Impressions of a learning event on the programmatic approach

What have we learned on programmatic approaches? Where do we want to take our learning? What is important? What do we need to face and develop, as organisations individually and as PSO as a whole? These are the leading questions at PSO's event Walk The Talk: a Programmatic Approach in Action on December 4th 2006.

At Antropia in Driebergen over 40 staff members of Dutch NGO's gather to develop answers to these questions ([click here for list of participants](#)). This report sketches what goes on at the event: in plenary sessions, in workshops, in the corridors, over lunch and, in between the lines, in the 'hearts and minds' of participants.

The report is a co-production of [Wereld in Woorden](#) and PSO. It uses materials that are produced throughout the day, by participants and by our 'resident' cartoonist, [Mark de Koning](#), who has drawn images of what participants say and do.

The impressions below are at the same time a journalistic product and a reflection on content and process. From them we seek to draw conclusions on how to move forward in terms of learning on programmatic approaches. In that sense this report serves as a prequel to the further development of the PSO learning trajectory on programmatic approaches. The contents are as follows, following the order of activities during the day:

- ☻ **Programmatic Bingo**
- ☻ **Reflection on Key Lessons**
- ☻ **Workshop impressions part one**
- ☻ **Meanwhile in the corridors…**
- ☻ **Workshop impressions part two**
- ☻ **Developing key themes**
- ☻ **A world café on programmatic themes**
- ☻ **Action planning**
- ☻ **Epilogue**

Pogrammatic Bingo

The day has a dynamic start with a Programmatic Bingo. Participants get the assignment to meet 6 persons with the following characteristics:

Has a field office	Works from a thematic focus	Learned on P A before
Discussed P A with partner	Represents a back donor	Written P A policy

The objective: find out what these individuals believe is important in a programmatic approach. The prospect of a full Bingo card: a Sinterklaas present. Before facilitator Roel Snelder even ends his last sentence participants start walking around getting into deep conversations and basically forgetting that they need to complete the Bingo. Evidently the energy is there and the interest as well.

The caption reads: 'Programmatic Bingo: all the rage in the Netherlands'

PSO definition of the programmatic approach
For PSO, a programmatic approach is based on the principle of coordinated support of a local programme. Such a programme is more than just a collection of individual projects. To be programmatic in nature the emphasis needs to be on collective analysis and planning, creating synergy between interventions, as well as on linking and learning between relevant stakeholders. In all this, local ownership is of paramount importance. In short, when working programmatically, four key factors need to be in place:
- Leadership by (a) local organisation(s);
- Local participation with respect to analysis, identification, programme design, implementation, management, and monitoring and evaluation.
- One cohesive programme and budgetary framework;
- Donor coordination and harmonisation of procedures.

Cees Oosterhuis of Woord & Daad (Woord en Daad) is the winner with 5 out of 6. He reflects that mostly everyone he has met has some idea of the programmatic approach. And, to him, this seems in theory more or less to correspond with PSO's definition (see box). He explains what a programmatic approach means for him: 'Working collaboratively from a local context in accordance with local stakeholders in a long term, long-lasting fight against poverty. In brief: everyone focussing in the same direction'. Interestingly he has not found any participant representing an organisation with a written policy (the missing sixth answer in his Bingo Card) on the programmatic approach.

The conversations during the Bingo also reveal that in practice participants have a narrower outlook on programmatic work than PSO's definition. While one person views this approach as essentially the realisation of a better collaboration between existing partners, another considers it to be the formulation of a goal at a higher level, which you are then going to discuss with partners. A third person considers programmatic work to be actually impossible: an ideal to which you can strive, but will never achieve. This difference in interpretation promises the discussions in the day are going to be lively and with a wide range.

Reflection on Key Lessons

The PSO learning trajectory on programmatic approaches has yielded eight central lessons / questions which are significant for PSO members and their partners when developing a programmatic approach.

Overview key lessons programmatic approach
1. Beneficiaries' perspectives need to be made more central.
2. Due attention to preparatory stage and to stakeholder involvement
3. Partnering and dialoguing in a system's perspective
4. Shifting responsibilities, local ownership and role change
5. Management support and change agents
6. Harmonisation: from control to trust / from details to results
7. Marriage of soft and hard skills
8. No one size fits all: basic criteria need to be further explored

Mark de Koning has interpreted these lessons in cartoons which together are presented in an 'exhibition of good practice'. In pairs, the participants visit the exhibition and add their reflections and ideas on sheets of paper. The exhibition shows that the key lessons appeal to people's imagination. Most participants can tune in and find them stimulating to examine their own practice.

