The litmus test

How good is our development sector really?

Fourteen stories of Dutch innovation and more—call it an anthology of good ideas and cooperation
The editor’s note

From Simon Jelisma’s Pleinpreken—‘sermons in the square’—in 1954 until now, the Netherlands has a long history of global solidarity and development cooperation. Although the budget has been cut substantially in the past decade, according to top civil servant Kitty van der Heijden, we are still ‘a donor with guts’, which is also how the world sees us.

A donor that does not hesitate to address sensitive issues and facilitate countervailing power, a donor with great expertise on important global themes such as food and water, a donor that is at the forefront of inviting new partners in poverty reduction, and a donor with knowledge platforms and universities that serve as a breeding ground for talent from low-income countries.

Some years ago, René Grotenhuis, the former director of Cordaid—who passed away recently in December—said that development cooperation should therefore also be regarded as a top sector and that this sector should present itself as such to the outside world. He made an important point: development cooperation is indeed a sector in full swing and one in which a great deal of innovation is occurring.

Yet many politicians and citizens are not aware of this. They often think of ‘classic’ projects, such as building schools, supporting orphanages or constructing wells. Moreover, the limited knowledge of what this field actually entails is still used to argue in favour of scrapping development cooperation. Resources are ‘misappropriated’, or it all disappears ‘into a bottomless pit.’

It is essential to resolve the mismatch between what many people and politicians think and what actually happens in practice, so that people can see that the Dutch development cooperation is a thriving sector contributing globally to solving problems of poverty, climate change and inequality—and thus also promoting the Netherlands in a positive way.

It starts with communicating a good image of what development cooperation is all about in 2022. What are the facts and the myths? What is the state of the art within the field at this moment? What core qualities can the Dutch development sector offer, and how can it contribute to the current major developments around the world? And how do Dutch knowledge and skills link with what the world is looking for in the future?

We want to answer these questions in this special edition of Vice Versa. They are addressed in a varied magazine full of backgrounds, reports and interviews; an issue in which we show what development cooperation really is about nowadays and why it is more crucial than ever.

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The sector on the canapé

Contemplation, assessment and self-reflection

What do you think: does Dutch development cooperation deserve the top sector predicate? The question brings Sara Kinsbergen, Barbara van Paassen and Rinus van Klinken through moments of contemplation, mountains of resistance and beautiful views.

‘If that sense of solidarity is alive again—on the street, in the community centre and at work—then we should already be able to lay claim to that title a little more.’

Text: Marlies Pilon

Thinking of Holland, we see the top sectors water and maritime, logistics and... development cooperation? If it’s up to Bart Romijn, director of Partos, the Dutch trade association for development cooperation: yes.

He believes in it and is convinced that many organisations can work at the top of their game with their employees and partners and often deliver top performances. That is why Dutch development cooperation deserves the top sector predicate, Romijn wrote in a blog on the Partos website last April. Because such a form of appreciation is important and deserved.

With that thought in mind, Vice Versa speaks to three perverse thinkers who have more than earned their spurs in ‘the sector’ and at the same time—all three in their own way—stand with one foot outside it. What do Sara Kinsbergen, Barbara van Paassen and Rinus van Klinken think about that predicate?

Thinking about this question, Kinsbergen (1982) tells via Zoom on a drizzly autumn evening that she looks at the Dutch field of international cooperation with a contemplative look as an odd one out.

Although the Flemish origin has been living in our little country for a long time, namely eighteen years, she still feels comfortable in that role of the odd duck out. It is a common thread throughout her personal and professional life. ‘I’m not seen as a classical scientist, I think because I’m too cheerful for that,’ she laughs.

In her presentations, she uses music, while teaching she recites poems. Colleagues sometimes don’t quite understand why she has been fascinated by private initiatives (PIs) for so long, considered a fringe subject within academic and professional circles.

‘They are players who fall just outside the established order,’ says Kinsbergen. ‘Precisely because that group is often described as “amateurs” and occupies a marginalised place, it gives me an intriguing glimpse behind the scenes of how the system works and how processes of inclusion and exclusion manifest themselves within organisations.’

‘It’s very unsexy what I’m about to say, but if you want to thrive as an industry, you need a fanbase’

The word top sector makes her think of the Olympic Games, the Top of the Pops of the sports world. She looked it up: if you want a sport to become an official part of the Games, it must meet a number of conditions—including being popular in the home country. And therein lies the greatest concern for her, and also the greatest challenge.

‘It’s very unsexy what I’m about to say, but if you want to thrive as an industry, you need a fanbase. The whole of Foreign Affairs will probably stop reading now, but far too little has been invested in strengthening public support. Let me put it another way: how many followers and likes do you get with this policy, the programmes and the strategy?’

She emphasizes that she is talking across the board, so the Ministry, NGOs, private initiatives, et cetera. ‘We’ve really neglected that, but your fanbase slowly walks toward you but runs away—and, guys, that fanbase has left running.’

Why is that worrisome? Kinsbergen: ‘We dug our own collective grave around development cooperation. Perhaps from the arrogant idea that we don’t need a fanbase.’

For Kinsbergen, wanting to claim to be a top sector, with the accompanying demands of growth and investment, is therefore still a bridge too far.

The urgency of the global challenges we face is so great,’ she says, ‘we can only tackle them if we work together, based on a sense of solidarity.’

The Netherlands is doing fantastic things in the field of international cooperation, but it has become a specialist elite sport, surrounded by a fog of technical language, with its own walk and talk.

‘That is a problem, because the story of global cooperation and solidarity only works if it is broadly supported, from the very heart of society.’

That gap that has come about, Kinsbergen has seen it happen. The Netherlands has always had a strong global citizenship policy, she says. Did you want a subsidy for a project or foundation? Then first look up the local media, give a presentation at school or organise a neighbourhood tournament.

