Synthesis literature reviews
'New roles of CSOs for inclusive development'

Assumptions Programme Knowledge Sharing Conference

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Contents

KNOWLEDGE PLATFORM ON INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

INCLUDE

Synthesis report
May 2018
Saskia Hollander

Synthesis literature reviews 'New roles of CSOs for inclusive development'

1. Introduction

The *New Roles of CSOs for inclusive Development Programme* (hereafter referred to as the Assumptions programme), launched by NWO-WOTRO and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in June 2017, investigates the assumptions underlying [the civil society policy framework 'Dialogue & Dissent' (D&D)](#) of the Dutch MFA. The aim of D&D is to contribute to sustainable inclusive development and fight against poverty and injustice by promoting the political roles of civil society organizations (CSOs). Currently, the Assumptions programme, also aimed at informing the MFA's future D&D framework, consists of six research projects which fall within the three themes of the programme: 1) CSOs and civic engagement, 2) CSOs and the aid chain and 3) CSOs in an enabling environment (see box 1). These six projects will be completed in 2019 and focus on four countries in particular: Kenya, Ethiopia, Ukraine and India. In addition, in July 2018 a [second call for proposals](#) was launched, which specifically invites research related to the third theme 'CSOs in an enabling environment' and broadens the geographical spread of the programme.

Box 1. Research projects: new roles of CSOs for inclusive development

1. CSOs and civic engagement
   - [Civil society engagement with land rights advocacy in Kenya: what roles to play?](#)
     Principal researcher: **Spierenburg**. Summary of literature review [here](#).
   - [Civil society advocacy collaborations in India](#)
     Principal researcher: **Van Wessel**. Summary of literature review [here](#).
   - [CBOs within the official development aid system in Kenya](#)
     Principal researcher: **Nencel**. Summary of literature review [here](#).
   - [Civil society against corruption in Ukraine](#)
     Principal researcher: **Bader**. Summary of literature review [here](#).

2. CSOs and the aid chain
   - [Enabling rules for advocacy in Kenya](#)
     Principal researcher: **Elbers**. Summary of literature review [here](#).

3. CSOs in an enabling environment
   - [CSOs in sustainable development in Ethiopia](#)
     Principal researcher: **Verschuuren**. Summary of literature review [here](#).

3

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The six research projects that currently fall within the Assumptions programme all consist of two phases: a literature review and an empirical investigation. The first phase has now been finalized and each project has drafted a literature review. These reviews discuss state-of-the-art literature relating to the research topic(s) and provide a first insight into the new roles of CSOs. All six literature reviews have been synthesized by the INCLUDE Secretariat, who is conducting the knowledge brokering activities of the Assumptions programme. The aim of the synthesis report is to identify common strands in the six separate literature reviews and, above all, outline significant gaps in the knowledge for the purpose of answering the questions from the call for proposals. Although the projects are categorized by theme, there are several overlaps and cross-cutting issues. Hence, in each section of this synthesis report, which is also structured by theme, insights from various research projects are used, regardless of their overarching research theme. In addition, the synthesis is also based on insights gathered during the Assumptions programme knowledge sharing conference, which took place on 17 May 2018 and facilitated dialogue between academics, practitioners and policymakers. This dialogue will provide input for the empirical phase of the projects.

1.1 Defining civil society organizations

CSOs do not comprise a homogenous group. According to the Theory of Change (ToC) of D&D, civil society is defined as "the space between government, the market (businesses) and private life (family and friends) where citizens can organise themselves to pursue goals unrelated to personal or financial gain, which concern a wider group of people and are not necessarily taken care of by government" (p.1). As such, CSOs can comprise a whole range of different formal and informal organizations, including NGOs, community-based organizations (CBOs), labour unions, professional associations, associations based on kinship, faith-based groups, and social movements. In the literature review, Verschuuren identifies CSOs as NGOs, CBOs, public benefit organizations (PBOs), non-profit organizations, advocacy organizations, societies, charities, religious organizations and activists and protestors. In doing so, CSOs are differentiated from media and political organizations. Also, Elbers uses CSOs to refer to a diverse group of organizations, including NGOs, non-profit organizations, social movements, interest groups, professional associations, CBOs, and religious groups. In contrast to Verschuuren, political parties are captured under CSOs.

As there are many methods of categorizing CSOs, Van Wessel argues that it is important to consider the broader civil society context and to recognize the wide variety of organizations active in the civic space. During the Assumptions programme knowledge sharing conference, research projects were urged to take into account organizations that are part of the MFA partnerships as well as CSOs that are not part of the MFA partnerships, including informal grassroots organizations. As such, the Nencel group specifically investigates the factors that enable and constrain the political roles of community-based organizations (CBOs), as a specific subcategory of CSOs. The project team emphasizes the 'connection with local beneficiaries' as a factor that distinguishes CBOs from other actors in the official development assistance (ODA) system. In addition, the research project by Bader examines the role played by CSOs in fighting corruption in Ukraine and identifies Ukraine as a 'living laboratory' of organizations currently operating. Comparing the roles, strategies and successes of different types of CSO within the aid chain provides insights about the varying conditions for success and helps the MFA determine how and which CSOs should be supported (and under what conditions), thereby recognizing the strength of a diverse civil society.

