Thematic Learning Programme – Fragile States

FINAL SYNTHESIS REPORT

PSO
*capacity building in
developing countries*

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Preface

In 2010 PSO invested heavily in the design of an innovative learning instrument which was intended to improve capacity development and which was referred to as the Thematic Learning Programme. PSO ran several programs simultaneously to test the instrument in practice. Unfortunately, PSO will not be able to refine what it has learned from the tests because the organisation is going to cease to exist after 2012. In this report we share our lessons learned from the Thematic Learning Programme with a specific focus on fragile states with the aim that development practitioners and other interested parties can use and benefit from them. For assessing the definitive impact of the programme and more particularly to asses whether the recommendations are in fact being adopted a longer time horizon would be required: up to 6 month – one year more.

In May 2010 PSO prepared a Thematic Learning Programme which focused on fragile states. A core group was formed which, in turn, invited Agriterra, Care, Impunity Watch and ZOA to join the TLP. The research was performed from mid 2011 until the beginning of 2012 and detailed case reports were prepared. This document describes the steps that were taken during the course of this TLP and summarises the main findings of the four separate research projects.

After the start of the fragile states TLP, another Thematic Learning Programme was initiated in November 2011, focusing entirely on South Sudan. It took account of some of the interim lessons learned from the evaluation of the TLP we describe in this document (www.pso.nl/content/lessons-learned-six-months-tlp-fragile-states).

The implementation of the TLP in this manner was made possible particularly by the professionalism and drive of Niek Thijssen of Agriterra, of Arthur Molenaar of CARE, of Karen Hammink of Impunity watch and of Corita Corbijn of ZOA.

I would also like to thank Chris van der Borgh of the Centre for Conflict Studies at Utrecht University and Peter Tamas of Wageningen University for their invaluable contributions, based on their extensive research backgrounds, which helped hone the research questions. Finally, I would like to thank Frans Bieckmann for his contribution to this report.

Johan te Velde, Consultant Learning for Change at PSO
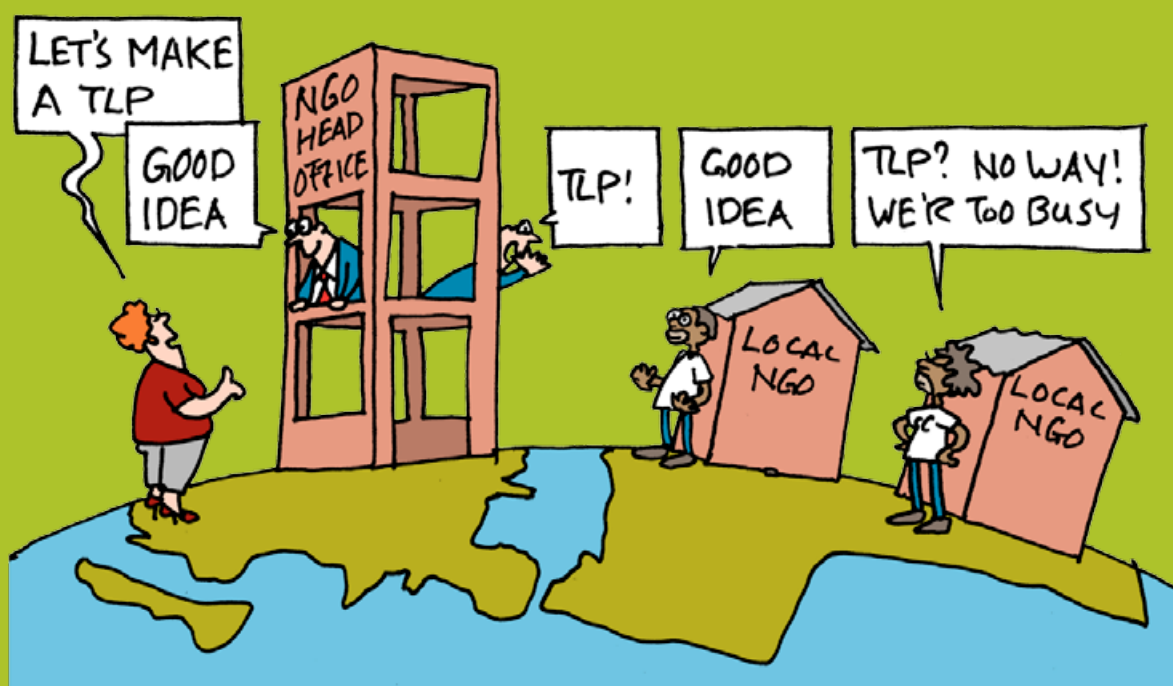*Coordinator of the thematic learning programme on fragile states*

What is a Thematic Learning Programme?

A Thematic Learning Programme (TLP) is a focused collective action learning or research programme that explores practical solutions in capacity development programs.

The objective of a TLP is to support systematic learning processes within NGOs by reflecting on existing strategies and experimenting with new strategies, approaches and instruments. A TLP uses existing knowledge and adds information about what works and does not work when applying concepts, tools and assumptions in a specific context. In a TLP, practitioners are the owners of both the problem and the research. The practitioner is the one who, thanks to expert mentoring support, designs and monitors the programme and collects and makes sense of the data. In addition, the participants commit to peer learning and add to the ongoing international development debates.

In other words, a TLP combines grounded knowledge of practitioners, scientific knowledge, peer review and process facilitation. This learning programme tends to result in best fit (in specific fragile circumstances) rather than best practice solutions. The advantage of the TLP is the combined focus on the interface between policies and strategies, organisational possibilities and personal capabilities.

The assumption was that a TLP is particularly useful in a fragile context such as the Kivu provinces of the Democratic Republic Congo (DRC), which are very dynamic and chaotic. There is lack of objective information and a necessity to act swiftly in order to solve (humanitarian) problems. It was assumed that, particularly in these circumstances, practitioners would benefit from a collaborative research and/or action programme like the TLP.

