



Ministry of Foreign Affairs

# IOB Study

## Strategies for partners: balancing complementarity and autonomy

*Evaluation of the functioning of strategic partnerships between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and civil society organisations*

*Summary with recommendations and findings*

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**August 2019**

## Foreword

Since The Netherlands' government first engaged in international development cooperation, the relationships between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and civil society organisations (CSO) has taken on many different forms. From 2013 onwards, the MFA envisaged a more political role for CSOs, in reinforcing civil society dialogues between citizens, government and the private sector. To this end, the MFA introduced so-called 'Strategic Partnerships' (SP) with CSOs. Compared to the previous MFS-II programme, these partnerships should bring more flexibility, more trust, a strengthened advocacy role, and a smaller regulatory burden.

Two of the current SP programs, 'Dialogue and Dissent' and the 'SRHR Partnership Fund', will expire by the end of 2020. A new policy framework is currently under development. This study on the functioning of SP's at various levels of the MFA - CSO collaboration provides timely input for the design of this new framework. IOB's aim is to find patterns in the functioning of these partnerships, to trace underlying causes and to formulate policy recommendations. It does not evaluate the impact of individual partnerships or programmes, since it is too early in the day to see their effects. Impact evaluations are planned for 2020.

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This evaluation draws on a limited document review and a large number of interviews with stakeholders in The Netherlands (>65) and in Nepal, Mali, Sudan and Uganda (>160), amounting to a sample of 26 strategic partnerships. The total budget for the four SP programs examined in this study (i.e. Dialogue & Dissent, the SRHR Partnership Fund, the DSH peacebuilding and conflict mediation SP, and Addressing Root Causes) amounts to some 1.3 billion euros. It is employed by some 56 partnerships in almost 100 countries over a five-year period.

IOB conclude that expectations of SP's were high, but not always clearly articulated. There exist good examples where the MFA and the CSO's played complementary roles within an SP, jointly contributing to results that the MFA or the CSO's individually would not have achieved. Generally, CSO's feel that their autonomy is respected. However, there are a number of constraints that have limited the functioning of SP's. These include: (i) late involvement of thematic departments and embassies in project development; (ii) misunderstanding on how the SP's contribute to the objectives and results of MFA thematic departments; (iii) tensions between aiming for complementarity and for CSO's autonomy; (iv) insufficient MFA staff capacity, especially at embassies; and (v) the long-term commitment and flexibility for Northern CSO's often not being transferred to Southern CSO's.

The report was written by IOB colleagues Ferko Bodnár and Rob van Poelje. They conducted the interviews in The Netherlands, with the appreciated assistance from their colleagues Rita Tesselaar and Pieter Dorst. The field data were collected by George Kasumba in Uganda, Ousmane Sy in Mali, Renuka Motihar in Nepal and Abdelhakam Omer in Sudan, all under the skilled guidance of Corina Dhaene and Geert Phlix of ACE Europe. We thank them all. We also like to thank the members of the external reference group for their advice and

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Final responsibility of this report rests solely with IOB.

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## Abbreviations

AfDB	African Development Bank
ARC	Addressing Root Causes (programme)
CD	Capacity Development
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
D&D	Dialogue and Dissent
DDE	Sustainable Economic Development Department
DGBEB	Directorate-General for Foreign Economic Relations
DGIS	Directorate-General for International Cooperation
DMM	Human Rights and Multilateral Organisations Department
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
DSH	Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid Department
DSH/BU	Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid Department / Implementation Office
DSO	Social Development Department
DSO/MO	Social Development Department / Civil Organisations
DSO/GA	Social Development Department / Health and Aids
EU	European Union
IATI	International Aid Transparency Initiative
I-CSO	International Civil Society Organisation
ID	Institutional Development
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IGG	Inclusive Green Growth Department
IOB	Policy and Operations Evaluation Department
IP	Implementing Partner
IWRM	Integrated Water Resource Management
L&A	Lobby and Advocacy
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MFS-II	Co-financing system Phase II (subsidies for CSOs, 2011-2015)
MLS	Multiannual Country Strategy
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MTR	Mid-term Review
N-CSO	Northern Civil Society Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OD	Organisational Development
PV	Permanent Representative
RTSO	Round Table for Sustainable Palm Oil
S-CSO	Southern Civil Society Organisation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SP	Strategic Partnership
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

ToC	Theory of Change
TFVG	Taskforce Women and Gender
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

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# Introduction

## 1.1 Why this report?

Strategic partnerships (SPs) constitute a relatively new instrument in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ toolkit. Because two of the current SP programmes, i.e. Dialogue and Dissent and the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Right (SRGR) Partnership Fund, will expire in 2020, new policy frameworks are being developed in the course of 2019. This report gives some recommendations for the new policy framework(s).

Also, the amount of funds involved in the SPs justifies a timely external evaluation of the ongoing progress. Together, the four studied SP programmes – Dialogue & Dissent, SRHR Partnership Fund, DSH peace building and mediation SP, and Addressing Root Causes – have a budget of about 1.3 billion euros, which has been used by some 56 partnerships in almost 100 countries over a five-year period.

The main questions of this evaluation are: How do SPs function? Why are they functioning well or not functioning well? What recommendations can we draw for future SPs?

The recommendations are based on an IOB evaluation of how strategic partnerships (SP) between the MFA and civil society organisations (CSOs) have functioned over the past four years. We have not looked at the ultimate results of the various SPs, because this will be done during the final evaluations in 2020.

## 1.2 The reviewers’ perspective: theoretical framework

On the basis of the policy documents for the Dialogue and Dissent instrument and suggestions from the members of our reference group, we have decided to look at SPs from the following perspective (Figure 1):

**Figure 1** *Theoretical framework for the functioning of SPs*



First of all, actors establish SPs because the respective roles they play are supposedly **complementary**. This complementarity can materialise through shared strategic objectives, a frequent strategic dialogue, the sharing of knowledge and networks, or even through joint activities<sup>1</sup>.

Second, for an SP to function well, each partner must respect the other partner's operational and tactical **autonomy**. That means that within the strategic agreement the partners are independent in their choice of approaches, instruments and activities.

Third, if resources are shared in a strategic partnership, their use must be flexible enough to accommodate a variety of international and local contexts. In terms of duration and timeliness, the resources must also be flexibly available to facilitate adaptive management in complex systems. In short, the **funding modality** must accommodate the SP's complementarity and autonomy principles.

Last, in an SP all partners are **accountable** to one another. Transparency regarding the use of shared resources is a key driver for mutual trust and a necessity for the justification of the use of public resources. An SP's accountability system of requires careful balancing of complementarity and autonomy.

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Compared to other partnerships, we characterise *strategic* partnerships as focusing more on joint objective-setting, strategic dialogue about results and project guidance, and where possible and useful, coordination of each other's roles and activities.

We have studied the above four elements at two levels:

- (a) the relationship between MFA and the lead (often Northern) CSO (N-CSO), and
- (b) the relationship between the lead CSO, its alliance members, and Southern CSOs (S-CSOs).