Here are some examples of participants' reflections on a selection of these lessons. Rodney Nikkels of the Green Development Foundation (GDF) and Bram Langen of PSO look at lesson 2: *'Due attention to preparatory stage and to stakeholder involvement'*. Nikkels: "I think that you do indeed need to take time, but what is more important is that you have some say in matters and are not just in a train that is just hurtling ahead'.


Participants at the exhibition

It transpires that many others agree with this because similar comments are written down, such as 'stay connected during the process', especially as 'stakeholder change during the process'.

Arising from lesson 1, *'Beneficiaries' perspectives need to be given (higher) priority'*, Nikkels also expresses his own experiences. 'It all sounds very simple but this is extremely difficult. Very often the target groups talk with us on a Wednesday evening and then at the meetings only those with classic NGO-speak, knowing what we want to hear, turn up.

Henk Tukker (PSO) and Cees Oosterhuis (Woord en Daad) comment that practical objections sometimes stand in the way of good intentions. Oosterhuis: 'Consultation with the target group takes time and that's time we often don't have, or cannot allow ourselves'. Language problems also frequently form a barrier to effective participation with local groups. Sometimes we are too ready to assume that our partners will maintain contact with the beneficiaries.'
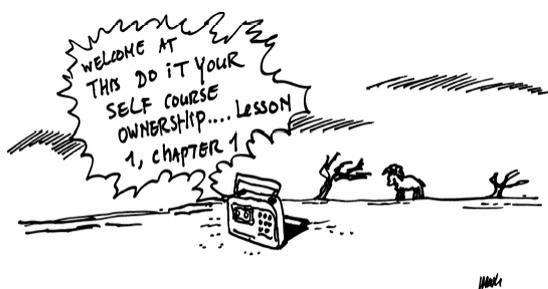
As for lesson 4, *'Shifting responsibilities, local ownership and role change'*, participants voice that partners often still have a long way to go. 'How many partners do really have the strength to say no to a donor?' According to some written comments, it is important that partners are given the financial freedom to experiment with programmatic work. Otherwise you will never learn.

A handy tool!
Based on the key lessons, cartoons and reflections of participants at the event we have developed a separate tool to stimulate further exploration of practice among organisations. You can enter the tool by clicking here or download it from the PSO site[1].

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[1]   http://www.pso.nl/asp/documentsite.asp?document=828

Workshop impressions part one

To inspire others with concrete examples from their programmatic practice participants choose two out of 7 workshops prepared by PSO members. ICCO, Terre des Hommes, Woord en Daad, GDF, NiZA, TIE and IICD. For an overview of the content of these workshops click here. Here are impressions of four of the seven workshops.

Shifting positions
The Terre des Hommes workshop attempts to conference with a Filipino partner by using skype. In spite of technical difficulties (the video connection hampers the associated sound) participants highly appreciate this 'voice from the South'. 'All at once you are right in the situation and that makes the issues much more realistic'.

In the last two years, TdH experimented in PSO's 'action learning cycle' on the programmatic approach together with its field office and local partner CPTCSA. TdH staff member Telay Echano Gaban: 'Generally in the first phase of the programmatic approach, the donor sits at the table with the other organisations. In our case in the Philippines, I feel I am not sitting there as a donor but as a stakeholder.'

She ads: 'that is fundamentally different. In that position you learn to trust the contributions of other stakeholders'. An interesting outcome is that the relationship between head office and field office is shifting. Telay: 'The TdH field office in the Philippines has always primarily had an administrative role. As a result of the experiment the field office has itself taken the initiative to inaugurate a new programme, which makes our role more complex'.

While this process has led to further decentralisation of TdH to the 'South', it paradoxically has enlarged the place of TdH within the Filipino field of influence. Has the process, as an unintended by-product of the programmatic approach, now become more top-down than before. Jennifer de Boer (TdH): 'In any case, it is important that we are aware of the various roles we play as donor'.

Are all programmes programmatic?
The Green Development Fund (GDF) **workshop** is in the form of a dialogue with PSO. GDF works with the producers to create a larger market for their coffee and cocoa. They do this, for example, by making sure that they gain access to the exporters. Rodney Nikkels explains that they have not consciously opted for a programmatic approach as defined by PSO. 'We work with programmes having various components that support each other'. Akke Schuurmans subscribes to this view: 'With their programme, they take into account what is going on in the region, what has already happened and what GDF can add to that', she says. 'And they can make it very clear what sort of outcome they want to have and how it will affect beneficiaries'.