Introduction

This report presents an overview of four action research projects and main findings conducted by four Dutch development organisations (Agriterra, Care, ZOA and Impunity Watch) that participated in the PSO Thematic Learning Programme (TLP) on Fragile States. Before examining the four separate projects, we provide some background about the process of this TLP, the action research methods used in the TLP, and some specific definitions and important issues that were raised during the TLP process.

Initial proceedings

The preparation of this TLP started with an orientation phase in May 2010. This was an interactive process between the members of a core group that was formed by PSO[1] and PSO member organisations. In this period (May – September 2010) exploratory meetings were held with member organisations[2]. It became clear that organisations varied with regard to the research questions they wanted to focus on in the TLP. In order to make the TLP work, they had to put some effort into determining their key questions. At the same time the core group looked for common attributes in these key questions which the PSO member organisations involved had put forward. These were found in the shared necessity to focus increasingly on a context analysis and on questions relating to the relations of the four Dutch NGOs with current or potential local partners. Context analysis and partnering therefore became the focus of the TLP.

Four basic questions

From the outset it was emphasised that more (general) knowledge about 'the context' or an improved understanding of 'what fragility is (about)' would not automatically lead to improved practice. Instead, the focus question should relate to which information your organisation (really) needs and how this relates to your assumptions and policies.
It was therefore stressed that questions about context analysis and partnering should be seen as part of a set of four general and interrelated questions that all organisations had mentioned in the orientation phase. These questions dealt with:

a) The usefulness of the assumptions of the four NGOs about social change and their contribution to development. One such assumption was, for instance, that 'more' civil society would automatically lead to more democracy or development.
b) The effectiveness of operational models and instruments NGOs use in fragile states.
c) The context analysis: which aspects of the context should be taken into account? How is that information obtained?
d) The monitoring and evaluation capacity.

The initial discussions also assessed the Theories of Change the different organisations apply. The degree of clarity of the Theory of Change depends partly on how well organisations have defined their own identity, vision and mission. In this TLP, CARE, Agriterra and ZOA focused on aspects of their Theory of Change.

Four research proposals

The learning and research trajectories of the four participating NGOs were further elaborated from September 2010 to May 2011. The NGOs had the lead over the research and they developed their own methods in cooperation with their Southern partners or country offices. The four respective coordinators wrote a research proposal, contracted (external) researchers, and consulted with other staff within their organisations, as well as partners in the respective countries.

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[1] The core group consisted of: Michael Baumeister (later replaced by Reinier van Hoffen) Chris van der Borgh, Peter Tamas and Johan te Velde.
[2] Not all organisations carried out action research within the framework of the TLP. Apart from the four organisations already mentioned, Amnesty International, Cordaid, Free Press Unlimited, ICCO/Kerk in Actie, IKV Pax Christi, Oxfam Novib were involved in the conception phase.

The core group commented on, and formally approved, the proposals submitted by the organisations. The coordinators and the core group met on several occasions to discuss progress, dilemmas, and common issues.

These collective moments are an important element of the TLP. A Thematic Learning Programme examines the interplay between policy recommendations and action, and the dynamics which lead to changes in both policy and practice. Part of this is the process of the research project itself. During the research, the organisations discuss and evaluate the research questions, the findings and the final analysis, which means they also reflect on their own practices. How this 'learning' takes place and to what extent it really integrates the results into its practices and policies, varies because every organisation has its own dynamics and organisational culture.

The specific research findings of the four projects are described in the sections below. They were also presented and discussed at a final seminar for a broader audience that was held in The Hague on 7 June 2012. However, some general definitions and explanations are important for understanding the background against which the four research projects were implemented. Below we first present the definition of fragile states that was used during the TLP, which partly determined the way the process unfolded. After that we briefly explain what action research is. Finally, we discuss some important issues that came up during the TLP.

What are fragile states?

The concept of fragile states is used to describe the regions or settings in which local or international NGOs are confronted with a particular complex, unstable, often violent and changing social and political environment. This fragile context has a major impact on the results of their work and therefore needs to be carefully analyzed. Usually, there is a lack of rule of law and of a legitimate and effective state, with other formal organisations or informal social groupings (like religious groups, tribes, militias, and government agencies) filling this vacuum. In academic discussions this context in which the state and non-state actors compete is sometimes described as a hybrid political order. It is important to note that sometimes Dutch NGOs directly or indirectly become part of these hybrid orders. This is something they need to be aware of. It is in these environments that the four participating NGOs have to make decisions, both in terms of interpreting the political settings in which they operate and of partner selection.

What is action research?

This TLP is an action research project. The main results are to be found at the interplay between general recommendations, the individual organisational processes and researches themselves. Not only have the researchers and consultants learned, the interviews and meetings and consulting moments also generated a common learning process among the staff of both the Dutch NGOs and their partner organisations. This helped the NGOs themselves, as well as the partnerships and networks of collaboration as a whole, to continue developing common learning processes and so enhance the partnering practices in the respective countries.

A brief explanation is necessary of how the term 'action research' is interpreted in this TLP. Classical research assumed that it is possible to study an object without changing it. The objective of this form of research is to produce knowledge (for example by hiring a consultant) that will, when read, change conduct. Even if we accept that this kind of research can produce adequate knowledge for the right people in a form they can digest, the assumption that research can be carried out in a way that does not itself change things has been disproved for over a century. Action research begins from the recognition that the act of doing research in itself changes things and that the changes produced by the research can, themselves, be a legitimate objective.

Action research has many different applications. For this TLP a form is used that helps shift the institutional practice of the NGOs involved. Instead of hiring an external consultant, the NGOs identified a number of individuals within the

organisation who collaboratively learned by conducting the research. This approach gave the NGO the opportunity to create new knowledge on which to base their decisions, while at the same time changing the way they work.

This TLP used a combination of the latter action research approach and the more classical approach. Staff members of the organisation were in the driving seat (they formulated their questions), but they were allowed to look for support of external (and often more experienced) facilitators or researchers.