### 1.3 How we worked: methodology

Because it was impossible to look at all SP activities in all countries was impossible in the given time frame, a number of considerations have guided the identification of a selection of SPs and a number of case study countries:

- All four SP programmes had to be covered.
- All different types of Dutch representation had to be covered (no embassy, embassy without development cooperation mandate, embassy with development cooperation mandate).
- The number of visited countries could not exceed four (cost-benefit considerations).
- All thematic directorates of MFA/DGIS should have at least one of their SPs in the sample.
- No duplication with other ongoing studies (in Kenya and India).

<sup>1</sup> In this report, the terms 'complementary roles' for MFA and CSOs and 'complementarity' between MFA and CSOs refer to forms of interaction between MFA and CSOs in a single project. This interaction can vary in intensity from informing each other to actual tactical collaboration, which could result in synergy. What is not meant by complementarity in this report is working separately or independently on different projects that may complement each other in a project portfolio.

This led to the selection of 26 SPs, active in at least one of the following countries: Mali, Uganda, Sudan or Nepal.

The IOB team conducted over 65 interviews with MFA and N-CSO staff in the Netherlands. IOB commissioned the country visits to ACE Europe, who worked with local consultants. Interviews and country visits took place between December 2018 and February 2019. In each country, ACE organised a workshop with S-CSOs, followed by individual interviews with CSOs, often on location. Embassy staff were interviewed separately. Over 170 people were involved in interviews and group discussions in the country case studies. Draft conclusions and recommendations were first discussed with MFA staff in late February, followed by a webinar with S-CSOs and a workshop with N-CSOs and MFA staff in March 2019. This made it possible to discuss findings and draft recommendations in April.

## 1.4 Main findings

The expectations for strategic partnerships – a new way of working for MFA and CSOs – were high but not always clearly articulated. The complementary roles of MFA and a CSO within an SP started with a strategic dialogue about objectives and results, and often included an exchange of knowledge and the use of each other's network. In some cases this opened doors that led to tactical cooperation, in which each partner played its specific role, jointly contributing to results that MFA or the CSO would not have achieved on their own.

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*An example of complementary roles between CSO and MFA thematic department: In Kenya the government wanted to open a coal power plant, using an AfDB loan. MFA thematic department IGG and the CSOs were against investing in fossil fuels, but the S-CSO was not allowed to openly criticise the Kenyan government. The S-CSO informed the N-CSO, who discussed this with IGG. MFA, who is party to discussions at AfDB, and then voiced its objection to coal power plants.*

Generally, CSOs feel that their autonomy is respected in the partnerships, thanks to the elaborate project proposal and inception phases. There are good examples of complementarity between CSOs, especially where decision-making power was delegated to a horizontal SP governance structure at the country level, where S-CSO jointly plan, budget and monitor.

In spite of the good intentions, and the positive examples of well-functioning partnerships that this study found, there are a number of constraints that have limited the functioning of strategic partnerships, the most important being:

- Thematic departments and embassies were involved late in the development of the project proposals, which reduced co-ownership of the SP.
- There is some misunderstanding about how SPs contribute to the objectives and results of MFA's thematic departments, which is reflected in the missing links between the theories of change and results frameworks of different MFA departments and SPs.

- There is a tension between the aim to achieve complementarity in the partnerships and CSO autonomy. CSOs require a certain degree of independence from MFA in order to fulfil their role of dissent in advocacy, which is important for policy coherence, and for peace-building and conflict mediation.
- MFA has insufficient staff, in some thematic departments and in many embassies, to fully play out its partnership role in the SP.
- The long-term commitment and flexibility that MFA provides to N-CSOs is not always transferred to S-CSOs, many of which are still bound to annual contracts, activity-based budgets and strict reporting requirements.

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## **Recommendations to MFA for future strategic partnerships**

These recommendations concern future strategic partnerships (SPs) between MFA and CSOs. We specifically focus here on recommendations for the next phase of the Dialogue & Dissent SP instrument. Therefore, the recommendations and related findings in this document are presented chronologically: (2.1) policy framework development; (2.2) partnership agreement; and (2.3) implementation. These recommendations are supported by a selection of findings. More complete and detailed research findings, as well as more information about the background and research methodology are available in the detailed research report, which will be joint as annex in a complete version of this report. <sup>2</sup>

## 2.1 Policy framework development phase

Recommendations	Findings
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Agreement within MFA on the principles and added value of SPs.                             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Agree on the complementarity between managerial and transformative development views<sup>3</sup></li> <li>(b) Continue using theories of change, at different levels, to clarify complementary roles and results</li> <li>(c) Encourage dissent for greater policy coherence, even if it feels uncomfortable</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Choose for strategic partnerships, above other contractual relations, only if they have clear added value and if both MFA and CSOs are committed to them</li> <li>3. Clarify MFA's expectations and SP elements to CSOs in the policy framework.                             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Balance complementarity between MFA and CSO, and autonomy for CSO</li> <li>(b) Choose the funding modality and accountability that suits the desired complementarity and CSO autonomy</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Both MFA and CSOs expected more strategic dialogue and complementarity, but expectations were not well articulated</li> <li>2. Complementarity between MFA and CSO started with dialogue, which created opportunities for joint action</li> <li>3. CSO autonomy can be undermined by the aim of MFA to achieve complementarity, and may require MFA to give CSOs more space</li> <li>4. Very few SPs worked on dissent, in spite of its importance for policy coherence</li> <li>5. Long-term and flexible funding made it possible for N-CSOs to invest in partnerships for transformative processes</li> <li>6. Some MFA thematic departments used results frameworks that are not appropriate for the SP</li> <li>7. Generally, N-CSOs appreciate the MFA's less detailed requirements for reporting results</li> <li>8. S-CSOs were often still bound to annual contracts, inflexible budgets and detailed reporting requirements</li> </ol>

<sup>2</sup> The full version of this report, including an annex with more detailed methodology and findings, will be published on the IOB website in September 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Social transformation in society is a long-term process, changes the attitudes and values of different actors, with, in the case of D&D, the aim of reducing unequal power relations and exclusion in the social economic and political domain.

## Recommendations

### *Recommendation 1 Agreement within MFA on the principles and added value of SPs*

First of all, there should be clear consensus within MFA on the strategy, to avoid misunderstanding, conflicting expectations and disappointments in future SPs. Even if one thematic department, DSO in the case of D&D, is in charge of developing the policy framework for a new SP instrument, the principles of SPs need to be agreed on within all directorates and departments of MFA which could become involved in future SPs. Principles include the desired complementary roles of MFA and CSO, the respect for CSO autonomy, and the corresponding appropriate financing modalities and accountability systems. Indeed, there are different views within MFA, that need to be discussed, understood and acknowledged:

#### **A. Agree on the complementarity between managerial and transformative development views**

There is potential incongruity, within MFA, and to a lesser extent also within CSOs, between the social transformative development view and the managerial development view, which can result in misunderstanding and frustration. In the managerial view, CSOs are a means to an end, while in the transformational view, CSOs have an intrinsic value for its political role in society as well; these views are not mutually exclusive. The trend at MFA is to increase accountability to parliament and the Dutch public regarding SDG-level results, with the risk of reducing space for longer-term social transformational results. DSO is well placed to discuss the complementarity between these two development views within MFA in general, and explain the need to embrace a transformative development view in the long-term processes that SPs work on. This will also clarify the balance between S-CSO's functional capacity development, and institutional and organisational capacity development.<sup>4</sup>

