption that the governments will be able to respond with policy development, budgeting and service delivery. The Ministry may not recognise that some governments may be weak themselves. We are developing advocacy messages, we want to see the change, but government may have no capacity to respond adequately.

In that sense, is there a way that the Dutch government could also start investing towards capacity building for government? At the end of the day a strong government is better able to accommodate the needs, voiced by civil society.

I say this, based on our South African experiences, where we have a programme on financial capacity building for provincial governments, funded by the US government. They recognised the weak financial management systems within our government to actually manage HIV funding. It was realised that government needed help as well, and there was the recognition that civil society can assist in building that government capacity. So, as CEGAA we have run this programme now for 11 years. Government sees the improvements and appreciates the independent support.

So, in terms of demand and supply, our civil society partners are marching in the streets, demanding more treatment for HIV and TB, knowing that there is money and knowing we have done the budget analyses. Simultaneously, we work on the supply side of the government, enhancing their skills to analyse and manage the budgets. We have to balance both. As we are pulling for advocacy on one side, we also can support the service delivery part on the government side. Then, at the end of the day everybody is happy.

We've also seen in the Right2Grow programme how this brings openings for change in South Sudan. Given the political situation, our partners said: 'there is no way we will get access to the governments' budgets. The first question from government will be 'who do we think we are to scrutinise their budgets'. So, we had to convince our civil society partners first to make them

aware of the advantages of doing budget advocacy and train them, before convincing government officials themselves.

Surprise, surprise: South Sudan government and parliamentarians loved the training programme. They invite our budget advocates to go and sit in parliament and listen when the budgets are delivered. Then we are invited to analyse their budgets and give them an objective view of how the budget is performing.

So, government is responding and wants it to be done. It shows that we should constantly look for opportunities to strengthen civil society, also by relating to the government, as important stakeholder.”

Power of Voices partnership

SHE LEADS

Ethiopia, Ghana, Jordan, Lebanon, Liberia, Kenya, Mali, Sierra Leone, Uganda

Organisation FEMNET, Consortium Member

Interviewee Esther Nyawira, Network Coordinator, SHE LEADS Pan-Africa Programme

SHE LEADS aims to increase sustained influence of girls and young women on decision making and the transformation of gender norms in formal and informal institutions, by working through three interrelated domains. They are the civil society domain: the enhancement of collective action of girls and young women in a gender-responsive civil society, the socio-cultural domain: support by increased acceptance of positive social gender norms, and the institutional domain: enabling meaningful participation of girls and young women in political and decision making institutions.

Participating in the Consortium

"I think She Leads is a good programme. We are with four organisations in the Consortium, three Dutch-based organisations and our organisation, FEMNET, as the only African one. All of us are represented at every level of the governance structure. Our approach, as FEMNET, is different, and the other Consortium partners have understood that.

I must say that the Steering Committee is very helpful. They really take on a neutral stand when it comes to solving challenges, and they listen. That is important for our collaboration. The governance structure allows us the autonomy to make decisions, there is no micromanagement from the Steering Committee. It enables a very adaptive and flexible programming. You have the space to say that something doesn't work, because the context is different. I really appreciate that.

One of the best things that happened when we were designing the programme was working together on the proposal. We were able to bring our FEMNET implementing partners on board. One of these partners, is Polycom Development Project, based in Nairobi. They said they felt so empowered and privileged, sitting at the same decision making table with international development partners. It is important to involve implementing partners in these processes. I would recommend that every Consortium partner would do so.

Another thing during the proposal writing that I'm really proud of, is that we tried to accommodate everyone in agreeing on the principles that will guide us. We agreed to be guided by the African feminist charter, even though the other Consortium partners had to learn on this.

Southern leadership

The fact that each country network in the She Leads programme is led by a young woman gives power to young African women. It is also a way to actually visualise that 'Southern-led' is a young woman leading from the South. That really works. It has been very helpful, that we are actually able to hold people accountable and say 'if you don't work with girls and young women, we can-

not listen to you. Or 'because you work with girls and young women, it doesn't mean that you can speak for them'.

It is good that a Southern partner like FEMNET came on board in the Consortium. Still, when I think about this promotion of Southern-led leadership and equal partnership, it feels a bit tokenistic. We have four Consortium partners and only one is Southern-led. What does that mean? Is it to tick the box? And do the international organisations really understand what it means for the relationship with their own implementing partners? I wonder if all implementing partners are aware of the power they hold.

When you're the only one from the Global South in the consortium, as we are, it is not difficult to see that Southern-led footing comes with power issues. Besides being the only African organisation, we are also a feminist organisation, while the other three are child rights organisations. Sometimes you feel like the bad one, always having a different perspective.

In the Consortium it was decided that Consortium members should lead on specific countries. The Dutch partners took the lead in all the countries, except for Mali. As FEMNET we have the regional lead, and we are leading in Mali. Mali has a very difficult context, and it is the only Francophone country.

And there is the funding. The Southern organisation got the lowest budget, while implementing in all the countries. In that sense you can question the equality in the partnership. When you are supposed to implement like any other, it's definitely not possible.

To have the change, the approach needs to be the other way around. Then it will work.

Partos Discussion Paper

If the agenda for a Framework like Power of Voices was set by us, it would be different, because we have different dynamics than you in the Global North. Our priorities are different, our language is different and our ways of working are different. The entire context is different.

A recurring theme in this discussion is about capacity. For instance, when you look at the accountability and M&E processes, the capacity to take on these processes should be there. As a coordinator I would say that 80% of the accountability framework is okay. However, that is because I have knowledge, I understand when they ask about the targets, the indicators and so on.

What is not understood, is that the implementing organisations, to be accountable, also need to have the capacities, but they don't have them. If the M&E framework could be simplified, it would be much better. It is a heavy burden, and the reporting sometimes feels very repetitive. And what happens after reporting with the recommendations and the lessons learned? Also, we report to the donor, but shouldn't we report more to the community?

I think it would be good to do some co-creation on what reporting should be. We now look at the management of the programme from a very technical perspective. If we took the angle of social change, reporting would have a different meaning, because the community would also be involved. The community will ask 'what did you do, and what happened?'

Regarding learning, I think we could reduce the work load as well. Now we usually have a separate learning agenda, but do we really need it? Our human resources are limited. I think we are learning all the way during our annual planning, doing the midterm review, and in our daily practice. We document many of these lessons. But I feel there is too much pressure to have it as a separate activity. Let's not have a learning agenda to tick the box.

At the same time, it would be good to find mechanisms so that funders learn from us.

Southern leads in the consortiums

The idea of Southern organisations leading in the consortium is a good thing. I am in favour. Let me paraphrase Maya Angelou saying 'I'm a feminist. I've been a female for a long time now. It'd be stupid not to be on my own side'.

However, again, the issue of capacity plays a role here. It will be there for a very long time, as long as we won't address it. But if we put the money where our mouth is, things will work. We can find points of synergy.

How many subgranted organisations does the funder know? Probably not all. But when you bring together the subgranted organisations, they will bring many synergies, they will see who can do what, and be part of this process of leading from the South. We can also learn from other programmes focused on leading from the South, funded by organisations like African Women Development Fund. So, we may not find a 100% capacity, but at least we can strengthen it gradually. It can be done if we are willing to make the changes and if resourcing is made available. We understand that it comes with a lot of responsibilities, but that is what leadership is all about.

The question is, is it worth the responsibilities? I've been reflecting a lot on the issues of consortiums, asking myself, are the advantages more than the disadvantages? The power dynamics are considerable, but it is also where the money is, so you have to be realistic.

Next Policy Framework

The Dutch ministry needs to listen to civil society in the Global South, particularly to girls and women's rights organisations, movements and networks in all their diversity. The principle of Southern leadership is really important. Now, we are discussing it and thinking about it. The next step will be to action it. It will need discussions from various angles, like the composition of consortiums in terms of Southern and Northern organisations, and the budget division.

I would also like to advise the Dutch ministry that in the next Framework ample attention should be given to community-led organisations. Without community-led organisations you cannot do anything. They should actually set the agenda.

But the other side of the coin is that many of these community-led organisations do not have the capacity. FEMNET once worked with an EU grant called 'Strengthened Women's Network for Greater Impact'(STITCH) . Their programme was purely aimed at strengthening the capacities of these women's rights organisations. It makes me think for the next Framework that, even if we can continue our work to ensure that there is systemic influence of girls and young women in formal and non-formal institutions, there should also be a component of capacity strengthening in

the Framework. If we would include strengthening institutional capacity as a key element, it would really help to action leading from the Global South.”

Power of Voices partnership

Sustainable Textile Initiative Together for Change (STITCH)

Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam

Organisation Cividep, Consortium Member

Interviewee Gopinath Parakuni, Director of Strategy

STITCH envisages workplaces where workers rights are respected, where their voices are heard, and they can be represented. As a partnership we will amplify workers' voices and drive global change by convening and aligning national and international supply chain stakeholders toward our shared goal.

"Let me start with some general comments on the Partos Discussion Paper. I think it reflects a fair assessment of the challenges and problems. It must be taken into account, however, that the paper is written from the context of The Netherlands. The Netherlands is one country and has its limitations in terms of international relations. Within these limitations there is the requirement to keep relationships stable, especially in the economic sectors. So, given all the limitations, it reflects the possibilities for mutual learning and mutual interest quite well.

When you allow me to give some suggestions, I would encourage the working group to add a deeper layer to the Paper, in which you explain a bit more on the concepts you use, for instance about 'cooperation on an equal footing', 'shifting the power' etcetera. It will bring you to the political and especially cultural dimensions of civil society. In the context of the Global South these dimensions are key. The Paper hardly mentions them. An example: when I take into account the cultural dimension in the context of, in my case, India, I see a society that is among other things characterised by a caste system that entails inequality. I don't think the concept of caste is clearly understood in Europe, which is understandable. It has never been a European phenomenon. It is especially found in South Asia and it is not easy to understand how it operates today. But when you want to address the shrinking space in civil society you need a common understanding of such a concept. Faith and politics more and more come together. It is a challenge to democracy.

So, what I mean is that you cannot set the agenda here when you don't know what is going on in other countries. The Dutch ministry and Dutch civil society have to understand the complexity of the context to be an effective partner. Especially cultural context is important. This could have been more worked out in the Paper

Agenda and Priority Setting

The Discussion Paper mentions the shrinking space of civil society, but many people don't realise the practical part of it. Take India again. If agenda setting would take place from India itself, there might be an immediate problem. In fact, the support of civil society in Asian countries has to be completely revamped. The mode of funding has to change. In Cividep we decided that our structure should be largely free of foreign funding in three or four years. Meanwhile we will work to

raise money from charities in India: people in the cultural field, academics, liberal Indians, even in business, who are concerned about what is happening to the rights of workers and communities being marginalised. It will be hard.

