

Shifting power relations: a long road to local ownership!

Experiences with the programmatic approach

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Ownership', 'accountability' and the 'sector approach' have long since ceased to be strangers in the world of development cooperation. In practice, however, donors still regularly fund projects that are not embedded sufficiently in the social context and that allow for only minimal participation on the part of users and other people involved. Even with experienced organisations (among which DGIS!) one continues to find 'stand-alone' projects. Apparently practice has a hard time keeping up with theory. For PSO this was one of the reasons to start developing a 'learning trajectory on Programmatic Approaches' for associated members. What are the successes and pitfalls on the road to the programmatic approach? An overview of lessons and voices from the Dutch sector...

In PSO's perspective, a programmatic approach is all about: ownership of local organisations; a 'broad approach' that starts with an in-depth analysis of the social context; involvement of several stakeholders; and donor coordination. In itself nothing new under the sun, but at the same time easier said than done.

The programmatic approach that PSO members are working on, fits with the Sector Wide Approach (SWAp) that was embraced by Foreign Affairs a couple of years ago. According to the 2006 IOB report 'From Project Aid towards Sector Support', DGIS is also struggling with the transition to a broader approach. "In over half of the 22 priority countries, however, the intention to give less earmarked support was not achieved and project aid is still dominant," IOB concludes. The struggle with working programmatically is thus not exclusively the domain of NGO donors and their partners.

According to Roel Snelder from the PSO Knowledge and Learning Centre, the recent interest in the programmatic approach among its members is significantly related to the discussion about result-oriented work. The call for results, Snelder thinks, has reached the development sector rather late. "For a long time, our sector revolved around showing solidarity; 'doing good'. With the current trend on accountability, we are catching up quickly. The assertion of many of our members is that working programmatically leads to more sustainable results, to more impact.

With the emphasis on impact, the issue of 'client satisfaction' is according to Snelder, also coming centre stage. "The perspective of the end users is now, at least in theory, showing a comeback. Snelder: "In the past – let's say from Paulo Freire onwards – contributions from and participation by the end users was what development was supposed to be all about. Many donor organisations now – rightly so - work through intermediate partner organisations, but there is often little time to dialogue with them on beneficiaries' perspectives, let alone interact with end users directly. We assume that our assistance automatically benefits the poor, but – seeing the way we are organised - the less self-evident this becomes. So paradoxically the professionalisation of our organisations seems to have removed us further from the field. We need to make sure that our working methods are adjusted to beneficiaries. Working programmatically means we need to start asking ourselves questions on participation and ownership all over again".

Learning on programmatic approaches

In response to requests from member organisations, PSO in 2003 started a 'learning trajectory' to map the bottlenecks and conditions of a programmatic approach and to investigate, together with the member organisations and their partners in the South, what this new approach implies for methods of work and mutual relationships. PSO's Knowledge Centre has summarised the experiences collected from workshops and 'pilot programmes' over the last few years in eight lessons (see box).

Eight vital lessons on the programmatic approach

1. The perspective of end users ought to get priority
2. More attention to the preparation and participation of all relevant stakeholders
3. Partnering and dialogue in a 'system-perspective'
4. Shifting of responsibilities with ownership to the 'South'
5. Attention to the role of 'change agents' and the support of the management
6. More donor-harmonisation and working towards trust instead of control
7. Mixing of 'hard skills' and 'soft skills'
8. There are no standard solutions

These lessons guide a toolbox developed by PSO. Organisations (both in the North and in the South) that want to take a step into the direction of more programmatic work, will find in the toolbox the experiences and reflections of organisations that passed through the PSO learning trajectory. Moreover each 'lesson' contains a questionnaire, which helps organisations to gain insight into their own 'programmatic practice'. The toolbox is available at the [PSO-website](http://www.pso.nl/asp/documentsite.asp?document=828) (<http://www.pso.nl/asp/documentsite.asp?document=828>)

Core finding from the learning trajectory is that power relations between donors and recipient organisations are shifting. This makes the transition more tricky. After all, theoretically nobody has any objections to 'ownership' in 'the South', but in practice handing over decision-making powers often proves problematic. Development organisations cannot only look south. Most organisations have their roots in western societies: this is where their support is located and where their funds come from. Decisions about the spending of money, about planning, monitoring and evaluation needs to be in line with public support for development cooperation in the North. PSO will continue to support its associated organisations in the transition to a programmatic approach. What are the questions of today that arise within PSO member organisations? Let's hear some members' voices

More coherent interventions

Herman Brouwer of ICCO sketches the progress made as a result of the change-over from project work to programmatic approach: "In the past we used to send tropical doctors to Malawi, build a small clinic and educate the medical staff. While that was all quite useful, it has come to appear increasingly futile given the 'tsunami' of HIV-Aids cases and the massive emigration of medical personnel.