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2. CSOs and civic engagement

D&D assumes that power asymmetries are an important cause of poverty and inequality. Moreover, the framework assumes that the MFA can contribute to inclusive development in low and lower-middle income countries (LLMICs) by supporting CSOs, since the latter are expected to play a crucial role in changing these power asymmetries for the benefit of the poor and marginalized. To be more specific, when it comes of the political roles of CSOs, the following assumptions underlie the D&D framework:

- CSOs play a crucial role in changing power relations
- CSOs perform 4 political roles: educational, communicative, representational, and cooperative
- Different roles require different organizational forms, capacities and forms of legitimacy
- When pressured, informed and/or persuaded by CSOs, states and companies change their policies and practices, and societal groups change their norms, values and practices to be more sustainable, equitable and inclusive
- As a precondition, CSOs need to be locally rooted, strong, legitimate and autonomous to perform political roles

To scrutinize these assumptions, two research questions and four policy questions are formulated (see box 2). Understanding how different types of CSOs contribute to inclusive development by changing power relations requires an examination of the various political roles they perform. In general, the reviews largely underscore the four roles as outlined in the ToC of D&D.

Box 2. Research and policy questions: CSOs and civic engagement

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Research questions:

1.How do different types of CSOs contribute differently (by performing various political roles and advocacy strategies) to changing or maintaining power relations?

2. What explains their success and failure?

Policy questions:

1.What type(s) of CSO should be supported to change power relations for achieving inclusive sustainable development and (gender) equality?

2.How and with whom should CSOs collaborate?

3.What mix of political roles/strategies is needed in what context?

4. What kind of support (i.e. capacity building, funding, diplomacy) do these organizations need from whom (i.e. NCSOs, SCSOs, embassies) to fulfil their specific political roles?

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2.1 The political roles of CSOs

First, CSOs have a role in *educating* citizens. According to Kamstra and Knippenberg (2014—extensively discussed in the review of Spierenburg), the educational role can be divided into an internal and external one. Internally, CSOs provide a space for educating their members and staff. In this sense, CSOs are portrayed as 'schools of democracy' where citizens can acquire social capital. CSOs also take on an 'external educational role', targeting people outside their organization (for example through the organization of seminars and debates) to educate them about their rights and inform them about important policy issues. As stressed by Bader, CSOs are the channels through which citizens can check governments and hold them accountable by raising public awareness. For example, when there is greater awareness of corruption, there is a higher possibility that corrupt actors are prosecuted, which enhances the costs of being involved in corruptive activities. According to Spierenburg, when CSOs perform an educational role, their tactics are indirect and may include public education, writing letters and petitions, working with advocacy coalitions, conducting research, writing policy reports and organizing non-violent demonstrations.

Second, CSOs act as citizens' *representatives,* and provide citizens with the means to express their voice. This is especially important for marginalized groups as they often have little other means to defend their interests. As such, CSOs can be important representatives of the rights and needs of marginalized groups and voices. CSOs can also be mobilizers. This is stressed in the Van Wessel literature review, which states that Indian CSOs working on women's rights mobilize and organize people around issues (such as women's employment, wage discrimination, access to water or electricity, and the participation of women in democratic processes) and formulate political agendas. When CSOs act as representatives and/or mobilizers, they function as watchdogs of the authorities and provide a channel for resistance and opposition. They are social forces to counter the political and economic authorities. By performing this role, CSOs adopt tactics that are either indirect and non-confrontational or they adopt outsiders and more radical tactics, including boycotts, protests, and demonstrations.

CSOs also perform roles which makes them insiders or partners of the authorities. First, they provide a channel through which citizens *communicate* with the state by providing and protecting a democratic public sphere where citizens can debate issues that affect their lives. As Van Wessel stresses, civil society is "the apparatus through which individuals negotiate, argue, struggle, against, or agree with each other and the centers of political and economic authority" (p. 47). By performing

7

this role, CSOs link citizens to the authorities by sitting at the (negotiation) table in multi-stakeholder partnerships. Hence, this role is not confrontational, but also not fully cooperative.

Finally, CSOs can also fulfil a *cooperative* role when they are consulted as experts or involved as partners in policy implementation or coordination purposes, for example through multi-stakeholder platforms. As such, CSOs adopt insider tactics by working directly with policymakers and institutional elites in order to change policies and/or regulations. Bader refers to CSOs as spaces of "co-governance", where society and the state govern on issues collectively in order to improve accountability. As stressed, such a cooperative strategy can be useful in order to help CSOs build capacities of the public or of state institutions, as this rests on their ability to create good working relations with the institutions that they want to influence or change. In addition, cooperation can be helpful because a cooperative relationship instead of a confrontational one can yield more fruitful results for the communities that the CSOs claim to represent.

2.2 Specialization or combining different roles?

There are trade-offs when it comes to these roles. As Bader notes, CSOs often have to choose between using confrontational or cooperative tactics in their work vis-à-vis the state. As stressed in the literature review of the Nencel group project, CBOs are usually included in development projects of the state or donors as partners because they are locally embedded and thus a source of legitimacy. Yet, when they cooperate too closely with the state, they have little space to act as watchdogs of the authorities because they cannot be too critical or confrontational. Moreover, often CBOs lack the capacity and resources to perform other political roles, like effectuating public awareness campaigns.

Given such trade-offs, Kamstra and Knippenberg (2014) argue that "comparing NGOs to each other reveals that none of them performs all roles simultaneously. They each specialize in certain roles, which is mainly due to contradicting organisational characteristics" (p. 599). Moreover, as outlined in D&Ds ToC, different organizational setups are valuable in their own right as they are positioned to make different contributions in terms of advocacy. In addition, specialization might be necessary in order to prevent a one-size-fits-all capacity building approach geared towards creating similar professional advocacy organizations around the world. In fact, as outlined in the ToC, rather than expecting organizations to perform all political roles, organizations can complement each other by combining strengths and safeguarding their agency.

8

Several reviews challenge this necessity for CSOs to specialize in a certain political role. The Spierenburg project, for example, explicitly aims to scrutinize this third assumption underlying the D&D framework, namely that "different roles require different organisational forms, capacities and different forms of legitimacy." The literature review suggests that specialization is not always required, as CSOs often find ways to deal with trade-offs between different roles. According to Spierenburg, "NGOs can switch between service delivery and advocacy quite flexibly over time and in function of their goals." (p. 22). Many CSOs are hybrid and shift between insider and outsider tactics depending on context. For example, they may choose to temporarily abolish more confrontational approaches to satisfy donors and safeguard financial stability. One of the participants during the Assumptions programme knowledge sharing conference referred to this as a constant and deliberate 'shifting of gears' depending on circumstances, which is vital for the success of CSOs.