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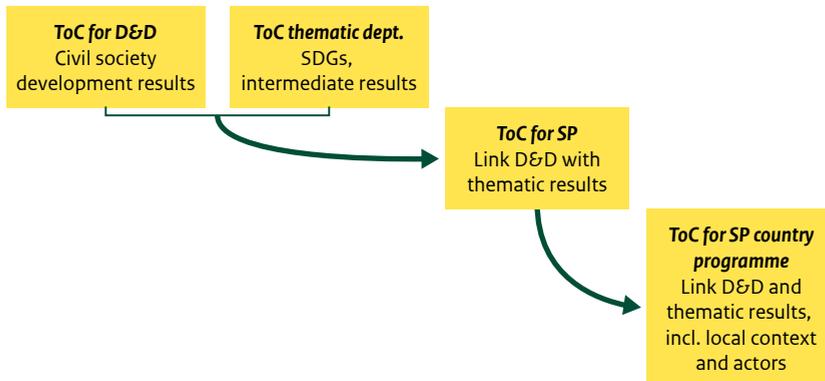
#### **B. Continue using theories of change, at different levels, to clarify complementary roles and results**

We encourage all parties to continue working with theories of change, as they are much appreciated by both MFA and CSO staff. We also encourage them to make more effort to periodically reflect on the ToC and the validity of its underlying assumptions, as this shapes the strategic dialogue both between MFA and CSOs, and within the CSO alliance. A ToC is best developed at three levels (Figure 2).

- (i) At the policy or instrument level by MFA, giving enough room for different SPs. Note that for the D&D SP, this requires a discussion about the overlap between the DSO D&D ToC, and the ToC of the involved thematic departments.
- (ii) At the SP level, by CSO in discussion with MFA (including thematic departments where relevant), giving enough room for different country contexts.
- (iii) At the country level, by CSOs, involving S-CSOs and embassies if present.

<sup>4</sup> Functional, or instrumental capacity building, often short-term, serves a specific purpose, e.g. skills for lobbying. Organisation and institutional capacity building, often longer-term, serves the autonomy of organisations, by improving internal functioning and functioning in their environment respectively.

**Figure 2** Theories of change at the policy, partnership and country programme levels



**C. Encourage dissent for greater policy coherence, even if it feels uncomfortable**

The SP programme could, but does not necessarily have to fit in an embassy’s strategy<sup>5</sup>, and can even take place in a country without Dutch embassy. Nor does an SP have to agree with all of the various MFA departments. First of all, complementarity can also take place between CSO and MFA in The Hague. Second and more importantly, CSO dissent, with an embassy or a particular thematic department, is important for overall MFA policy coherence<sup>6</sup>. For D&D in particular, activism is one of the policy influencing approaches. As for dissent in strategic partnerships where CSOs and MFA are jointly responsible for results, CSOs and MFA should at least agree on a few main overarching objectives, and to some extent on the tactics and external communication (e.g. first discuss any disagreement internally before campaigning publicly).

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*Recommendation 2 Choose for strategic partnerships, above other contractual relations, only if they have clear added value and if both MFA and CSOs are committed to them*

The internal MFA discussion on SPs will also clarify the place that SPs have among other contractual relationships that MFA can have with CSOs. Not all of the work done by CSOs that is funded by MFA requires an SP. MFA can choose from within a spectrum between trust-based relationships with full autonomy for the CSO, on the one hand, and transactional relationships with predefined results and MFA-determined budget lines on the other. Strategic partnerships are an option in between these two extremities (Figure 3). The type of relationship that is chosen depends on (i) the context, varying from crisis, recovery, transition, transformation to resilient contexts, for example; (ii) the objectives, varying from service delivery such as access to drinking water, to long-term transformative processes such as civil society development; and (iii) the capacity and interest of the CSO

<sup>5</sup> Since the embassies developed Multi-annual Country Strategies (MLS), ideally all centrally funded programmes, including SPs, should be covered by the strategy. In practice, however, we found embassies that simply had not anticipated any CSO SP work in their embassy strategy, let alone dissent to their embassy strategy.

<sup>6</sup> For example, an embassy or a thematic department may prioritise the interests of the Dutch private sector abroad, while CSOs can draw MFA’s attention to the overlooked negative social or environmental effects.

and the MFA department. MFA should clarify the criteria for when an SP will be the preferred option, and when other contractual relationships will be preferred, and decide whether strategic partnerships are the desired instrument for a given goal and context.

**Figure 3** *Spectrum of different MFA-CSO relationships*



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As an instrument, SPs are well suited for longer-term social transformation processes, as well as for peace building and conflict mediation processes, in which CSOs have sufficient autonomy while benefiting from the complementary roles of MFA, and where there is sufficient room for dissent. To avoid CSOs forcing all their plans into a strategic partnership proposal, MFA should point CSOs to other possibilities and funds for other MFA-CSO contractual relationships.

**Recommendation 3** *Clarify MFA's expectations and SP elements to CSOs in the policy framework*

The internally established SP principles and expectations should be explained to candidate SP proponents (CSO) in the policy framework. The framework will clarify what part of it is pre-determined by MFA (e.g. overall policy objectives, financing modality and financial accountability), what part will be agreed on in dialogue between MFA and the CSO (e.g. specific objectives, strategic and tactical alignment; accountability for outcomes), and what part is up to the CSO to determine (e.g. tactical and operational autonomy; approaches; room for dissent; flexibility in implementation). The policy framework and application document should include a set of SP elements to be considered in the CSO proposal and which can be further elaborated in dialogue with MFA. These SP elements are organised as 10 (sub-)recommendations, divided into two groups overarching challenges<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Note that the policy framework, theory of change, and guidelines for filling in the application forms used in 2015 cover aspects that we now consider to be crucial for strategic partnerships. Apparently, not everyone interpreted these aspects in the same way or else they did not give them sufficient attention during the development and assessment of proposals.

**A. Balance complementarity between MFA and CSO, and autonomy for CSOs:**

- **Complementarity: CSOs should have clear added value in terms of their roles being complementary to the roles played by MFA.** CSOs and MFA can play complementary roles at the country level in the South, in the Netherlands, and at the international level. For D&D, advocacy roles include: advising, lobbying, and activism.
- **Complementarity: CSOs should clarify how different CSO partners, including local movements, in the SP complement each other.** For D&D, often a combination of CSOs and movements is needed covering local constituency, research, diplomacy and campaigning.
- **Autonomy: MFA should not undermine CSOs' autonomy, in their aim to achieve complementarity.** Strategic objectives, country choice and results reporting should be agreed on in dialogue, not imposed by MFA. Certain lobbying and advocacy work requires regional or global activities that cannot be limited to Dutch priority countries. CSO country selection should be based on needs and the opportunity to address these needs; if this turns out to be a non-priority country, complementarity can still take place with MFA in The Hague.
- **Autonomy: N-CSOs should give sufficient autonomy to S-CSOs.** Autonomy for S-CSOs (and southern movements), representing local beneficiaries and interests, deserves special attention in the partnership between N-CSOs and S-CSOs. N-CSOs should discuss with S-CSOs how to reduce power inequalities, in spite of the funding modality and accountability, and how to acknowledge the added value of each partner in the SP.