To tackle this problem we brought all stakeholders together and discussed the best ways to intervene. The shared analysis showed that our approach of supporting hospitals was too limited. We jointly decided in favour of a series of related interventions – one could call this a programme – which would include support to individual hospitals as well as posting abroad of personnel (tropical doctors), while at the same time we committed ourselves to making it more attractive for local medical staff to remain in Malawi. For instance by offering decent housing and sufficient career perspective." "The housing project moreover gave us the opportunity to involve private partners, individuals and companies active in development cooperation. The building of houses for nurses and doctors in the vicinity of hospitals can very well be financed through private gifts and initiatives from Dutch individuals and companies. We have also incorporated a trajectory to increase influence on the national health care policy on the part of civil society. All in all, we believe, a more sustainable approach."

Luuk van Schothorst from the organisation *Woord en Daad* puts forward the chain approach as an example of a 'broad approach'. By expanding its view beyond one project, *Woord en Daad* managed to spectacularly improve its support to cashew nut producers in Burkina Faso. "We took a good look at the chain and managed to locate a processing company for cashew nuts. Chances are that the farmers whom we support will be able to supply to that company in the near future. And within the same process we also located an importer in the Netherlands, so that holds good prospects. This is really a result of the programmatic approach; suddenly many lines meet." Van Schothorst stresses the need for an analysis shared by all stakeholders: "All those involved must be able to see the benefits. You must not create things artificially. And ventures should be made profitable. Business is business."

According to Herman Brouwer (ICCO) a one-dimensional project approach does not invite a proper analysis of the context and the social circumstances within which one operates. He gives the example of the support given to farmers in developing countries in gaining access to the market in order to sell their products. "If your aim is to get farmers onto the market, a chain approach is required. Working solely on project basis does not provide insight into the full chain. A programmatic approach brings many different actors together. This allows them to link up and to tackle the problems in a far more sustainable way. Or, if necessary, a lobby trajectory can be connected to it."

All together around one table

It is essential for the programmatic approach that all relevant stakeholders come together at the start of the cycle in order to join hands in analysing the social context and trying to list the most important challenges. Joining at one table and analysing together is not that easy. After all, who do you invite? How do you ensure that all points of view are put on the table? How do you deal with conflicts of interest? And: how to make sure that those present do not simply look questioningly at the donor?

Responses vary. Christine Fenenga of Cordaid stresses that there have to be good reasons to invite someone. "In developing countries too people are busy, you cannot send for them just for any reason. Only people who are involved with the theme feel like attending such a meeting." Another problem is the vast difference in competences, Fenenga adds. "If things have to be explained repeatedly, experts will be quick to pull out." Cordaid gives the local partner the main responsibility of choosing the local stakeholders: "They know the most important players as well as the mutual relationships." Conflicts of interest are not the most difficult problem, Herman Brouwer (ICCO) thinks. "As long as the analysis is shared, conflicting interests are no big issue. But you have to name them, of course."

Many organisations make use of a professional 'facilitator' for such crucial stakeholder meetings. Rens Verstappen (Leprastichting): "A competent facilitator makes sure that everyone can have a say in the matter. To start with, we work with a permanent panel chairman from the Netherlands. This person knows when it is sensible to split up into sub-groups, and when to stick to plenary discussion. That is also culturally determined. In Indonesia for instance, people usually express themselves much less directly and hierarchy plays an important role. This knowledge serves as a key determinant in the formation of sub-groups. In Nigeria, people very easily and confidently express themselves in public, also in plenary sessions." The Leprastichting has by now trained local people to chair such meetings. "We now have two female facilitators in Nigeria who are perfectly able to lead a stakeholder meeting."