The reviews largely underscore that combining different roles can be beneficial for CSOs. As Spierenburg stresses: "The constituencies of service delivery NGOs are oftentimes targeted by public policies because of their relatively marginalized status, and at the same time, these same NGOs have relationships with public policy officials, which gives them an important linkage function—as people 'on the ground' do not have such channels of access" (p. 22). Moreover, service delivery grants CSOs legitimacy in their advocacy role and can even be a 'point of entry' at the local level. Also, knowledge of the grassroots is a strong asset for building legitimacy with the government. Further, confrontational and cooperative strategies can reinforce each other, especially when they are played out in coalitions. Being able to shift between different roles and strategies in particular benefits CSOs working in restrictive environments. As stressed in the literature review of the Verschuuren group, CSOs working on a range of matters or that have a range of strategies are best able to adapt and survive in case of regulatory constraints and control.

Nevertheless, according to Spierenburg, with respect to CSOs' strategies towards the state and private sector, "there is some disagreement in the literature whether organisations best start with a confrontational approach, and then eventually move to collaboration, or first start to collaborate to gain legitimacy, and then move to confrontational approaches in a kind of 'escalation' ladder" (p. 54). Moreover, of specific importance is the question of what happens with grassroots support when CSOs cooperate with the state or private sector (see literature review Spierenburg, p. 54).

Hence, a valuable area for further research is to examine how trade-offs work out differently for different types of CSOs, as well as the conditions under which different strategies can be combined and how that affects the success of CSOs. Understanding organizations' flexibility is needed in order

9

to better support them in the future. Moreover, following the ToC of D&D, projects are also urged to examine the conditions under which CSOs, especially those that are smaller and less professionalized, can work together to complement each other in performing political roles and what this all means in terms of capacity development trajectories.

Knowledge gaps 1–4

- How do the trade-offs between different political roles and tactics affect varied CSOs differently?

- Under which conditions can political roles and tactics be combined, and how does this affect the success of CSOs?

- Under which conditions are CSOs better off by working together to complement each other?

- What does this mean in terms of capacity building trajectories?

2.3 Success and failure

The six reviews stress that success and failure depend on several factors, both internal and external to CSOs. Internally, success and failure depend on the way in which CSOs are organized, as well as their financial resources and human capacity. As argued in the review of Verschuuren, CSO projects can be ill-conceived, have a too limited reach or a too inexperienced staff. Moreover, the reviews largely underscore the assumption in the ToC that CSOs need to be locally rooted, legitimate and autonomous in order to be effective. Yet this assumption is adopted, rather than explicitly scrutinized. Are CSOs indeed more effective when they are locally rooted and connected to grassroots? Is there indeed a trade-off between professionalization and local embeddedness, and how does this affect different CSOs differently?

As the Bader group notes, "domestic and international civil society organizations alike seek to enhance the accountability of government and the public sector but are largely not held accountable themselves. When they grow into influential actors, the lack of accountability of civil society organizations can be viewed as a serious dilemma" (p. 4). This is also addressed in the review of Spierenburg, which stresses that CSOs might strive for norms and values that they themselves do not always live up to. As a result, CSOs increasingly need legitimacy in order to secure political, moral and financial support for their work. This is underscored in the review by the Verschuuren group, who argue that "since CSOs straddle the public and the private, and since they are often obligated to their funders, directly and indirectly, rather than to their constituents, a question arises about the

10

legitimacy of these pseudo-public actors." As a result, CSOs have also come under increased scrutiny from governments, the private sector, media, the general public and civil society itself, leading to CSOs increasingly deploying accountability mechanisms (for an overview and discussion see here). The review by Nencel discusses how, due to such an enhanced demand for professionalization and accountability, CSOs could lose local embeddedness because they become separated from their communities. Moreover, the review stresses that legitimacy and accountability problems can also occur because they are often only involved in policy implementation and not in decision-making. Yet more research is needed to examine whether CSOs indeed need to be locally rooted, legitimate and autonomous in order to be effective in performing political roles, as well as what happens with CSOs' ability to do so when they lose legitimacy (and what type of legitimacy) and autonomy.

Success and failure of CSOs in performing their political roles to a large extent also depends on factors *external* to them. In fact, CSOs above all need an enabling (political) environment in order to be able to perform their political roles. As noted in the review of the Bader group, this implies a system in which political and civic rights and liberties are protected, a stable legislative environment, and political will on the part of the authorities to cooperate with CSOs or to be responsive to their advocacy. In fact, the basic assumption underlying the ToC of the D&D framework that CSOs play a crucial role in changing power relations is often undermined by those exact power relations that they intend to change. In other words, as explicitly stressed in the reviews by Van Wessel and Verschuuren and as an explicit assumption underlying the D&D framework, CSOs need political space to perform agency. Thus, herein lies a crucial tension: CSOs need political space to perform their political roles in order to change power relations, but the extent to which this space is granted to them depends on exactly those power relations. Finally, in order for CSOs to fulfil political roles, CSOs, especially CSOs in LLMICs, need to have stability in resources. In general, the reviews point to a consensus that CSOs in LLMICs are better off when resource dependency and funding fluctuations are reduced, and when local ownership, autonomy and legitimacy of these CSOs increase. Yet, the question remains how exactly a loss of local embeddedness, autonomy and legitimacy affects CSOs' ability to perform political roles.