Participating in the Partnership

In the STITCH partnership we have a broad common understanding of the equality issues in relation to the workers and suppliers. In many organisations in India the diversity of the ethnic groups is not represented in the staff composition. In STITCH we pay explicit attention to it. It's a way to balance the power.

In the STITCH Consortium Fairwear Foundation, a Dutch-based organisation, is the lead. They have a high awareness of the importance of working on an equal footing, and the need to correct imbalances. That is important. I know them well, because I am the first non-European in their Board. And my colleague from the Indian team is going to join their management team. These are serious attempts to balance the relations.

Where this is most effectively done in the Consortium, is in the allocation of funding and in the governance structure of the Consortium. Taking the difference in purchasing power and value of money into account, I'm pretty sure that the allocation to my organisation, and to the other Southern Consortium member, CDI in Vietnam, is really fair. I have absolutely no ground for complaining. In terms of the governance, all six Consortium members, four from Europe, two from Asia, are equally represented in the Steering Committee. So, at the highest level we are able to have the discussions and do the decision making and steering of the programme together. That's very fair.

In the beginning of the programme, we had some difficulty in reaching synergy between the work done in the Global North and in the Global South. And synergy is of course important in these partnerships. The agenda was on the 'human rights due diligence law'. From the European perspective it was very important, for us it was also important, but not implementable, because the law has no legal validity in India. For us ultimately the Indian laws count. But since it became clear that the brand company policies can be influenced by the human right due diligence law, European partners put resources there. And it is also good for us, because they need input from us, especially concerning the supplier companies who are established here in India and other southern countries. Before, the brand companies in many cases failed to verify many aspects of the working conditions in the supplier factories. The human rights due diligence law, however, gives the European entities more power and makes the brand companies more active towards the suppliers. As a Consortium, we could increase our synergy by practising constant exchange between the thematic groups who work on this. In this group we discuss together what is the right thing to work on. There is a lot of scope now with the guidance of human rights due diligence, which makes our cooperation very meaningful. It also offers an opportunity to go deeper and pay attention to things like gender disparity.

Accountability, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

We experience the monitoring and accountability requirements of the programme as heavy, but it is a burden we have to carry. It is necessary and efficient. I've seen many NGOs collapsing, be-

cause of a lack of accountability. Trust is necessary and very good, but in terms of resources there needs to be accountability. It makes us stronger in the end.

The structure of reporting to the Ministry is the right structure. Inside the programme, between the six partners, there is considerable flexibility to refocus, increase and decrease, so that is not a problem at all. You need a structure, otherwise you go into all directions and the synergy is lost. You should keep the strength of everyone and try together to make the most critical change possible. Then a strong reporting structure helps.

We have a balanced partnership in which we learn from each other. We are, as Cividep, experts on labour rights. Others may learn from us. At the moment we are maybe not asked enough on our other capacities, but developments like the climate change make us globally very required to work together. We learn together in the partnership on human rights issues. We translate it also in our work processes. As Cividep, we are perhaps an exception as an Indian organisation, because our long tradition of working with Dutch organisations has made us increasingly adopt a 'poldermodel' way of taking decisions, instead of deciding in a top-down manner, which is more common in India. Although I must say that the younger, educated people, who live much more in a global reality, have a more egalitarian view of things.

Next Policy Framework

A more precise understanding of the cultural and political context is key. You need a deep understanding of the context, especially culturally and politically. Likewise, you need a deep insight into what kind of categories stakeholders there are.

Related to that, we should be aware that our capacity to influence developments from civil society is very little. In the cultural and political context of society, we are the weakest. I don't think it is wise to only invest in the weak, when you want to address the shrinking space in civil society. So, the Ministry should also be asked to invest relatedly in the strong party which is the government.

I'm sure that when you start to work out the concept of 'shrinking space', going very deep into the cultural and political elements that play a role, everything that is needed for a next Policy Framework, will come to the surface."

Power of Voices partnership

STRENGTHENING CIVIL COURAGE (SCC)

Burundi, DRC, Ethiopia, Iraq, Kenya, Lebanon, Palestinian Territories, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Yemen; Sahel Region: Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger

Organisation DefendDefenders, Alliance Member

Interviewee Memory Bandera, Director of Programmes and Administration

The main objectives of the SCC Alliance are to protect and strengthen civic space, pursue gender equality, support activists and youth leaders working on peace and human rights, and push for international regulation of external stress factors which facilitate or exacerbate violent conflict.

“DefendDefenders holds a track record of 18 years in providing emergency protection support to human rights defenders (HRDS) at risk. We collaborate with 26 national coalitions of human right defenders on the continent. Regionally, we work with the African Union and the regional blocks. At global level we bring the voices of the national coalitions through our own office in Geneva at the table of the Human Right Council. It is part of what we contribute to the SCC Alliance.

Local ownership and equal partnership

Local ownership and power dynamics were from the beginning discussed in our partnership. As part of the proposal, the SCC Alliance developed a vision on and approach to local ownership – building on discussions with partners in previous years. Since then, an agenda for local ownership is (slowly) taking shape. The use of the concept ‘local ownership’ is not without debate and some prefer ‘working towards a more equal partnership’. Either way, we seek to address power (in)balances in our partnerships and aim to improve the cooperation in order to have a bigger positive impact with our collective effort.

To be honest, the SCC is one of the few alliances we’ve been part of, that has been very transparent and in which the programme was developed with input from everyone. You know, there are times when you are invited to be part of a consortium, and they tell you what role to play, what percentage you will implement and how much you get, depending on the work you do. That isn’t the case in in this Consortium.

We appreciate that we have ownership over our own work and can relate to our local partners in our own way. As DefendDefenders we have an approach in which we identify a local partner who indicates the areas where they need support. And then we support them in those areas, but we don’t hold their hands completely.

The partners come with their own structures and we only come in when they actually need support. We did also some work for our Alliance partner Amnesty International, to identify partners for them. They walked step by step with the local partners. So, the way we establish our relationships with local partners, is slightly different. And other partnerships we are in, all of them take

different forms. The variety is not only through the partnerships, also each country has its own context. But as DefendDefenders we always try to stay away from a relationship where we are on top and tell them what to do. We do a lot of mentoring, for example by giving them examples from other countries, support brainstorming, so that they come up with their homegrown initiatives.

What we have agreed upon internally as an organization, is that whatever consortium we enter into, we try as much as possible to maintain our structure, because it will help us to stay within our mandate and to do things that align with our strategy.

Southern leads in the Partnerships

When you ask me if I think Southern organisations should take the lead position in these partnerships, I personally say 'yes', if we were in an ideal world. But to be honest, I don't think we would have taken the lead, if there had been the opportunity.

It is quite complex to put the proposal together and manage it. We have gained experience in this field, we took the lead in an EU-consortium for Burundi, but when you look at the magnitude of the SCC programme, I don't think we would have felt comfortable.

Southern organisations who have the capacity should definitely take the lead and run with it. But when the capacity is not there, consortia like SCC are very handy, because everyone can bring in their particular expertise and you end up in a solid programme, where you can benefit from each other without stretching yourself into things you don't have the expertise.

Agenda and Priority Setting

It is key to note that the agenda and priority setting for the Global North and Global South vary because of resources, coverage, allies and organizational mandate. In a scenario where the Northern partner has limited to no contacts in the Global South, there is a need to consider a southern CSO with a wider coverage and expertise in the region, to act as the entry point to the community, since they have the direct contact to the end users.

Risk

Given the volatile and complex operating environments in the Global South, there are a lot of uncertainties especially in war and conflict. Often it may be difficult for the Northern CSOs to comprehend the magnitude of risk faced by Southern CSOs: it's one thing to picture it and another to experience it. Yet on the other hand the Global South CSOs have no idea on the risks that the Global North CSOs experience.

To respond to the environment and ensure the safety and security of HRDs at risk, the flexibility and adaptability of the programme is relevant. In making programme decisions on the spot, DefendDefenders consults with the local partners, the national coalitions, across the project countries and doesn't have to seek approvals of PAX, the Dutch-based lead partner. This has enabled the project to remain relevant even amidst volatile operating environments.

Risk management goes back to the capacity of organisations. In another project where we had the lead, we worked with partners who didn't have all their systems yet in place. Yet, we wanted to make sure that they could actually implement and use the grants responsibly. Here it is very

important that organisations like ours, help to realise other organisations to develop their own systems over time. Then when a donor comes in, they can show they are able to take on the risk management. When this is not done, donors always approach the same Southern organisations that already have the systems in place, while many others are left out.

Accountability

Two observations: firstly, the Global South accounts to the Global North. Who does the Global North account to and is this information shared with the Global South? Secondly, accountability protocols designed for the Global North may not favour the Global South CSOs. The interpretation of accountability varies, and the systems of accountability are different. For example, a service provider at village level may never deliver an up-to-date receipt for a service delivered. But a receipt of payment form designed by a CSO could suffice as accountability. Therefore, different parameters of accountability need to be explored. This will mean that in an ideal world, the Global North would have to be open for alternatives.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

As much as all these processes are relevant to the project cycle, they are time-consuming. The manpower is spread thin, as people also must implement the project.

And some processes take extra time. The compulsory basket indicators came when we were already on our way with the proposal, developing the indicators. They mainly speak to advocacy. For some Southern CSOs, advocacy as set in the agenda of the Ministry, might not be a priority, thus we run a risk for failure to document what is relevant given the vast organizational niches. We as DefendDefenders, were able to align to the basket indicators, because we do a lot of advocacy as defined by the Ministry, but some partners do protection work and don't necessarily speak out. If advocacy is done differently, it makes it not easy to relate to these indicators. Being in an alliance can then help. We use our Geneva office to support Alliance partners to do advocacy with us. So, by complementing each other we are able to align to the basket indicators. The learning however is that the Ministry should communicate things like basket indicators earlier in the process.

Concerning our internal learning in the Alliance, we established a learning platform. PAX as the lead partner organises sessions where local partners can share and document best practices for work. It facilitates learning across the board between Alliance partners and local partners.

Next Policy Framework

Preserving civic space is key. If the space is not there, everything else, also advocacy, becomes difficult. The space should be there for people to do their work, with freedom to speak on human rights, freedom to associate, etcetera. But we know that the space is not there in some countries, some spaces are closed. So, a vital question to answer in a next Framework will be what we can do to open up the closed spaces, like Djibouti or Eritrea.

Another key issue is the shift towards localisation. Its importance cannot be overstated. When communities feel that their voices are heard and that they have agency in shaping their environment, they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership and pride in their community. This in

turn leads to increased civic engagement, social cohesion, and overall wellbeing. Localisation is an important component of effective and sustainable development both in the Global South and North. It is particularly critical in the Global South, where historical power imbalances and complex challenges require a more collaborative and community-driven approach to development.

Localisation is not a one-size-fits-all solution either, it requires ongoing engagement and collaboration with the community to ensure that efforts are respectful, inclusive, and effective. There is a need for more investment in local organisations and actors to strengthen their capacity and ensure they have the resources and support they need to lead development initiatives. Additionally, there is a need for greater collaboration between local and international actors to ensure that initiatives are aligned with broader development goals.