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**B. Choose the funding modality and accountability that suits the desired complementarity and CSO autonomy:**

- **Funding modality: MFA could combine a long-term commitment with flexibility for new SPs .** MFA is committed to long-term engagement in an SP, but it also wants to create space for engaging in new SPs. To overcome this dilemma, MFA might consider selecting the best candidates from the pool of both old SP and new SP candidates, based on their track record and long-term results in the past.
- **Funding modality: N-CSOs should use funding modalities for S-CSOs that reflect a strategic partnership.** The funding modality should correspond to long-term commitment, autonomy, flexibility and limited administrative requirements. There is an inherent tension between the long-term commitment and capacity development of selected partner S-CSOs, and the flexibility of partner choice from a large network or emerging movements, with limited short-term functional support, responding to emerging lobbying and advocacy opportunities.
- **Funding modality: MFA should guide CSOs towards funds for non-L&A activities.** In lobbying and advocacy trajectories, there is often need for funding services to increase local buy-in and legitimacy. Ideally, this should be funded from other budgets available for CSOs. There may be cases where MFA could agree to a small part of the D&D budget being used for non-L&A activities.
- **Accountability: MFA and CSOs should agree on a mutual upward and downward accountability system.** A strategic partnership is reinforced when MFA and CSOs share responsibility for results and jointly report on these. Besides the usual upward accountability, downward accountability needs to be strengthened, from MFA to CSOs,

from N-CSOs to S-CSOs, and to local stakeholders and beneficiaries, for example by including them in planning and monitoring.

- **Accountability: MFA and CSOs should discuss and agree on which short- and medium-term indicators to report on.** MFA's desire to report annually on aggregated results should not result in requests to CSOs to report on irrelevant indicators. For D&D SP, it is possible (i) to translate the generic six D&D indicators to the specific SP theme; to link SP indicators to thematic indicators through a plausible narrative; or (iii) to directly report on thematic process or outcome indicators. The flexibility in SP implementation should be reflected in the accountability: (i) with a focus on (short-term, intermediate) outcomes and (ii) flexibility in process and output indicators.
- **Learning: MFA should continue to expand funding and facilitate of learning.** MFA should consider using the D&D Linking and Learning activities in other SP programmes as well, and expand them to thematic learning, and learning at the country or regional level. First and foremost, learning should serve the needs of adaptive management in (local) SP programmes.

## Findings

The above recommendations are based on the following findings:

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*Finding 1 Both MFA and CSOs expected more strategic dialogue and complementarity, but expectations were not well articulated*

The N-CSOs' expectations of the new strategic partnership were positive: more strategic dialogue with MFA as partner, more complementarity between CSO and MFA in joint objectives, and in the case of D&D, more acknowledgment for lobbying and advocacy with a link between local, national and international activities. N-CSOs were also uncertain about what a 'strategic partnership' meant exactly, and how it would work in practice. The MFA's expectations at DSO, the department initiating the D&D and SRHR SP, were similar to those of CSOs.

Some thematic departments and embassies were only involved at a later stage, and either did not have any clear expectations, or anticipated having a much stronger influence on the SP, in terms of where the SP would work, and the extent to which the SP would contribute to and report on the specific thematic results framework, or fit in with the embassy's multi annual country strategy (MLS). Too little effort has been made to come to a joint agreement on overall objectives and clarifying how some of the SPs would contribute, in the short-term or the long-term, to the thematic department's results framework.

Our study also confirmed the findings of an earlier study from 2016<sup>8</sup>, namely that CSOs had higher expectations than MFA.

Most S-CSOs mentioned that they did not have clear expectations of the new strategic partnerships. A few S-CSOs mentioned that they had expected more capacity building and

<sup>8</sup> Wessel M, L Schulpen S Hilhorst, K Biekart. 2017. Mapping the expectations of the Dutch Strategic Partnerships for lobby and advocacy.

that they would be less dependent on N-CSO's for technology and funding. Both N-CSOs and S-CSOs had expected the Dutch embassy to be more involved. CSOs' expectations of MFA's role were often unrealistic, according to MFA, given MFA's limited staff capacity.

*Finding 2 Complementarity between MFA and CSOs started with dialogue, which created opportunities for joint action*

Complementarity between MFA and CSOs started with agreement on strategic objectives in the project proposal and inception phase, and was followed by a strategic dialogue, often through frequent informal contact between MFA and N-CSO. This made it possible to use each other's knowledge and networks. Dutch embassies, when present, were often involved as well, and helped to facilitate the exchange of information between the embassy and the various strategic partners. The strategic dialogue has also informed Dutch policies and the embassies' multi-annual country strategies. When strategic dialogue was effective, it created opportunities for the actors to assume complementary roles. For example, MFA and embassies have opened doors for CSOs' lobbying and advocacy efforts in international forums or national governments, while CSOs have informed embassies about the concerns of local communities, and provided evidence on themes that MFA would like to address, such as human rights and the environment. This study found good examples of complementary roles, involving MFA in The Hague, embassies, N-CSOs and S-CSOs (Table 1). However, both CSOs and MFA acknowledged that many opportunities for complementary roles were missed as well, partly by unclear expectations about each other's roles, diverging interests, and lack of MFA staff capacity.

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There are major differences between the four different SP programmes. Looking at the spectrum of relationships, which range from transactional relationships, via strategic partnerships, to trust-based relationships (see Figure 3), the DSH ARC programme was more transactional-based during implementation, while the DSH 'Peace building and mediation SP' are more trust-based. The D&D and SRHR SPs are more in the middle, and show the most complementarity between MFA and CSOs. For the DSO D&D objective to strengthen civil society for their lobbying and advocacy role, we found in this study that SP agreements are indeed appropriate and certainly have added value. Within the complex environment of lobbying and advocacy, SPs enable many of the partners to consistently act, observe and respond in a complementary manner.

One of the features of strategic partnerships is that setting joint strategic objectives can only be achieved when proposals are developed in a dialogue between MFA and CSOs, which explains why a standard tender procedure, in which the applicant is required to submit a full, detailed proposal, is inappropriate for strategic partnerships.

Several examples of joint CSO-MFA action were found, a few of which are presented below. The overall patterns of the complementary roles that CSO and MFA played are summarised in Table 1.

An example of complementary roles between MFA and an environmental CSO: In Uganda, IFAD supported the development of two oil palm areas. However, the environmental assessment was done poorly. Therefore, the Dutch embassy asked the environmental CSO for advice. The CSO commissioned an additional study that showed the negative environmental impact. As a result, IFAD is currently reorienting their investment, and Dutch banks that were ready to invest in oil palm, are warned by this assessment.