Knowledge gaps 5–6

- Do CSOs need to be locally rooted, legitimate and autonomous in order to be effective in performing political roles?
- Does a loss of local embeddedness, autonomy and legitimacy affect CSOs' ability to perform political roles? And if so, how?

11

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2.4 CSOs' contribution to inclusive outcomes and inclusive processes

Success or failure might mean different things for different actors within the aid chain. For example, whether a CSO has succeeded or failed in terms of contributing to inclusive development depends on what is prioritized, inclusive processes or inclusive outcomes. Of course, these two are not necessarily opposed, but they are not interchangeable either. CSOs can play a crucial role in encouraging inclusive participatory policy processes (i.e. scoring high on the representational and associational roles), but this might not necessarily lead to more inclusive outcomes. Conversely, CSOs can be successful in lobbying for and effectuating inclusive outcomes, while not necessary promoting an inclusive decision-making process or even lacking accountability, legitimacy and autonomy themselves.

 Overall, the literature reviews do not define success and failure, and how inclusive development processes and outcomes interact. In the review of Van Wessel, a distinction between inclusive outcomes and inclusive processes is recognized, in which 'inclusive development' is defined as "the working out of development goals with the consideration of the needs of the poor and marginalized (excluded)", while an 'inclusive development process' is defined as a process that "includes the knowledge and aspirations of local communities and enhances their participation in decision-making" (p. 34). It is furthermore stressed that inclusive development requires participatory and collaborative approaches (i.e. inclusive processes). Yet as Van Wessel points out, it is exactly such collaborations that challenge CSOs autonomy and ownership, and hence their ability to work in the interest of the ones they represent (i.e. inclusive outcomes). The research group therefore stresses that research should be done on the role of autonomy and ownership in shaping CSOs' contributions to inclusive development. It is crucial to take into account how CSOs themselves define success and failure, and how they understand concepts of autonomy, legitimacy and ownership in order to better support CSOs in their needs and aspirations.

Knowledge gap 7

- How do inclusive processes and inclusive outcomes interact, and what does this imply in terms of CSOs' autonomy, legitimacy and ownership?

2.5 What types of CSO to support?

In the call for proposals for the Assumptions programme, the MFA explicitly asks what types of CSOs they should support to change power relations for achieving inclusive sustainable development and (gender) equality. The literature reviews offer no blueprint as to which CSOs to support. Overall, the reviews largely agree that the current mode of selection is not always beneficial to grassroots CSOs

or CBOs, and hence does not necessarily make the largest contribution to inclusive development. As noted in the review of the Elbers group, "in order to ensure that local CSOs render a 'proper account' of how the aid money is used, donors and northern CSOs set strict selection criteria as part of their funding modalities ... This resulted in donors favouring more established and urban-based CSOs to the neglect of small and rural CSOs" (p. 19). Moreover, while the review stresses that this may benefit donors because funding professionalized CSOs means that donors can be more reassured that their money is being allocated and spent wisely, such selection may have negative effects in terms of effectuating inclusive outcomes, since in general, large professionalized CSOs have less legitimacy and weaker grassroots connections. For that reason, Nencel (summary of the literature review) argues that it is important that donors working with CBOs (for example embassies and international NGOs) recognize the diversity of knowledge that exists within less professionalized CBOs (rather than professional CSOs) such as practical knowledge on how to implement projects as well as knowledge of the (inter)national political spaces they operate in.

A general message across the reviews is that donors—governments, embassies and international NGOs—should take into account local context when selecting CSOs to work with. For example, in the summary of the literature review by Van Wessel, it is stressed that the added value of collaboration needs to be assessed considering the state and wider civil society contexts. The project outlines that the following questions need to be asked when selecting CSOs to work with: 1) What is the composition of civil society in a country, working on a certain issue? 2) What agendas and actors advancing or countering inclusive and sustainable development are present and active? 3) What voices are weak or silenced? And 4) How can different forms of collaboration contribute, relating to these realities?

2.6 Collaborations with state authorities, Northern NGOs and the private sector

In the call for proposals, the MFA also specifically asks with which actors should CSOs collaborate in performing their political roles. In this respect, the six literature reviews all address collaboration between CSOs and state authorities, both at national and donor levels. In general, such collaboration can be effective because CSOs are then close to political power. Yet by collaborating with governments, CSOs run the risk of being co-opted and thereby losing grassroots support. As stressed in the review by Spierenburg, collaboration could make it more difficult for CSOs to criticise government, thereby potentially losing out on their watchdog function. Moreover, co-option could also mean that CSOs 'internalize' the norms and bureaucratic rules imposed by the partnership. However, the review also notes that a number of authors nuance the danger of co-optation, as there are several examples of CSOs that cooperate with the state while still having autonomy. Hence,

13

research is needed about the conditions under which cooperation with state authorities (whether national or donor) does not imply a loss of legitimacy and autonomy.

The same applies to collaborations between CSOs in LLMICs and Northern CSOs/NGOs. According to the review by Elbers, such collaborations have the potential to benefit southern CSOs, as their Northern colleagues can offer capacity development, political leverage in the global arena, exchange of information and lending credibility to local advocacy coalitions (see section 3). Yet, the nature of the aid system induces resource dependency, which can limit the effectiveness, autonomy and legitimacy of CSOs, and CBOs in particular. As discussed in the review summary by Elbers, "increasing the likelihood that Southern CSOs are able to perform advocacy roles requires both eliminating the potentially negative effects of the aid chain rules and maximizing the added value of Northern CSOs and donors in advocacy" (p. 1).

