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It takes two to tango: reversed organisational assessments between Northern and Southern civil society organisations

Experiences from The Netherlands

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Do Southern civil society organisations (CSOs) have a role to play in assessing the performance of their Northern partners? What can we learn from attempts to include Southern partners in assessing our organisations?

Introduction

The importance of CSOs in development cooperation is growing, with a steady rise in numbers in both North and South; their position as a vehicle for development has been established. When Northern donors channel funds through Northern CSOs for activities involving Southern counterparts, they expect these CSOs to assess their Southern partners; either to select whom to work with, or to agree on the Southern partner's organisational needs. But, do Southern CSOs have a role to play in assessing the performance of their Northern partners; for instance, to assess if they are sufficiently equipped to work in the partner country? This question of 'reversing' the assessment came up during a learning programme on organisational assessment (OA) involving Dutch CSOs and their Southern partners. When taking principles like ownership and mutual accountability seriously, all implementing organisations should be involved in dialogue about organisational standards and performance. However, in current practice the aid-chain (donor– Northern NGO–Southern NGO–CBO– target group) provides little space for this dialogue. By 'reversing' the chain we try to promote a systems orientation in the landscape of organisations involved in development cooperation.

To gain more insight into this topic, two Northern CSOs invited their partners to join the assessment of their organisations. This note details the background, experiences and lessons learnt from these assessments. Two contested concepts will be used: the difference between 'Northern' and 'Southern' NGOs, and the use of the word 'reversed' OA. Some Southern partners took exception to the term 'reversed': as if the *normal* way of doing an OA would be from North to South. We are aware of the difficulties in using these words, but could not find better ones, and welcome better suggestions.

Recent history

Assessment of Northern society and its CSOs by Southern partners is not new; during the 1970s Dutch churches invited outsiders to judge various aspects of Dutch society. A systematic attempt to provide voice to the North-South dialogue was provided by a group of 13 Dutch CSOs that started a project called 'Platform Andersom' that ran from 1990- 93; this platform invited four pairs of Southern consultants to assess the performance of Dutch development organisations. The project appeared to be an important learning experience; after each pair had made its assessment, an intermediate reflection was held in order to improve the next experience. The Southern consultants came with both positive and critical messages. Positively valued was the mere fact that this project existed – the openness with which all Southern colleagues were encountered – and the willingness to take the conclusions into account when preparing policy and programmes. Critical messages were formulated concerning the Northern way of working, such as denying the political nature of development, the disregard of local expertise, and the one-sided images of developing countries in Dutch marketing campaigns ("these people are extremely poor and only white experts can save them")[1]. One consultant compared Dutch organisational life with his own South American organisation: "There is priority for rationality and efficiency, less room for spontaneity and the unexpected, these seem to be threatening. In this case, the institution and structure threaten to take precedence over people, their creativity and respect for personal differences."[2]

These initiatives took place in an era when Northern CSOs moved their policy directions towards structural assistance; concepts like *sustainable change* and *institutional development* moved into the mainstream. Bilateral assistance was also experimenting with introducing a Southern

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[1] Onze Wereld, October 1993, p.15
[2] Andersom, in de spiegel van de ander ('in the other's mirror'), Review of the experiences, with the programme 'andersom', 1990-1993, May 1993, p. 28 (translated from Dutch)

voice in Northern decision making: in 1994 the then Minister of Development Cooperation signed a 'sustainability treaty' with Bhutan, Costa Rica and Benin, aimed at international cooperation towards environmental sustainability, and based on the principles of reciprocity and equality. Southern scientists investigated Dutch sectors like agriculture, urban development, and culture and religion. The Bhutanese scientist involved in this programme later called it a "successful failure", due to differences in political ideology, socio-economic status and lack of a shared vision.[3] Real cooperation between North and South appears uneasy.