In some cases, localisation is treated as a checkbox to be ticked off rather than a genuine effort to engage with the community and build meaningful connections. This leads to tokenism and superficial engagement, rather than genuine efforts to build trust and collaboration. There are also unintended consequences if not done thoughtfully. When localisation is implemented in this way, it can perpetuate inequalities and reinforce power imbalances between different groups within a community.

Finally, localisation is not just about giving local communities more agency. It is also about recognizing the value of local knowledge and expertise. Local actors often have a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their communities, their needs, the challenges they face and the socio-political context in which they operate. By leveraging this knowledge, the localization movement enables the development of more relevant, effective, and sustainable solutions.”

Power of Voices partnership

VOICES FOR JUST CLIMATE ACTION (VCA)

Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, Kenya, Tunisia, Zambia, Indonesia

Organisation SouthSouthNorth, Consortium Member

Interviewee Josh Ogada, Head of Knowledge Management, Member Joined Programme Team VCA

VOICES FOR JUST CLIMATE ACTION presents a fair, just and solution-oriented agenda that integrates social and economic rights into climate action. Together – alliance partners and local civil society organisations - we create a democratic playing field and amplify the inventive local solutions to spur a broader development. By doing so, we are set to shape a new reality for people and nature.

“VOICES FOR JUST CLIMATE ACTION works in seven countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia. The Programme Team supports the organisations at regional level. Let me begin by saying that the Discussion Paper resonated well in the Team, although there is little reference to Southern-based academics in the paper. Authenticity of voice is hugely important. In our partnership it is central: give voice where it needs to be given.

Before we dive into the Paper some general observations: you noticed rather late that there could have been more response from the Global South. If you had revised your tactics earlier, more had been possible. We appreciate the effort made in having the interview, but it is only one voice from VCA. A multiplicity of voices from the Global South is extremely important. You could have had more.

Another observation: we wondered how the Dutch Ministry organises the consultation on the new framework. A consultation process should be transparent and it comes with a certain level of responsibility: do you have answers to all the questions, and are you willing to answer all the questions? What if you get robust, challenging questions from the Global South? Is the Ministry willing to answer them? Next to the Ministry's international development policy there is its foreign policy, by nature having clear objectives from an enlightened self-interest that may or may not be at variance with what the Global South wants.

The Ministry should give clarity about that. The Global South does not expect more from the Dutch government than the Dutch government is willing to give.

And finally, we should realise that while focusing on this Dutch Policy Paper, the debate is much wider, it touches upon socioeconomic relations, historical perspectives, the legacy of colonialism and continued dysfunctional relationships between the Global North and the Global South. We might be on the sharp end of the stick in terms of this Policy Framework, but the global discourse is broader. So, we address here no global solutions, because the Dutch ministry is just one funder among many.

Partos Discussion Paper

We found strong resonance in the choice made to highlight the elements of Agenda and Priority Setting, Risk, Accountability and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning.

Agenda and Priority Setting

Upside down agenda setting: yes, but how realistic is it, given the flow of resources and the importance of a political perspective in aid policies?

It gets a bit messy when strategic (geopolitical) assistance gets mixed with benevolent aid. Think of Tunisia, one of the countries we work: financing development to avoid migration influx to Europe. In such a context it is difficult to develop a country programme aimed at expanding civic space.

Likewise, many times VCA consulted Dutch Embassies to align objectives and work together. And then we met political and economic interests, that didn't match with our civil society strengthening approach or were even contradictory. No meeting of minds. We need to bridge that gap. When the Ministry rolls out this framework there needs to be the ability to sing from the same tune across the board.

We agree with Partos that a next Framework should go beyond the advocacy role. The Framework should allow multiple roles for civil society, think of civic education, being service delivery. We cannot do without, it's key in creating an enabling environment on the ground for programmes like VCA.

We endorse that the time frame should go beyond five years, and be extended to ten years. We are now in year 3 and at country level things are only starting to cook. But the pressure is high to already start consolidating results. Realistically speaking, in five years we can only lay a sound locally-driven ground work for the period after.

Risk

We need greater clarity from the Ministry on the risk it's willing to take. It relates directly to the level of flexibility in which we can for instance work with small grants for the unusual suspects, who are key to our work. It will free up the process.

Apart from the donor role there is also a partner role for the Ministry to take up, when risks are concerned. The Ministry should be prepared, when developing the new Framework, that there is a risk that harm is caused when citizen rights are claimed, because there is a reason why civic space is constrained. The Ministry should find that out, so that the risk is known. Think of indigenous human rights defenders in Brazil, they're extremely vulnerable. So, what are then the building blocks that need to be in place to avoid harm? Will the Dutch government come in at intergovernmental level when there is a risk of harm? It should be part of the partnership.

Accountability

A tough nut to crack. We need to build real experiences on the level of accountability in which we go from a patron-client relationship to an equal partner relationship.

After five years we will have real experiences to inform the level of accountability that can really support us. And that is not limited to tax payers in The Netherlands, but includes accountability of

the Southern CSOs to their populations on what was meant to achieve. We have to find a balance between that duality. It will greatly impact the relations.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

We share the concern summarized in 'are we learning for reporting, for the sake of accountability, demonstrating 'value for money', or are we actually learning for the benefits of the regional teams?' There should be joint decisionmaking on monitoring, evaluation and learning between the Ministry and the Consortium.

Overall, we appreciate the optimistic tone of the document. It resonates space for change, the premise that the Dutch ministry is receptive, in short: hope.

Next Policy Framework

What should be central in a next Policy Framework on civil society strengthening? That's a difficult question. It should reflect a broader perception of the Global South: rich in knowledge, culture, business opportunities, rising GDP etcetera. Nowadays the overarching sense is that the South is underdeveloped. That's not a helpful perspective.

Let the Global South define the perspective for themselves and how they see solutions to their problems. And then they can say: "how can you help us with the solutions we are already aware of?" That is where partnership comes in.

We also need a more nuanced definition of civil society. CSOs represent civil society in varying degrees. Important is how they represent their constituencies. We still need a lot of introspection around that.

These suggestions align a bit with the process we are currently in at VCA. It centres around the question of how we are performing when it comes to promote leadership from the Global South, and what action is needed from us, also in the future beyond VCA. We can have this discussion, because there is a deep sense of mutual respect and honesty in our Consortium.

Our underlying question is how much we still revert to business as usual. I refer here to the programmes we run as individual organisations. Is our traditional way of working mitigating true leadership from the Global South? Nowhere in the accountability chain to the Northern funders of these programmes, Global Southern leadership comes in. What are our blind spots here? We never confronted ourselves with these questions.

We need to work better to promote leadership by Southern voices from the ground. And we have to come from far. There is this historical context where a lot of damage was done. It affects how we behave in the present. You can compare it to the 'kicked puppy syndrome' in the aid space. Even when the puppy isn't kicked anymore, it keeps behaving as if it is. Compare it to people, like in my country Kenya, specialising in writing proposals for Northern funders. They exactly know the donor language and what boxes need to be ticked.

How do you undo that? We shouldn't go with this system, but try to dismantle it. But you have to go deep. It is about honesty to be clear to funders what the claims of people at local level are. Not telling funders things that make them happy, so they can give money.

We suggest that in a next Framework time and resources are dedicated to pay attention to these 'syndromes' in order to realise a level playing field of equal partnership.

Maybe a next Framework on Civil Society Strengthening should entirely be devoted to the issue of capability strengthening of key actors, from the idea that civil society actors should be strengthened to do in an optimal way what they envisage to do. In a way it's about unlocking opportunities for change, that didn't materialise up till now."

Power of Voices partnership

WE ARE ABLE!

Burundi, DR Congo, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda

Organisation African Disability Forum, Consortium Member

Interviewee Shuaib Chalklen, Executive Director

WE ARE ABLE! helps people with a disability achieve a sustainable, fully-fledged place in their community, so that they have greater food security.

“By introduction I would like to share some thoughts on the budget of the partnership. The funding we received from the Dutch ministry was €34 million. That is a substantial amount of money. We are with six partners in the Consortium: five Dutch organisations and one African organisation, the African Disability Forum (ADF), my organisation. ADF received 13% of the budget, that is €4.47 million.

This amount has been a game changer for ADF. We were able to grow the organisation and we have been very well supported by lead organisation ZOA, to develop for example our financial systems and to practice subgranting. So, we subgrant and we work with our €4.47million in all six countries. A consequence for us as ADF, is that we don't have much budget left for the actual running of our organisation.

Shift the Power

The financial control is in The Netherlands, with ZOA as the lead applicant and responsible for the reporting and overall management of the programme. The value that ADF brings to the Consortium is our knowledge of disability and human rights, and our broad network of grassroots organisations of people with disabilities.

Our understanding of the concept of 'shift the power' and what we understand from our partners in the Netherlands is, that it means shifting decision making power to the partners in the South. This can be a bit confusing as it may take different forms, such as ADF assuming roles of heading working groups, for example the Advocacy or Communications Working Group, and so on. It implies additional work within the same budget framework while assuming more responsibility. The term 'shift the power' in this context is also confusing. Can it not be called 'shift of decision making power', so that it becomes clear what power exactly is being shifted?

I think that our contribution to the Consortium has not been properly valued. It has made me wonder how the Consortium members are engaged. I think it has partly to do with the fact that they have this label of professionalism with well-functioning systems and longstanding experience, while we are a new, starting organisation. To give an example, at the time we signed the contract we only had two staff members, now we have 25. Nevertheless, we worked already with

different donors like Norad, SIDA, Handicapped International, Mastercard Foundation. So, we were able to grow in a very short time.

Why do I have the impression that our contribution was undervalued? Over the last two years, there were recurring moments in which some colleagues of the partner organisations rather judgmentally hinted at our capacity being 'inadequate'. I find such an attitude difficult to understand given the narrative of 'shift the power' that is adopted in their documents. It makes me wonder if 'shift the power' is what they truly pursue. Or is it because the Dutch government developed a new policy? Do all Consortium partners believe in localisation of development?

The Consortium seems to be foremost charity-driven, but ADF is not a charity organisation. We are a human rights-based development organisation. Maybe that is why we approach the concept of 'shift the power' differently.

All in all, it makes me a bit uneasy, because I don't know if we are on the same page.

Risk

We have flexibility in the programme, which is good. We had to examine how we would focus on empowering the voices of people with disabilities, so that they are able to motivate and lobby their governments regarding food security, access to land, etcetera. We realised we needed more resourcing into bonding, upright voice and that definitely has worked well.

Accountability

We do a lot of learning in terms of developing the organisational capacity and management. We manage our funds correctly without incidents of mismanagement, disburse to six countries and submit our financial reports to The Netherlands. It has been a steep learning curve as an organisation. ZOA has been very supportive. When they realised that we don't have the same capacity and resources, they just stepped in. We appreciated that very much.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

In terms of M&E, we are part of the Consortium M&E Working Group, in which we work on reporting. However, as an organisation we don't have an M&E officer. We simply don't have the resources.