In the workshop there are also quite critical remarks. According to various participants the main point in a programmatic approach is to

have a broad view on poverty analysis. That is not necessarily the case with programmes. Jan Cartier (TIE) and Rene Joosten (Freevoice) wonder whether GDF programmes do in fact contribute to resolving actual problems or just those that it can handle.

Mark de Koning's cartoon summarizes the discussion. "We are working in a programmatic way", said one speaker. "But we are working with programmes", said the other. The mouse in the corner has lost the plot.

Meanwhile in the corridors…

Actually, how new is the programmatic approach? Roel Snelder: 'The idea has been around for a long time, but experience shows that we do not practice this method consistently. To me it appears that most organisations are convinced of its value and want to learn more about it'. According to Snelder, PSO's programmatic approach fits well with international trends of professionalisation and a focus on results and effects. The approach also fits with changing positions among donors and partners. Snelder: 'donors want to be more than just financiers and partners have matured.'
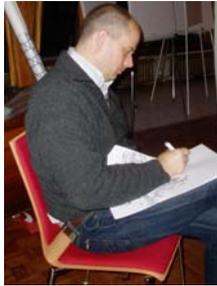
Mark de Koning at work

Petra Kuipers from Dorcas admits that the programmatic approach is not a new phenomenon: 'Jargon in the world of developmental collaboration comes and goes, while the technique does not always turn out to be different. To me the new aspect of this approach is that you deal in a much more conscious way with something you were already doing'.

Over lunch Wilfried Schasfoort from ICCO adds: 'We want to be more than just the financier. We are also involved in capacity building, and bringing people into contact with one another. In addition, we do some lobbying and we want to strengthen our base in the Netherlands. And we also want to attract parties from outside, such as the government.'

'In our policy plan, ICCO states its intention of working 80% programmatically in 2010. Essentially we want to let partners, each with their own agendas, draw up common objectives, to which they can all individually contribute'. Schasfoort emphasizes that this will only work if you ask partners what those programmes should be about. For this, critical partners are needed who take the initiative in discussions.

Kyra van West of AMREF also sees a critical role for donors: 'I sometimes wonder: what Amref-Nederland offers in terms of added

value? Couldn't we just join forces with Amref-Italy, or suchlike? The conclusion I am reaching today is that our role is important particularly because of the position we have in "the North". For example, the Netherlands is extremely non-religious. That means that we can operate much more openly in the fields of gender and sexuality, for example, than the Italians who continually have to take the Catholic Church into account.'

Workshop impressions part two

In the ICCO workshop after the break Wilfried Schasfoort presents some of ICCO's current practice. He submits a number of statements to the participants. Supporters of the proposal have to move to the sign 'In favour, opponents to the sign 'against'. Statement 2: 'Within a programme the budget for capacity building should be limited to 10%'. All but one participant move to sit with the sign 'against'. Someone comments: 'sometimes you first have to spend 100% of your budget on capacity building, in order to then be able to carry out adequately the contents of the programme'.

Only one person tries to defend the proposal saying that programme goals should be central, yet she finds the 10% criterion also too inflexible. In response De Koning draws a cartoon on a programme geared to capacity building with the subtitle 'unintended effect'? and the dialogue: 'What do you do for work?' - 'I'm taking courses'.

Painful choices

Another statement is about letting go of partners which do not fit within a programmatic approach. Interesting is that most see ways around it, in still doing projects with such partners. One person in favour emphasizes that 'a programmatic approach means getting into new relationships, and ending old ones', and ads 'you cannot do everything'.

Later in the corridors Gerrit de Vries from Kerkinactie (Church in Action) adds: 'We want to try to work in a programmatic approach with our present partners, but if there is no longer a fit, then the consequence of this new approach is that we will have to break off the relationship with them.' Obviously adapting programmatic approaches can result in painful choices.

More unintended effects

'You do programmatic work together with all the other stakeholders, and there should be an integrated approach', argues Luuk van Schothorst at the beginning of the Woord & Daad workshop. Yet it can also go wrong. Van Schothorst tells of a planning meeting, mid 2006 with a partner in Burkina Faso. The intention was to arrive at a programmatic approach for the fight against poverty within a forestry programme. 'Instead of discussing a plan of approach, they presented us with a "shopping list": so many irrigation canals, so many kilometres of asphalted roads, so many dams etc. And could we take care of that'.

