

Capacity Development in Humanitarian Crises: Practice and lessons learnt about strengthening civil society organisations

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1. Introduction

The January 2010 crisis in Haiti led to renewed attention to the dilemmas of humanitarian action and its relationship with development. Northern international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs) supporting capacity development of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the South are confronted with many additional challenges when working in the context of humanitarian crises.

Although crises caused by conflicts or natural hazards each have their specific challenges, there are some common features. Humanitarian crises are characterised by the pressure to respond quickly and to obtain short-term results, in contrast to client-oriented long term development approaches. INGOs experience this pressure not only from their 'back donors' (governments and public), but also from the media, their southern partners, local communities and local governments. Another common challenge is that local CSO capacity is often adversely affected by the crisis.

As a consequence, responses by INGOs may actually undermine existing capacities. There are many examples of local capacities being neglected or of local organisations being judged too weak to work with, without a proper assessment of their capacity. Some INGOs established parallel structures and worked directly with the affected communities from their field offices. On the other hand, there are also many examples of local CSOs being overloaded with funds and increasing their capacities, which can then not be sustained after the crisis.

It situations like Haiti, CSO budgets are increased enormously in a short time, additional human resources need to be recruited and CSOs venture into relief and rehabilitation activities that are far from their regular mandate. An additional complication

is that CSOs may have to operate in a context that has become politicised and insecure. The tensions and lack of mutual trust in society affects the potential for cooperation.

Northern INGOs have to find a balance between the humanitarian imperative to deliver immediate results (and hence rapidly build the skills to achieve this) and the longer term requirement to contribute to sustainable development.

PSO Capacity Building in Developing
Countries unites 58 Dutch development
INGOs in their support to the capacity
development of their civil society partner
organisations in the South. Over the last five
years the PSO association has financed pilot
programmes and offered a platform for
reflection and learning through seminars,
conferences, collective learning trajectories
and action research.

This Praxis Note summarises the lessons learnt from five years of PSO support to capacity development of CSOs in crises, and looks at the trends of capacity development practice in the Dutch INGO members of PSO. What did the PSO association learn and how did it deal with the many challenges? The note summarises the authors' understanding of the insights from the many evaluations and reports that resulted from these activities.

Lessons learnt become only meaningful when they lead to changes in behaviour and practice. Therefore the note starts with the lessons learnt and then looks in more detail at how Dutch NGOs are applying these lessons in their current practices.

This Praxis note is based on an initial paper presented at the World Conference on Humanitarian Studies in Groningen in 2009, and updated with new insights and valuable inputs received from ICCO/Kerk in Actie and INTRAC. We would like to thank Evert van

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2. Lessons learnt within the PSO association

What where the key lessons from the many programmes and learning events?

2.1. Strategic lessons learnt

There is always local capacity

Under all circumstances, individuals with relevant experience and basic skills try to cope with their situation. Humans are always organised in one way or another, whether formally or informally, although links may be brittle and performance poor. In crisis situations, caused by either conflicts or natural disasters, the normal tension between institutional and humanitarian imperatives is highlighted¹, and in conflict situations the space for CSOs often limited.

On the one hand, crises can be a constraint for the capacity development of local CSOs, as they tend to have a negative impact on local organisations that existed before the natural disaster struck or armed conflict started: key staff may have been killed, wounded or displaced; distrust and egoism may increase at the cost of cooperation. On the other hand, crises also offer opportunities to "build-back-better" and to access unexplored funding, knowledge and expertise. For CSOs, crises can be a chance to contribute to social and political change in society.

Assess and strengthen local capacities

Proper identification and assessment of the local context and availability of existing

1 Gomèz, G. M. (2008) Final report – Field presence of Dutch NGOs: What is the impact on

civil society in the South? The Hague, PSO p25

capacity is crucial, if one wants to find a balance between a rapid and effective response, and longer term impact and empowerment. The capacity of organisations, such as social service NGOs, faith-based organisations (FBOs), community based organisations and social networks may be weak, but is often underestimated. Humanitarian responses can build on these local organisations. Strengthening their capacity is challenging, but needs to be at the core of any strategy in response to crises. The context of conflicts is dynamic and assessments of the local context require regular updating and need to include conflict mapping.