It's a strange reality that donors require that you, as a new organisation, have an M&E officer, without offering a budget line for such a position. How should we pay for it? We receive funding for programme activities, not for staff. Donors also talk about sustainability after the programme, but then you need a fundraiser, which we don't have either.

So, I think that organisations in the programmes must be empowered and capacitated to do the M&E and the learning. It must be not assumed. These capacity gaps should be identified at the beginning during an inception period, which was missing for our programme. We didn't even know each other.

Next Policy Framework

What is very necessary in Africa is having a voice to hold authorities to account, and to engage them. African civil society still has to develop more, we need social capital. Democracy cannot

function without civil society involvement. It is the same for human rights. Human rights, it is a local thing. It's how people live and have their rights respected, as an individual, a family, a community. Without that foundation you cannot have democracy or good governance.

Civil society has to challenge the capacity of the state, for instance to provide services so that we are not reliant forever on aid. The Dutch ministry could consider to be strategically supporting civil society, by engaging with the regional development blocks and the economic communities like SADC and EAC, and with the African Union. Stronger state capacity also strengthens these blocks and the African Union.”

Interviews

**SRHR Fund
partnerships**

SRHR Fund partnership

BREAK FREE!

Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Sudan, Zambia

Organisation SRHR Africa Trust, Consortium Member

Interviewee Jonathan Gunthorp, Executive Director

BREAK FREE! aims for adolescents to make their own free and informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health in order to combat teenage pregnancy and child, early and forced marriage, and in some countries female genital mutilation and cutting

Participating in the Consortium

“How are power relations going in the Consortium? Current governance and decision making are well-balanced, with some good re-balancing having taken place since the Consortium began. Our organisation joined the Consortium somewhat inexperienced in this form of partnership, and, at the beginning, we said ‘yes’ to everything advocated by the initiating partner. In hindsight, we should have said ‘no’, or, ‘instead let’s do it like this’ more often. We don’t have any sense of this being deliberate; rather, it’s a symptom of Southern NGOs feeling fragile and insecure in the current funding climate where Southern civil society has been hollowed out; most core funding has disappeared; and civil society space is under constant attack. ‘Survival-chasing’ by indigenous NGOs undermines agency vis-a-vis ODA agencies via partners from the North.

Additionally, in Northern-initiated programmes, proximity either to the funding, or simply to the initiating governments somewhat empowers Northern NGOs/INGOs and somewhat disempowers Southern NGOs. Finally, budget space in consortiums also skews power relations – those with more budget space have more flexibility to think and act bigger, to innovate and explore more.

Agenda and Priority Setting

Should agendas be set more in the South? Undoubtedly, is the answer. But realpolitik must be factored in. As conservative forces grow around the world, not least among Northern voters in democracies of Europe, so does political volatility, and sentiment against aid.

A key component in the defence of aid must be that it aligns with the values, the direction, and the policy agendas of countries whose citizens are supporting the aid. Without this alignment I really believe it becomes increasingly difficult to win the hearts and minds of taxpayers and keep ODA funds flowing.

That being said, there are good and bad ways to channel approved ODA funding. Co-creation, rather than only consultation, is essential. Personally, I have good hopes of the upcoming model of the Team Europe Initiative in SRHR, which, if it expands to include civil society in its partnership, could lead to new thinking about North-South development in thematic areas relevant to SDG achievement and beyond.

Southern agenda-setting is essential to Southern ownership and to sustainability of development, while development partner agenda-setting is central to the continued flow of ODA.

Advocacy

Advocacy leads in this call and in this consortium. That's great, because advocacy leads to change. Still, the extent to which it is an effective instrument in the work we do, depends a lot on how one defines it.

My view is that one needs, among many other things, credibility and political capital in order to advocate. And in order to have political capital and credibility, one needs to be doing more than advocacy. Practice leading to learning, learning leading to evidence, evidence leading to advocacy for better policy, and policy leading, in turn, to improved practice.

Particularly in the African region where we have an anti-rights movement articulating rights as 'Northern', or 'un-African' ideas, if you are simply articulating and advocating, you can be labelled as such. If you actually do programming on the ground with real people that improves lives, you have some action credibility; something on which to hang advocacy. It is a holistic thing.

Risk and Accountability

Risk is a terrible thing in ODA. If you are in the private sector and you invest, not all investments come back with 100% return, but you have an insurance. Sometimes you even have government buffer funds to help you out. But when you are an NGO in Southern Africa, despite having the best systems in the world, and you take on funding, you're 100% accountable if you have a problem. Both ODA and multilateral funders have zero risk appetite. This global 'downsourcing' of risk to those who can least afford to carry the risk – CSOs – is a built in 'bug' or fault in the international aid system that weakens an already weakened civil society engagement.

Regarding accountability, we are not battling with it in the Consortium. Our intentions and the Dutch ministry's are aligned. And the intentions of the three Consortium partners are aligned as well. The political and development agenda of the Consortium is well-balanced so there is no sense of these agendas being set or overly pushed from the North. When it comes to consortium management and operating, however, there is a stronger sense of a driven agenda from the coordinating partner- which happens to be Northern-based. This is not "a Northern" agenda but rather a management one. Accountability in the country is also interesting with all of the partners having mixed accountability lines, supposedly most strongly to one another and the Consortium delivery in-country, but arguably in some circumstances, stronger ties to their parent body.

In general ODA is about vertical, upward facing accountability, and downward accountability to communities can be an issue. But the problem is almost bigger with horizontal accountability. A clear example is how Northern funding has sometimes weakened key population NGOs in Africa by encouraging them to remain in a bubble of accountability to ODA capitals ion the North, instead of encouraging horizontal accountability outwards to the women's movement, lawyers, etc. etc. in their countries and regions. Collaboration, alliance-building, and sometimes compromise, are needed to root movements in context. Otherwise, you weaken the impact and sustainability of the Southern NGOs.

Should ODA have more Southern leadership? Definitely. But how to define Southern leadership and how to define 'Southern' is becoming a battle for indigenous NGOs. Increasingly, we are seeing INGOS register in countries in the South and so transform themselves in 'Southern' civil

society. This can be a cynical ‘fishing in Southern waters’ resource mobilization strategy; at an international level where small Southern NGOs battle to operate, the INGOs dominate competitive funding, and, in addition, armed with their Southern registrations, they now also dominate competitive funding in Africa.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

Indicators are certainly necessary to see how progress is made. Still, we definitely need the flexibility of instruments like outcomes harvesting. This does justice to the fact that programming and delivery context is difficult, and it often changes. Social change is complex and non-linear, and successes often come not exactly where they were planned. Sometimes bigger wins emerge outside of the indicators, and if you’re then not allowed to use a tool like outcome harvesting you miss a lot. Outcome harvesting fits very well in the line of the South setting the agenda.

The most important learning for us has been the steep learning curve to operate in this kind of a consortium. We really underestimated the resources needed to co-manage delivery in this kind of collaboration. We perhaps also budgeted too much on direct activities, and too little on the budgets of staff who deliver in an advocacy programme. These overstretched components of our consortium contribution mean we focus a little too much on delivery, accountability, and co-working, and not nearly enough on meaningful learning and growing as an organisation.

Learning could be one of the areas where one could tip the balance North-South to South-North, without upsetting northern voters who pay for ODA, because it’s not about big money. Here the South should definitely set the development agenda – and requisite resources, because learning for the sake of improvement, change and empowerment is absolutely key for the South. What ODA leadership in the North needs urgently to learn is how to better design and manage funding flows aimed both at delivering development, while at the same time more equally balancing power relationships with the South.

Southern leads in the Consortium

We had the issue of Southern-led, at a micro-level in the Consortium, when we had planned to swap coordination leadership in one Consortium country, but after much planning we ended up leaving the country coordination with our Northern partner. This is a little allegory for the bigger picture. Leadership in ODA-programmes requires large resources, and expertise and experience. Setting up entire management units from scratch in non-core funded Southern NGOs takes time, and, with inconsistent funding, is often not viable. Hence, consortium management often remains in the global North. When you have a well-balanced partnership, this is not short-term problematic, but it does leave the bulk of resource mobilization and management in the North.

Next Policy Framework

I think of young people, and the rampant unemployment among them as the wasted potential of the world. Young people’s opportunities to access health, including sexual and reproductive health, gender equality, work, the internet and one another, and social mobility are key areas to focus on.

Developing a policy with some marginal appetite for risk that creates a safer 'investment environment' in young people and in communities would be great. An intentional strengthening and protecting of civil space, as it increasingly comes under attack by anti-rights movements and nations, will be key, as would be a return by more funders to core funding; longer-term programming and funding; and a conscious effort to build indigenous civil society in the South as a long-term outcome alongside other programme deliverables."

SRHR Fund partnership

Love Alliance

Burkina Faso, Burundi, Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, Mozambique, Nigeria South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe

Organisation GNP+ Global Network of People living with HIV, Alliance Member

Interviewee Georgina Caswell, Head of Programmes

The Love Alliance is based on an unwavering commitment to protecting, promoting and fulfilling sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) globally, unifying people who use drugs, sex workers and LGBTIQ+ movements, and amplifying the diversity of voices in these communities.

“The Alliance brings together national thought leaders GALZ, SANPUD and Sisonke; regional grant-makers UHAI EASHRI and ISDAO; and global advocacy partners GNP+ and Aidsfonds. Aidsfonds is the Netherlands-based administrative lead. All the Alliance members, except for Aidsfonds, are based and/or have offices on the African continent.

Equal footing

If I were to characterise the Love Alliance, I would say we have been extremely intentional about the word ‘partnership’: all partners having an equal say. It has resulted in an equal partnership with Aidsfonds as the administrative lead. We call the lead organisation the ‘administrative’ lead, because it is a specific role with a specific responsibility, not with more power. In the Board meetings Aidsfonds has a vote, as we all have a vote.

We separate roles and responsibilities. Focusing on roles make you focus on what people do.

In the Board four key populations are represented: people living with HIV, sex workers, the LGBTIQ+ community, and people who use drugs. Additional communities of key populations are linked to the Board through an activist advisory group. They are our mirror. They raise issues often before we have even thought about or discussed them in the Board. And we have working groups on topics like advocacy, communications, grantmaking and innovation. Here we encourage people working at national, sub-regional and global levels to work together.

There are so many mechanisms and spaces in the programme. It sounds smooth and easy, but it takes a lot of time to keep everything moving: ten country contexts are involved, different key populations, change takes place at different speeds in different contexts.