That was the 'Sinterklaas' model, according to Van Schothorst. His question for those present was what should be done if the views on the reciprocal roles had obviously developed in such divergent directions. The participants' answers: 'At that point you should start a discussion about how the shopping list has come into being.' 'Start by establishing

priorities in the list.' 'Start with a discussion about who should be responsible for this sort of projects.' 'Throw back the question and say: why are you coming to us with this?'

In any case, the programmatic approach is new for Woord en Daad: 'Before it just didn't happen that I was present at this sort of planning meetings', Van Schothorst gracefully admits that in this case they have done things wrong. 'In the eyes of our partner, we were not sitting there as a stakeholder, but as a financier. We should have made the purpose of our visit clearer. If you are working in a programmatic way, you can arouse expectations that cannot be met: it's a fact of life that local people can dream up more projects than donors can finance. A keyword is "expectations". You have to *manage* expectations'. Mark de Koning adds the cartoon below:

The caption reads: 'okay, anything is possible but only within this framework'.

Developing key themes

The key lessons, the workshops and Mark de Koning's cartoons serve as an inspiration for participants to reflect on their own practice. Throughout the day participants make notes of their personal reflections in their logbooks. They reflect on four questions:

☻ What will be my (organisation's) theme / key issue within a programmatic approach and why is it important to work on that?
☻ What will I see as a result when I have tackled this issue successfully?
☻ What do I need to develop in order to be able to tackle the issue?
☻ What will be my first priority action?

The box below highlights questions and themes participants are entering in their logbooks.

Some individual questions and / themes

☻ What do you do if, as a result of a programmatic approach as a donor, you are forced into a role that you do not want?

☻ How does a programmatic approach fit in broader national / regional development plans, which are actually a "programmatic approach on a large scale". The analyses NGOs make with stakeholders should include these wider plans.

☻ How does the programmatic approach fit with the growth of an organisation? Does it require a particular minimum scope/experience of donor and/or partner organisation?

☻ In-depth situation analysis takes more time than we normally allow ourselves. Programmatic work means that for us as a donor, we must be better informed to be able to talk about content. That is a sticking point.

☻ We need an 'agent of change' in the partner organisation and in the donor organisation who can "carry along" the programmatic approach. It's not a self-enhancing process.

☻ Programmatic work requires an explicit, practical decision at management level, if only for the reason that it demands a much greater effort from the individual organisation.

The next step in the event is to share these individual themes with each other and to find out what are questions participants share; where can participants see common ground? Which are important issues to tackle together? To do this participants form small groups and formulate themes on 'paper clouds'. Some impressions:

René Joosten from Freevoice and Gerrit de Vries from Kerkinactie come up with a lot of questions. Joosten: 'There is a big difference whether you are doing programmatic work at the level of producers like GDF, or at the level of NGOs. So programmatic work at what level? Is it possible to do programmatic work with small organisations? How to find a balance on ownership between local organisations and donors? And how does programmatic work fit in the aid-chain, and where do we fit in that chain?

PSO programme staff developing key themes

Petra Kuipers (Dorcas), Kyra van West (Amref) and Wilfried Schasfoort (ICCO) decide that the dilemma lies mainly in the question of ownership. Schasfoort: 'Those of us from ICCO would very much like to be one of the players. We don't want to be just the donor and not even the sole donor. It is irrelevant who finally finances the plans and that should

be in the last part of the discussions. 'We even suggested to partners that they should henceforth take the decisions about distribution of funds. But they didn't want to do that as it would have led too quickly to controversy among those involved.'

About 20 paper clouds are formulated containing numerous questions and themes. Again this underlines the complexity of working with the programmatic approach. Quite a number are of a similar nature though. Together with the participants Roel Snelder ('and where does this one fit') groups the 'clouds' into four coordinating themes:

1. Questions on Ownership
2. Questions on PSO policy
3. Issues of partnership
4. Issues relating to the Aid-Chain

A world café on programmatic themes

Each participant chooses the theme he or she wants to work on. And with the objective to come up with ideas on how to tackle these key themes participants join in a café arrangement. The assignment is straightforward: Why are these themes important? What results become visible if these themes are successfully dealt

with? What should you be able to do and know as an organisation to achieve this result? The discussions are 'reported' on large table cloths of paper. The idea to comment on each others product by circulating in world café style does not work out very well. Most groups opt to take more time for their own discussion. Below the outcomes of the discussions on all four topics are summarized.