LEARNING BY DOING

Consistent with the view of fragile states as 'hybrid political orders' described above this TLP recognises NGOs as arenas within which the interaction of competing understandings and commitments results in practices that are, themselves, at times very differently understood. Seeing NGOs as arenas rather than as actors makes it possible for the TLP to take account of formal and informal processes within NGOs. In fact, this TLP assumes that the patterns of interaction between formal and informal knowledge allow organisations to marry together the very different worlds, such as The Hague and Eastern Congo, within which they must act responsibly.

For this TLP we accepted the fundamental premise of action research: the act of performing research changes under-standings and conduct. We also accepted the core premise of experiential learning: learning done in context is more likely to produce shifts in practice. From this it follows that this TLP will, in the first instance, engage exclusively with NGO staff who are fully involved in ongoing NGO operations. While this constraint will restrict the generation of more general knowledge, it will ensure that this knowledge is generated in a manner that can be continued after the termination of funding and that the processes used to generate that knowledge are likely to be remembered and used.

Who is the problem owner?

In this TLP process some specific issues appeared to be of importance that are worth mentioning. They all had to do with the central question of who exactly is the 'problem owner'?

During the implementation of the TLP the following simple questions were repeatedly asked:
1) Who is the problem owner and what will it do with the results?
2) What problem needs to be solved?
3) Where does the motivation for the research come from? From the headquarters (HQs) of the NGO in the Netherlands, the field office, or maybe a partner organisation, or is the research mainly of interest to external financiers?

A mismatch may result if, for example, the HQ that determines the research question but the field office has to implement the action research. The goals of the research and definitions have to be very precise and not the result of a compromise or a latent interest. A compromise regarding the research questions may be interesting from a consensus-building perspective, but is not useful from a TLP action research perspective.

In almost any organisation there are fixed patterns of collaboration and sometimes mutual stereotyping between HQs and field offices, as well as differing priorities. This has to do with different functions: HQs are accountable to the general public and are responsible for following donor rules. On the other hand the field offices work together with local partners and implement project cycles. They have to deal with practical dilemmas and unforeseen bottlenecks. This tension will always exist. When designed wisely, a TLP is well aware of this and contributes to an improved collaboration between HQs and field offices.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ONE PROBLEM-OWNER

It seems obvious that action research can only be relevant if the practitioners take the lead. In practice this is an element that has to be repeatedly verified. Practitioners must formulate the research questions and implement the research themselves guided, if possible, by professionals. Consultants can be hired for specific aspects.

ZOA research on partnering and capacity development

ZOA

ZOA's vision is to contribute to sustainable change at community level in three dimensions: access to basic resources and services, community governance and inclusion, peace and stability. In recent years ZOA has made a shift towards working more with partners, instead of providing services directly. Partnering is now an important part of ZOA's new strategy, while many ZOA country teams are also fully involved in direct implementation.

Research process

The ZOA research focused on the following questions:

1) How have different ZOA country teams implemented ZOA policy on partnering and capacity development and with what results?
2) How can better-informed decisions be made with regard to partner selection and engaging the partner?

The research was performed in Uganda (Pader), DRC (South Kivu), and Liberia (Monrovia). A total of around 20 local NGOs and 10 international NGOs were interviewed, as well as several local government agencies that are ZOA partners.

The research project was facilitated by an external consultant, Domien Bruinsma. Within each country the ZOA team was fully involved, as well as a ZOA colleague from another country and a staff member from the ZOA Headquarters in Apeldoorn. Within the general framework of the action research approach, ZOA was responsible for several key steps. The project started and finished with a workshop with ZOA staff at the ZOA Headquarters in Apeldoorn

## Research results and lessons learned

This TLP has put partnering processes more definitively onto the ZOA agenda, especially the reasons for partnering and the link with the overall ZOA theory of change. An additional result is that a methodology has now become available to evaluate partnerships and to reflect on partnering with colleagues in the whole ZOA organisation.

The ZOA country teams analyzed the research and formulated some general conclusions on four different aspects, which help ZOA to implement its new strategies more effectively:

1. Theory of change

How can partnering and capacity development contribute to the general ZOA vision and why do we want to work with partners? Choices with regard to partnering and capacity development are often related to the timeline of the ZOA intervention. After all, ZOA starts operations shortly after a conflict with direct implementation, a gradual search for subcontractors, the evolving of these into broader partnerships and then preparations for the phasing out.
The theory of change related to partnering is not always clearly defined nor shared at the different levels of the ZOA country teams or with the partners. This leads to inconsistent partner management within ZOA and partner expectations which are not properly managed.
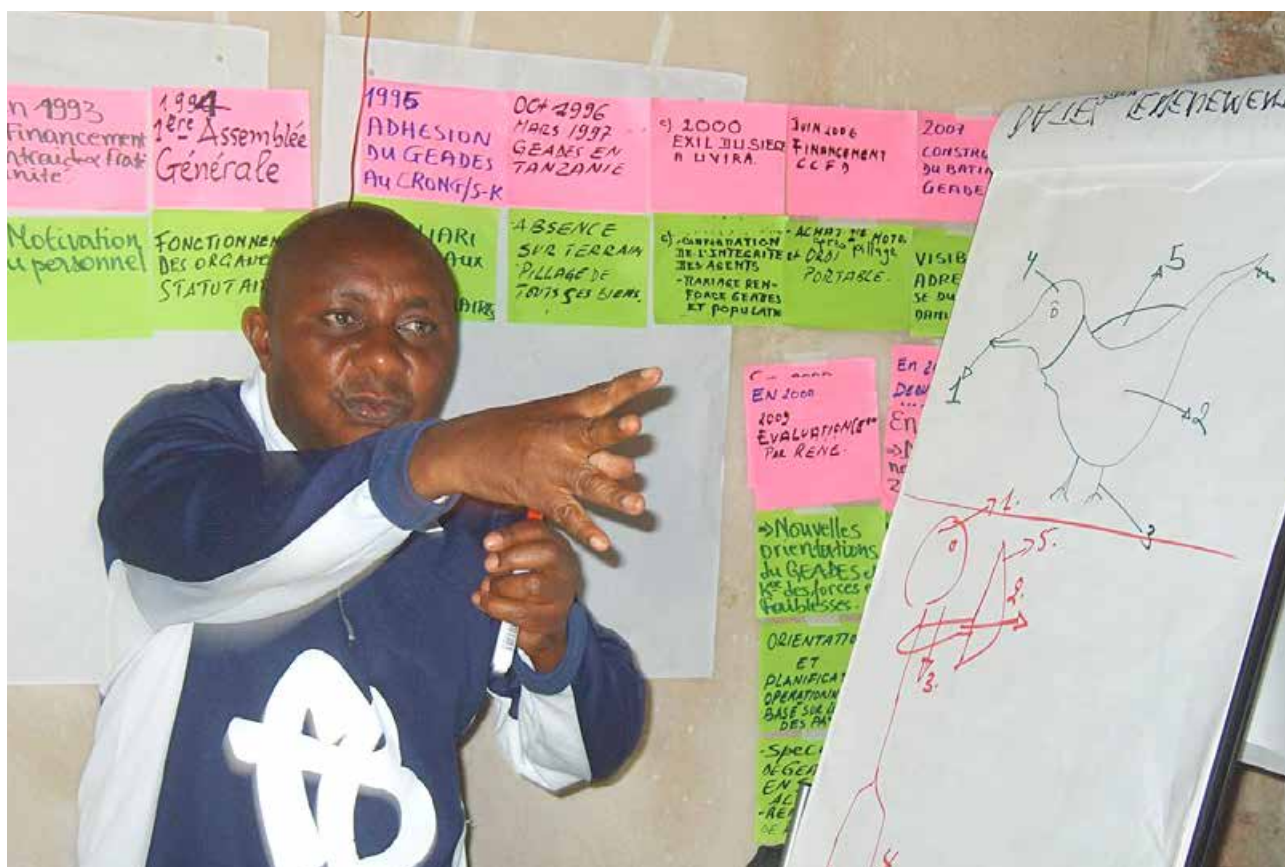
2. Partner selection and engagement

More background research on the potential partners is needed before a Memorandum of Understanding or contract is signed. The right motivation of a partner is more important than adequate capacity since capacity can be enhanced, but motivation needs to be present from the start.

A system analysis of stakeholders (looking at the relations between the stakeholders) should be an integral part of any stakeholder analysis. This is also a lesson learned with regard to this TLP. Instead of looking at the functioning of and relations with individual partners, it might have been better to relate this to the general local context or, for example, to the relationships between the different partner organisations and other Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), as well as with local governmental institutions. The ZOA research focused on partnering processes, and less on context. However, these partnering processes are influenced by the context in which they take place.

3. Cooperation with partners (strategies and instruments)

Partners want to understand ZOA and be understood. The partnership itself (mutual expectations, future of the partnership) must be put on the agenda more often and meetings between ZOA and a partner should go beyond concrete activities.

ZOA staff must be emphatic in their contacts with partners, but also keep a critical distance. The transfer of responsibilities to partners and the phasing out of ZOA requires time and adequate communication between ZOA and the partners. It also needs specific capacity development.

ZOA learned that it should put a lot more effort into a dialogue with the partners. As the work is very practice oriented, very little time and space is left for common reflection and communication with the partners. ZOA staff are technically

very well equipped, but less so in communication skills. It was often unclear what mutual expectations were. For example, in Liberia there was a lot of distrust among partners because of ZOA demands for financial administration and control. This was partly related to the demands by ZOA financiers who required detailed accounting reports. On the other hand it was the result of previous experiences of ZOA with corruption and financial mismanagement on the part of Liberian NGOs. It would have been better for ZOA to explain these reasons to their partners in Liberia.

4. Capacity development of partners
The needs for partner capacity development should be identified jointly by ZOA and the partner, otherwise it will not be effective. The ZOA support for partner capacity development is linked to the type of partnership and the vision of partnering. If a partner is only a subcontractor, capacity development will be very limited. If a partner is seen as an important stakeholder in the wider context, then capacity development will also cover more organisational aspects of the partner. In ZOA practice, capacity development has often been limited to training sessions and coaching and mentoring are options which can be used more often.

ZOA started out from the assumption that its own status as an implementing organisation which directly delivers services in the field makes it better equipped to help building the capacity of its partners, because of the experience and practical knowledge it brings. This assumption, however, proved false, or at least not always correct. In some cases it can also slow down the partners because of ZOA's habit to do things themselves instead of patiently teaching and showing the partners how to do things. The conclusion is that, in many cases, it is better to adopt a hands-off approach and give partners the space to learn, including from their mistakes. Clear agreements about who does what at what stage should be made beforehand.

Agriterra: Farmers' organisations in fragility in the DRC

Agriterra

Agriterra was founded in 1997 by Dutch agricultural membership organisations working in, and for, the private sector. Agriterra works with farmers' organisations and cooperatives in approximately 40 countries. It aims to stimulate, support and finance the international cooperation between rural people's organisations in the Netherlands and those in developing countries. It wants to help build strong member organisations with a primary focus on providing services to people in rural areas.

Agriterra works in three areas, namely agribusiness (technical assistance for cooperatives that already have a certain market share), grass roots entrepreneurship (financial assistance and capacity building for farmers' groups) and lobbying and advocacy (leadership training and other instruments).

Agriterra's roots are in the Dutch organised agriculture and agricultural sector. Similar organisations exist in other Western countries. Agriterra set up AgriCord with them in order to streamline cooperation and coordinate activities. Through AgriCord collaboration has taken place with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the EU, the FAO and the International Labour Organisation.