**Table 1** Overview of complementary roles of MFA and CSO found in this study

Role MFA	Role CSOs
<b>Use each other's knowledge and networks:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitate information exchange between SPs.</li> <li>Bring CSOs in contact with other CSOs working on same theme.</li> <li>Organise and fund learning, through knowledge platforms, linking and learning events.</li> <li>Introduce CSOs to international organisations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share knowledge (thematic, local context).</li> <li>Share network (local constituency; local concerns).</li> <li>Train MFA staff.</li> </ul>
<b>Strategic dialogue:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invite CSOs for reflection on programme or thematic theories of change</li> <li>Invite CSO advice for Dutch policies and strategies (MLS)</li> <li>Participate in joint political country analysis.</li> <li>Invite CSOs for reflection or input on international policies.</li> <li>MFA departments discuss policy incoherencies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide thematic and local context input (CSO network).</li> <li>Add legitimacy through local constituency.</li> <li>Participate in joint political country analysis.</li> <li>Point MFA at policy incoherencies.</li> </ul>
<b>Coordinate joint advocacy in the South:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advise CSO about tactical approaches.</li> <li>Forward CSO message to government that CSO cannot deliver themselves.</li> <li>Linking CSO to Dutch programmes or investors, in case of concerns about social or environmental impact.</li> <li>Protect S-CSO activist and lobby for civic space in dialogue with government.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Signal local concerns (social, environmental, human rights).</li> <li>Provide embassies with information for dialogue with government.</li> <li>Mobilise local constituency for credibility.</li> <li>Inform embassy about threatened S-CSO activists and shrinking civil space.</li> </ul>
<b>Coordinate joint advocacy in international forums:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MFA The Hague and Dutch Permanent Representatives discuss roles with CSO in joint policy lobbying initiatives.</li> <li>Use MFA access to, and credibility in international forums (UN, World Bank)</li> <li>Inform CSO about political feasibility and advice about tactical approach.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Link local to international lobbying and advocacy.</li> <li>Mediate between Dutch and Southern governments.</li> <li>Lobby, through MFA in The Hague and Dutch public, for more attention to social and environmental issues in the South.</li> <li>Provide MFA with evidence and legitimacy (CSO network).</li> </ul>

*Finding 3 CSO autonomy can be undermined by the aim of MFA to achieve complementarity, and may require MFA to give CSOs more space*

There is a trade-off between complementarity and autonomy. The complementarity between roles assumed by MFA and CSOs has resulted in synergy, but it can also undermine a CSO's autonomy. Some MFA staff, in their aim to achieve complementarity and reduce fragmentation, would like to see CSOs work on MFA priorities in MFA priority countries. However, CSOs and other MFA staff agree that CSOs should not be prevented from working in countries where the Netherlands does not have an embassy, in non-priority countries, or from working on themes such as human rights or the environment in countries where Dutch priorities are different, for example trade, private sector development and the interest of Dutch companies. On the contrary, the latter is seen, also by MFA, as an example of 'dissent', or providing a platform for unheard voices. Indeed, it is viewed as a different kind of complementarity, which would disappear if CSOs had to conform to MFA's priorities.

The perceived autonomy is also influenced by the local context and cultural reality of the S-CSO. In some countries it is important to maintain some critical distance from donors and their embassies. Some S-CSOs must stay under the radar, while others need to be seen as being impartial and not give the impression that they are being funded by Dutch money. The reverse is also true: MFA may agree with a CSO's activist approach, but may avoid this association when conducting government-to-government diplomacy.

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*An example of a CSO not wanting to be openly associated with the Dutch government:  
The fishing community in Jakarta did not want to engage in a consultation with the Dutch embassy staff because of Dutch support to Dutch dredging companies, who were causing troubles to the fishing community.*

*Finding 4 Very few SPs worked on dissent, in spite of its importance for policy coherence*

The Netherlands is quite unique in its support to the political role of CSOs, which is becoming even more relevant given the current shrinking civic space in many countries. Dissent and activism is an important part of advocacy work. Although CSOs appreciate having the room to disagree, most CSOs emphasised the element of dialogue. CSOs stated that discussions with MFA, and the resulting policy input from SPs, proceeded smoothly because they have common objectives. True dissent only took place in a few SPs, where CSOs brought attention to MFA's internal policy incoherencies, e.g. between the government's interest in trade, investment, and the Dutch private sector abroad, on the one hand, and labour conditions for the local population and the environmental impact, on the other. In such cases, the CSO may agree with certain departments, and disagree with others. The MFA departments that feel least comfortable with dissent, for example those dealing with foreign trade and investment abroad, note that dissent in SPs can work well as long as there is agreement on overarching objectives from the start, and a willingness to come to an internal agreement before starting to campaign publicly. There are interesting examples where initial disagreement ultimately resulted in more policy coherence.

*An example of CSO dissent contributing to MFA's policy coherence: In Kenya, there were problems with labour conditions in the flower sector, where Dutch companies are involved: low wages, sexual harassment and exposure to pesticides. For CSOs it is difficult to get in contact with the private sector. Through the embassy, the CSO was introduced at a round table with the private sector. This resulted in the setup of a 'Living wage lab' consisting of CSOs, the private sector and ILO, which has launched a pilot project with several Dutch flower companies.*

*Finding 5 Long-term and flexible funding made it possible for CSOs to invest in partnerships for transformative processes*

Characteristics of the MFA financing modality in the SP are a long-term commitment (often five years) that makes it possible to plan for longer-term processes and build local capacity, and flexible funding along broad budget lines that makes it possible to focus on outcomes rather than detailed activities. These were much appreciated by N-CSOs and lead S-CSOs, and allowed them to build longer-term relationships with other S-CSOs and communities, invest in capacity development, and adapt plans when contexts change. It also allowed CSOs to combine SP funding with other funding and to build a more coherent, long-term country programme. Long-term processes require longer than five years, so most CSOs hope for continued funding for well-performing SPs.

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*An example of the positive effect of long-term and flexible funding: A N-CSO involved in an SP in Sudan explained that they can combine this with funding from other donors to develop a longer-term coherent country programme.*

On the other hand, some CSOs mentioned that for lobbying and advocacy purposes, flexibility is needed to switch partners, select partners from a larger network and involve informal movements, as lobbying and advocacy opportunities arise. This may limit the duration of the commitment towards S-CSOs and the focus on civil society development in the South.

*Finding 6 Some MFA thematic departments used results frameworks that are not appropriate for SP*

The idea of a strategic partnership is that MFA and CSOs agree on long-term outcomes, and provide the CSOs with sufficient flexibility in their choice of outputs, processes, and intermediate results, to achieve those outcomes. However, MFA reports aggregated results to parliament annually, and wishes to include SP results. In the case of D&D, most SPs were transferred to other thematic departments, who have their own results framework. Too little effort has been made to link the different ToCs and to look for overlap in the result frames. Unfortunately, in the chain between MFA thematic department, Dutch-based N-CSOs, the N-CSOs' field office, and S-CSOs, what was meant to be a dialogue about indicators to report on, ended up being an imposition of inappropriate indicators for certain S-CSOs. The final result reflects what the DSO D&D ToC document (2017)<sup>9</sup> describes

<sup>9</sup> Kamstra J. 2017. Dialogue and Dissent Theory of Change 2.0. Supporting civil society's political role.

as a clash between the transformative development view and the managerial development view, partly caused by MFA's aim to report results annually, and partly by the relation between N-CSOs and S-CSOs.