Some research projects address collaboration between CSOs and the private sector. Given the current global emphasis on promoting partnerships for inclusive development (as for example enshrined in SDG17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development), it is important for CSOs to connect with the private sector, not least because of the influence of this sector has on national governments, including donors. Spierenburg discusses a strand of literature that stresses that to work successfully together with companies, CSOs should have a pragmatic approach and speak the company's 'language', should be committed to nonviolence, and adopt a consensus orientation. However, other authors in Spierenburg's review contest the consensus approach. For example, power dynamics between CSOs and companies suggest that CSOs run the risk of being co-opted. As argued by Spierenburg, companies are often not willing to reflect on their "negative injunction duties", they regard CSOs merely as "instruments" and they often prove unwilling to link up with local communities in order to make decisions that affect its core business. Spierenburg therefore advises that the risk of co-optation can be reduced when "moderate" and "radical" CSOs work on advocacy cases in parallel: moderate CSOs can cooperate with companies in dialogue, while more radical can use more confrontational approach (which forces companies to listen to the moderate CSOs). Also, Van Wessel points out that partnerships with the private sector for CSR purposes are not always beneficial to CSOs. As she puts it, "although relationships between CSOs and the private sector may be mutually beneficial ... these relationships cannot be viewed as equal as private firms have control over the financial resources, complicating the independent functioning of CSOs."

The Nencel group argues that risks of being co-opted by state authorities, Northern NGOs or the private sectors especially applies to CBOs. As put in the review, "dominant development actors co-opt CBOs expertise and reach through the practice of community participation, whilst limiting their political space. Therefore, it can be argued that current practices make CBOs work for, rather than with (or potentially against) the ODA system" (p. 8). Hence, the literature provides a starting point but more research is needed on conditions under which such collaboration is effective.

Knowledge gaps 8-9

- Under which conditions are collaborations between the state, Northern NGOs, the private sector and CSOs (especially CBOs) in LLMICs effective?

- Under which conditions do such collaborations not lead to a loss of legitimacy, autonomy and ownership?

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3. CSOs and the aid chain

There is a substantive branch of literature suggesting that currently, particular aspects of the aid chain tend to weaken the embeddedness, autonomy and legitimacy of CSOs in LLMICs. This could potentially undermine some of the assumptions underlying the D&D policy framework, namely:

- External aid by the Ministry and (mainly Northern) CSOs can strengthen CSOs in LLMICs in political roles through capacity building and assistance in advocacy processes, including offering protection in hostile environments and lobbying for improved political space.
- CSOs are actors in their own right and not merely instrumental channels for aid delivery.
- Promoting civil society's political roles needs a long-term, context-specific approach, which incorporates mutual learning, trust and local ownership.
- As a precondition, the design of the aid chain does not interfere with the aspects mentioned above.

Yet, as outlined in the call for proposals, there is a gap in the knowledge concerning how exactly the institutional design of the aid chain, and in particular the role of CSOs in the North, affects and shapes the ability of different types of CSOs in LLMICs to engage in advocacy work. The effects of the aid system on the day-to-day operations of CBOs has been especially understudied. As Nencel stresses, "insufficient (academic) attention is paid to the power relationships constructed in this system, be that between CBOs, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and (inter)national donors. Likewise, very little is known about the ways in which such power relationships influence CBOs' work on the ground." (p. 2). Bearing these knowledge gaps in mind, in the call for proposals the MFA has

formulated various research and policy questions (see box 3). Although the reviews underscore that these development actors can indeed strengthen different CSOs in LLMICs, there are nevertheless challenges in the aid system due to which this potential is pressured.

3.1 The added-value of Northern CSOs

Although much of the literature emphasizes the challenges that the nature of the aid system induces, Elbers reviews the literature that clarifies the potential added value that donors and CSOs from the North have for CSOs in LLMICs. First, they can provide financial resources otherwise not available, which are crucial for the work of CSOs in LLMICs. In fact, many CSOs in LLMICs depend on resources they receive from donors and/or their Northern counterparts, sometimes completely. However, as stressed by participants of the Assumptions programme knowledge sharing conference, Northern CSOs are not merely 'money pushers' that focus mostly on service provision to satisfy the donor. Rather, Northern CSOs are also involved in lobby and advocacy efforts. As such, they could play an important role as enablers in advocacy networks and could potentially assist CSOs in LLMICs in strengthening the link between local interventions and national or global campaigns.

Box 3. Research and policy questions: CSOs and the aid chain

Research questions:

1. How does the way civil society aid is organized influence the political role of CSOs in LLMICs for inclusive sustainable development?
2. How is power distributed in the aid chain in terms of accountability procedures, relationship models and role division between various actors?
3. To what extent does this reflect social transformative and/or managerial principles?
4. Why is aid organized in this way?
5. How does this strengthen and/or obstruct the political role of CSOs in LLMICs for inclusive sustainable development?

Policy questions:

1. How should civil society aid be organized for supporting civil society's political role?
2. To what extent is this possible given the political and administrative realities?

Indeed, according to Elbers, the added value of donors and Northern CSOs can go beyond financial aspects. Accordingly, they also have potential added valued in terms of capacity-building and producing and sharing information by offering protection to local CSOs (and CBOs in particular) through coordinating coalitions and ensuring synergy between members and by connecting the work

16

of local CSOs to Northern audiences. Moreover, as donors and Northern CSOs tend to have more political power and influence in the global arena, collaboration with donors and Northern CSOs can strengthen the effectiveness of CSOs in LLMICs by lending credibility to local advocacy organizations and coalitions, and by advocating for the adoption of international treaties and norms, thereby pressuring national governments from the outside. Van Wessel also adds that collaborations between Northern and CSOs in LLMICs can produce effective campaign alliances and promote transnational networks.

3.2 Challenges in the aid system and the consequences

Due to the dependence of Southern CSOs on resources from governments and NGOs abroad, flows of aid operate in an environment that is power asymmetrical. Such power imbalances affect different CBOs differently. Yet these imbalances are not only induced by financial aspects of the aid chain, but there are more complex relationships between Northern CSOs and CSOs in LLMICS that go beyond the transfer of financial resources. The project team within this theme, led by Elbers, focuses on the interrelated 'rules' in the aid chain that regulate, for example, who is in and who is out, the roles and responsibilities of different actors, decision-making procedures and processes of information sharing.

