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Report of the follow-up meeting of research groups on 'New roles of CSOs for Inclusive Development: Assumptions underlying *Dialogue and Dissent*'

Thursday 22 February 2018, 13:00 –16:30 hours

Introduction

On 22 February, the six research groups in the Assumptions programme gathered in Utrecht with INCLUDE and NWO-WOTRO to discuss the ongoing issues in the research programme 'New roles of CSOs for Inclusive Development; Assumptions underlying Dialogue and Dissent'. The meeting was a follow-up to the Inception Workshop held on 15 December, in which the research groups had requested an additional meeting to strengthen cooperation among the researchers and discuss the concepts and methodology relevant to all research projects within the Assumptions programme. The first part of the afternoon focused on the literature review and the progress made so far. After this, each research group introduced a topic for further discussion based on the previous workshop or their own experience. The last part of the meeting was used to discuss other issues. The next Assumptions workshop will be held on 17 May, at which time the research groups will share their literature review with a broader group of stakeholders (policymakers and CSOs).

The goals of the meeting were to:

- Share progress on the literature review, the first part of the Assumptions programme
- Discuss pertinent conceptual and methodological topics relevant to the research groups (e.g. causality, legitimacy, development discourse, autonomy etc.)
- Explore other running and practical issues concerning the Assumptions programme

Literature review: progress so far

The Assumptions programme consists of six research groups, which are conducting research in 4 countries: India, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Ukraine. The programme has 2 parts: a literature review (3 months max) followed by empirical research (15 months max). The different studies will contribute to the evidence-base of the policy framework Dialogue & Dissent and support CSOs. During the first part of the meeting, the research groups shared their progress with the literature review. The relevant literature varies greatly between the different themes (CSOs and the aid chain; CSOs and civic engagement; CSOs in an enabling environment) and for the different countries. Most of the literature on advocacy is from the advocates themselves, not from academic researchers. All of the research groups are currently exploring the various roles of CSOs within the literature. The need to critically look at the **various definitions of CSOs**, CBOs, and NGOs and how they relate to each other was emphasized by the research groups. Through the literature review, the different groups will unpack and narrow down their definition of these organizations. An interesting issue raised in the meeting was that most CSOs adopted the managerial approach, not the social transformation approach. Among other things, the literature review will be used as a tool to uncover the theoretical arguments for **why CSOs are appropriate actors** (or not) to perform their different roles.

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Another interesting issue is the various **constraints on CSOs**, which differ according to the project and the country. Constraints on CSOs might be embedded in, for example, the aid chain, the institutional design of the organization, accountability, resource dependency and the legitimacy of the CSO. Although this differs per project and per country, a comparison between the different (types of) constraints is an interesting aspect at the Assumptions programme level. All of the research groups are convinced that the Assumptions programme will contribute to the **contextual knowledge** for the Dialogue & Dissent framework.

Highlights of the discussions

- Within the Assumptions programme, various research and policy questions relate to the 'actions' of CSOs. These questions investigate what actions CSOs have undertaken and the perception of these actions, i.e. whether they were considered a success or failure. **Benchmarks of success** can be considered political, because they depend on perspectives and achievements in the eyes of the beholder. An important issue for the research projects is, therefore, to define according to *whom* these actions are perceived as a success or failure. A suggestion was to start with the CSOs themselves and obtain information from them on what they are trying to achieve (and what they consider to be their successes and failures). This can be compared to the CSO's Theory of Change and what is happening on the ground. Another suggestion made was to look at the different time frames for the advocacy.
- Although the Assumptions programme call clearly states that the goal is not to evaluate the work of CSOs in the Dialogue and Dissent policy framework, **causality** is still a relevant concept in all of the research projects. In line with the previous discussion point, the outcomes of the advocacy activities are not self-evident; causal relations between actions and results are difficult to establish. The achievements of CSOs are the result of negotiated and intangible processes and, therefore, establishing the achievements of advocacy is inherently complex.
- The Assumptions programme focuses mainly on CSOs, but by adopting the social transformation approach, the Assumption programme also invites research groups to investigate **other forms of citizen engagement**, including those that take place outside established CSOs. These civic engagements can be, for example: less formalized, outside Official Development Aid, and close to social movements. Any type of citizen engagement can be used within the research projects and the research groups are encouraged to provide insights into the connections between these civic initiatives.
- The **development discourse** is an issue that influences the research setting: how to avoid reproduction of development discourse by respondents? One way to address this is to make use of co-ownership with the CSO counterparts in the research project, which goes beyond mere collaboration. Co-ownership forms the basis of mutual understanding and lays the foundation for trust in the relationship. Although co-ownership might be a solid start to working together, it remains a delicate topic, because both parties need to agree on the terms of the co-ownership. A suggestion was made that any form of co-ownership be put in writing in order to make the topic negotiable. The most important value in working together is trust; the people you work with must feel safe and the interests of both parties kept in mind while working together.
- **Legitimacy** is another interrelated concept for the research groups and is linked to issues such as representation and accountability. The concept of 'legitimacy' should be looked at critically before using it in the research setting, because in some situations the concept is

highly politicized. Legitimacy contains all kinds of contestations, e.g. legitimate to whom? The literature suggests that research on legitimacy should always be context specific and stakeholder related. Processes like the upscaling and professionalization of a CSO might also affect the legitimacy of the CSO in the eyes of the community, because the CSO might be perceived as less connected to its grassroots cause. Legitimacy in the eyes of the communities that are represented by the CSOs is also contested, as not every member of the community will view the CSO and its activities in the same way. Researchers must make conscious decisions about who to talk to in communities and what to discuss: concrete measures/outcomes, the processes themselves, or people's perceptions? The discussion might also be influenced by the expectation of what the CSO should do for their constituencies, in the eyes of community members. Legitimacy in the context of shrinking civil space is also complex, as the state may purposely delegitimize the existence of CSOs, while at the same time viewing some of their activities as legitimate.

- The last remark was on the **ethics and safety** of the empirical research. Although every research has its own setting and related constraints, the research groups should be aware of the risks of involving participants in their research.

Other running issues

In the last part of the meeting, practical and contractual issues related to the literature review were discussed with NWO-WOTRO. Research groups must submit their literature review by 15 April and will be assessed by the NWO-WOTRO Programme Committee. The research groups are required to present their literature review on 17 May, at which time the main applicant and co-applicant will discuss their findings with a broader group of stakeholders (policymakers and CSOs).