The Dutch development sector learnt from these experiences and put more emphasis on relationship building with their Southern partners. At the same time the Southern CSOs became stronger and more vocal. The international discussion on development effectiveness centred around 'who is driving development' and gradually led to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005), in which governments agreed to work according to five aid effectiveness principles: ownership, alignment, harmonisation, managing for results and mutual accountability. Civil society was mentioned only once in this declaration. The follow-up conferences (Accra 2008 and Busan 2011) increasingly emphasised the role of CSOs. Accra (civil society mentioned four times) includes CSOs as partners in a multi-stakeholder environment; Busan (civil society mentioned six times) creates space for CSOs at the main negotiation table. Improving the effectiveness of CSOs is increasingly seen as a crucial element of development effectiveness.

Parallel to these international developments, there is a rise in cultural consciousness about North-South relations among Dutch governmental and non-governmental policy makers. Government subsidies are stimulating Dutch CSOs to develop partnerships with local CSOs. Over time, long-term relations

are emerging between Northern and Southern partners, making it easier to address each other's ways of functioning and policy directions. What remains, however, is that development funding mainly flows from North to South, providing space to the power imbalance.

Just like 20 years ago, the initiatives to reverse traditional North to South Organisational Assessments that are described in this note were based on the values of reciprocity and equality. The two Dutch CSOs had queries about their organisational performance, one on expanding their services to a European market, the other on the suitability of an emerging new tool on organisational assessment. They invited their Southern partners to join in working through these questions. Despite the Northern NGOs paying for these exercises, their partners did not feel inhibited in being critical: most likely because of the longer term relationships that existed between them.

Why emphasise 'reversed' OA?

The development landscape is changing. As well as money flowing from North to South, there is a growing South-South exchange, as well as increased local country government funding of their own development programmes. Northern donors are bypassing Northern CSOs and working directly with Southern partners, forcing Northern CSOs to re-assess their relevance in the development arena. Southern CSOs are forming their own (international) networks. Networking is further stimulated because donors expect CSOs to work together and submit joint proposals. Funding decisions are being made locally and funding increasingly involves tender procedures. Larger Northern CSOs are creating local branch offices, often with local management. And in a tighter aid market, competition among CSOs is growing.

These changes have important implications for the internal organisation of CSOs; organisational capacities have to be in line with the local development demands, as context specificity is the new paradigm. Northern and Southern CSOs

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[3] Rinzin, C. The 'successful failure' of the sustainable development agreement between the Netherlands and Bhutan, Sustainable Development, Vol. 15, issue 6, Nov/Dec 2007, pp 382-396

become more inter-dependent; and in some cases, Northern CSOs are not needed at all. CSO networks – by sector, by sub-region – are emerging, and it becomes less important whether they come from North or South, as long as they contribute to development effectiveness. Old ideologies of partnership and equality are gaining new meaning.

In this type of cooperation among organisations, questions arise about how each of the partners should perform; a notion of *organisational standards* is entering the cooperation agenda. Can we assist each other in how to organise internally and how to provide good services? Consequently, both Northern and Southern CSOs have a stake in knowing each other's strengths and weaknesses. The degree of this knowledge will be situationally dependent, e.g. more exchange will take place when the NCSO has local field offices. There is no clear-cut answer as to how mutual assessments should take place, either about procedures, or about tools or contents. For example, mutual assessments might take place when forming coalitions for tenders or when setting up (inter-) national networks. Tools can be heavy or light, long distance or face-to-face. Contents can be pre-coded or qualitative/story-like. In any case, for Northern CSOs to remain relevant and have added value, mutual assessments may become crucial for their survival.

Our experiences with reversing the assessment

Woord & Daad (W&D, Word & Deed)

W&D works with around 30 national CSOs in Africa, Asia and Latin America, with which they have developed long-term relationships. They work through technical, organisational and financial assistance on themes such as education, health and private sector development. Funds come from private and government donors.

In 2007 W&D started to re-orient its partnership relations. In light of partners becoming bigger, W&D asked themselves if they could play a role in facilitating local

and regional networks of which they would also become a part. Besides being a funder and technical service provider, W&D wished to become a partner in the regional networks in order to demonstrate the equality of the relationship. Through a series of international conferences during 2008-10 partners became more influential in deciding on W&D's policy directions. Part of this process was a shift towards working in Regional Alliances (RAs). These RAs would assist each other in capacity development and work on joint project proposals.