The Netherlands institute for Southern Africa (NiZA) organised a consultation meeting to give shape to its 'Human Rights and Peace Building Programme'. Maaike Blom: "Such a consultation meeting is extremely intensive. In our case it took four full days. We hired a professional facilitator which proved very useful, especially in creating a pleasant and confidence-building atmosphere. Initially the participants' attitude was to wait and see; they did not know what NiZA had in mind. Some organisations were also new to us. We were very clear from the start about what to expect from us, which proved very valuable. After that we invited the partners to give their presentations. What joint analysis and planning boils down to is giving your partners the opportunity to say 'no'. There is no point in frenetically trying to keep everyone on board."



Another rule of thumb, Blom says, is for donors to be prepared to adjust their presuppositions. "We for instance did this concerning the gender approach. We had decided in advance that there should not be a separate women's cluster. We thought it important to integrate this theme into all the other themes. But the response from the women's organisations, made us change our mind: 'first give us time to grow and become strong', they said, 'after that we can begin to mainstream'."

Contributions from ordinary people

Involving end users in setting up programmes is anything but easy, so we are told by many. Blom confirms that her organisation does not have direct contact with its beneficiaries. At the consultation meeting in preparation of the human rights programme that NiZA supports in Southern Africa, no 'ordinary' people participated. The perspective of the end users was put forward by 'bare-foot-lawyers' who do know the interests of ordinary people in setting up a human rights programme.

Rens Verstappen (Leprastichting) says his organisation too has to make an effort to involve the ordinary patient. "We invite articulate patients to planning meetings, but often without result. When they do contribute, we do get useful information, for instance that people postpone going to the hospital as long as possible when they suspect to be suffering from leprosy. This is because leprosy patients are stigmatised. In some cases this has resulted in adjustments in the original planning."

Luuk van Schothorst (Woord en Daad) has a “baffling story” to tell about what can happen if you do invite end users for a “participative inventory of local needs”. At one such meeting, organised by a partner in Burkina Faso in mid 2006, the participants’ expectations about the presence of a foreign donor turned out to be running high. “Instead of jointly analysing the problems in the region, we were blandly presented with a shopping list: so many irrigation channels, so many kilometres of asphalted road, so many dams, and etcetera. And would we kindly take care of that. “The Santa Claus model”, according to Van Schothorst. The solution must probably be sought in ‘expectation management’. The people round the table should have an insight into each other’s possibilities and limitations.

Partnering with local government

Many organisations struggle with their attitude towards the government, who are relevant stakeholders in nearly all cases. This may even be true in countries with a highly politicised separation between government and NGOs. As part of the action learning process within PSO’s learning trajectory, Filipino organisation CPTCSA, a partner of PSO member Terre des Hommes, experimented to cooperate more with government. Despite the ‘difficult’ relationship between civil organisations and the government of the Philippines, the decision to invite the government as stakeholder eventually led to the ‘up-scaling’ of the anti child abuse curriculum in schools.

Especially ‘politically oriented’ organisations see themselves as ‘opposition force’ and consider the government an antagonist rather than a potential partner. NiZA usually chooses to keep the government out. Maaike Blom: “In conversations on human rights the government is a sensitive subject, because they are often actors in human rights violations. Many of our partners are being oppressed, which makes it hard to work together with the governments. This is especially true in a country like Zimbabwe, with an extremely repressive government. But elsewhere too it is difficult. Partners indicate how far they want to go, taking into account their own safety. It is not up to NiZA to break through this, and it would be presumptuous to suddenly start conversations with the government.” According to Blom, when entering into (new) forms of cooperation you always need to make a choice between ‘width’ and ‘depth’. “The right path must be somewhere in the middle”.

The Leprastichting positions itself at the other end of the spectrum. The government is actually its only partner. Verstappen: “Leprosy is a dangerous, contagious disease. The fight against it is, by definition, a task for the government.” But that does not mean that we only invite the government to the table. “Also other stakeholders participate, like the WHO, tuberculosis organisations, universities and hospitals. Together with our partners we make the decisions about who is to be invited.”