*An example of an inappropriate results framework for S-CSO: A D&D programme in Sudan, implemented by an S-CSO, was happy with its own innovative 'community score card' monitoring tool. Then a consultant, brought in by the N-CSO, came and developed an additional list of indicators, which were not considered relevant by the S-CSO. Later, the N-CSO requested the S-CSO to report on MFA/DSH indicators, and these even changed a number of times. The S-CSO is now focusing on meeting as many of the MFA/DSH requirements as it can and using as few of the indicators proposed by the consultant as possible. Their own M&E, including the community score card, is not integrated into the new M&E system yet.*

The ARC programme has developed a common results framework, but the CSO does not consider it to be particularly appropriate as it does not reflect the local reality, nor do the figures aggregated by DSH mean much. The DSH peace-building and mediation I-CSOs, by contrast, whose funding is largely unearmarked, prepare one report that is sent to all core donors. In addition, since 2018 these I-CSOs also report to MFA/DSH on a limited number of DSH indicators, which were discussed and agreed upon.

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*Finding 7 Generally, N-CSOs appreciate the MFA's less detailed requirements for reporting results*

MFA's intention was to have lower administrative requirements than under the previous MFS-II programme, and joint responsibility for agreed outcomes. For the D&D programme, DSO identified six universal indicators, which all D&D SPs could report on. MFA recommended an 'eight-page' annual report, but most SPs submitted more elaborate reports, typically 30-60 pages long. N-CSOs appreciated the less detailed reporting requirements with a focus on (intermediate) outcomes and a reflection on the ToC and its underlying assumptions (complemented with reporting in IATI). This is considered appropriate for the longer-term transformative processes such as support to the capacity development of civil society and lobbying and advocacy. Nevertheless, MFA Control Units still require detailed financial reporting.

*Finding 8 S-CSOs are often still bound to annual contracts, inflexible budgets and detailed reporting requirements*

Many S-CSOs have not benefitted from long-term commitment and flexibility, and are still bound to annual contracts with inflexible activity-based budgets. Most SPs have a limited budget for S-CSO overhead costs and contingencies. This limits the continuity of their activities – including staff retention – and the possibility of strategic long-term planning and capacity building, and it also affects their sustainability.

A particular constraint, mentioned by several CSOs in the D&D SP, is that expenditure on service delivery is currently prohibited. These CSOs see this expenditure as necessary for their

lobbying and advocacy work, for gaining the buy-in of local communities and governments, in particular in contexts where there are limited options for other donor funding.

In the South, reporting on outcomes was new and appreciated by S-CSOs, because it facilitated more strategic discussion and programme adaptation. However, most S-CSO still need to submit detailed activity reports accompanied by detailed financial reports. This is related to the above-mentioned annual, inflexible activity-based budgets. One of the reasons mentioned by N-CSOs and lead S-CSOs, is the level of the administrative capacity of the contracted S-CSOs, and N-CSO and lead S-CSO's fear of financial mismanagement by S-CSOs. Another reason why lead S-CSOs have high financial reporting requirements: working for different donors, they use one system that meets the requirements of the most stringent donor.

*An example of short-term budget and its negative consequences: An N-CSO visited Sudan to find out why there was budget underspending. It turned out that the implementing S-CSO had ran out of money, and had been waiting for a long time for money from the bureaucratically organised lead S-CSO. The implementing S-CSO turned out to run out of money regularly, had to discontinue activities, and had difficulty retaining staff.*

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## 2.2 Partnership agreement phase

Recommendations	Findings
4. Involve thematic departments, embassies and S-CSOs earlier in the assessment and further development of the proposals.	9. Late involvement of thematic departments and embassies reduced co-ownership of the SP.
5. Aim to achieve complementarity between CSOs in SP country programmes.	10. The elaborate inception phase increased ownership and autonomy for S-CSOs.
6. Clarify and document the complementarity with thematic departments and embassy programmes in an MoU.	11. Flexibility in the strategic choice of partners with different expertise increased complementarity between MOs.
7. Address MFA staff inadequacies, in particular at the embassy level.	12. Complementarity also depended on the available MFA staff to play out its partnership role.
8. Encourage N-MO to delegate power to a country level SP governance structure.	13. A horizontal governance structure between CSOs at the country level improved SP functioning.

## Recommendations

### *Recommendation 4* *Involve thematic departments, embassies and S-CSO earlier in the assessment and further development of the proposals.*

In the spirit of a more equal partnership, the assessment and further development of SP proposals should involve discussions between MFA and CSOs about the above-mentioned SP elements. S-CSO autonomy benefits from early involvement in the design of the SP. In particular existing SPs that intend to continue working together in a subsequent phase have the opportunity to better involve S-CSOs, other Southern stakeholders and the embassy in the design. MFA could ask submitters of SP proposals about the extent to which S-CSOs, including movements and CBOs, have been involved, and about the extent to which these represent a local constituency to which they are accountable.

### *Recommendation 5* *Aim to achieve complementarity between CSOs in SP country programmes.*

For SPs working with a group of different Northern and Southern CSOs, MFA should encourage the N-CSO to choose a CSO alliance that meets the required capacity of the SP objectives in the country context. The roles are a logical consequence of the ToC, context and actor analysis at the country programme level. The political roles that are expected to be assumed in the D&D programme often involve bringing into play a combination of local constituency, information and knowledge, international networks, diplomacy, and activism. MFA should encourage SPs to include community-based organisations, movements, the private sector and local governments, not only as lobbying targets, but as coalition partners to play complementary roles in the partnership.

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### *Recommendation 6* *Clarify and document the complementarity with thematic departments and embassy programmes in an MoU*

For SPs elaborating a programme in countries with a Dutch embassy, make sure that the SP is not only co-owned by thematic departments, but also included in the embassy Multiannual Country Strategy (MLS). The MLS should explain how the respective ToCs reinforce each other, so the SP receives sufficient attention through a certain level of co-ownership by the embassy, while respecting CSO autonomy. The embassy, thematic department and CSO should discuss and agree on the desired level of complementarity, which can vary in intensity from simply informing each other, using each other's network, to actual tactical collaboration in joint activities. An outline of the expected roles of the CSO, the thematic department and the embassy in the partnership, should be agreed on, based on a realistic estimate of staff time each partner can make available for this partnership. This should also be documented, e.g. in an MoU, also to avoid disruption in case of staff rotation.

*Recommendation 7 Address MFA staff inadequacies, in particular at the embassy level.*

For the implementation of the SP, MFA should provide sufficient capacity, proportional to the number of programmes and their budget, to the thematic department but even more so at the country level. The best place to increase capacity at the country level is at the embassy. Alternatively, if no additional MFA staff can be hired, additional CSO staff could be hired for the duration of the programme, funded from the overall programme budget, to facilitate communication and collaboration between the embassy and CSOs.

*Recommendation 8 Encourage delegating power to a country-level SP governance structure.*

The SP framework, proposal, and country programme, in increasing level of detail, should clarify what decisions can be taken at what level, thus applying local ownership and subsidiarity principles. This requires N-CSOs to delegate power. MFA could ask how the SP expects to organise country-level governance in order to enhance the SP's functioning. The benefits of different CSOs with complementary roles working in one SP in one country depend considerably on the country-level governance structure. We recommend a horizontal governance structure in which, at the country level, all SP partners can jointly plan, budget, divide tasks, monitor and take responsibility for results. This kind of a horizontal governance structure also reduces the power inequality that still persists in some N-CSO–S-CSO bilateral contractual arrangements.