So, I definitely agree that a programme like this needs more than five years to deliver impact. I can show great examples of today’s impact, based on Dutch-funded predecessors of the Love Alliance, initiated from 2014-2017 (Link Up) – in which for example a youth centre in Burundi received its first grant to be a safe space for young people in all their diversity. It is now a huge centre offering integrated SRHR, HIV, harm reduction and other services to young people living with HIV and from key populations in Burundi. The impact gradually grows over the years. I see our Board members taking their national expertise to the world. Local leaders start influencing global spaces and leave their space for others to grow and they do the same.

Southern leads in the Partnerships

Being the administrative lead is hardcore. It's no joke. To be very honest, I'm really grateful to Aidsfonds for doing that. It is possible for Southern organisations, but it takes a lot of your energy away from your core business. So, we should be open to both options. I do believe in Southern leadership, and I also believe in shared responsibility. The administrative lead must have very special qualities: be a servant leader, and be very conscious about distinguishing between its administrative role and its partner role. Aidsfonds does this very carefully and tactfully.

Advocacy

I love the focus on advocacy, because advocacy is to push change, while service delivery is 'day to day' business. Of course, it is always important to have funding and space for service delivery, especially as the world becomes more conservative and it becomes more difficult to operate and support certain groups of people. Think of Tanzania where the environment is restrictive and where it's difficult for government to deliver certain SRHR and harm reduction services. You need opportunities for service delivery otherwise lives will be lost.

Agenda and Priority Setting

I understand the criticism in the Partos Paper that policy should not reflect the Dutch agenda, but I find it a tough one.

Traditionally Dutch government has always been very brave about supporting difficult topics, like abortion, sex work. In a world where rights are under pressure, it is important it stays that way. Everyone wants to work with adolescent girls and young women. We need Dutch colleagues to create space and opportunity for civil society to work on the tough topics, otherwise nobody will do it. So, I struggle a bit with leaving the priority setting process fully open. Who in the Global South will decide? What will happen to the priorities and needs of key populations? Will they be included in the priorities? The Dutch government already built a track record in SRHR and human rights, they should take it to the next level.

We have experienced openness and flexibility in their funding. In a previous Dutch-funded consortium I was part of, I remember they allowed and even welcomed the addition of vocational training in our HIV programme because they understood young people needed not only health services, but skills to get a job and have a livelihood.

It makes me nervous if this was all put aside for another priority. Maybe we need some parameters that allow us to keep building.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Again, I'm a bit mixed. I understand and recognise the feeling of the burden, but we all need to do narrative and financial reporting, because this is taxpayer's money and we need to be accountable in use of funds. We need to do that, not for the administrative lead, not for the Dutch ministry, but to show that we use the money well.

It's part of good management, we also set internal accountability rules, like how much we want to travel, because of the environment, and how much we spend on direct and indirect costs, because we want most of it to go directly to supporting communities.

On learning I see few learning spaces between the partnerships, which is really a missed opportunity. I remember one exchange being organised by the Ministry, but it felt one-off and was a theoretical conversation. It would be so interesting to bring partners from different consortia together and have real conversations. I mean: sharing difficult challenges we are seeing and experiencing. It has to be a trusting space where you're not going to be penalised, but can really learn. There is so much potential for cross-learning. In the Love Alliance we are focused on HIV, SRHR and rights but we should learn from other sectors and integrate it into our work. And others could learn from us. But this is not facilitated.

We do our own internal learnings and we are trying to be more structured about it and to tackle difficult topics. If I were a funder, I would push for exchange with at least one other consortium a year. Then you have to make time for it. You're always surprised when you dive into someone's else's work and find out what the connections and possibilities are for learning.

Risk

Sometimes I get the impression that MoFA is nowadays less willing to take risks. Traditionally, MoFA has been a partner that takes calculated risks. In the current partnership we give a lot of time to thinking through and writing up mitigation strategies. Nevertheless, there are often so many questions from MoFA that you wonder where the trust is that we, as partners, share the risks and have it under control.

Next Policy Framework

It is important that we build on the things we have already achieved. There is still a lot to be done in terms of movement building. The Love Alliance works on building a movement in which we as the involved key populations join forces, based on what we have in common. Ultimately, it is the same environment that criminalises us. We bring partners together from country level to regional and to global level.

There are many young people involved in the movement. Youth people often identify with different communities and think intersectionally. We need to build an intersectional movement. We must connect with feminist groups, climate change activists, human rights activists, we all fight for the same cause. Such a social justice movement could be really powerful. It wouldn't be led by the Dutch ministry, but by the partnerships.

Imagine, MoFA released a call for a special fund in the next Framework for partnerships to lead the movement. Suppose the Love Alliance got it and managed to attract, let's say, 15 partnerships in a social justice movement to join forces around the SDGs. That would be exciting."

SRHR Fund partnership

MAKE WAY

Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, Zambia

Organisation The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians Kenya, Consortium Member

Interviewee Telesia Musili, Lecturer University Nairobi and Member of The Circle

MAKE WAY is focused on improving sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of the most minoritized people in society. Together with our partners, we develop innovative tools to identify people's overlapping vulnerabilities, allowing us to better understand how these affect their SRHR. In doing so, we sharpen our own lobby & advocacy and that of other civil society organisations.

"Reflecting on the Partos Discussion Paper and the recommendations for the Dutch ministry, I would say the aspect of context should be very prominent. Context is by all means cross-cutting. If context would really become a key component, you have a solid departing point to look at the impact of your work.

Let's take the example of the context of SRHR. SRHR is a global issue, not just for the Dutch, but also for people in the Global South. However, what it is that our partners in the Global North are concerned about, in terms of SRHR issues, might not be the same for the people in the Global South. The umbrella of SRHR resonates with both of us, but coming down to particularities, context comes in. It changes the dynamics. When we worked on the proposal in the consortium this aspect was recognised, because I remember being asked explicitly: 'what are some of the issues you deal with?'

There are issues we cannot penetrate in our African context, and there are those everyone can talk about, which may be non-issues in the North, like teenage pregnancies. When I studied years ago in Belgium, I could see young girls take contraceptives. Something you still cannot just talk about here. Many of us struggle giving young people contraceptives, although there are mixed opinions. Some are progressive, whilst others being more reluctant.

And there is the aspect of forcing things. I've seen that a lot. When partners want to impress, like saying 'we can talk about LGBTIQ, sure, we can do that'. I wonder then, if they are doing it to impress, for instance the donor? Nevertheless, it is good to try and start a discussion on these issues, because progress and change will come. We should only be careful not to force it, when it is not really grounded in the context.

Equal footing and balanced relationships

In the Consortium we are with three African and three Dutch partners. In terms of collaborating on an equal footing, there is no huge power play that brushes away the organisations. Not at all. There have been a lot of attempts to bring the power relations on par. But truth behold, we can never be equal. It's just as it is. Think of the element of finance. Given the fact that we have to account for the grant to the Dutch ministry, will make it impossible to have balanced power relations.

But when it comes to understanding the programme and the implementation, I see the synergy in the Consortium. So, it is a question of what you are dealing with. We have a lot of cross-learning in the programme and there the power is equal. We ask each other how we work from our context. We are open, there is no mistrust or pushing, and the questioning is authentic. We listen to each other. We learn from each other. We compare, and it is through comparing that we gain new knowledge. So, for me it depends on the aspect that is being factored and considered. In the implementation it's kind of balanced, but in other aspects it is not.

In the governance each consortium member is represented at every level. I am a member of the communication working group and the risk management working group.

Southern leads in the Consortiums

How I look upon this issue of Southern leads in consortiums, like we are in now? It depends actually what you're looking at. Some things look really decorative, but is it practical? Take the issue of capacity. It is fine if a Southern organisation would lead a SRHR consortium comprehensively, but thinking of the organisations, I would say we are not there yet.

I would think of a kind of blended way of doing it. Wemos, the lead in MAKE WAY, is sitting high up there, and has the structures, the capacity and the integrity towards the Dutch ministry (without saying that we don't have the integrity!). They can steer, showing the way to go. What I would love to see is that this would be supplemented by a kind of leadership, including management tasks. So, a relatively high-seated level, occupied by a partner from the Global South, receiving assistance when needed, from a separate budget. In this way we could gradually grow into such positions.

Religion as driver of change

Persistence and consistency are everything in relation to the SRHR issues we work on. In the programme we now start talking with the Ministries in the countries, and they are opening up a little bit. Religion can help to make the change, but it is really tight ground we are walking on.

It is important that we have established the relationships within the Consortium, and with the Dutch ministry. Despite power imbalances in certain aspects, it is important that we are in this together, and that we continue. Our work on SRHR is a long-term cause.

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, of which I am a member, is focused on culture and religion, taking a critical stand. This position resonates in a very poignant way with many of the issues that NGOs are dealing with, be it SRHR, climate change, or any other actual topic.

In Africa religion is the agent that runs the community, and the society. The sacred texts are quite normative. Earlier this year I did a baseline study for an NGO that was looking at the intersection between feminism and faith. It was very interesting, because the very moment you call yourself a feminist, you cannot be a church-goer anymore.

Here we come in, trying to bring a different understanding, that faith is about mutuality, not about exclusion. And because religion is such a part of lived reality, NGOs come to ask us how religion is embedded in all kind of issues, also new ones, because Africans will listen to anything that has to do with religion. In that sense religion can be a relevant driver of change.

Next Policy Framework

When you ask me if it would be interesting to pay attention to religion in a next Policy Framework, I take a practical perspective. I would like to cite an African scholar, saying that 'Africans are notoriously religious.' Everything goes back to faith, not only Christianity, also Islam and African traditional religions.

What I've seen in the NGO world is that you stop being religious when you do NGO work. But the people you're dealing with are religious, so I would say religion gives you a complete outfit of the people you're dealing with, also as an NGO worker. Faith is African. If we want change in Africa, we need to bring in faith.

More generally speaking, I think it is key to build on the successes of the current Policy Framework. An evaluation should bring these successes to the fore. We need a very clear picture of how the successes are related to the contexts, and walk with these contexts. It is all about the impact the programmes have had on the specific contexts. And our partners in the Global North should evaluate their contributions to strengthen the partners from the Global South. The outcomes of this part of the evaluation could be used to offer areas of improvement to the Southern partners and pay special attention to their growing leadership in the next Policy Framework."

SRHR Fund partnership

MASAROUNA

Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

Organisation FEMALE, Consortium Member

Interviewee Hayat Mirshad, Executive Director

MASAROUNA mobilizes the power of young people in the Middle East and North Africa so they can claim their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). We work with and for young people, and together we forge new pathways through influencing and strengthening civil society.

“FEMALE is a feminist collective, based in Lebanon. We work on building and strengthening the feminist movement. Our interventions are focused on knowledge production and dissemination, movement building and advocacy related to gender, gender rights and SRHR.

Participating in the Consortium

Masarouna addresses SRHR and targets youth, especially young women and journalists. The journalists are an important group for us to work with, because feminist media and knowledge production is key in the programme. Think of gender-sensitive reporting.