Research process

The general research question Agriterra asked was, 'How can the analysis of the fragile state context (in the DRC) in which farmers' organisations operate be included in the decisions on the capacity building trajectory and on strengthening those organisations?'

The research was conducted in September and October 2011 in six regions in the provinces North and South Kivu in the east of the Democratic Republic Congo (DRC). 71 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 121 respondents, as well as 20 focus groups with 164 participants.

The research project involved six case studies of three issues, which were chosen after consultation with stakeholders in the focus groups and interviews:
- Land issues (conflicts between big estate owners and small producers, inheritance of land and access by women);
- Production chain and market access (rural markets; border markets);
- Structure of producer organisations.

Research results

The overall report of the Agriterra research concludes that the element of fragility in the research area in the DRC that most affects the farmer organisations is the behaviour, and lack of implementation, of national laws by the local government. The organisations operate in a kind of 'vacuum' and, instead of trying to influence this political context

and the causes of this bad governance situation, they focus on their work and on the capacity building of their members. An important problem was illegal taxing by (often badly or unpaid) civil servants. New economic or taxing policies, agriculture laws, or land ownership rules are often not applied at local level. The government in the (East of the) DRC is very weak and officials are unable to control what is happening in the villages.

The usual survival strategies of farmers and their organisations involve trying to circumvent illegal taxation, instead of changing this behaviour. The government is seen as the enemy. However, there is a growing awareness among farmers' organisations that, instead, the local government should and can work on behalf of their interests, and that local government has to behave according to laws that are negotiated at a higher governance level which will, for example, lead to lower costs and lower taxes.

Similarly to the lack of connections between the local level of governance and the provincial and national levels, there is weak vertical coordination among the CSOs themselves. Those Agriterra partners, that operate at the national levels or in provincial capitals and try to influence legislation or lobby national governmental institutions for specific interests, are often not directly connected to the local organisations that operate at community level. If, for example, a national agricultural law is agreed upon, partly due to lobbying by national farmer networks, this national law is not applied at local level in North or South Kivu. The local governance does not function properly, and similarly, the local organisations are unaware (nor are they made aware by their national counterparts) of the existence of this law.

Lessons learned

The main conclusion for Agriterra is that advocacy at the local level needs to be strengthened in the specific fragile context of the research areas. Although farmer organisations are achieving results in lobbying and advocacy at a higher governance level (Kinshasa, Goma), the problem is the implementation of these policy changes at local level. Agriterra is going to place a greater emphasis on lobbying and advocacy at this local level. Members of the farmer organisations in the villages will have to be more involved, and should be better informed about the laws and rights they have. In addition to that, the organisations should monitor the implementation of those laws more effectively.

Another important conclusion of the Agriterra study concerns the way the farmers' organisations deal with the weak state. The research shows that farmers organisations work in a kind of a 'vacuum' without tackling the real problems. They do not work effectively on the real issues. They should do this is a more systematic way and should cooperate more with the government, although this may be difficult in a fragile context. The lobbying agenda's should be more concrete and SMART.

More specific conclusions of the three case studies are the following:

Land issues: Agriterra should treat the issue of land in these areas of the DRC as a greater priority. More emphasis needs to be placed on the struggle against impunity. Illegal access by land dealers in order to acquire large land concessions, that in turn causes conflicts with smallholders and small farmers, should be countered by effective government actions. The land registration system and property rights need to be modernised to ensure that land can be owned by small producers. The new Code Agricole (Land Law) has been approved and is now going to be implemented. Farmers' organisations participated in the writing, but the challenge is to make it effective at grassroots level and to get members involved.

Production chain: A single window for tax collection must be created, which should take into account the specific context of different markets. More emphasis is needed on the setting up and strengthening of cooperatives of agricultural producers to create greater negotiation power vis-à-vis the authorities.

Structure of producer organisations: A strategy should be defined to combine support for farmers with a strong entrepreneurial vision with the support for farmers that have less capacity and experience in terms of entrepreneurship. The farmer organisations stress that more support is needed for lobbying and advocacy activities. Moreover, the farmer organisations need to consult their members much better, and thereby improve vertical linkages and enhance transparency, based on support from Agriterra.

CARE: The role of civil society in governance processes in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

CARE

CARE Nederland is part of CARE International. CARE is a humanitarian organisation which focuses on emergency aid and reconstruction, but which is always searching for underlying causes, which are frequently in the realm of governance. The organisation aims to strengthen the resilience of the poorest communities, with a special focus on working with, and for, poor women. Originally, CARE worked directly on projects all over the world. These days, however, it is in a transition towards working with local partners.

Research process

CARE's research question was: Given the variety of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the DRC, many of which mirror the dominant patrimonial nature of the state, with limited capacity and potential to achieve sustainable change, how can different types of CSOs in North Kivu and Maniema contribute to good governance and how can Care International best collaborate with civil society to achieve this goal?

In March and April 2012, 64 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) were interviewed in the territories of Lubero (North Kivu), Kasongo and Kindu (Maniema) and in the city of Goma (North Kivu). Each interview took 3 to 5 hours. 36% of the CSOs interviewed were part of the 'primary level' or communitarian level (cooperatives, local unions, community based organisations, with only local influence), 30% were from the secondary level (Non-Governmental Organisations, churches, higher union levels, usually based in the cities with influence at the level of the territories), and 30% were from the 'third level' (church hierarchies, provincial or interprovincial NGOs and networks, with influence up to national level).

Research results

In general, the CSOs researched in North Kivu and Maniema in the DRC do not contribute enough to the aim of enhancing governance in the region. The general state of fragility in the DRC regions is reflected in the CSOs itself. They are fragile in terms of financial capacities and are very dependent on foreign donors. They are incapable of mobilising funds themselves.