To begin with, organisational assessments of RA partners, including W&D, were carried out as an entry to capacity development. These took place in 2009 and made use of a standard OA tool (a revised USAID OCA: 'Organisational Capacity Assessment') using pre-coded categories. When evaluating this process, it appeared that any capacity development plans were insufficiently developed. The main reason for was that the Southern partners were not used to looking at their entire organisation when working with funding agencies; in the case of W&D, funding flowed from their programme department to the partner's programme department, with less focus on the entire partner organisation. M&E was at programme level, less at organisational level. At the same time, the OA tool that was used was perceived to not look sufficiently at organisational outputs, and to be based on governance standards that were not suitable for the partners' local context.

With these experiences in mind, W&D and a number of partners developed initiatives that focused more on the partner organisation in its context, and not exclusively on separate programmes. A more open and flexible OA tool was found in the '5 Core Capabilities Framework'. In 2011, this framework was piloted with a few partners and Alliances. An additional reason for selecting this tool was that the 5C framework is used for organisational development monitoring by a Dutch government subsidy scheme (MFSII, 2011-15). This provided the necessary budget for W&D to experiment with the shift from programme to organisational

support. After the management of W&D received feedback from these pilots, they became interested to see if and how this approach could be suitable for their own organisation, and how the 5C framework would relate to other M&E instruments like financial control and programme evaluations. At the same time it would provide an opportunity to involve partners in the internal functioning of the organisation, alongside the existing policy dialogue. This triggered the decision to ask partners to join in the assessment of W&D in The Netherlands. It was an ambitious undertaking since the methodology was quite new to both the partners and W&D.

The 5 Core Capabilities Framework[4]

From 2002-08 the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) carried out a study on how organisations and systems, mainly in developing countries, have succeeded in building their capacity and improving performance. This study focused on endogenous processes of capacity development and provided the basis for the development of the 5C framework.[5]

There are two principal conceptual foundations behind the 5Cs framework: a systems perspective and a multi-stakeholder approach. Working from a systems perspective means that organisations are seen as social systems in their own right. This perspective opens the way for a comprehensive understanding of the true nature of, and the 'boundaries' to, development problems. Importantly, it gives a view of the inter-connectedness of 'units', such as departments, and their functioning within organisational systems. Organisations are

social entities, not machines. They are part of other systems. To stay 'fit' they must adapt themselves to complex situations and ever-changing circumstances.

The five Core Capabilities are:
1. Capability to act and commit the ability to work properly: to plan, take decisions and act on these decisions collectively (e.g. efficient structures, inspiring leadership, motivated staff)
2. Capability to deliver on development objectives: to ensure that the organisation is producing what it is established to do. (e.g. ability to generate own resources, information sources, human resources, equipment, performance measurement)
3. Capability to adapt and self-renew: the ability to learn internally and to adjust to shifting contexts and relevant trends (e.g. openness to learning, confidence to change, context analysis, use of incentives)
4. Capability to relate to external stakeholders: building and maintaining networks with external actors in government, private sector and civil society (e.g. participation in coalitions and alliances, gain political legitimacy and social credibility)
5. Capacity to achieve coherence: the strength of an organisation's identity, self-awareness and discipline (e.g. ability to balance stability and change, coherence between values, principles and operations)

Four RA chairpersons were invited to join this OA, of which two already had some experience within their organisation with the 5C approach. As executive directors of national CSOs, they were asked to be resource persons and facilitators in W&D's self-assessment, to provide their view on the organisation from a Southern perspective. The OA comprised of seven steps:

- W&D formulated a draft Terms of Reference (ToR) and shared it with the RA chairpersons, who provided their input. A local (Netherlands) consultant was hired to facilitate the process.

- A half-day briefing took place before the OA started, during which it became clear that apart from being resource

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[4] Taken from 'Bringing the invisible into perspective, 5C reference document', ECDPM living document, December 2011.
www.ecdpm.org/Web_ECDPM/Web/Content/Download.nsf/0/01346D754AFFE62BC1257A13005D7FBF/$FILE/5CS%20Reference%20Document%20final_reduced%20size.pdf
[5] See
www.ecdpm.org/Web_ECDPM/Web/Content/Download.nsf/0/200164BB4441F544C1257474004CF904/$FILE/05-59B-e-Study%20_Report%2029%20may.pdf for the synthesis report.

persons, the CSO directors also wished to learn more about how the 5C method works in practice. The overall assessment outline was agreed upon: meeting external stakeholders; elaborating on the 5Cs in two groups; discussing the main instruments that W&D is using; and evaluating the results and process.