Since last year we do a lot of regional trainings of journalists on how to write on SRHR topics in a transformative way. And we train and mobilise journalists to work with us. We invest also substantially in networks among youth and young girls in the different countries where Masarouna operates and there is a big component of global advocacy, we are present at Bread and Net, CSW and at international conferences like Women Deliver.

As a Consortium partner we are part of the decision making in the programme. I'm a member of the Steering Committee, with Oxfam Novib, RNW Media, and SMEX, another Lebanon-based CSO. We regularly conduct strategic meetings to review reports, discuss the progress. And we are involved in working groups, like the Influencers Working Group.

We joined Masarouna in a later stage, when the design and planning phase was already completed. So, to a certain extent we didn't have so much to say about the design of the programme.

But from the moment we came in, we were engaged in the decision making following the design phase. For us it is a good experience to be in the Steering Committee, because this is acting on a strategic level. It differs from taking decisions on the ground with the collective.

Oxfam Novib is the lead organisation, but I never sensed at any moment that they claim a special position. Our contact person at Oxfam Novib is adhering to feminist values and practice. She is dedicated to put the lead into the hands of the local organisations in the Steering Committee. It is also nice to experience how capacity development is taken up. Usually, Northern partners come with ready-made packages of capacity development, but what we do here is strengthen our capacities by working tailored on for instance our needs to produce policies, and we are trained in using these policies.

What makes the Masarouna experience also interesting for us, is the fact that it is a long-term programme, really ensuring impact. The size of funding is reasonable, and there is flexibility to decide on priorities, depending on the context.

Agenda and Priority Setting

There is a lot to say about agenda and priority setting. What is crucial for a programme like Masarouna, is that the agenda and the priorities are not set in stone. I value the flexibility the programme offers: we can decide our own activities, within the strategic objectives. You cannot do without this flexibility.

Let me explain: one of the challenges we face is that with Masarouna, we come with an agenda on SRHR. It caused a challenge for us to make a shift from working on feminist knowledge, to an explicit SRHR agenda.

We received many comments also in our own organisation: ‘why do we transform all the sessions into speaking only about SRHR? Is there an agenda behind that?’ The premise of a conspiracy theory, combined with the sensitivity of SRHR topics in certain sessions made us very considerate to not only focus on SRHR, but to integrate topics like gender-based violence and safety. We needed the flexibility to mainstream these other topics into the sessions with the groups we worked with. All to make sure that we are considerate of the context we work in. In such a way we can include people. We want the knowledge to reach everyone, not a small group only. You need to be able to finetune and gradually transfer your knowledge. That’s important with a topic like SRHR which is relatively new in the region, and very sensitive at the same time. In Lebanon and other Arab countries we are facing a real backlash against the feminist and other movements. The attacks always link the feminist movement with other movements and are systematic and led by political parties and religious leaders. It means we have to be very cautious, working on SRHR.

You also need flexibility in your interventions. Advocacy is a priority in Power of Voices, but in the current crisis we face in Lebanon, it is not always so effective: we cannot hold government accountable, because the government is not functioning, we don’t have a president and parliament is not meeting. So, the main thing we do, is movement building, because the movement will bring the change.

Risk

I don’t mind the emphasis on risk management in the requirements of the Ministry. It is good that risks are recognised, but they should be dealt with in a flexible way. The risk differs from country to country, and depends on the topics you work on. In Masarouna risk is not perceived as a hindrance to implementation. Risks are mitigated by the flexibility of zero visibility for Masarouna in some activities and allowing the partners to work in a very flexible way, giving them individually space to assess the risks they want to take.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Because of Masarouna we have a MEL coordinator now, who is frequently in contact with the MEL officer in Oxfam Novib. I consider it important to have such an M&E accountability mechanism

and such measurement tools. For us, reporting is useful, because we want to know about the impact of our work. We do it not only for the Dutch ministry or Oxfam Novib, it is related to us as an organisation to understand what the needs are, what the impact is, how knowledge is developing.

We now have resources as an organisation to set the first steps in learning trajectories. Our MEL coordinator recently did a training on outcome harvesting organized by Masarouna and she was very impressed. It helped her so much to develop her way of working. And because of Masarouna we developed our MEL policy as an organisation.

The frequent exchange and sharing with the Oxfam Novib team on MEL and accountability is a great opportunity for us to develop our capacities.

Next Policy Framework

The main thing in a new Framework is that it should be feminist funding, with localisation as a key element: giving ownership to local organisations on the ground.

The funding should be long-term, flexible and not pre-defined. There should be a reasonable percentage for human resources. In some projects we did, it looked like you had to work on a voluntary basis, but we need funding for administrative costs to secure the sustainability of our organisation.

There should be a lot of investment in movement building, building awareness of the need to fight shrinking space and ensure that there is safe space for people to learn and develop knowledge. Only then can we effectively tackle backlashes, like we experience now in Lebanon. Designing programmes with grass roots organisation is key to reach this. With the people on the ground we have to prepare, so that we are ready for this golden moment of change.

Masarouna was an opportunity to strengthen our partnerships and networks with Consortium partners and other like-minded local and national groups and organisations which allows for exchanging knowledge and experience and future collaborations.”

SRHR Fund partnership

POWER to YOUTH

Ethiopia, Ghana, Indonesia, Kenya, Malawi, Senegal, Uganda

Organisation Amref Institute of Capacity Development, Member of the POWER TO YOUTH Global Supervisory Board

Interviewee George Kimathi, Director

POWER TO YOUTH seeks to empower adolescent girls and young women to increase their agency, claim their rights, address gender inequalities, challenge gender norms, and advocate for inclusive decision making.

“Amref Health Africa is a Southern-based organisation with its headquarters in Nairobi. We have offices in nine (9) countries in Africa, and eight (8) offices in Europe and North America, among them Amref Netherlands (NL). Amref HQ leads the overall organizational strategy development and execution.

Amref NL is a partnership- and fundraising office. Amref NL is also the lead organisation of Power to Youth. The Coordination Lab by young people for Power to Youth is in Nairobi, hosted at the Institute of Capacity Development.

Maybe good to mention that I looked at the Discussion Paper from the perspective of Amref HQ in Nairobi, with some specific references to the Power to Youth programme.

The Discussion Paper is rich, succinct and useful. Not too detailed and it cuts sharp. It is focused on the Dutch funding setting, but it relates to other funding settings as well, like Global Fund and USAID. Amref receives funding from these funders to grant to CSOs in different countries in Africa. The Paper resonates with the sector as a whole. It will certainly inform the next Policy Framework of the Dutch government, but should also stimulate discussion with other donors to question their commitment to Southern leadership and ‘shift the power’: what does it mean to let power go? Amref would be more than happy to convene a session on this.

Agenda and Priority Setting

You need power to be in a position to set the agenda. If the Dutch ministry (MoFA) should say that in a next Framework some funding is only available for CSOs in Southern countries, it would already be a big improvement. Directly receiving the funding gives a bit of control and esteem. And of course, when MoFA commits to this, the compliance should be discussed as well. This is not new at all when you consider other donors in the same landscape.

I would like to share an example of how USAID recently went into a process with local CSOs in Ethiopia, among them Amref, to set the agenda.

We didn’t do a concept note, not even a proposal, but there was a pitch in the form of a power

point. Based on the pitch USAID selected two organisations to write a proposal. There was ample time for co-creation with many stakeholders involved: ministries, CSOs, partners, USAID staff on the ground. USAID financed the CSOs during the writing process.

Co-creation needs a long period when we really want to listen to the community, particularly if we are to include perspectives of last mile populations, so to say. We cannot do that in a few weeks. It was already an advantage that the process took place in the Global South, where we, as Southern-based organisation are so much closer to the communities than Northern organisations. It makes the agenda and priority setting easier, because we can hear directly what the issues in the communities are. Compared to the highly labour-intensive calls the Dutch ministry releases, the approach taken by USAID felt less demanding and a more inclusive way to set the agenda and priorities. Maybe MoFA can also consider such an approach.

Regarding advocacy, it is important that MoFA focuses on this, but there should be flexibility in funding, think of what recently happened in Uganda around the LGBTQI law. In such a case you must be able to adapt your activities. Partners need flexible budgets, and reservations for emergencies for dramatically changing contexts. I would like a next Policy Framework to challenge partners to work on advocacy from an integrated approach, meaning some service delivery and capacity strengthening work around social determinants, without losing the power of advocacy. There should be flexibility to shift the focus periodically from advocacy to for instance displaced persons, when such an issue becomes so urgent in a context, like the case of South-Sudan.

Risk

The debate on Southern leadership and working on an equal footing is highly important. Not only between CSOs from the Global South and the Global North, it relates also to general funding principles. Take risk management: when we as Amref receive 40-50 mln US\$, how do you expect Amref to work on an equal footing with the CSOs we grant? How does our partnership look? Those issues are critical for equal partnerships. That's why there is so much discussion going on in terms of 'localization', and direct funding to local CSOs. But do we see that already back in the implementation at national level in our countries? No, the international funders offload the risk to Amref. And then we have to mitigate the risk in the consortiums we work in. Here is still work to be done.

Accountability and Learning

We report to the donors, we sing their tune, because they provide the money. But we don't report to the communities, the women, the young people who receive our support at national and sub-national level. In the same vein the Discussion Paper is right that it questions learning for accountability instead of speaking to the needs of communities. We have to ask ourselves to what extent the learning we do is downstream, instead of at country or consortium level. We have to listen as much as possible to our co-constituencies, especially the end-beneficiary.

Next Policy Framework

I agree on an extended Framework of more than five years. Realising impact in communities

needs such a long duration period. We acknowledge that the Dutch government wants to stay within its political cycle, but governments don't stop and start all over anew after each election. Longer term commitments are possible and must be explored. My assumption is that such a Framework is a living document, because communities and their needs are evolving, and the consortium involved has to evolve with them.

Civil society is very diverse. I suggest we could show our special appreciation in a next Framework to the CSOs that go for the last mile and are closest to the greatest needs. The Ministry could focus on supporting them in strengthening their organisational systems.

Another issue concerns the many layers of actors involved in international development. We need to cut or strip where possible, but be sensitive not to lose diverse important roles. It requires a close look at how the roles of Northern NGOs, national CSOs in the Global South, and subnational and community-level CSOs should be defined. Of course, there will be interfaces, but duplication should be avoided. While local level CSOs and CBOs are central in the implementation, national CSOs have an important role to play in mentoring. Both levels should receive direct funding. The Northern CSOs should no longer be involved in the implementation, including agenda and priority setting. They are best placed to advocate in the Northern political context. And there is still so much richness of skills in the Global North, that can be made available to the Global South. So, a strong case for skill transfer in a mutually acceptable manner.