Moreover, the large majority of CSOs are incapable of systematically and regularly analyzing the socio-political context in which they have to operate and which they have to influence. This means that these CSOs are incapable of planning strategically, which in turn adds to their weakness. Similarly, most of the CSOs are unable to work at a programmatic level. Their capability to collaborate with the authorities – the local and regional governments – is very weak, nor are they able to serve as a watchdog for these government institutions. The CSOs are, in general, unaware of the Rights Based Approach, or of the human rights they can apply. This weakens their capacity to enhance the emancipation of their constituencies.

The CARE research used different levels to categorise CSOs at local, provincial and national governance levels:
- The 'lowest' level was the local grassroots level with Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and cooperatives, which in general have more legitimacy but less influence on policy.
- The intermediate level consists of NGOs with, usually, more highly educated staff who, in practice, have very little contact with the communities and the people who work at local level and the farmers themselves. These NGOs work in advocacy or in providing services for different target groups.
- The 'highest' national level is of networks and federations that lobby in the capitals for legislation.

The research showed that there was a lack of connection between the local level on the one hand and intermediate and highest level on the other.

Lessons learned

The categorisation of three levels of NGOs allows CARE to distinguish more effectively different types of approaches and focus better on adequate levels. For example, the capacity building efforts it undertakes should focus more on the connection between the intermediate and higher levels on the one hand, and the local grassroots level on the other. At the same time, advocacy should not only try to influence national and provincial legislation, but also monitor implementation of these laws at local level. Part of this capacity building process would also need to be a greater awareness of the potential of cooperation between the community based organisations and (local) authorities. These days the different governmental bodies are often seen as the enemies, with the (three levels of) CSOs being opposed to (the three levels of) government. In some cases it would be better to seek alliances between local government and local CSOs.

The harsh picture of civil society in Eastern Congo that emerges from the CARE research casts doubt on the feasibility of CARE's Theory of Change – which broadly comes down to: a stronger civil society can contribute to better governance, which will lead to equitable and sustainable development. On the one hand it does not challenge this Theory of Change in general, because the DRC is a very specific context in which civil society is extremely weak. However, on the other hand it does challenge some unrealistic ambitions that many people tend to have about civil society. CARE Netherlands has used the results of this TLP to sharpen the Theory of Change of CARE International. This fits in well with the transition CARE International is currently going through at the moment, which includes reviewing its operational model designed to lead to less self-implementation with work focusing more on long-term ´genuine´ partnerships in which CARE fulfils the role of innovator and capacity builder. One aspect of this are new research projects. CARE Netherlands is currently involved in setting up research similar to this TLP in Burundi, South Sudan, Sudan and Liberia.

The CARE research has been concluded and summarised by writing a list of general recommendations along three axes:

Axis 1: Dialogue with the CSOs about what the work towards better governance can and should consist of, prior to an eventual signing of partnership agreements. The dialogue should lead to a consensus on the domains of intervention of CSOs (holding to account of the formal powers, monitoring of budgets, corruption, facilitating access to information, et cetera) and the approaches (project management, Rights Based Approach, gender, internal governance) that the CSOs have to put in place.

Axis 2: Dialogue with the governmental institutions in the DRC about the role civil society can and should play in terms of creating better governance, more security, and more sensitivity for gender issues.

Axis 3: A programme to develop the capacity of future partners. The focus should be on context and conflict analysis and its integration into the programs, intervention logics (problem analysis, formulation of objectives, choice of strategies and activities) and theories of change.

At a more abstract level, the research project has led CARE to reconsider its strategies. Some initial lessons learned from this reconsideration are:

- The vast majority of CSOs are not fulfilling the functions CARE thinks is necessary to contribute to good governance. The relevance to CARE's governance programming is very limited.
- CARE should rethink its level of ambition and timeframes, but not give up on CSOs.
- CARE should make clear strategic choices in its governance programming, which means a clear vision on the role CSOs and authorities should play at different levels, and how this relates to CARE's tasks.
- CARE should engage with CSOs on the basis of a sound analysis of the organisation and its environment. Rosy & romantic views about civil society and what we can achieve by collaborating with it are counterproductive.
- CARE should not impose its objectives and ambitions on a partner, but engage in dialogue with potential partners and openly negotiate a shared vision, objectives, roles, responsibilities, etc.
- These partnerships should be 'genuine' and both parties should commit to the long term. This is only possible with partners who have sufficient will and potential.

Impunity Watch: Enhance meaningful involvement of civil society organisations in IW's research-for-policy approach

Impunity Watch

Impunity Watch (IW) is a Netherlands-based, international non-profit organisation which seeks to promote accountability for atrocities in countries emerging from a violent past. IW differs from the other participants in the TLP in that it is not a development organisation but a research-for-policy organisation. IW conducts systematic research into the root causes of impunity that include the voices of affected communities with the aim to produce research-based policy advice on processes intended to enforce their rights to truth, justice, reparations and non-recurrence. IW works closely with civil society organisations to increase their influence on the creation and implementation of related policies. IW runs 'Country Programmes' in Guatemala and Burundi and a 'Perspectives Programme' involving comparative research in multiple post-conflict countries on specific thematic aspects of impunity. IW's work generally consists of three main phases. First, in-depth research is conducted in coordination with relevant CSOs into the root-causes of impunity and the main obstacles to its reduction, as well as state obligations. Secondly, broad consultations on the findings of this research are organised. The third phase consists mainly of (the facilitation of) advocacy and lobbying activities for the implementation of the policy proposals that result from the consultations. Throughout the whole process the partners – CSOs and grass roots organisations – are fully and equally integrated.

Research process

Impunity Watch based its research on the following research question: How does a stronger leading role of IW in in-country research and a more flexible involvement of CSOs in the research process influence CSOs acceptance and ownership of research results?