- On the first day eight external stakeholders were visited to gain clarity on W&D's context. These were:
  - EU-CORD, a network organisation of 23 Christian CSOs (of which W&D is one) aiming at member capacity development and advocacy
  - PARTOS, the umbrella organisation for Dutch CSOs
  - Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department for Civil Society support
  - Driestar Educatief, an institute for higher education and consultancy with which W&D cooperates
  - Three private entrepreneurs who are actively supporting W&D
  - A local committee of volunteers which regularly organises local awareness and fundraising activities for W&D

- The second day started with a presentation and discussion on what the resource persons had learnt from their visits to the W&D external stakeholders. Apart from the changes taking place in the aid environment (e.g. from service delivery to capacity development, emphasis on results, increasing role of private sector, direct access of Southern organisations to Dutch donors) the resource persons also provided feedback on how W&D was perceived by these stakeholders.

- The remainder of the second and the third day consisted of workshop discussions amongst 30 management and senior staff on the 5Cs and the new M&E toolbox that W&D was constructing. The three most pressing issues for W&D that came out of the discussions were: added value vis-à-vis the Regional Alliances; best approaches to sustainable change; and communication about effects. The 5C model created the language to put

the various organisational improvement suggestions into perspective. The four topics to work on for W&D were: its theory of change; the role and development of the W&D alliance teams; improved communication; and a PMEL system that is flexible and geared to external requirements.

- The third day finished with an evaluation session, where recommendations for follow-up were given. During this session the Southern partners provided feedback on each Capability to W&D, based on their experiences with the organisation.

- A report was written and discussed in the Management Team. Decisions about follow-up on the recommendations were shared with all participants of the OA process.

For W&D and their partners this was a valuable OA exercise. The main lessons learnt were:

- Partners appreciated the invitation to participate in an assessment of W&D and learn more about the 5C approach. At the end of the exercise W&D acknowledged that the roles of the Southern partners could have been defined more clearly beforehand. They were invited as resource persons and facilitators in a self-assessment, but at the same time some W&D managers expected a more directive and assessing role from the partners. Addressing this issue at the beginning of the process might have clarified mutual roles.

- The interviews with the external stakeholders were crucial in understanding W&D's context. However, the link between context and the 5Cs was insufficiently made during the second and third day. Doing this might have contributed to a deeper understanding of the organisation in its environment.

- The 5C framework succeeded in surfacing important organisational development priorities, such as internal communication and W&D's Theory of Change. However, the discussions lacked sufficient structure and focus,

due to too little preparation of the partners on their role and on the 5C approach, and too little steering by the local consultant.

- It was wrongly assumed that the participants (senior staff and management) were knowledgeable about the 5C approach. It would have been better if at the start of the workshop more time was spent on explanation, discussion and expectations.
- The ambition to combine a pilot about the 5C approach with a real organisational assessment led to different expectations among the workshop participants. More clarity in the beginning – among management and those preparing the exercise – would have helped to better manage these expectations.

That the outcome of this exercise has been integrated in the Annual Plan 2013, and at the same time W&D's programme with the Regional Alliances has gained new inputs towards partner relations. In 2013 W&D's instruments and processes will be elaborated further and experimented with. Depending on the objective, W&D will gain more experience on:

- The earlier developed pre-coded OCA tool, but only to be used for new partners
- An instrument focusing on administrative standards
- An M&E system, also involving programme reviews
- A strategic review, including an open reflection using the 5Cs, leading to improved strategic planning.

