



DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION TIPS TOOLS INSIGHTS PRACTICES

In practice

NETHERLANDS' STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS TO STRENGTHEN CIVIL SOCIETY ADVOCACY CAPACITY

Key messages

The Netherlands' "Dialogue and Dissent" programme has enabled civil society organisations (CSOs) with a track record in advocacy to strengthen their capacities and pursue advocacy goals. They have contributed to numerous changes in laws, policies and social norms. Success factors include strategic partnerships built over time and based on trust along with flexible long-term funding.

Keywords

[Civil society](#) | [Innovation](#) | [Partner countries](#) | [Partnerships](#)

Key partner

[Netherlands](#)

Challenge

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have a crucial role in advancing inclusive, sustainable development. They are important implementing partners in development co-operation and are also independent development actors in their own right. CSOs fulfil varied roles such as in service delivery, representing the needs of diverse and often marginalised groups, and promoting and defending people's rights. They have a critical role as a watchdog, monitoring developments and voicing alternative or dissenting views to hold government and business to account. However, this role as an independent and autonomous actor has often been downplayed by the development co-operation community who see them primarily as an implementing partner. Moreover, civic space is shrinking in numerous countries, creating threats and limiting civil society's operational space.

Approach

In 2016, the Netherlands launched the "[Dialogue and Dissent](#)" [policy framework](#) to support CSOs in partner countries in their political capacity to lobby and advocate. With a total budget of EUR 925 million,

25 organisations or consortia were awarded grants to work with and support 1 335 organisations in over 65 countries. Key features of the framework included:

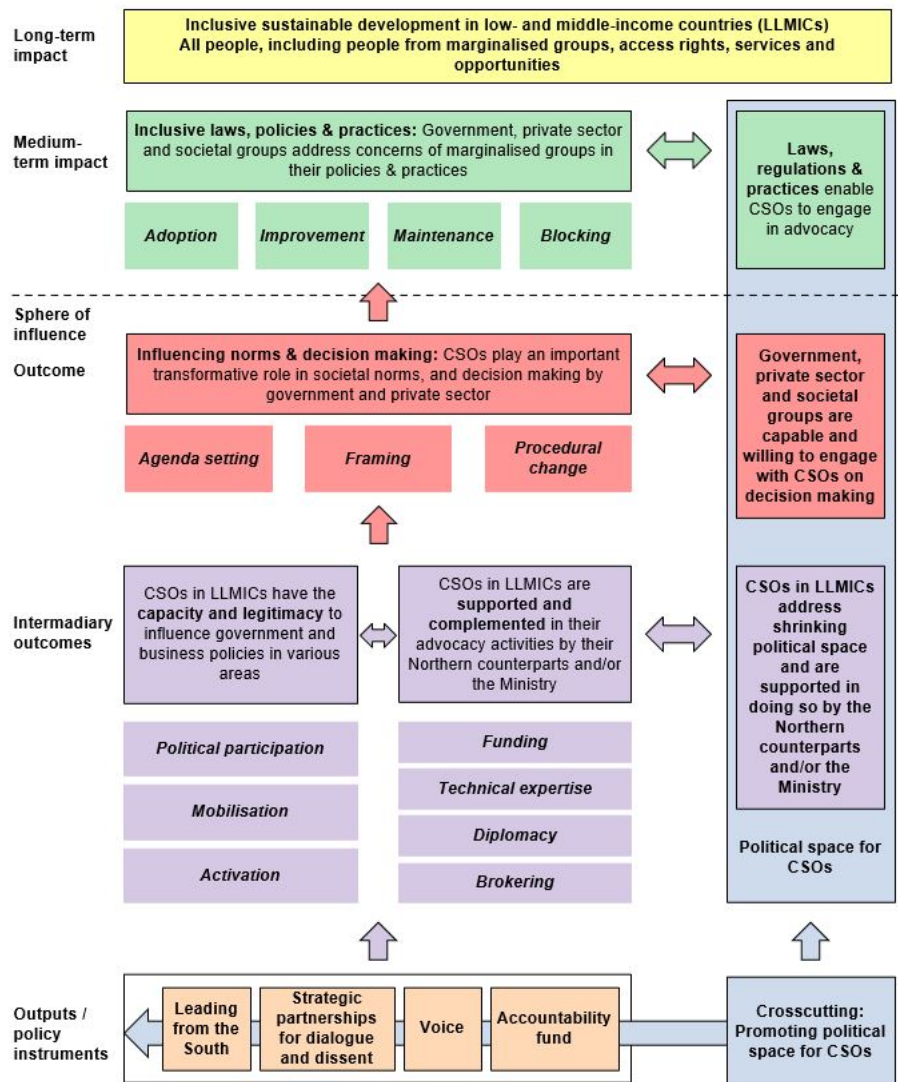
- Selection of CSO partners based on proven quality of the CSO, its good track record in lobbying and advocacy, and a sound theory of change, rather than their project proposal.
- Focus on the independent, autonomous role of CSOs rather than their role as implementers of development funding.
- Working in strategic partnerships with select consortia of Dutch and partner country CSOs, having a joint definition of a strategic goal and results while allowing the CSOs to define the details. Long-term, context-specific approach, which builds on capacity development, complementarity, mutual learning, trust and local ownership.
- Use of theories of change to promote a transformative approach and adaptive management.
- Embassies ensured complementarity and synergy between Dutch policy priorities and CSO efforts in-country. They hosted linking and learning sessions to encourage collaboration and supported civil society participation and an open civic space through diplomatic efforts and dialogue. An Accountability Fund allowed embassies to directly fund organisations in partner countries.
- An innovation hub to support learning and innovation among Dutch CSOs and their partner-country CSOs.
- Two CSO-managed funds aimed at reaching the most marginalised groups ([Voice](#)) and strengthening women's rights organisations ([Leading from the South](#)).