In the first years of IW's existence, two country-level research initiatives were realised. These entailed CSOs participating as equal partners in the entire research process as well as in the analysis of results and the writing down of conclusions. The decision to establish such partnerships was based on the assumption that this process would help to strengthen capacities, enhance the meaningful participation of CSOs and generate ownership of the research outcomes. However, and as was signalled in an 2009 evaluation of IW's performance, in practice the principle of fully equal participation of partners in the research process leads to tensions between, on the one hand, the high quality of the research IW considers is required as a basis for increased CSO leverage and, on the other hand, CSOs actual capacities and openness to operationalise a rigorous research model. Moreover, in post-conflict settings especially, polarised political positions from the conflict era often continue to influence political and social relations between CSOs, with fear and mistrust being widespread, thus impeding constructive collaboration and coordination. What is more, by working as equal partners with CSOs, IW's role in the process became complicated (because it was a funder, supervisor and participant), contested by CSOs and invisible to the outside. This position of IW made it difficult to take the lead at moments that required such a decision from the research point of view.

The research was conducted in Guatemala, Burundi, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The focus was on the research phase of IW's work. In line with the recommendations resulting from the above-mentioned 2009 evaluation of IW performance, IW decided to take a more leading role during the research phase and involve CSOs in a validating, consultative role. This leading role meant that the implementation of the research was in the hands of (local) research experts who reported directly to IW. Various types of CSOs (human rights organisations, women's organisations, peace building organisations, victims organisations) were consulted at the start of the research with regard to its focus and scope, with the objective being to ensure that the expected outcomes would provide them with interesting and well-founded insights that would also add new elements to their lobbying and advocacy agenda. These consultative meetings also served to clarify the leading role of IW in the research phase, as well as to map out the strategic moments for CSO input and feedback. For the case studies that involved on-the-ground research with victims and/or in conflict-affected communities, IW engaged directly with relevant CSOs. 20 civil society organisations in the three countries were involved in consultations during the research process. Apart from the locally operating CSOs, the involvement of international NGOs and academics was also relevant for IW and they were consulted regarding the broader framework of the research framework.

The research process we focus on (the part that is under consideration in this concluding TLP report) was in fact part of a broader research project, conducted by IW, which looked at a gender sensitive approach to justice and reconciliation processes in the three countries. Within this gender research, the Thematic Learning Programme examined how a more leading role (as contrasted to more equality with partners) by IW impacted on the ownership of the research results by the partners.

Research results

The leading role IW took in the research phase does not seem to have a negative effect on CSO ownership regarding findings and recommendations. In each of the three countries there was a lot of interest in participating in the validation sessions as well as support for, and participation in, the broad multi-stakeholder policy consultations. Moreover, in each country several relevant CSOs expressed interest in following up on research conclusions in (joint) lobbying and advocacy initiatives. Apart from relevant CSOs being involved in the various phases of the research (start, during and after), some of the conditions for this ownership are:

- The research is being modelled after a first analysis of a 'felt and expressed need' among relevant CSOs.
- Relevant CSOs are consulted about the focus and scope of the research instrument.
- There is an openness and willingness to discuss findings and recommendations in a constructive way.
- The issue at hand in the research-for-policy trajectory is of interest to relevant CSOs.
- New insights are acquired that can strengthen and reinforce CSO work and support their advocacy efforts.
- The link to the international level, to gaining insights into the experiences and lessons in other countries, and to being considered in international level overarching analyses, is attractive for CSOs and considered an important added value.

When these conditions are met, a clearer leading role of IW during the research might lead to even better CSO ownership of research results. Since the research results are obtained by an independent and professional researcher, who is part of an international organisation, CSOs seem to consider these more 'credible' than those produced by peer organisations, thus supporting the acceptation of these results. The subsequent consultations on these results support a constructive dialogue between different types of CSOs and stakeholders in that they not only put the issue at stake on the agenda, but at the same time contribute to the (re-)construction of (often damaged) relations between various actors.

Lessons learned

For IW it was important that the local CSOs felt ownership of the results of the research on gender sensitive approaches, even though IW took the lead in this research and involved the CSOs only for consultations. It indeed seemed to be the case that the CSOs generally showed a keen interest in the research findings and are committed to following up the outcomes by integrating them into their lobby and advocacy agendas. In addition, the level of ownership of the research findings felt by the partner organisations was high, although there was one exception. Some CSOs in Burundi seem to link further involvement in follow-up on research results with the need for financial compensation. This can, however, be related to a variety of factors, varying from the extreme poverty situation in Burundi to previous experiences with international organisations that do provide funding for lobbying and advocacy. A possible consequence is that, on the initiative of these CSOs, IW and these organisations will consider developing a joint funding proposal to continue this work. This shows that these CSOs regard the recommendations as being relevant and want to be involved in the follow-up lobbying and advocacy for their implementation.

The important lesson of the IW research was that it is possible to take a more leading role in the research phase as a Dutch (or foreign) NGO without negative consequences for the relations with the southern partners and as long as open communication is in place, key moments for input and feedback by CSOs are clearly identified, and their input is taken seriously.

For Impunity Watch, the consequences of a fragile context for civil society were one of the reasons to experiment with a shift towards more leadership by IW in their research projects. The clearer leading role of IW during the research, as an international and independent CSO, might even lead to enhanced acceptance of the results since these are in line with CSO priorities and interests, despite them coming from a neutral and professional 'outsider'. This seems to lead to a constructive dialogue between these various actors in the policy consultations on research outcomes which not only puts the issue at stake on the agenda but, at the same time, contributes to the (re-)construction of (often damaged) relations between various actors.

Conclusion

While the previous sections showed that each research project had its own research questions and methodology, they all dealt with challenges of context analysis and partnering. Below we discuss some of the main findings, as well as common attributes and differences.

Partnering

Partnering processes were at the core of the Thematic Learning Programme (TLP) on Fragile States. Clearly, each of the four Dutch NGOs has a different approach in this regard and therefore faced different and sometimes 'opposing' challenges. For instance, ZOA and Impunity Watch tried to find answers from different working practices.

In the case of ZOA the research project contributed to a debate about the prospects of working with local NGO partners. In the past, ZOA had mainly implemented projects directly, while some country offices had started to work with partners. Consequently, the research focused on the possibilities and impact of greater collaboration with local partners. This means that the TLP research for ZOA was also a kind of mapping exercise and an attempt to make better informed decisions on partner selection and engagement.