Nineteen of the 58 member organisations of PSO are active in crisis situations. They support their partner organisations in humanitarian assistance (relief and rehabilitation), conflict prevention, peace building, human rights, disaster preparedness, and disaster risk reduction. They respond to natural disasters and many support their partner organisations in countries that have recently been grouped under the heading "fragile states", e.g. Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan. Most of the larger INGOs in the Netherlands supporting partners in crisis are members of PSO.

Combine short-term strategy with long-term vision

Capacity development in a 'normal' context (i.e. a non-emergency situation) requires long-term commitments. In crisis situations, the immediate humanitarian needs often require the capacity to respond quickly, e.g. the ability to distribute relief items to the most affected population in a short time-frame. This implies short-term strategies to strengthen the implementing capacity. However, care should be taken that the rapid up-scaling of capacity to meet the demands of the crisis does not lead to a situation where there are negative longer term consequences for the CSOs involved. Although in the context of sudden onset disasters, one cannot expect that a long-term capacity strategy will be developed in the

early response phase, one can at least expect that there is a long-term vision. Without such vision, civil society risks coming out of the crisis disempowered rather than strengthened.

Response to humanitarian crises often takes place in protracted crisis contexts. Conflicts in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan have continued for many years. Longer-term strategies are realistic in such environments, as there is more time available to plan and implement them. This also applies to responses to natural disasters in high risk areas such as Bangladesh, the Caribbean and Vietnam.

Give capacity development a sustainable perspective

Northern and Southern NGOs have become aware of the pitfalls of limiting capacity development solely to training in skills, which are needed to fulfil their own accountability requirements such as project cycle management and financial management: it creates local clones that remain fully dependent. Parallel to the operational capacity needs, attention to sustainable organisational development can make the difference between a clone and an independent partner: e.g. the capability to relate (network with other organisations) and to adapt and self-renew in an ever-changing context. CSOs must be supported in the regular review of their vision, mission, structures, systems and strategies in order remain effective in a fast moving world.

PSO strategies for capacity development: the sources of lessons learnt

The 2007-10 strategy of PSO aims to improve the quality of cooperation between Dutch development organisations and their partners, and reinforce the contribution of an independent social civil society to community development and poverty alleviation. Learning is a central issue.

To reach its objective PSO uses four interlinked strategies to support sustainable capacity development. These strategies are applied to "normal" development contexts as well as to contexts of conflict or natural disaster-related humanitarian crises. They are interlinked and lessons from one strategy often feed into another at various levels.

Strategy 1: Facilitation of learning of individual member organisations

PSO facilitates member organisations to learn from the capacity development support in practice. The member organisation identifies a challenge in their relationship with Southern partners and together with PSO a process of learning is developed to address the issue. These processes give PSO an insight into the practice of its members and the challenges each member faces. The results of the learning process are shared with other PSO members.

Strategy 2: Financing of programmes

PSO also funds programmes at the request of member organisations. The programmes support capacity development of their Southern partners and allow members to systematically learn from the implementation. PSO has a separate fund for capacity development in humanitarian assistance. Financing is strategically aimed at improving quality.

Strategy 3: Innovation

The PSO Innovation Fund supports member organisations' initiatives that aim to improve the processes or programmes with their Southern partners in an innovative way. The lessons from the most successful innovations are shared in workshops and through our website.

Strategy 4: Collective learning

Together with member organisations, PSO identifies common issues on capacity development that merit being the object of joint reflection. With member organisations collective learning is organised either through single events or through a longer trajectory. Also, PSO facilitates action research of the member organisations.

Invest in relationships

The quality of the relationship between Northern and Southern NGOs determines the room for external support to local capacity development. The peer review of five Dutch NGOs concluded that there is "ample reason that partnership is viable in crisis situations too (....) The added value that partnership has in development situations, in terms of reach, effectiveness and capacity building, also holds in crisis situations. Especially when working partnerships are already in place, these offer an effective starting point for responding to disasters and conflict"².

Long-term commitment to a partner relationship is important for successful sustainable capacity development. Smooth transition of Dutch NGO support from relief to rehabilitation and development and vice versa enables the development or continuation of long-term capacity development strategies. These long-term relations also provide the basis on which to support and develop disaster preparedness capacity. Therefore in high risk areas, both Southern and Northern NGOs (and their back donors) should give greater priority to preparedness for future crises. Strengthening the capacity of Southern NGOs at the national level does not automatically mean that the lower levels, e.g. community based organisations are strengthened. Capacity development needs to cover the whole 'aid chain' or, as Van Der Haar and Hilhorst argue, even more:

"Capacity building should be taken beyond the level of individual organisations: the challenge is to look at effective ways to strengthen the civil society sector as a whole. In view of the often noted problems with coordination in emergency and postemergency situations, a stronger domestic civil society sector could contribute to the

effectiveness of aid." Institutional development of the sector is also important in crisis situations.