The government was a relevant participant at the above-mentioned stakeholder consultation organised by *Woord en Daad* in Burkina Faso. Luuk van Schothorst: “We like to involve the government in the new programming. That goes for district governments, but also for village elders. It is important not only to know one’s way to the government offices, but also to know the key persons working there as well as their fields of interest. Even the actual people involved are known by us. Even though the government is not involved in the discussion about programmes, we always present our plans to the relevant civil servants.”

Ownership is the vulnerable spot

Ownership is central in the programmatic approach, and perhaps the very flaw in every form of development cooperation. The idea is that, as long as you set up a programme jointly, in dialogue with all those involved, and as long as you grant local forces maximum voice and authority, they will consider themselves the 'owners', and consequently they will guarantee its sustainability. Luuk van Schothorst (Woord en Daad): "If you lose ownership, the battle is lost. It is deadly when a partner plays up to you. The partner's contribution is essential. It helps to be a loyal donor, so that your partner need not worry that you will pull out as soon as he says something that does not please you."

Within a programmatic approach, ownership does not mean though that donors sideline themselves. Nearly all the people quoted in this article endorse the notion that the donor's role as regards to content is in fact on the increase. Within a programmatic approach, donors are full participants in the conversations about a programme's content as well as its political and social relevance and embeddedness.

Herman Brouwer (ICCO): "Ownership does not mean that you are always obediently waiting for initiative from the South. You can also take such initiative from Utrecht. But you do have to be aware of your role. In our experience, local ownership can grow – or instead weaken – during the course of a programme. The art for northern organisations is to offer timely input that can stimulate the energy and coherence within their programmes. Sometimes this implies offering expertise or access to networks, sometimes leadership to help cut the Gordian knot, sometimes money."

Luuk van Schothorst (*Woord en Daad*) is convinced that contributions from the Netherlands can have added value content-wise: "Being relative outsiders gives us a wider overview. So it can be useful to come up with an option that is not easily thought of locally." Naturally there is an area of tension between the desired 'ownership' on the part of the aid 'recipients' and the organisation that takes care of the necessary funds. The one who pays, decides.



Small steps in donor coordination

The omnipotence of donors can be cut down by reducing organisations' dependency on one single donor. Christine Fenenga: "Cordaid attempts to reduce its partners' dependency by involving other donors in its programmes." To this end, the Catholic organisation has even started a trajectory 'local fundraising', which is to assist partners in finding additional funds from local companies, organisations and governments.

Maaïke Blom thinks that there is added value in being a relatively small donor. "NiZA will not easily outflank its partners. In pure scale, we are not our partners' most important donor. Our influence is therefore quite limited: our partners are in a position to be articulate. NiZA is much more a partner than a donor."

Ideally, the programmatic approach is a useful leg up to maximum donor coordination. After all: already in the planning phase other donors are supposed to join at the table. Several organisations nevertheless indicate that contact with other donors remains minimal. *Woord en Daad* has no contact with other donors in setting up its programme in Burkina Faso. The reason, according to van Schothorst, is simply that no other donors are active in the region: "Then there is no point in artificially making them join."

Maaïke Blom (NiZA) tries to qualify the ideal picture of donor coordination. "We did try to map the other donors in our field, but getting to draw one line in coordination is difficult. One should not be too naïve when it comes to donor coordination. Donors take on very different roles. One of our partners in Malawi receives a lot of money from USAID. They are a very directive donor. It is simply impossible to coordinate our activities with them: we are not even granted a place at their table. Because USAID does not finance lobby activities, we decided to fund this partner's lobby department. NiZA is an additional player that always searches for its niche. In that sense we do look at other donors' funding choices. We are no main player, and the area of donor coordination knows its own hierarchy."

Part of a bigger system

It is remarkable that NGOs in their application of the programmatic approach pay little attention to actively including programmes within the national Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) that most poor countries formulate. NGOs appear to be clearly reserved about seeking alliance with larger initiatives. According to Maaïke Blom (NiZA), one needs to be a big player if one is to have a substantial role within such wider context. Herman Brouwer states that ICCO's partners in the areas of education, health care and food security always operate within the framework of national plans.