I advise the Ministry to be keen on the governance in the next round of partnerships. Without being prescriptive, it is key that especially the country- and community level receive attention in the governance. We already try to work like that in Power to Youth, experimenting with a Coordination Lab by young people, based in Nairobi, functioning as the Programme's secretariat. It is still experimenting, because the lead, being Amref Netherlands, is accountable to MoFA for the partnership, so it is understandable that they want to have some control. That's the complexity of it. But it's interesting and we learn a lot. Advancing Southern leadership needs uncomfortable conversations, otherwise there won't be any change. And it shouldn't stop at the national level. The youth in the communities should be at the table of the consortium, or we should bring the table to the communities. Oh, no, go to the communities and request to share their table! Southern leadership is a journey, we don't talk here about making instant coffee."

SRHR Fund partnership

RIGHT HERE RIGHT NOW

Bangladesh, Benin, Burundi, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Morocco, Nepal, Tunisia, Uganda

Organisation YUWA, Country Host Nepal

Interviewee Rajendra Maharjan, Country Coordinator RIGHT HERE RIGHT NOW

The RIGHT HERE RIGHT NOW partnership envisions a world where young people in all their diversity enjoy their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in gender-just societies. We do not shy away from taboo subjects. We also advocate for the rights of marginalised groups such as girls, young women and young lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTQI+) people

Participating in the Programme

“Right Here Right Now (RHRN) is in its second round. I was involved from the beginning, working at YUWA, a youth-led and youth-run organisation in Nepal, promoting youth participation through empowerment and advocacy. YUWA is the country lead organisation in Nepal, we are not a global consortium member.

It has been an interesting journey with RHRN. What I like, is the collaboration between the countries and the global level. Responsibilities are shared. It is also interesting how the global Consortium involves country coalitions, and empowers the organisations by bringing them into the decision making process. An example is the process of the midterm review (MTR). One of our YUWA PMEL officers was part of the recruitment team for the consultant. She was given equal opportunity in reading the application letters and she participated in the interviews and the selection of the consultant. The RHRN lead, Rutgers, a Dutch organisation, also invited representatives of the country teams to the Netherlands, to discuss with the global Consortium what the MTR should look like. And recently we went with representatives of all the countries to Benin to evaluate the MTR findings and recommendations. We discussed and revised recommendations. It was appreciated by us as country teams, we felt valued by the global Consortium. In other programmes, findings are shared and then you have to follow, but in RHRN we have meaningful participation. Our voices are heard and taken very seriously at the global level.

As a Country Coordinator I have direct contact with the global level, through a focal person dedicated from Rutgers. We have monthly check-in calls, keep each other posted on what's happening and I can get support. We discuss programmatic issues, but I can share personal concerns as Country Coordinator as well. And there is the team from the global Consortium, with focal persons on advocacy, PMEL, digitalisation etc. They are to support us at country level, especially during the planning and reporting processes. This team was first led by the focal person from Rutgers, but now it is handed over to the Country Coordinators. So, I'm leading and I can decide the agenda and when to meet with the team. It is empowering, because it is about very important components of the programme and it affirms that the country level is essential.

In Nepal we have six youth-led and youth-serving organisations, including YUWA. We have organisations led by LGBTIQ+ people, youth-led organisations, woman-led, youth with disability etcetera, a diversity of organisations, working together. I am the liaison for them to the other countries and the global level. For example, The Blue Diamond Society, a LGBTIQ+ organisation in Nepal had this plan for a training on meaningful youth participation, because they consider handing over responsibilities to the youth, but they find it also difficult. So, they asked for support. I connected them to CHOICE, a youth-led consortium member, who will now provide a training.

Partos Discussion Paper

I read the paper, and it has many in-depth inputs and recommendations. It is quite a complete document. Let me go a bit deeper into the four topics that were given extra attention.

Agenda and Priority Setting

In terms of the agenda setting, we didn't feel that our agenda for the second round of RHRN was influenced by Rutgers or the Dutch ministry. What we wanted to do at country level, was almost similar with the proposal that had been developed. And in the planning process we were there, as countries, and we were involved in the different stages of development of the programme.

In terms of the priority setting for certain countries though, it can be very challenging. Nepal is not a priority country for the Dutch ministry. We had to struggle, and Rutgers also had to lobby at the Dutch ministry, to continue RHRN in Nepal. Funding is nowadays more prioritised in Africa than in Asia. However, the issues we have around youth populations in Asia, and in Nepal in particular, are huge. 95% of the population has a low level of education. We have child marriage. The age of girls for first pregnancies is under 18. Thirty percent of our government's budget depends on foreign aid.

A shift in priority setting by the Dutch ministry creates big challenges for us, but it is difficult to do anything against it. It would be good, if we could explain the challenging context to the Ministry, so that they are more aware of the implications, when a choice on prioritising countries has to be made.

Risk and Accountability

The responsibility for the grant is with the lead organisation. Though we have six partners, YUWA is completely accountable for all the expenses in the country. We are also accountable for incidents of partners who make mistakes or have compliance issues. I wonder if we couldn't discuss with the Ministry to think of a system to share these accountabilities within the country, and also with the global Consortium level. It will make it much easier for the country leads to deal with this burden.

Each country has its own way of accountability and compliance mechanisms. For RHRN, the Dutch ministry has this requirement that all country partners have to follow the same procedures. For us at country level, it can be difficult to ask each partner to follow the same accountability system, because they have to do it only for this project, while they have other projects with other accountability requirements.

This can bring conflict among the partners in the country coalition. An example of how the guide-

lines from the Dutch ministry have directed us, is the recent requirement to document all actual indirect costs. Of course, the ministry is right that organisations should be accountable on their expenses. But in the previous phase we calculated indirect costs in percentages, so 10% of staff expenses or 5% of activities. That was much easier. The sudden change in these calculations has brought some difficulties for the coalition partners. It is micro-management and limits the flexibility, so the question is if this is really necessary.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Monitoring is not an issue for us. We have the monthly check-ins with the Rutgers focal person, and the PMEL-group is there to support on the templates. Additionally, it would be good if once a year colleagues from the global office would come to better understand how we work. Such a visit can give more contextual insights than the reports we send. Sometimes we cannot express in the reporting the things that we've gone through.

On learning we do a lot, like the Benin meeting we had on the findings on the MTR. There are also communities of practice, led by the global Consortium on themes like dealing with opposition and digitalisation. These are important spaces where countries can share. This year we asked for support of the Ethiopian coalition on the use of community score cards by young people. It is an interesting tool to generate evidence from the communities, led by young people. We initiated the discussion with Ethiopia. Unfortunately, this year there was no budget for us to go to Ethiopia, but we have made a virtual start.

Southern leads in the Programmes

It could certainly happen that Southern organisations take the lead in programmes like Power of Voices. RHRN has been building capacity since years for the participating organisations, not only on SRHR, but also on organisational management, procurement, finance, governance. The time is there that we could start piloting, so that it actually happens. There are organisations that are positioned well enough to do it. It may not be an instant process, but it can be done gradually. And these organisations can be capacitated along the way, when they are willing to do it. I don't think however, that it may be possible at this moment in Nepal.

Next Policy Framework

For a new Framework, decision making regarding the selection of countries for a new Framework is very important. At least the current countries should be discussed, given the issues and the contexts they are in, before deciding on prioritising countries.

On resource allocation for the countries and the country partners: we have this budget scheme and within the scheme we plan our budgets, and we distribute the budgets among the organisations at the country level. I would suggest to explore if we could have some kind of flexibility on the amount of budget and the size of the programme at country level. A bottom-up system would be really good.

It would also be worthwhile to discuss the possibility of shared accountability mechanisms between the countries and the global level. It would be a relief for the country leads.

And let's above all keep the good things, like mutual consultation, shared decision making, and mutual capacity strengthening of the coalitions at country- and global level.

Meaningful and inclusive participation principles are key. They are very important for young people to take the leadership position, otherwise it will always be adults leading while young people are being tokenised."

SRHR Fund partnership

WE LEAD

Guatemala, Honduras, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda

Organisation SRHR Alliance Uganda, Country Host Uganda

Interviewee Charles Owekmeno, Country Director

WE LEAD is an innovative and far-reaching programme that aims to strengthen the influence and position of young women whose sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRH-R) are neglected the most. It targets young women and adolescent girls who: live with HIV; face vulnerability and discrimination; live with a disability; and/or are affected by displacement.

“Uganda is one of the nine countries in which the We Lead Alliance works. As the Uganda country host, we subgrant to 18 organisations who implement the We Lead programme.

Participating in the Partnership

Reflecting on the We Lead partnership in terms of ‘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’ (cf. Policy Framework) 2021-2025), the lines of decision making are key.

So let me elaborate on the decision making. In WE LEAD Hivos is the lead agency. Hivos works in a multi-layered structure. There is the Hivos Global Office in The Netherlands, the Hivos Regional Office in Nairobi and then you arrive at the layer of Country Host with the sub-granted organisations. So, when the decision process reaches the South, there may be not much of it left for the local organisations.

Take for example what happened when the recent anti-gay legislation, that was signed by the President into law, was being brought up. The local partner organizations had clear ideas, knowing the context, how to inform, which steps to take, define priorities, but the room for decision making at country level was minimal. And we could not free up resources to respond to the immediate advocacy issues or emerging needs among the rightsholders. You need quick and more flexible decision making process to respond to such developments, which are important for the relevance of the programme, but not foreseen in an annual planning which was finalized end of last year.

Another thing is partner selection. This is a process that should majorly be led by Southern partners with support and guidance from the Northern. However, I have observed in some partnerships this process is also led by the Northern partners with limited support of the Southern partners.

I know that this is not the same in every partnership, I have had different experiences where there was flexibility. And also now, I see a number of partnerships in Uganda, where the flexibility is there. So, the Framework allows it, but it is differently interpreted by the lead organisations.

It is good to mention that when we are facing issues, for instance when decisions taken at country level are not honoured at global level, we appreciate the continuous support given to us by the Dutch embassy. We consider them a strong strategic partner in the country. Their role in my opinion is critical in monitoring and holding Northern partners accountable for strengthening the power balance between the Northern and Southern partners.

Next Policy Framework

These experiences prompt me to suggest the following for a next Policy Framework:

At the start of a new programme the Dutch ministry should assess every programme on the decision making structure, first to confirm that there is 100% clarity on who decides what, but also to safeguard that there is a power balance and that decisions informing the country programme should be taken at country level. I refer here to programme design (including profound indicators), partner selection, planning and (flexible) replanning, decision making on partner challenges. That empowers the South.

Secondly, I plea for the availability of resources during the programme period for (tailormade) competency strengthening and technical support focused on organisational strengthening.

If you want Southern partners to be influential, you should invest in them. It doesn't happen by miracle. And you should have trust in them.

In a similar vein the concept of Southern lead partners in the partnerships is the model that we should grow towards in the long-run. It can be piloted with a few partnerships and then later scaled. It should be a sustainable and cost-effective future of the SRHR partnerships. This means that the Dutch ministry and Northern partners should be deliberate about investment of resources and capacity strengthening to build Southern partners who in the near future will have the requisite capacity to lead such partnerships. Then, the role of Northern partners will shift to provision of technical support and oversight.