Results

Programme monitoring in 2020 has documented several direct results of the "Dialogue and Dissent" framework:

- **Strengthened capacity of 7 306 participating organisations** who undertook 9 473 initiatives to influence policies and behaviours in their countries. This resulted in [1 465 improved laws, policies and social norms](#), ensuring more people can now enjoy their rights and access services.
- **The Accountability Fund has directly strengthened the advocacy capacities of local CSOs** in numerous countries. For example, [as a result of lobbying and advocacy of civil society partners in Kenya](#), public authorities have increased the resources, and have delivered more efficient services, to help people counter gender-based violence.
- **Monitoring of social transformation has been ensured** through establishing of indicators that measure the number of CSOs whose advocacy capacities are strengthened, the number of lobby and advocacy initiatives, and the resulting improvement in laws, policies and social norms and their implementation.

Figure 1 Results framework of the “Dialogue & Dissent” programme



Source: Government of the Netherlands

Lessons learnt

The programme managers and an evaluation of strategic CSO partnerships highlighted these insights:

- Strategic partnerships with flexible and long-term funding are a valuable approach to strengthening CSO advocacy capacity as independent actors. They enable partners to consistently act, observe and respond in a complementary manner.
- Social transformation is a long-term process, that requires time, innovation and flexibility.
- It requires time and trust to build a strategic partnership, and clarity about each other's roles.
- In a partnership one can agree to disagree, but a minimum level of agreement is required on overarching objectives and tactics. Trust in a partnership, despite disagreement, is needed to balance the autonomous role of CSOs, while seeking complementarity.

- Strive for co-creation processes and local ownership from the start to support legitimacy and context-specificity; ensure flexibility is translated to CSOs from partner countries and they are not constrained by tight reporting requirements or ill-suited indicators.
- Complementarity and strategic alignment at country-level, requires engagement of embassies and thematic departments at an early stage.
- Build strategic coalitions beyond your own circles, with community-based partners, local governments, the private sector, etc.
- Linking and learning activities between CSOs, in particular to support adaptive management, has been very useful.
- Service delivery can be relevant for lobbying and advocacy, recognising that CSO's perspectives and legitimacy can be strengthened this way.

The lessons learnt have largely been incorporated in the design of the [Power of Voices programme](#), the successor of "Dialogue & Dissent". This programme runs from 2021-2025 and includes a learning component to support partnerships and policy thinking along the way.

Further information

IOB (2019), *Strategies for partners: balancing complementarity and autonomy: Evaluation of the functioning of strategic partnerships between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and civil society organisations*, <https://english.iob-evaluatie.nl/publications/publications/2019/08/01/431-%E2%80%93-iob-%E2%80%93-evaluation-of-the-functioning-of-strategic-partnerships-between-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-and-civil-society-organisations-%E2%80%93-summary-with-recommendations-and-findings-%E2%80%93-strategies-for-partners-balancing-complementarity-and-autonomy>.

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OECD resources

OECD, *Civil Society Engagement in Development Co-operation*, <http://www.oecd.org/dac/civil-society-engagement-in-development-co-operation.htm>.

To learn more about the Netherlands' development co-operation see:

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