Ownership

How to develop inclusive ownership: donor - partner –beneficiaries – government – tax payer?

Ownership is about having commitment at all levels in the aid chain, including the target group. It is important because it will facilitate achieving more sustainable results. What will our practice look like when we achieve ownership in this sense:

- ☻ We will see better communication among stakeholders
- ☻ More networking will ensue
- ☻ Together we will focus more on innovation
- ☻ Dynamics between stakeholders will have shifted with clearer (and changed) roles
- ☻ We will have changed all sorts of systems in our organisations

To achieve this participants identify a number of competencies that need toe be developed: mediation and negotiation; knowledge on cultural context; flexibility to switch between roles; and insight into power relations. Also some 'hard' outputs need to be produced such as: vision, policy paper, roles & responsibilities, adjusted funding contract and procedures.

PSO policy

The importance of one unified PSO vision on programmatic work is to facilitate dialogue and understanding between various stakeholders. Filling the policy with concrete examples of will help to design activities that 'fit' with policy. What will our practice look like when we have achieved this unified vision?

- ☯ We will be able to adapt to developments and context of our partners and beneficiaries
- ☯ We will have a wider (than solely donor - partner) view on development
- ☯ We will be better able to position our own activities in a wider framework
- ☯ Programmes will be more relevant, consistent and sustainable

To achieve this participants are of the opinion that they need to be able to communicate clearly on the importance of the programmatic approach and how it fits in PSO capacity building policy. They recommend organising a joint discussion among PSO members to co-design the PA policy. And at their own level members need to make a decision at management level on adopting the programmatic approach.

Participants reacting on each others products

Partnership

Partnership is discussed at two separate tables. Overall participants agree that partnership is about building relationships and striving for equality or at least the open acknowledgement that there is some sort of inequality (in a funding relationship). Partnership cannot prosper when we seek to compete with each other. Partnerships can also take different forms: financial, supportive, otherwise. This also means that stakeholders need to be flexible in their roles.

There is some dissent on this. Some emphasize: You are always the donor. Finally, it's you who decides whether you are going to

finance a programme. And partners often know exactly what the donor wants to hear. Mark de Koning illustrates this discussion in that partnership is like a piece of music in which everyone plays a different instrument and you have to listen to the others in order to make it tuneful.


What will our practice look like when we have achieved 'real partnership(s)'?

- ☻ We will be negotiating on what each partner will 'give and take'
- ☻ We will be working in cooperation with a wider network
- ☻ We will be sharing responsibility for decisions on money, content, strategy etc. with other organisations
- ☻ We will have defined long term commitments

- ☻ We will have defined where we are complementary to others

To achieve this situation participants identify that networking and social skills are important. We need to learn to listen and built trust and work to develop a relationship of collegiality. Also, donors and partners need to work more face to face and use ICTs creatively. And there needs to be a certain level of knowledge on specific content. Finally an ability to steer and create a bird's eye view, as well as the capacity to learn on an organisational level are crucial competencies to develop.

Aid chain

How to work programmatically in a complex field of relationships?
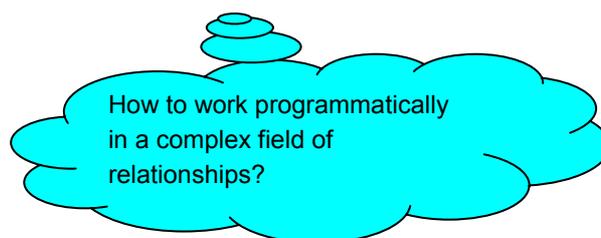
Participants emphasize that working programmatically means you take into account various spaces in the aid chain, not your direct relationship (as a donor NGO) with southern partners. They come up with the following framework.

Back donor e.g. PSO or DGIS	donor (PSO-member)	P A	Beneficiaries
	donor	R T	‖
	government	N E	= CBO
	third parties	R S	

Contextual developments

What will our practice look like when we are working within this framework?

- ☮ We will see how developments at one end of the chain influence developments at the other end
- ☮ We have developed our own strategy in view of what is happening in the rest of the system
- ☮ We try to influence back donors impeding our possibilities to work programmatically
- ☮ Back donors subscribe to the consequences of NGO's and partners working programmatically, allowing flexibility

To achieve participants take the position that we need to be able to view the aid chain as an interconnected system; to position ourselves vis á vis other stakeholders; and to have no fear to confront impeding obstacles. Mark illustrates this with the 'confrontational' cartoon below.