The potential of an international partnership to develop joint North–South capacity for advocacy and lobby on common issues is often not exploited, although many Southern NGOs are interested in working on this issue.

Southern capacity development requires Northern learning

Contributing to capacity development in the South puts high demands on Dutch NGOs, as it requires critical reflection on one's own approaches and internal organisation. This Northern learning is stimulated through sharing knowledge and experience in 'collective learning trajectories' and other meetings. The additional need for a broader orientation in which theory and practice are linked led to strategic cooperation between PSO and the Disaster Studies department of Wageningen University. One of the outcomes of this cooperation is a peer review of partnerships in crises-related interventions by five Dutch organisations. One of the interesting lessons learnt from this review is that looking at each other's practice can be an effective tool for mutual learning from each other's interventions.

2.2. Methodological lessons learnt

So far, discussions on capacity development have centred mainly around **what** capacity is needed, much less around the questions on **how** it should be built. By using methods that are not effective for the specific context many well-intended capacity development initiatives have failed to produce tangible results. This does not however imply that completely different methodologies have to be developed for crisis contexts.

² Haar, G. van der and D. Hilhorst (2009), Partners in crises, Peer Review on Partnership in crises-related interventions, The Hague, PSO

Approaches for a 'regular development context' can be applied in fragile environments, if adapted

Approaches, tools, and strategies for capacity development, which have been designed for 'normal' contexts can be used in fragile environments as well. The Civil Society Index developed by CIVICUS or the model for Integrated Organisation Management from the Management Development Foundation were found to have their merits in fragile environments, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo or Afghanistan. However, it is essential to adjust and adapt these tools for the specific context of fragile environments. For example, the dynamic environment of fragile states requires more frequent context analysis and organisational assessments than in a 'normal' context. Testing other approaches, tools and instruments for quick assessments and analysis remains very relevant. For instance, there is a need for further adaptation of strategies that stimulate the participation of local CSOs.

Flexibility in capacity development

In fragile conflict and post-conflict environments, capacity development approaches must be flexible. A fast changing context requires that CSOs play different roles at different moments. Northern NGOs and their back donors should provide space for these changes. The process of translating policy into strategy and then into operational interventions must be short to allow for this flexibility. Guiding principles grounded in audited quality systems like EFQM may become an important alternative to prescribed linear intervention logic. Tools that have been developed for complex development situations may also be of great use in crisis situations. Planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME) tools that focus more on processes and relationships, and more on what is actually happening than on predetermined indicators, need to be tested more systematically.

Potential role of intermediate organisations

Intermediate NGOs in this context are organisations which operate at the national level and do not have direct interventions at the commune level, except for pilot projects. The intermediate NGO can play a link between INGOs and local CSOs. The CSOs work directly with community based organisations (CBOs), while intermediate NGOs can fulfil functions such as needs assessments and training. The Tsunami response in Southern India showed that an intermediate NGO with knowledge and experience in national disaster response can play an important role in strengthening the development of local CSOs in disaster response and enhance coordination and links with local government. This role can be both short-term for strengthening the immediate capacity for disaster response and long-term in strengthening the disaster preparedness capacity for potential future disasters. It is encouraging to see that Dutch emergency aid to Haiti is often channelled through preearthquake partner networks. The role of intermediate organisations and the consequences of their aid role for their civil society role need to be carefully observed and evaluated.

3. Current practice of member organisations

To what extent do Dutch NGOS apply the lessons learnt we have mentioned? How do they actually approach capacity development in humanitarian crises? What are their priorities and what are the important trends?

Partnership

Most PSO member organisations have signed the Code of Conduct of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement on Disaster Relief. The first article is that "the humanitarian imperative comes first". Therefore, for most PSO members, direct aid to people affected by crises has the highest priority and most resources are allocated to

this purpose. Next to this PSO members comply with article six of the Code of Conduct which states "We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capacities". It is a firm statement towards working, whenever possible, with local organisations as partners.