Luuk van Schothorst confirms that the PRSPs did play a background role within the 'learning trajectory programmatic approach' that *Woord en Daad* and its partner Credo passed through. "In principle, our partner Credo is supposed to translate the national poverty reduction plan to the local situation. But the PRSP is not explicitly dealt with during the stakeholder meetings. It serves as background material."

"In our water programme for instance, the placing of water points is partly based on the norms stated in the PRSP: water taps are supposed to be located within a range of x meters from a house; such kind of things. Those are of course no hard facts, but it does give an indication of what is considered 'normal'. In a local situation one easily loses sight of that."



Within this cooperation ICCO plays a double role, Brouwer confides: “On the one hand we assist in capacity strengthening for the benefit of the implementation of the national education plan, but on the other hand we also serve as watchdogs by critically following the impact of the SWAp.” Brouwer believes that working programmatically can make organisations like ICCO more interesting to institutional partners because “we can work together on a reasonable scale and on a strategic level.”

Obstacles to change

“Rationally everybody is in favour of a programmatic approach”, Rens Verstappen (Leprastichting) states. “Who can possibly object to ownership?” And yet, a programmatic method of work is anything but an automatism for many organisations. Roel Snelder (PSO) signals resistance that has to do with the amount of work required for a changeover to a programmatic approach. “Especially when it concerns a small investment, there will be a lot of turning things upside down. Also the approach may lead to difficult choices. For instance, a joint analysis may show that you should end the relationship with a certain partner”.

Snelder does not agree that this involves mainly small organisations. “No, that is not how things are. One of our smaller members, TIE, has chosen fully for the approach. It fits well with their network approach. And from earlier research we have seen that larger emergency oriented organisations struggle with the approach. Humanitarian aid typically requires swift decisions and action, a culture which doesn't always fit well with the rather slow trajectory of looking for ownership and wide analyses”.

Herman Brouwer mentions another few obstacles to a well-working programmatic approach. The first is some partners' lack of capacity. “It is essential that partners can claim their role. That requires a certain strength and maturity, which African partners in particular often lack. In Latin America this is less of a problem. Some partners there for instance say: ‘We don't want your money; we want your lobby-network. We can get the money somewhere else.’ Such an attitude makes for effective joint analyses and shared responsibility.”

Being lightly pressed, Brouwer is willing to confirm that one obstacle to programmatic work has its roots in the direction current thinking about development cooperation is taking in the Netherlands. From the point of view of public support, there is need for projects that go down well with people: concrete activities with a visible and measurable end goal. Such kinds of projects, however, rarely present the most sustainable form of aid. “ICCO cannot entirely ignore that agenda either.” Herman Brouwer also believes that some issues are better dealt with in project form. “You should only choose for a programmatic approach when it concerns a complex issue that cannot be solved by one actor alone.” Fenenga explains that for most of its new and innovative initiatives, Cordaid consciously chooses the project approach.

Most policy staff members at the Leprastichting believe in the added value of a programmatic approach. It is only in the case of relatively small financing that not everyone is enthusiastic. Verstappen: “A broad, programmatic approach demands a lot of time and attention. That is a real bottleneck. In Indonesia for instance, we have around thirty running projects. Organising stakeholder meetings for all those activities is impossible, especially in the short term. We only have a limited number of medical advisers at our disposal. All in all I estimate it will take another five years before this new approach has been fully implemented.”

Verstappen's point that the pressure for a more participatory method of work does not really come from the South, indicates a slight contradiction in terms. "At times we even notice resistance against more participation and ownership on the part of our Southern partners. It is mostly the 'professionals' who object; they are afraid that non-professionals will start joining in the conversation about their field of expertise. What usually works well is that we let such critical persons participate in a workshop elsewhere. Towards the end they are usually very enthusiastic and want the same for their own practice."

Less micro management

A switchover to programmatic work will always imply a great deal of change. Not only for organisations in the South, but also (and perhaps especially) for donors. Most people we talk to believe that it will make their work only more interesting. A programmatic approach implies actually working together in laying down the outlines and implies mutual trust where details are concerned.

Maaïke Blom compares the current situation to the period when NiZA still largely worked through postings of Dutch experts abroad. "In the past, all contacts went via the 'expat'. At times when he was gone, all fell silent. Now we ourselves talk about content with our partners. The 'dream' or the ideal that keeps you going has not changed, but our daily activities are currently much more in line with that dream."