The caption reads: 'oke now a question on participation!'

Action planning

Finally, everyone gets, and takes, some time to reflect on their themes and priorities. Participants complete their logbook with practical actions they are going to take in the coming months. Some impressions:

Maurits Servaas from VSO has resolved that on his next field visit he will see whether there is enough capacity at the field office for the facilitating role that VSO would like to have. He will intervene if there is not. Jennifer de Boer from TdH will set up a dialogue with field offices about the role they can play for their partners in addition to financier.

René Joosten will give feedback to his colleagues and set up a discussion using the key lessons. Helmke Hofman en Tjeerd de Boer are going to revisit one of Edukans' programmes, looking at roles and relationships.

Many of the others are going to talk to colleagues, to management on the consequences of adopting a programmatic approach. Menno Ettema (United Network Of Young Peacebuilders): I am going to revisit some of the objectives for our restructuring using the perspective of the programmatic approach.

Epilogue

As with any event there is the excitement of the week before. What energy are participants bringing; how will they interact? Is the theme appealing enough to make the day eventful? To me as a facilitator of the day and responsible for the design of it, I am happy to see that learning on the programmatic approach is very appealing. The day was energetic, (maybe too) full and very varied. One participant said to me: 'The various methods have had the effect that I nearly met everyone here'.

The contributing organisations, ICCO, Terre des Hommes, Woord en Daad, GDF, NiZA, TIE and IICD, have shown that the practice of the programmatic approach is very much alive and relevant. A firm thank goes out to them, not only for their effort in preparing a workshop, but also for sharing their experiences openly. Those workshop experiences, the key lessons and discussions have helped participants to design their own plan or idea of how to deal with the matter further based on what they themselves consider important.

Participants designing plans

Common denominators
The day began with a rather complete, some might even say 'complex' spectrum of the programmatic approach. However, the key themes developed surprisingly show quite a lot of overlap, with four common denominators: ownership, partnership, the aid chain and PSO policy.

And on closer scrutiny the discussion within these themes result in quite a number of similar priorities and competencies to develop. Looking at these similarities the following messages stand out:

1. The programmatic approach is relevant in the life of development organisations today. It fits with ongoing change processes within their organisations and helps in facilitating these.

2. Management of PSO members needs to be motivated and / or take the lead in adopting and adapting the approach. At the event few managers were present. It may help to design separate learning activities for management on the approach.

3. There is awareness that the programmatic approach is an ongoing international trend. It helps to put NGO donors work in a wider framework, i.e. in the aid chain or a broader institutional context. The implications vary from one organisation to the next. Yet it may be interesting to examine this in a concerted effort with organisations working in similar circumstances or (thematic) areas.

4. It appears that organisations are buying in to bits and pieces of the approach and have difficulty grasping the 'whole'. Key lessons learned can therefore serve as a tool to examine programmatic practice step by step, among PSO members and / or with partners.

5. In turn, collecting experiences from organisations going through such a learning process has helped and will help to further enrich programmatic practice. It also feeds into policy, openly and tacitly. In that sense there is also a need to work together and openly on a unified vision on the programmatic approach among the PSO membership.

6. The event shows we are getting more and more open in sharing our successes and failures. Still a missing link on the day is actual programmatic performance. How does the programmatic approach work out in terms of (building capacity for) poverty alleviation and civil society strengthening? Are we getting better results than with projects, what do they look like? It may be worth while to enrich the debate further with a closer look into effects and impact of the programmatic approach.

The caption reads: 'programmatic approach, I've been doing that for years, but not that ownership palaver' and 'relationships great, except for that affection nonsense'

7. Essentially the programmatic approach essentially is about relationships. Systems thinking and analysis are crucial tools to understand relationships among various stakeholders. It will help to position oneself as an organisation, and to develop appropriate (new) roles. Gauging the role of power in such a dynamic is also an essential competency to develop. It helps in being transparent, building trust and eventually in developing common strategies. It may be worth while therefore to explore such tools further in an action oriented setting.

PSO will use the outcomes of the event to develop a number of activities to strengthen the learning on programmatic approaches. To do this efficiently we will be looking into ways to either develop separate activities, or to link up to existing learning trajectories. We will keep you posted!

PSO, Wereld in Woorden
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