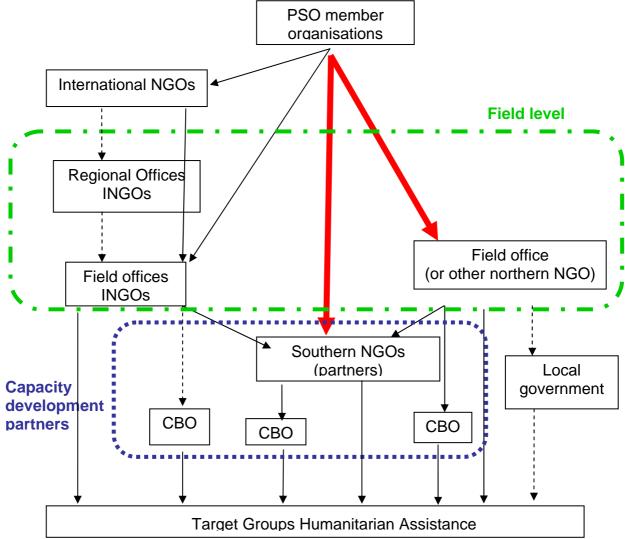
In addition to direct support, all PSO members have identified support to the capacity development of their partner organisations as a priority area. Compared to five years ago, when a number of organisations were still operational in the field and worked directly with the affected populations from their field offices, PSO members are now mostly working by channelling assistance through partners in the South. It has been recognised that the effects of a field presence must always be carefully considered from both the relief and

the sustainability angle. So the lesson that "there is always local capacity" now seems to be applied in practice.

There are major differences in the way member organisations channel their support. **Figure 1** illustrates how funds are channelled through the chain, and shows PSO's target organisations for capacity development. A few members also target local government agencies for capacity development.

A number of PSO members have field offices that work directly with community based organisations. Capacity development of CSOs for them is strengthening community structures. National staff in field offices work directly with formal and informal organisations at the community level.

Figure 1: Financial chain of humanitarian assistance of PSO member organisations



The majority of PSO member organisations have partnership relations with NGOs at national and provincial levels. Their capacity development efforts prioritise these partner organisations. These NGOs are often rightly referred to as CSOs, if one defines civil society as the arena not belonging to the state, the market, where people associate to advance common interest³. Most PSO members distinguish between Southern professional NGOs with often a less clear constituency, and often less professional community based organisations (CBOs) with strong roots in the community. Southern NGOs often link the member organisations to the smaller CBOs, although a few member organisations still work directly with CBOs from field offices. Involving intermediate NGOs is not yet a common practice.

There are partner organisations in crisis areas with almost no constituency or links to CBOs. These NGOs are service providers, for example running a hospital. Oosten⁴ in his study on civil society in southern Afghanistan, concludes that many NGOs in the provinces of Uruzgan and Kandahar do not have a constituency and should be referred to as social entrepreneurs rather than CSOs. Provided these NGOs deliver their services well, it may be justifiable to support them. However the lack of constituency is very relevant if one intends to strengthen capacities that go beyond delivering services to advocacy for social change, to which PSO member organisations are giving increasing priority. They are facing the challenge that their partner organisations will not necessarily be equipped for these roles. A number of members deal with this challenge by supporting separate advocacy organisations as well as service delivery organisations.

3 Heinrich, V.F. (2007) CIVICUS Global Survey of the State of Civil Society, Volume I Country Profiles USA Another trend among PSO members is to channel more funds through other INGOs in response to sudden crises, especially if they do not have partners in the affected country. They prefer not to go into a venture with unknown and possibly unreliable partners and nor do they wish to become operational themselves. They seek to identify INGOs with a similar mission and vision as well as a well-established network in the affected country.

From human resource development to organisational development and beyond

The majority of members' capacity development work in crises is directed towards their partners' human resource development. Training staff in project cycle management and financial management are the most frequent subjects. This was confirmed in the peer review of five Dutch NGOs on partnership in crises⁵. These are also the areas that are required by donor organisations and their back donors for financial management and accountability. Smillie states in Partnership or Patronage?⁶: "Capacity building is a central issue in partnership in crisis-related interventions. A recurring issue regarding capacity building is who sets the agenda and for what purpose. Capacity building may become a means to control partners' adherence to standards and financial accountability, and it has been suggested this has more to do with disciplining organisations to become good partners than to help them to realize their own goals".