Light for the World (LftW)

LftW is a development organisation whose mission is to eradicate avoidable blindness and promote inclusion of persons with disabilities. LftW's approach to partners has mainly focused on their technical and capacity development needs, and subsequently finding ways how to meet those needs. Since 2011, LftW has been developing an advisory function on disability mainstreaming directed at Northern CSO clients. To assist LftW to take informed decisions on how to make this advisory function operational, a consultant was hired to carry out an organisational assessment that also involved a marketing study. Three Southern partners were invited to join the assessment as resource persons. In their respective countries, these partners already have this advisory function towards other organisations, and thus knew from experience the requirements needed to provide these services. Since the three partners are more advanced on this advisory function they could provide valuable information in the assessment process. At the same time, they could learn how to play a role in future joint activities with LftW. Main steps in the reversed OA were:

- HQ and partners together developed the ToR for the consultant, and discussed the selection of the consultant.
- Partners provided their opinion on LftW, and LftW staff were involved in a self-assessment. During the OA the two groups worked in parallel. Seven LftW staff carried out a one-day self-assessment, and at the same time the three partners assessed LftW. They used instruments focusing on organisational culture. At the end of the day the two groups came together to exchange findings.
- The next day, the consultant and three partners combined the information from both the partners and the self-assessment, and prepared a joint analysis.
- The consultant reported on possible solutions for LftW's new advisory function, and the resource persons commented on this report.

This exercise provided LftW with a series of recommended actions. The main lessons learnt were:

- It was positive to ask the partners to join at the early stage of ToR development and consultant selection; it brought a sense of mutual accountability, and the real value of a partnership.
- Partners feel more connected to LftW's disability mainstreaming work with Northern CSOs.

- The partners could have been involved much more; possibly they could have been driving the entire OA process, with just a facilitator needed to introduce them to external stakeholders in the Netherlands.

Overall conclusions

These two experiences were reflected upon at a later stage with all involved, together with the other participants in the OA learning programme (see below). The main thoughts that came out of this dialogue were:

- Regular OA is needed for each organisation serious about learning and developing its capacity, whether based in the North or in the South.
- Peer-CSOs and (network) partners can play an important role in OA but should be sufficiently independent from each other, to allow for serious critical feedback.
- Any OA involving cooperation partners, 'reversed' or otherwise, will only be effective when there is trust between the organisations. We are aware of the need for *Results-Based Management*, but without *'Relation-Based Management'* organisations will not cooperate; lip-service will become the norm.
- Northern CSOs are often used to working with Southern partners on policy matters. This policy dialogue is still rather abstract as it involves working at a conceptual level. When working together on organisational improvements, i.e. having a look in each other's kitchen, cooperation becomes more sensitive as it entails human behaviour with all its ups and downs. This also applies to the 'reversed' OA.
- Involving an external facilitator may, or may not, be needed. Internal expertise is often sufficient. If you use an outsider, make sure which behaviour and results are as expected, both in terms of process and contents.
- With an open method like the 5C framework, take sufficient time to elaborate on roles, process and expectations.

Summary

If North-South relations are only about channelling money, then a simple, one-way, limited performance assessment would be sufficient, similar to what a regular bank would do. If cooperation means working together in the programme cycle, it is clear that the participants in this cycle need to be aware of each other's organisational strengths and weaknesses so that all can work on improved development effectiveness. Awareness will increase by jointly working and reflecting on activities, by gradually creating the trust to look into each other's organisations. It then no longer matters whether the partners are coming from north, east, south or west. The fact that one or a few partners have more money than the others is just a variable in the negotiation process.

Twenty years after the Platform 'Andersom' gained valuable experience by asking Southern experts to look into Northern development organisations, our recent experiences show that important changes have taken place. A new policy environment has emerged that provides the Southern partners more opportunities to lead their own development. This shift is also in line with the findings of the recent Keystone Performance Survey (2011) elaborating on Southern CSOs' relationships with their Northern partners.[6] The two Northern CSOs that were part of this 'reversed' practice realise that they are not in the top end of the aid-chain, but are part and parcel of a network of organisations that can only be effective when following organisational standards and maintaining good relationships.

These reversed OAs were part of the thematic learning programme on Organisational Assessments, organised by the Dutch support organisation PSO and which ran from April 2011 until October 2012. The programme has produced a large series of reflection notes and resulted in a series of short guides for doing OAs. These will be available online in December 2012 (www.pso.nl).

[6] www.keystoneaccountability.org/sites/default/files/Keystone%20partner%20survey%20Jan2011_0.pdf