Van Schothorst puts it differently: "Donors can now gain a much deeper insight into the programmes. We no longer limit ourselves to management, but especially take a strategic angle. 'Values' become more important. One value is 'focusing on the most vulnerable', or 'sustainability'. If we do not recognise those values in a programme proposal, we do not fund it. But this is done based on arguments. At the level of activities, our role as donor is decreasing: less micro management." In terms of measurability too, Van Schothorst adds, quite a lot is changing. "We measure different things, and we need to practice more patience when looking for results. It is a shift from measuring the output – 'how many people were trained in building lavatory pans?' – to measuring the impact – 'how many cases of diarrhoea do we still have?'. I see this as an enrichment of our organisation. Shortly there will be a partner conference, during which we will present this to all our partners. In principle all of them will have to start working programmatically, but it will take some time to materialise. Not everyone will pick up on this immediately."

Christine Fenenga of Cordaid: "The involvement will be extended beyond mere funding. Staff members at Cordaid get more personal responsibility. The relationships become more business-like: we are going to judge each other on results. Part of a programmatic agreement is a clear and marked end to the funding. When we have achieved what we agreed on beforehand, the funding stops."

New requirements for staff

The changes ask for different capacities on the part of staff members. The question is whether these capacities are sufficiently present. Are people who were contracted for project administration and monitoring automatically able to make political and social analyses together with the partners? That

question cannot, in advance, be answered positively. Most organisations realise that a new method of work requires new skills. Cordaid has reserved this year's entire budget for training and capacity development of its own staff to enable the new working method. Christine Fenenga: "It is partly about a different mix of soft and hard skills. A good relationship with the partner is what makes or breaks the programmatic approach. Dialogue is becoming much more important. For instance, how do you deal with a partner who does not want to achieve and deliver? How do you handle a bad-news-conversation? These are all things that we need to improve on. We are also trying to learn more from each other. This becomes more feasible as we are developing better documentation systems, which make the lessons learned more accessible. We organise sessions to share the problems we are faced with in our work, and we exchange best practices. Furthermore, we are running an internal trajectory meant to increase our shared reflection on the programmatic approach."

Luuk van Schothorst confirms that soft skills have become more important: listening, connecting 'values', conflict management, facilitation, and etcetera. "I hope that the organisation and our people are ready and able to make this switch. I'm reasonably optimistic. Generally speaking our people are interested in thinking along strategically. This attitude has been part of our selection procedures for some time now."

Changing power relations

For 'big' organisations like ICCO and Cordaid the programmatic approach is part of a large reorganisation. Both ICCO and Cordaid have recently 'turned over' the organisation: from a regional to a thematic approach. This switch forms a perfect match with the programmatic approach. Christine Fenenga: "Lobby and policy development are now more integrally incorporated into the organisation. Programme people are obliged to be more politically aware, also in their approach towards partners. Much more than in the past we need to enter into a strategic discussion with our partners."



Herman Brouwer: "In the past few years, ICCO has thoroughly reflected on its niche. What is our task, what is our added value? We came up with four roles: strategic funding, capacity development, a broker's role and lobby/advocacy. Our past emphasis was on strategic funding. ICCO staff members now have to perform well on all four roles. The idea is that people look beyond the borders of their theme. For our staff members this is a considerable change. Those who used to deal with – let's say – peace building in Asia, now also have to look at the relationship between peace building and economic development. That requires a more creative search for strategic forms of cooperation within and outside ICCO." These are processes, Brouwer says, in which the partners are being granted a much bigger role. The programmes that partners develop will also be judged locally by Regional Councils, which are still to be established. Eventually only the formal approval will be done in Utrecht. At ICCO, this whole process is the talk of the town."

But other organisations too follow with interest the process that is taking place at ICCO. "They realise that we take plenty of risks. We are doing a lot at the same time: both handing over responsibility and decentralisation. It is a real turn to change the power relations. Already in the eighties, Minister Jan de Koning said: it is time that you really do something about ownership. Nobody has truly heeded that call. Until now."

More info on programmatic approaches and current PSO-activities is available at the [PSO-website](#)