A broader shortcoming in the Policy Framework is that strengthening civil society is, due to a thematic (SRHR, climate etc.) and interventional (advocacy) approach, predominantly limited to thematic and advocacy capacity strengthening. In other words, it is preoccupied with building strong programmes, not with building strong civil society organisations.

In line with this, attention is needed for strengthening the coordination mechanisms not only within programmes, but also between programmes. Civil society organisations should act together, join forces, instead of working fragmented in a country, starting anew every five years.

Civil society at country level could win in strength when there is transparent well-capacitated cooperation between civil society organisations from the Global North, national CSO's in the country and local CSO's outside the capital. Such a cascading cooperation can be very effective.

Each should take its own role, feeding each other and capacitating each other. Learnings should be documented and shared. In such a way competency can be built, strategic use is made of how the international, national and local CSO's are positioned.

This needs clarity in decision making structures in the programmes, as well as trust and commit-

ted support from the Northern CSOs to make the coordination at country level work well. Now we are sometimes faced with challenges at the country level between organisations in which we cannot handle, because we don't have the necessary 'coping mechanisms' to solve them. And then we are back at where I started: the importance of clear and jointly agreed decision making structures cannot be overstated."

**Some Topics
worth a Good
Conversation**

The interviews bring forward a wealth of experiences, based on a wide range of contexts.

One thing is clear. The importance of the Dutch Framework to Strengthen Civil Society is beyond dispute. And in a world of many different funders, the Dutch ministry ranks relatively high in terms of, progressive policies, duration of the grant and relative flexibility.

There is appreciation for the Partos Discussion Paper. Many of the arguments given in the Paper are confirmed in the interviews by illustrations from daily practice.

In other instances, the interviewees draw attention to potential negative consequences of certain recommendations and they bring forward inspiring new insights. We take you along some of their interesting observations.

They are certainly worth a good conversation, with the Ministry, and with the Northern and other Southern organisations.

In the interviews the considerations are more elaborately explained.

First some general observations:

- 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. There is a risk that applicants are inclined to sing the song of the funder, instead of focusing on the issues asserted by the communities on the ground.
- We need an arrangement built on trust rather than a contractor-client relationship. This implies an investment in time. We need co-creation instead of consultation. We need a system that is simple and not bureaucratised.
- If the Ministry wants to be an ally in the advocacy of Southern organisations, they should be more visible and directly accessible. Their role and responsibility should be clear.
- If Embassies would be more in charge, local-level decision making could come nearer.

Agenda and Priority Setting

There is overall support that agenda and priority setting should take place in the Global South.

However, there is a 'legitimation' and a 'representation' issue, as one of the interviewees observes.

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, taking into account the geopolitical and economic situation in Europe with growing right-wing leadership.

And who in the Global South will set the agenda, given the diversity of civil society? It is mentioned that one needs power to set the agenda. Who has the power? The power dynamics are also a reason in some interviews for concern, thinking of the inclusion of certain groups like key populations in such a process. Up till now Dutch policies supported the work on these 'tough' topics.

All in all, the idea of Southern agenda setting will still need a lot of thinking.

Finally, the shrinking space of civil society can have serious implications beyond the agenda setting. One interviewee indicates that CSOs in the Asian region, like India, will need a new mode of (domestic) funding, because access to foreign funding is more and more limited. Attention for these developments is missed in the Discussion Paper.

Advocacy, being a central concept in the programmes, is certainly embraced in the interviews, because ‘advocacy means change’. However, its effectiveness is hindered by the rather rigid and sometimes traditional definition of advocacy. This definition doesn’t align with Southern contexts. The interviewees all recommend to include complementary roles and instruments for a more effective advocacy and – even more important- to do no harm and save lives. The examples given are clear: the current straight-jacket insufficiently factors in a context in which actors (not necessarily organisations) should be able to speak from credibility and be able to shift action, which implies taking on complementary roles.

Referring to the notion of the Ministry being an ally in the Dutch-funded partnerships, some interviewees suggest the Ministry, based on actual developments in South-East Asia, Brazil and Uganda, to consider a separate window for quick response funding for legal support in cases where advocacy really has put people in danger.

Risk and Accountability

It is crystal clear in the interviews that the funded organisations should be accountable. But the approach in the Discussion Paper and in the Framework, is felt to be rather contractually oriented: risk management is restricted to financial risks, whilst attention for accountability is focused on the donor. As an interviewee phrased it: ‘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 is then about concepts like solidarity and close communication.

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.

In terms of accountability, a general disbalance is felt by the interviewees on the investment needed to report to the Northern organisations and the Ministry, compared to the time available to report to the communities and the groups at national and subnational level.

The disbalance regarding risk and accountability, expressed in a financial and a Northern bias looks like an important issue for a good conversation with the Ministry.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Concerning M&E we find a quite similar observation across the interviews: the M&E part is quite overwhelming, complex and 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.

The change of M&E procedures after the programme start was perceived as unfortunate: ‘you shouldn’t change the game during the match’.

M&E is experienced to serve mainly funder accountability purposes. One interviewee described it as: ‘the method decides the change, while the change should decide the method’. More qualitative reporting instead of reporting numbers is considered key.

The meaningfulness of devoting substantial time to IATI is doubted. It is unclear what the Ministry does with all the reported data. In one case IATI was mentioned to have harmed partners.

Concerning learning, some interviewees mention flourishing cross-learning within their partner-

ship. Interestingly, for several organisations the participation in the partnership has been a very steep learning curve. Generally, it is regretted that intersectional learning between partnerships is not facilitated by the Ministry. The Power of Learning programme, initiated by the Ministry takes place in a limited number of countries and appears to be hardly known.

A shared observation is that there is a need to rethink and be creative in financial/M&E reporting and learning. 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.

It is mentioned that the programmes are rich and deserve a meaningful collaboration with the Ministry. The learning should inform the next Framework.

Shift the Power/Leading from the South

Shift the Power, Southern leadership and Leading from the South were concepts that came across frequently in the interviews. We summarise here the main points.

The issue of power and a reset of relationships between the Global South and North underlies the exercise of the Discussion Paper. Interviewees notice that they miss an explanation how Partos relates to these concepts.

In the same vein, a lack of clarity was felt concerning the introduction of Southern leadership by the Ministry and the Dutch CSOs in the current partnership programmes. This Northern initiative is received as laudable, but it is mentioned that 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. A good conversation will certainly help to gain clarity.

The interviews reveal that experiences between partnerships differ, so it could also be interesting to exchange practices and learn from each other.

With the entrance of (more) Southern organisations at consortium-level, their involvement in decision making has definitely increased. The change coincides with new, additional roles and responsibilities, on top of the implementing role of the Southern CSOs. The budget division in the consortium however, is not always matched accordingly. This raised the question, if the Ministry is willing to take the consequence and raise the consortium budgets appropriately.

The interviewees indicated Important points of attention for a flourishing Southern-led collaboration, such as:

- Partner selection and composition of the consortium
- Decision making structure
- Budget division
- Investment in capacity strengthening

One consortium commissioned an independent review at the start of the programme to know where the consortium stood in terms of equal decision making.

It is useful to learn that not everything in the collaboration can be traced back to the North-South dynamic. Some elements are recognised to be of a more general nature, like the space the lead organisation provides. Interviewees mention also other elements, such as the fact that their thriving collaboration has never been solely based on the funding opportunity, but on longstanding relationships and a shared vision grounded in, in this case, feminist principles. This shows that, apart from North-South dynamics, a lack of familiarity with each other's background may need some extra steps to reach a shared vision. The interviews comprise some examples that illustrate this point.

A suggestion came up if the Ministry should assess every programme on its decision making structure and power balance. It would be interesting to discuss if this is considered an adequate measure.

The role of Southern lead organisations in the programmes raises mixed feelings. While it is for some an important expression of 'Leading from the South', it is for others an appreciated, specialist role to be taken up by Southern (even Northern) organisations that are well-equipped for the task. It is suggested that the Ministry and Dutch CSOs should be deliberate about building the requisite capacity of interested Southern CSOs to lead such partnerships. Still, it remains important for several interviewees that the funding goes directly to Southern organisations, instead of being managed by Northern organisations.

It should be noted that the two current Southern-led partnerships are both built on feminist principles and gradually built their expertise as a lead agency.

A final good conversation on North-South power dynamics may concern INGOs registering as Southern CSOs in Africa. In several interviews the remarks were critical and concerned.

Next Policy Framework

The question in the interviews on suggestions for the new Framework has resulted in a lot of food for thought. The expectations and the ambitions are high. One interviewee formulated it as follows: 'the Ministry has been one of these groundbreaking funders in enabling the strategic partnerships. They rightly earn a lot of credit for that. Looking at the next Policy Framework, they can be champions again.'

So, what are some examples of the ideas mentioned to strengthen civil society and open up civil spaces?

- Take a long-term approach of 10 years or more to guarantee continuity, and build on good practices from the partnerships with mixed funding approaches, such as Dutch funding mixed with locally raised funding.
- Continuity also implies attention to maintain the selection of countries.
- Engrain the concept of 'Leading from the South' in the framework.
- Give Southern-led capacity strengthening a prominent place.
- Take an intersectional approach, because that is how social change works.
- Facilitate cascading models of cooperation of national and community organisations.
- Pay attention to connecting social movements in the context of countries and regions, cul-

minating into a wider movement for social justice: women, key populations, climate, youth, disability activists, etc.

- Accommodate the Framework for movement building, to a broad spectrum of actors, beyond CSOs.
- Keep the mix of country-based programmes and global programmes in the Framework.
- Include approaches to involve 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.
- Work towards a new role for Northern CSOs away from implementation in the Global South to implementation in the North. Northern CSOs can support country-based programmes by campaigning in their own country, by transferring knowledge and skills, and they can (continue to) implement parts of the global programmes.

Information on the Partnerships

Power of Voices Partnerships

- [Benkadi](#)
- [Count Me In! Consortium](#)
- [FAIR for ALL](#)
- [Fair Green and Global Alliance \(FGG\)](#)
- [Free to be me](#)
- [GAGGA – Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action](#)
- [Generation G](#)
- [Giving for Change](#)
- [Green Livelihoods Alliance](#)
- [Joint Initiative on Strategic Religious Action](#)
- [Just Future Alliance](#)
- [CREA - Feminist Human Rights - Our Voices Our Futures](#)
- [Power of Dialogue](#)
- [Power of Pride](#)
- [Reclaim Sustainability!](#)
- [Right 2 Grow](#)
- [She Leads](#)
- [Stitch](#)
- [Strengthening Civil Courage](#)
- [VCA – Voices for just climate action](#)
- [We are Able!](#)

SRHR Partnership Fund

- [Break Free!](#)
- [Love Alliance](#)
- [Make Way](#)
- [Masarouna](#)
- [Power to You\(th\)](#)
- [Right Here Right Now](#)
- [We Lead](#)