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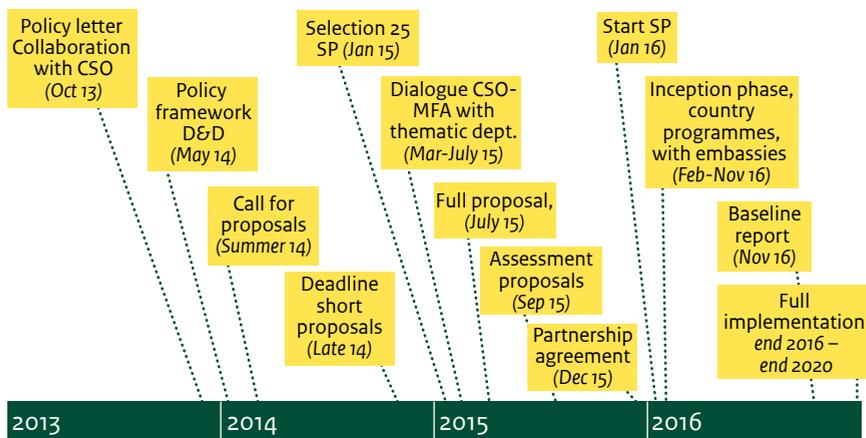
## Findings

The above recommendations are based on the following findings:

*Finding 9 Late involvement of thematic departments and embassies reduced co-ownership of the SP*

As described in Finding 6, complementarity between MFA and CSOs had a false start due to the late involvement of the thematic departments and often even later involvement of the embassies. The timeline of the D&D project development procedure, from the first policy letter in 2013 to the start of full implementation in late 2016, reveals that the thematic departments and embassies were not involved in the initial short proposals (global ToC and track record) in 2014. Selected short proposals, which already included overall goals, were then divided across thematic departments for the joint elaboration of the full proposals in 2015. Embassies were only asked to come on board, insofar as relevant, during the inception phase in 2016. This reduced early opportunities to reach a joint agreement on overall goals and to link the ToC and corresponding results frameworks. Especially in the case of DSH, and in the case of certain embassies, there is not much sense of co-ownership because of the perceived dissonance between the overall objectives and results frameworks.

**Figure 4** Timeline of the preparation of D&D strategic partnerships



*Finding 10 The elaborate inception phase increased ownership and autonomy for S-CSOs*

S-CSOs are often sub-contracted after the overarching SP agreement has already been signed, and S-CSOs therefore have less influence at the strategic level. Although the assumptions underlying the SP policy frameworks are therefore challenged by CSO realities, both the N-CSOs and the S-CSOs feel that their autonomy is well respected in the SP. The elaborate, in-country inception phase has contributed to this strategic autonomy, as it allows parties to adapt their strategic choices to the local contexts.

*Finding 11. Flexibility in the strategic choice of partners with different expertise increased complementarity between MOs*

Certain SPs made more of an effort during a scoping study in the early stages, which prompted the CSO alliance to welcome additional partners with complementary expertise, needed in pursuit of the SPs' objectives. This increased complementarity between MOs in an SP. For lobbying and advocacy, this could include: contact with local communities, local government legitimacy, information gathering and research, links to international forums, capacity for campaigning, and diplomacy.

*Finding 12 Complementarity in the SP depended on available MFA staff to play out its partnership role*

A major constraint, mentioned by many CSOs, but also by several staff at MFA, has been the lack of MFA capacity to play out its partnership role. This had to do with the number of staff, staff expertise and personal motivation, and high staff turnover. International CSOs witnessed a high staff turnover in MFA compared to other donors. CSOs appreciated longer-term contacts (>4 years) with MFA staff in The Hague, as it led to more trust and strategic dialogue. Embassies that have (additional) staff dedicated to maintaining contact with CSOs played out their partner role much better. The most interesting cases of complementarity are those where S-CSOs, N-CSOs, embassies, Dutch Permanent Representatives and different thematic departments collaborate, thanks to motivated staff and good personal relationships.

*An example of the benefits of additional MFA staff capacity: The embassy in Uganda recruited an additional local staff member for the coordination of SP (and other projects) working on SRHR, organised several meetings per year, and invited the SRHR SP for input in the Multi-annual Country Strategy (MLS).*

*Finding 13 A horizontal governance structure between CSOs at the country level improved SP functioning*  
Several SPs had innovative governance structures, involving all CSOs at the country level. Both new and less experienced CSOs and older and more professional CSOs participated to an equal degree. The governance structure organised joint planning, divided tasks according to the CSOs' capacities and divided the SP country budget according to outcomes. Joint monitoring of outcomes made it possible to rearrange tasks and budget between CSOs when necessary. The governance structure supported peer-to-peer support for capacity development, and resulted in a clear shared responsibility for the agreed outcomes. This governance structure was in sharp contrast to some of the bilateral N-CSO–S-CSO relationships found in some of the other SPs, which suffered from major power inequalities.

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*Examples of a horizontal governance structure of S-CSOs: In three SP's, active in Uganda and Nepal, the CSOs have a joint government structure at the country level, and, in two SP's a steering committee with rotating presidency. The S-CSOs do joint planning, divide the country budget, and discuss progress. All S-CSOs are well informed about the others, have a strong sense of joint responsibility, and when necessary tasks are redistributed among the partners.*

## 2.3 SP implementation phase

In the current D&D programme, there was a separate inception phase of almost one year (2016), followed by a four-year implementation phase (end 2016–end 2020). In reality, implementation already started in the inception phase, while the programme was regularly reviewed and adapted during implementation. Therefore, DSO proposes not to have a separate inception phase in the new D&D programme. Our recommendations below concern the new implementation phase, including the further development of country programmes, but the supporting findings refer to both the previous inception phase and the previous implementation phase.

Recommendations	Findings
9. Facilitate adaptive project management by regular strategic dialogue and validation of the assumptions underpinning the SP.	14. Continued strategic dialogue enabled joint MFA-CSO action.
10. Let each SP formulate a strategy for both short- and long-term capacity development for S-CSOs.	15. A vicious circle of short-term support and limited capacity development kept some S-CSOs in an unequal partnership role.
11. Fund and organise continued learning relevant for SP implementation.	16. CSO autonomy was strengthened by the focus on outcomes and trust.
12. Strengthen shared responsibility and downward accountability.	17. Joint learning was well organised in D&D, but poorly organised in ARC due to limited staff.
13. Allow flexibility in the SP results framework for context specific interpretation and flexibility over time.	18. Shared responsibility for outcomes evolved over time, and was facilitated by the SP governance structure.
	19. Accountability remains mainly upward.

## Recommendations

*Recommendation 9 Facilitate adaptive project management by regular strategic dialogue and validation of the assumptions underpinning the SP.*

Dialogue should not be limited to the formal, annual strategic dialogue meeting. Rather, it should be frequent and informal – and strategic. It should take place both locally at the country level, and in The Hague, and the dialogue should be sure to cover the achieved outcomes, the ToC’s underlying assumptions and the consequences for making adaptations to the programme.