Despite this emphasis on human resource development, we are seeing a clear trend among PSO members to take a wider perspective on capacity development, even in crisis-related interventions. Support to organisational development and institutional development is getting more priority in

⁴ Oosten, van, H (2008) Enhanced Community Capacity for Peace Building and Development, A research to the functioning of civil society in the provinces of Kandahar and Uruzgan in Afghanistan

⁵ Haar, G. van der and D. Hilhorst (2009), Partners in crises, Peer Review on Partnership in crises-related interventions, The Hague, PSO 6 Smillie, I (2001) Patronage or Partnership; Local Capacity Building in Humanitarian Crises, USA

policies and programmes. When the focus shifts from relief to rehabilitation, there is more attention given to sustainable capacity development. Most members realise that the sustainable recovery of the affected population is only possible if the capacity of local organisations is also strengthened. We can conclude that the lesson on the importance of "taking a wider perspective than just training" is gradually being adopted.

Funding

Most PSO member organisations experience difficulties in obtaining external funds for capacity development in humanitarian crises. The main institutional donors of PSO members are reluctant to fund capacity development of CSOs that goes beyond the short-term capacity needed to get the relief job done. If funds are made available at all, organisations face strong competition for the limited allocation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands has granted PSO a small fund to finance capacity development programmes in humanitarian crises, covering less than 3% of the total expenditures for humanitarian crises of the member organisations. PSO has explicitly included programme criteria that favour the development of a long-term vision on local capacity development. In sudden crisis situations it cannot be expected that a longterm strategy for capacity development is immediately possible. But one can expect the intention or plan to produce such a strategy in a reasonable time period.

Most members have access to limited unearmarked funds and are able to support their partners in line with the lessons learnt. A small number do not have this access. Despite good intentions, these members remain dependent on the willingness of their back donors to realise their objectives.

Strengthening partnership relations, joint learning through M&E systems

Hilhorst and Jansen⁷ note that the term partnership is most frequently used for relations where INGOs fund local NGOs to perform humanitarian work. The relationships take different shapes and vary in intensity. They give the following examples of relationships to show the diversity:

- A contractual agreement based on a tendering procedure where local organisations simply implement a job for which the parameters are fixed by the donor. No capacity building is involved; the bidders need to prove they possess the required capacities for the job.
- A short-term incidental project applied for by a local NGO engaged in relief or rehabilitation. Functional capacity building may be part of the project.
- A longer-term partnership whereby the northern NGO commits itself to support an organisation on a long-term basis, including capacity building.
- 4) A long-term partnership where the parties engage in a horizontal relationship in which the partners (ideally) have a say in the policies and decision making of the northern NGO as much as the other way around.

Relationship 1 is rarely applied by Dutch NGOs, while number 4 is seldom realised in practice. The majority of the humanitarian assistance is performed under relationships 2 and 3. All PSO members are seeking to move from relationship 2 to 3. The more the focus of a programme moves from relief to development, the more the relationship moves towards relationship 3 or even 4. There is trend to develop and apply systems as a result of learning gained from monitoring and evaluation, such as agreed criteria for effective partnerships.

⁷ Hilhorst, D. and B. Jansen (2005). You never walk alone: participation, partnership and coordination in humanitarian aid. The Hague: PSO

More disaster preparedness and prevention

PSO member organisations are giving increasing priority to disaster preparedness, risk reduction and conflict prevention in high risk areas. All those involved in relief and rehabilitation also give priority to strengthening the capacity of their partner organisations in preparedness and prevention. For example PSO supports ICCO/Kerk in Actie, assisted by Wageningen University, to refine methodologies in preparedness in a broad sense. It focuses on how to make communities more resilient to face the threats they meet in their environment. How the "aid chain" should change in order to assist the community in this, is also the subject of research in this programme. A group of Dutch NGOs lobby the Dutch Government to put preparedness and prevention higher on the agenda.

Capacity development in humanitarian crises and capacity development for disaster preparedness, and prevention are overlapping themes. Most of the member organisations also have difficulties in raising funds for preparedness and prevention, both from government and private sources. Despite giving high priority to this theme, in most organisations only a small percentage of the overall turnover on response is spent on preparedness and prevention.

Staffing

There is a clear trend among member organisations to employ less Dutch staff in capacity development programmes. Priority is given to the recruitment of national staff or from the region and only as a last resort will Dutch staff be employed. The qualification criteria for Dutch staff are changing. Rather than an humanitarian assistance manager, who is directly operational, the trend is towards employing staff who are able to facilitate the work done by partner organisations.