The first challenge imposed by these interrelated rules and relationships is *top-down decision-making,* which affects CSOs in LLMICs, especially CBOs. As for example outlined by Nence, there a strong tendency among development actors to exclude CBOs from agenda-setting, design of development interventions and decision-making processes. Rather, the aid system mostly includes CSOs (and CBOs in particular) as pragmatic partners in the implementation of programmes and as a means to reach pre-defined development ends. As stressed by Van Wessel, for donors, this has advantages in terms of lowering transaction costs, ensuring greater transparency, dealing with free-rider problems, and utilizing CSOs' relative flexibility in their responses to local needs. Yet according to Elbers, this can undermine CSO and CBO ownership over their advocacy work and therefore also their ability to stay committed to their missions. It can also undermine their ability to maintain strong beneficiary linkages and thereby their legitimacy, as it runs the risk of weakening local participation of beneficiaries.

Advocacy CSOs depend largely on donor resources to undertake their activities. In particular, as outlined by Nencel, funding of CBOs is often channelled through Northern NGOs, who receive large-scale funding after which CBOs are contracted to do the implementing work on the ground. This creates the second challenge, *resource-dependency,* which impacts upon the functioning of CSOs. Consequently, the objectives of CSOs in LLMICs are dependent on (or they are pressured to align

17

their objectives with) the objectives of donors. As stressed in the review by Elbers, donor policy objectives tend to be more aligned with constantly changing donor "fashions" than local priorities and situational specificity. This is underscored by the review by Van Wessel's team, who stress that Southern CSOs experience fluctuations in funding due to the shifting priorities of their Northern international donors. As they note, "political, strategic and economic factors often influence the funding decisions of the bilateral donors, which in turn leads to instability in funding levels for countries, program areas and beneficiary organizations" (p. 9). In addition, in order to secure and maintain continuous flow of funding, many domestic CSOs adopt strategies that would serve the interest of those who control those resources, such as changing the agenda of their advocacy and limiting them to have a long-term strategy. Donors are also said to impose their preferences during the design and implementation of projects and interfere in the internal affairs of Southern NGOs. In addition, it can lead to a loss of staff and capacity, and a shift in focus from advocacy to service delivery.

Third, when selecting CSOs in LLMICs to work with, donors and Northern CSOs tend to favour more established, urban-based and professionalized CSOs and neglect smaller, less professionalized, rural-based CSOs with stronger grassroots linkages. Selection criteria determine which local CSOs can become part of advocacy aid chains. As Nencel stresses, there is a trade-off between having an 'on the ground' approach and the burden imposed by the aid system for CSOs to become professionalized. The choice for large and professional CSOs may ease donor concerns that their money is being allocated wisely, but the effects of this *selection bias* on the ground can be damaging, because larger, more professional CSOs run the risk of having less legitimacy and weaker connections with the grassroots. As argued by Van Wessel, providing legitimacy to organizations that are able to "speak the same language" of the donor agencies means that such organizations are unable to engage in a dialogical interaction that would characterize a true grass root social movement. Moreover, according to Elbers, the demand for a very specific kind of professionalization results in widespread homogenisation among the organizations. And, according to Nencel, "it creates processes of inclusion and exclusion, which effects their possibility to be effective on the ground" (p. 18).

The fourth challenge is *top-down or upward accountability,* which means that the demand for accountability is often unequal. While the aim of CSOs' advocacy is to promote the interests of intended beneficiaries, their need for resources makes them more accountable to donors. As argued by Nencel, CBOs in LLMICs are expected to be accountable to others in the partnership, while the latter rarely report to the participating CBOs. Moreover, as stressed in the review by Elbers (p. 20),

18

accountability in aid chains is often measured in terms of tangible outcomes that can be achieved within a short duration. The risk is that Southern CSOs start focussing on short-term measurable outcomes rather than long-term investment towards their intended beneficiaries and organizational development. In addition, the prevalence of upward accountability pushes CSOs to shift their focus to bureaucratic processes to ensure their own resource stability, rather than concentrating on their own ToC. Hence, this can conflict with advocacy. More practical knowledge is needed about how bureaucratic requirements affect different types of CSOs differently, especially CBOs that work in contexts of what Nencel calls "chaos of urgencies", due to a lack of physical safety, food, housing, health care, etc. Moreover, more knowledge is also needed about how such challenges can be addressed when donors aim to work with CBOs.

Knowledge gaps 10–12

- How does the institutional design of the aid chain affect different types of CSO in LLMICs differently in performing their political roles?
- How do bureaucratic requirements affect different types of CSOs differently, especially CBOs that work in vulnerable contexts?
- How can such challenges can be addressed when donors aim to work with CBOs?

3.3 How should aid be organized and can this be done?

According to Elbers, challenges in the aid chain can be overcome or mitigated when donors realize more explicitly that the rules embedded in the aid chain can have positive and negative effects on the work of CSOs in LLMICs. Accordingly, to ensure that CSOs are able to perform their political roles, the potential negative effects of the aid chain rules should be eliminated and the added value of Northern CSOs and donors in advocacy maximized. From the review by Nencel (summary of the literature review), this means that when donors work with CSOs, questions should be asked as to 'who includes', 'who is included' and 'on whose terms'. This is underscored by Van Wessel, who stresses that it is essential to examine how autonomy plays out in collaborations between CSOs. Important questions are whether CSOs are able to make choices in allocating internal resources and whether they have "the freedom to invest its resources in activities that are unrelated to satisfying the obligations or expectations of an organization with which it develops a relation" (p. 25). Hence, political economy analyses are important in the selection of CSOs, the design of interventions and the implementation. Only by unpacking the key actors and power relations within the aid chain will it be possible to understand the possibilities and limitations for CSOs' political roles. For Spierenburg

19

([summary of the literature review](link)), this also implies that donors should make explicit what type(s) of legitimacy they value and intend to promote, in order to avoid vicious cycle of upward accountability.