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*Recommendation 10 Let each SP formulate a strategy for both short- and long-term capacity development for S-CSOs.*

SP proposals should present a vision and strategy on how capacity development in civil society will be supported in the short- and the long-term. The question is to find the right balance between capacity for a specific purpose (functional or instrumental capacity development), and capacity for empowerment of an organisation, by better internal functioning (organisational capacity, e.g. financial management, M&E, HRM) and by better functioning in their environment (institutional capacity, e.g. networking and relations management, fundraising, and determination of coherent strategy).

*Recommendation 11 Fund and organise continued learning relevant for SP implementation.*

The Linking and Learning activities in the D&D programme are recommended for other SP programmes as well. In addition, more learning could take place at the country or region level, as well as at the thematic level. The focus should be on lessons for SP implementation and adaptation.

*Recommendation 12 Strengthen shared responsibility and downward accountability.*

To strengthen shared MFA-CSO responsibility for SP results, MFA – and embassies where possible – should play a role in monitoring and reporting. Moreover, MFA should encourage downward accountability, from MFA to CSOs, from N-CSOs to S-CSOs, and to beneficiaries, for example by including southern stakeholders in planning and monitoring. A horizontal CSO governance structure at country level, (see Recommendation 8) with delegated decision-making power, combined with strategic dialogue with MFA, facilitates joint planning, monitoring and adaptation, and reporting.

*Recommendation 13 Allow flexibility in the SP results framework for context specific interpretation and flexibility over time.*

Because of the nature of the SPs – clear overall objectives, and flexibility in approach and activities – MFA thematic departments should also allow SPs a certain flexibility in the results reporting – in discussions between MFA and CSOs.

## Findings

The above recommendations are based on the following findings:

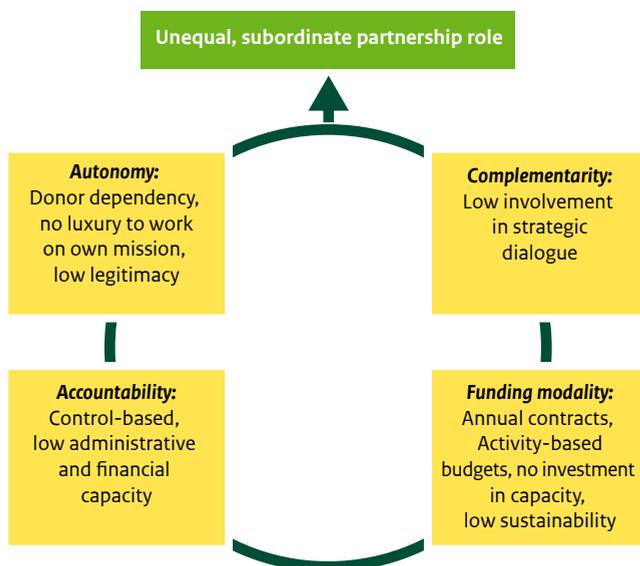
*Finding 14 Continued strategic dialogue enabled joint MFA-CSO action*

| 32 | As Finding 2 illustrates, the study has found various examples of joint action in which CSOs and MFA played complementary roles, thanks to continued strategic dialogue during the implementation of the SP. The involvement of embassies varies considerably between countries, and depends on embassy priorities (MLS), but also on the personal interest of individuals. As a consequence, embassy involvement also varies with staff rotation.

*Finding 15 A vicious circle of short-term support and limited capacity development kept some S-CSOs in an unequal partnership role*

In the case of D&D, two main objectives were combined: (i) a general objective to enhance the development of civil society in the South, and (ii) lobbying and advocacy towards decision-makers that will eventually contribute to SDGs. The first objective required longer-term commitments and flexible funding to build the capacities of S-CSOs. The second objective required flexibility in partner choice, including less organised and formalised movements, and support was sometimes limited to short-term functional capacity building. In practice, grassroots organisations or movements are often combined in an alliance with more professional CSOs to take advantage of their administrative capacity and accountability. So even though not all S-CSOs needed to professionalise, some of them found it difficult to escape from a vicious circle that involved all four aspects of SPs' functioning. As a result, these S-CSOs found themselves in an unequal, subordinate role in the SP partnership (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5** *Vicious circle between funding modality, accountability, autonomy and complementarity*



*Finding 16 CSO autonomy was strengthened by the focus on outcomes and trust*

The flexibility regarding the day-to-day management of the SP activities is highly appreciated by the CSOs in all four programmes. The annual joint discussion on outcomes and the reflection on the ToC had a positive effect on the flexibility and autonomy of S-CSOs. However, as Finding 8 demonstrates, in some cases S-CSOs faced demanding reporting requirements, not in line with the original idea of strategic partnerships. Trust between MFA and CSOs, and between N-CSOs and S-CSOs, improved the autonomy of CSOs. High staff turnover often meant re-building trust again, and had a negative effect on S-CSOs' autonomy.

*Finding 17 Joint learning was well organised in D&D, but poorly organised in ARC due to limited staff*

Joint learning in SPs, between MFA and different CSOs, happened to varying degrees. The D&D SP were facilitated by the MFA budget for Linking and Learning events, which were much appreciated. ARC, by contrast, had very little effective support from MFA for learning, and N-CSOs found the research agenda too academic. Some CSOs involved in ARC organised exchanges themselves at the country level. Embassies often facilitated exchanges between SPs, or, in some cases between CSOs working on the same theme, e.g. SRHR. The main determinants were budget, and availability and priorities of MFA staff.

*Examples of suggestions made for improved thematic learning: Several CSOs mentioned that it could be more beneficial if a smaller group of CSOs (not limited to D&D) working on the same theme would be invited to learning events, e.g. at the country level. Examples are the three SPs working on child marriage. One CSO explained that the ToC is not being used sufficiently to validate assumptions, which is best done by inviting SPs working on the same theme.*

*Finding 18 Shared responsibility evolves over time, and is facilitated by SP governance structure*

Shared responsibility for agreed outcomes gradually developed as MFA's involvement in joint strategic dialogue and collaboration increased. In Uganda, the embassy even tried joint monitoring of all SRHR projects, but that turned out to be difficult for practical reasons. Shared responsibility between CSOs in the same SP was stronger when there was a governance structure for joint planning, budgeting and monitoring (Finding 13). A constraint in the outcome-focused monitoring and the desired flexibility in implementation was the imposition of reporting requirements on S-CSOs, from N-CSOs or from MFA.

*Finding 19 Accountability remains mainly upward*

Accountability has mainly been upward, from S-CSOs to N-CSOs to MFA. S-CSOs complained about the lack of feedback. Downward accountability happened to some extent if S-CSOs were member-based organisations or organised meetings with beneficiaries or local authorities, as part of their monitoring and planning. In exceptional cases, SPs facilitated downward accountability from the minister to Dutch parliament and the public, responding to questions following SP campaigns in the Netherlands, e.g. about environmental or social issues in the South.

*An example of downward accountability: in Sudan, the first step towards downward accountability was involving beneficiaries and local authorities in progress monitoring, during interviews and focus group discussions. An interesting side effect of this was the increased trust between local communities and local authorities.*

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