On the other hand, Impunity Watch reconsidered the participation of local partners. In the past, IW tried to realise participation of a wide range of partners in the countries in which they worked and this led to a number of problems and tensions in the implementation and use of research. IW had already decided that it wanted to play a more proactive role vis-à-vis partners and used the TLP research to find out how their partners experienced this changed approach of IW.

For Agriterra the question was not whether to cooperate with partners or which partners to choose (the options for Agriterra are limited: it works with farmers member organisations), but on how a context analysis can help to strengthen this cooperation and the capacity building of the partners.

Finally, CARE examined a range of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in East DRC so that it was more able to differentiate between, and design, tailor-made policies for (potential) partners.

PARTNERING

Context analysis

All organisations emphasised that a detailed context analysis is necessary in order to be able to adapt adequately to circumstances in the hybrid political order of a fragile state. This means that one should go beyond the general characteristics of fragile states that most of the countries share: they are generally poor, the societies are divided and characterised by a multiple (competing) institutions, there is a weak state and some countries have high levels of violence. However, it also became clear that there are marked differences between these countries and that there is no standard 'fragile context'. Moreover, even in the same country context the organisations had different information needs regarding what exactly they need to know and what should be analyzed in a particular context. The knowledge needs largely depend on the assumptions of the Dutch organisations and/or their intervention strategies. Furthermore, it was emphasised that performing a context analysis in a fragile setting, especially when it touches upon vested interests and informal power structures, can be a sensitive process.

Governance

Unsurprisingly, the most important element of a general fragile context as is being examined in the four research projects, appears to be the issue of governance. In fragile regions there is usually a lack of a functioning central and local government. Implementation of national laws and the provision of services are very weak at local level. Local CSOs are not generally aware of the concept of human rights and, when they are, they are extremely difficult to realise. It is therefore interesting to note that most NGOs and their local partners still have a strong belief in the need for a government to create order and an enabling environment, including the security of people and the rule of law.
This importance of a stronger government is also recognised by organisations like Agriterra that focus on economic empowerment of their partners and support the marketing of their products (for example by improving the physical infrastructure or by realising technological improvements like increasing yields through fertilisers). After all, a lack of adequate local governance and security can, for example, lead to those fertilisers never reaching the farmers or being too expensive because of illegal taxing.

However, while most NGOs argue that, in the long run, a functioning governance structure is to be aspired to, it is recognised that little can be expected from (local) government structures in the short term. At the same time the capacities of local organisations as regards lobbying for a stronger and better government presence was relatively weak. Organisations like Agriterra and CARE both faced the dilemma of how to deal with this. What can be expected from local organisations? What are realistic objectives? This raised fundamental questions about civil society strengthening in a context of state fragility. Is it possible and feasible to lobby for 'more government', or is this terminology not adequate for situations where state–society relations are fundamentally different to those in a hybrid political order?

TLP process

Apart from the conclusions of the research itself, something can be said about the process of this Thematic Learning Programme. As described in the introduction, the action research methods that were used require practitioners to lead the research. The four NGOs have acquired more experience in conducting such action research themselves. They may, next time, use more participative learning methods which follow the rhythm of the organisations themselves. What is more, it appears that organisations sometimes prefer a collective write shop to formulate a proposal rather than a lengthy process of continuously improving drafts. This could facilitate the involvement of the practitioners.

Although the TLP has, in some cases, led to more generic insights concerning the general functioning of the four NGOs, the greatest benefit of the research was felt in the countries in which the research was conducted. The action research left something tangible at the level of field offices and partner organisations and many of them used elements of the research in their action plans.

During the TLP research the sometimes complicated relationships between the headquarters of the NGOs and the staff at the field offices led to some logical tensions. These were dealt with during the TLP process by facilitating dialogues between headquarters and field offices. In the case of ZOA a follow-up was organised by basing a policy officer (from headquarters) for three months in Kivu (DRC) to guide a policy change by strengthening the capacities of the country staff as regards partnering and capacity development. It is exactly when a TLP is implemented that one comes to realise that a policy change requires different staff capacities and competences. It only underlines the necessity of the kind of action learning and research undertaken in this TLP.

This report is based on

- Interviews with Chris van der Borgh (Centre for Conflict Studies at the University of Utrecht), Corita Corbijn (ZOA), Karen Hammink (Impunity Watch), Dik van de Koolwijk, Arthur Molenaar (CARE Nederland), Niek Thijssen (Agriterra) en Johan te Velde (PSO).
- The following reports:

  ZOA

  ZOA research on partnering and capacity development. Overall report. Domien Bruinsma, October 2011.

  Agriterra

  Les organisations paysannes face a la fragilité en RD Congo. Rapport final de la recherche action en province du Nord et Sud Kivu. Une mission dans le cadre de la trajectoire de capacitacion des organisations paysannes dans les états fragile. Nynke Douma et Maliyasasa Syalembereka, Arnhem, Mars 2012.

  CARE

  Etude sur Role de la Société Civile dans les Processus de Gouvernance en République Démocratique du Congo (DRC). Jérome Gouzou, Innovative Strategies for Change (ISaC), April 2012.

  Impunity Watch

  Enhance meaningful involvement of civil society organisations in IW's research-for-policy approach.

The following researchers (including staff of the four NGOs and external researchers) collaborated per study:

ZOA

Corita Corbijn (coordinator)

Domien Bruinsma (external consultant)

Agriterra

Niek Thijssen (coordinator)

Nynke Douma (external consultant)

Maliyasasa Syalembereka

CARE

Arthur Molenaar (coordinator)

Jerome Gouzou (DRC)

Impunity Watch

Karen Hammink (coordinator)

Sanne Weber (Guatemala)

Mathilde Boddaert (Burundi)

Maja Sostaric (Bosnia-Herzegovina)