Most member organisations prefer to employ staff who can link relief with rehabilitation and development. However, these competencies are in short supply, in particular during large scale responses. Universities in the Netherlands are educating students in this field and in the future this shortage is less likely to persist, if combined with junior job opportunities to obtain the necessary work experience. Junior programmes exist, but the number of vacancies in the humanitarian field is limited.

More reciprocity and joint reflection/ learning

There is a trend among member organisations to reflect jointly on common issues, to share experiences, knowledge and lessons learnt. One example is the workshop to discuss the outcome of the TEC evaluation (Tsunami) and its implications for quality improvement. Moreover, in the Netherlands Humanitarian Panel, Dutch NGOs regularly discuss issues of common concern (e.g. quality, humanitarian principles and practice). Organisational learning is increasingly embedded in the organisations and the need to learn in the North is commonly recognised.

Linking relief, rehabilitation and development

Van der Haar and Hilhorst contend in Partners in Crises that: "There is a lack of theorising about protracted crises with more and less violent or critical periods or with natural hazards compounding the crisis. The intervention models of aid remain based on a dichotomy between relief and development. though practice shows that there are many ways in which relief and development efforts are already linked." Linking relief, rehabilitation and development has been a reality for member organisations in their priority countries. All PSO member organisations provide sustainable capacity development support only in priority countries. In the case where these organisations support relief or rehabilitation outside their priority countries, they tend to fund only short-term incidental projects and increasingly channel their funds through other INGOs. In priority countries, the support is more likely to be more long-term and the 'gap issue" in the link of relief-rehabilitationdevelopment is less likely to be an issue.

Future directions

PSO members are facing many challenges in their efforts to support the capacity development of civil society partners. At the level of individual organisations many lessons are learnt. The joint reflection and exchange with peers and other actors in the chain does not get enough attention and the lessons that do trickle through are not always acted upon. There is a clear need for methods and instruments that enable mutual learning at all levels, from target groups up to the back donor, and to apply the lessons learnt.

A first step would be a review of the present PME systems and processes that are geared towards results and accountability, in order to create more space for joint reflection and learning. In this respect, PSO itself has reviewed and refined its own monitoring and evaluation systems to better facilitate learning at all levels in the chain and allow for lessons learnt to be acted upon.

A second step would be to adapt tools that are available for 'normal' development situations to be used in crisis situations. Here we think of participatory research on rapid (self)assessment tools for fragile institutional contexts and local organisational capacity. In 2010 PSO is organising action research with member organisations and their partners around these issues.

In addition, PSO will continue to facilitate learning on capacity development in humanitarian crises. The peer review of partnerships by PSO and Wageningen offers ample opportunity for follow-up.

4. Conclusion

This paper identified the lessons learnt by PSO and its member organisations in the development of the capacity of CSOs in the context of humanitarian crises. In our view, the needed "to do" mode must be combined with a wider vision on capacity development and with better documentation and application of the many lessons learnt.

Capacity development is complex and this is even more so the case in fragile contexts. Therefore, learning is a central issue, and Northern organisations have as much to learn as Southern ones.

An examination of what PSO member organisations actually do reveals that most do have internal learning processes and seek to apply the lessons learnt. However, more attention needs to be paid to learning together with strategic partners, and to learning from their perspective.

We concur with Sen's conclusion that: "What is missing in the discourse of fragile states is how to utilise citizens in building democratic government rather than focussing on fixing failed states according to an external donor agenda". Dutch humanitarian aid must therefore think beyond the "do no harm" principle and develop a better eye for the consequences of emergency aid strategies on the development of (civil) society.

In crises, the humanitarian imperative must be better balanced with the reconstruction and development imperatives. Local service NGOs implementing agendas largely set by foreign donors must be distinguished from CSOs that have an important role to play as civil society actors: contribute to peace, social justice and democracy that is supported by its citizens rather than foreign agencies. More rigorous application of our own lessons learnt will contribute to this.

It is possible to use tools and strategies designed for "normal" development and adapt these for the context of humanitarian crises. In this, we must distinguish between shortand long-term capacity development objectives and build in sufficient room for flexibility. Such tools and strategies must be the result of sector-wide collaboration and international partnership. It would interesting to develop this further with interested partners from around the world.

⁸ Sen, Kasturi (2008) 'Fragile States or Failed Policies; Some donor-induced dilemmas' Oxford, Policy Briefing Paper INTRAC

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