Crucially, in funding CSOs in LLMICs, donors should pay more attention to the context in which these CSOs operate. As Elbers stresses: "Understanding local contexts is a crucial factor for successful advocacy. However, the current emphasis on short-term projects by donors can be problematic for advocacy because it often fails to appreciate the long-term and complex nature of advocacy work on the ground" (p. 18). Also, Van Wessel ([summary of the literature review](link)) emphasizes that the added value of collaboration between Northern and Southern CSOs needs to be assessed considering the state and wider civil society contexts. As stressed in section 2 and given this reality, when selecting CSOs for collaboration, questions should be asked as to the composition of civil society, and how different collaborations can contribute to inclusive development. To exemplify this, Van Wessel notes that in India, professionalized CSOs are dominated by the educated urban middle classes, which poses questions of representation. By solely supporting such CSOs, other groups in society are excluded. Moreover, as she claims, some of these CSOs have acted as instruments of the state to counteract other CSOs.

As such, it is crucial to take into account how grassroots communities themselves perceive the CSOs that ought to represent them. The issue of misrepresentation by CSOs is also addressed by one of the research projects within the NWO-WOTRO funded research programme *Research for Inclusive Development in Sub-Saharan Africa (RIDSSA), [Barriers to Batwa Inclusion in Rwanda](link).* Accordingly, the Batwa are represented by the Rwandese community of potters, COPORWA, which receives funds from international NGOs that push for indigenous rights. In order to receive these funds, COPORWA actively adopts an indigenous narrative by referring to the Batwa community as the first to occupy the Rwandan territory. Yet the Batwa communities do not see themselves as indigenous and for them the concept has little resonance. The project finds that such misrepresentation has crucial implications for the social and economic inclusion of the Batwa.

When resource dependency and funding fluctuations are reduced, local ownership, autonomy and legitimacy of Southern CSOs might increase. Yet, an important question that arises is that since donors and NGOs also face accountability demands from their own electorates and members, is it possible for them to loosen accountability demands on Southern CSOs? Is it, for example, possible for donors, including the Dutch MFA, to abandon the focus on 'projectization'? Or are all partners trapped in the same system? A key question for further research is how to ensure accountability from both sides of the aid chain. Elbers stresses that whether aid benefits Southern CSOs in

20

performing their political roles depends on how the inherent power imbalances in the aid chain can be mitigated or even utilized. It depends, for example, on the conditions under which CSOs in LLMICs have agency to overcome the challenges in the aid chain. The effects of the selection bias towards large professionalized CSOs also depend on the conditions under which development partners can enhance the legitimacy of these CSOs in donor programs and approaches. This makes it necessary to understand how aid chains promote or impede efforts for various Northern and Southern CSOs. As significant knowledge gaps remain in this area, studying the relationship between aid chains and their effects on the advocacy activities of different types of CSOs is of vital importance.

Knowledge gaps 13–15

- What is the relationship between aid chains and their effects on the advocacy activities of different types of CSO?
- How to ensure accountability of all actors in the aid chain, while at the same time not affecting CSOs autonomy, legitimacy and ownership?
- How can the inherent power imbalances in the aid chain be mitigated or even utilized?

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4. CSOs in an enabling environment

As outlined in the ToC of the D&D framework, an important precondition for CSOs to perform their political roles is that they have the space to do so. Political space is then defined as the economic, social, political, legal and cultural conditions which stimulate the formation and functioning of civil society. It refers to the space that CSOs have (or don't have) to perform their political roles and implement their advocacy strategies. Important assumptions underlying the D&D framework are:

- CSOs need political space to perform political roles
- External aid by the Ministry and (mainly Northern) CSOs can strengthen CSOs in LLMICs in their political roles by offering protection in hostile environments and lobbying for improved political space

These assumptions relate to the notion that in Dutch foreign policy, creating space for CSOs is both a goal in itself and a means for enabling CSOs to work effectively. Following these assumptions, it is important to examine how restrictive environments affect the ability of CSOs to perform political roles as well as their internal organization, how international actors can support them in such

21

environments and how they can contribute to improving political space. As such, various research and policy questions are formulated (see box 4).

Box 4. Research and policy questions: CSOs in an enabling environment

Research questions:

1. Why is political space diminishing?

2. What role do various actors have in promoting and/or obstructing political space?

3. As seen from the perspective of CSOs, what are the constraining factors for the performance of their political roles?

4. How does shrinking political space affect the way CSOs organize?

5. How does this affect their political role?

Policy questions:

1. How can the Ministry and Northern CSOs best contribute to safeguarding and/or enlarging political space for CSOs? (i.e. which vital elements/actors of political space can it influence, and how?)

2. How should the Ministry and Northern CSOs relate to CSOs in restrictive contexts, and how can they best support them in their political role in such environments (i.e. capacity, moral, political and/or financial support)? Also, what should they not do?

3. What can CSOs and the Ministry do to limit and mitigate risks in restrictive environments?

4.1 Shrinking political space

The literature reviews do not challenge the core assumption that CSOs need political space to perform political roles and that foreign aid can help enhance this space. In this respect, the curbing of civic space that is observed by CIVICUS (State of Civil Society report 2017) can be perceived as a challenge to CSOs' political roles (albeit not in all contexts, and not for all CSOs) and hence, to D&D. There are several ways in which the political space of CSOs is restricted, both by state and non-state actors (such as private companies). The most obvious is by using physical force against CSOs and activists. As stated in the State of Civil Society report 217, "around the world, it is becoming increasingly dangerous to challenge power, and to do so risks reprisals". Yet, often restrictions are not as such violent, but aimed at hindering the work of CSOs, for example by restricting physical access to territories and populations or by refusing permission to operate in specific areas. For instance, as discussed in the literature review by Van Wessel, India increasingly constrains civic space by preventing CSOs from intervening in areas of defence, law and order and foreign policy. These areas are completely closed for the influence of civil society, as the state has monopoly of decision-making power on these matters.

22

In addition, civic space is also restricted by legislative and regulatory measures or by controlling how CSOs are funded. Such measures are especially applied to CSOs that receive money from abroad. For example, as Verschuuren stresses, in Ethiopia, the Charities and Societies Proclamation 2009 categorizes CSOs and determines the kind of work organizations are permitted or prohibited from doing primarily based on the sources of funding. It specifies that CSOs receiving more than 10% of their funding from foreign sources are not allowed to be involved in advocacy on matters like human rights and democracy, and also that CSOs cannot spend more than 30% of funds to staff and administration. This has radically altered the way CSOs allocate their budgets and their ability to engage in certain kinds of work.

Proclaiming the state of emergency is another regulatory way in which authorities can restrict the political space of CSOs. As stressed by Verschuuren, in Ethiopia, the 2016 state of emergency included far-reaching limits on freedom of speech, movement and association. Indeed, across the world there are examples of how CSO activities are restricted—whether intentionally or unintentionally—by authorities proclaiming a state of emergency. One example is provided by the French prohibition of mass demonstrations during the 2015 Climate Conference in Paris (see Activism, Artivism and beyond 2017), which followed after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, and the subsequent proclamation of the state of emergency.

Finally, the work of CSOs is also hindered by delegitimizing and intentionally stigmatizing them. For example, as outlined by Verschuuren, the Ethiopian state justifies the funding restrictions imposed on CSOs by claiming that it aims to ensure that funds are allocated properly and to prevent excessive overhead costs. In addition, Ethiopian CSOs are also openly attacked on grounds of suspicion of foreign political meddling, fears of violent extremism and anti-elite attitudes. This is facilitated by state influence over the media, public narratives that reinforce anti–civil society suspicions and weak-rooted formal NGO-sectors.

Knowledge gap 16

- How does the shrinking of civic space by various state and non-state actors affect different types of CSOs?

This obviously impacts on the extent to which CSOs are able to perform their political roles. In general, CSOs in a restricted environment will become less confrontational and more cooperative in their strategies and tactics. This means that the watchdog function of CSOs is under threat. Also,

because of funding challenges, CSOs have capacity and staff constraints. As a consequence, CSOs tend to focus on service-delivery instead. As argued by Verschuuren, "the majority of Ethiopian CSOs have chosen to shift their activities toward technical development and local service delivery work, moving away from any issues that could be construed as politically sensitive" (p. 36). When CSOs are too adaptive to the dominant political order, they run the risk of losing grassroots support, thereby losing on their representational function. Moreover, sometimes restrictions cause CSOs to cease to exist entirely. Yet as Verschuuren stresses, "little has been written on the impact of these executive orders on the operations of CSOs generally, further research is required in this regard" (p. 31). A key question to be answered is how the shrinking of civic space by various state and non-state actors affects different types of CSO differently.

4.2 What can donors do to help CSOs in restrictive environments?

The literature reviews do not explicitly provide recommendations as to what donors and CSOs in the North can do to help CSOs that operate in a restrictive environment. However, a general recommendation is to take the local context into account. The contexts in which CSOs operate are highly complex and organizations themselves are far from homogenous. More knowledge is needed of how specific CSOs change and adapt to different restrictive contexts. Such knowledge is for example needed for donors in order to 'do no harm' because foreign funding can impact on CSOs ability to fulfil political roles.

Verschuuren (summary of the literature review) stresses that when political space is restricted, donor countries and Northern CSOs can play a role in terms of political dialogue, or through direct assistance to CSOs adapting to a new regime. Yet more research is needed on how exactly this can help CSOs in restrictive environments. Moreover, Verschuuren's research project explicitly examines whether there are possibilities for CSOs in Ethiopia to look beyond their own jurisdiction and find support and space in international law, as there are many international agreements that guarantee the political space of CSOs. During the Assumptions programme knowledge sharing conference, it was furthermore stressed that CSOs use the opportunities they have to proceed with their activities (for example in Ethiopia). In order to better support them in doing so, it is valuable to gain more insight in the ways in which different types of organizations circumvent or adapt to restrictions.

Knowledge gaps 17–18

- How do different types of CSOs change and adapt to different restrictive contexts?
- What can donors do to support CSOs in restrictive environments?

24

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5. Next steps for the Assumptions programme

With the finalization and synthesis of the six literature reviews, the project teams have now entered the second, empirical phase of the research. Insights from the reviews, especially when it comes to the research gaps, will guide this empirical phase. The currently ongoing six research projects will be connected to the second call for proposals, which will mainly focus on the third theme 'CSOs in enabling environment'. The research projects of the second call will start in November 2018. All the projects will be united in the knowledge brokering trajectory of INCLUDE. In doing so, not only will the six research projects contribute to the evaluation of the assumptions underpinning the D&D framework, but also to the new policy framework. The discussion on the literature reviews and the broader projects during the knowledge sharing conference on 17 May underscored the importance of engaging with researchers and practitioners in designing this new framework. As such, two other conferences are scheduled: the first one will be an expert meeting held in January 2019, during which the research projects present the mid-term results; and a second conference is scheduled for October 2019 where researchers will present a summary, conclusions and recommendations for each of their respective projects. Keep an eye on the INCLUDE website to stay up-to-date on the latest developments.

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