She fears that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will now completely drop out, but would nevertheless like to state that the NCDO was a major player in the field of strengthening public support and global citizenship.

‘Many walks of life were reached,’ she says, ‘the subject was a hot topic. It connects the Dutch with the world in a very concrete way.’

According to Kinsbergen, austerity rounds and the introduction of managerialism have resulted in the Dutch government’s policy in the field of public support and global citizenship now being non-
Rinus van Klinken acknowledges that he has become increasingly implicated to transfer the story of development cooperation to society. Just before he was sent to Kenya on behalf of SNV in 1979, he was addressed by Prince Claus along with a load of young development workers.

He spoke about the honourable Dutch contribution to the construction of developing countries. Just like his family and neighbour-hood, Van Klinken's parents were very proud of their 23-year-old son, who was allowed to work as a bridge engineer under the Kenyan Ministry of Transport. Van Klinken remembers that it felt like a special honorary task.

Rinus van Klinken

He saw his positive and proud attitude towards Dutch development cooperation change in the eighties and nineties—because of the disappointment that followed at the level of corruption and conflict in young African countries, he thinks.

The simplified idea of building a country so that it becomes like the West turned out to be rather naive. It was many times more complex than that; much more insight into other societies was needed. It became more difficult to get people involved in that story.

Now, 42 years after Van Klinken proudly boarded a plane to Kenya, much of the lustre that hung around development work has been lost. And on the world stage:

International speaking, he says, the Netherlands clearly played a leading role in the development field in the 1990s, by putting the sector-wide approach on the map, he sees.

We have lost the leadership role. I do not think that the Netherlands is still seen as a model country, but in many countries, it is seen as a loyal donor and a reliable partner. Although the choice of partner of each new Minister creates long-term resentment, of course.

The Dutch knowledge is stored with old, grey men like me!

It is logical that some of the development funds that go through a government are political in the first place, but that short-term thinking is at odds with the long-term vision that sustainable development cooperation demands. We are now too dependent on new trends and choices made by Ministers, who all come up with their own ideas.

In the late eighties, Van Klinken led a project in Kenya worth about five million euros a year, and in 1999, one of the largest projects running at the time. Now he leads one of the Dutch Embassies in Ethiopia, where he lives, worth five million euros a year.

According to him, it is a good indication of how the sector has been professionalised. ‘Where it used to be about improving the living conditions of local communities, the ambition now lies with system change’.

In his case, in Ethiopia: how can we help the dairy sector to make a professionalisation move? ‘We really have something to add to that’, he says. In his view, the reputation of the Dutch development sector abroad is still positive, despite the growing aversion to external interventions.

The seasoned Van Klinken sees the role of development cooperation as ‘a bridge’ between ‘thinking, knowledge and experiences, insights and techniques’ that has been developed between ‘western and southern countries’. A bridge does mean that there are two equal sides—and something often goes wrong there, he says.

‘From the West, too little account is taken of where the bridge leads. If you just throw anything across, it’s more like a parachute dropping something, rather than an equivalent bridge. Then it is important to take power inequalities into account and it is essential that you appreciate and know the local context. Without that knowledge, there is no bridge.’

He sees that a lot of local knowledge is lost in the circuit in which he is now. ‘The Dutch knowledge is stored with old, grey men like me! Fortunately, there is renewed interest among the young generation, but try to find a man or woman between forty and fifty who has good knowledge of development cooperation. I see that a gap has fallen between the Jan Pronk generation and what is happening now.’

How did that hole come about? Just like Kinsbergen, Van Klinken thinks that this is due to the professionalisation approach. ‘Making a career in the sector is becoming increasingly difficult for the Dutch,’ he says, ‘also because there is now enough local knowledge. The choice between a Kenyan farmer with a Master’s degree or a Dutch expert is easily made.’

‘But this puts the bridging function under tension, because the Kenyan cannot fulfil it. You can see that partly because of this, the Dutch sector is becoming very business-like, which means that it is increasingly becoming a technical intervention. But the bridging function is necessary for knowledge systems in which dialogue is so important.’

He would like to see a broadening of the development, not only as business and technical intervention, but also social support and increase inflows to the bottom.

Despite his criticism, Van Klinken responds positively to the question of whether Dutch development cooperation deserves the top sector designation. ‘Yes, it is, because if I look at the dairy sector, we are in East Africa working with it to bring the various authorities, the government, social organisations and knowledge institutes together.

We are investigating how we can be relevant to the East African dairy sector with our Dutch knowledge. Seen from there, we have so much to offer… We have to be sober and modest, but we have a lot of knowledge and insights that have been developed from the Dutch situation.

We can offer that bridging function, provided we really recognise the relationship with the local organisations, and that we are not holding a monologue. ’Then such a top sector predicate can contribute to a good profile of the Dutch development sector.’

The idea of a top sector, of wanting to profile yourself to the rest of the world in this way, makes Barbara van Paassen ‘a little bit queasy.’

After working for Foreign Affairs and as head of policy and campaigns at ActionAid, she has now been working as an independent consultant in Milan for three years, from where she advises change agents, social organisations, governments and foundations in the field of (mainly) women’s rights and economic justice. With support from the London School of Economics, where she is an Atlantic Fellow, she creates the People vs Inequality Podcast.

‘You don’t necessarily want the idea that “Dutch solutions” are unique solutions for the rest of the world. I also think that wanting to be a top sector is part of a problem, not the solution, because they no longer go into it with a listening ear.

‘You see that everything has to be more professional and business-like,’ she says, ‘while it would be good to go back to the motivations and values we stand for, and to propagate them together.’
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For Van Paassen, the question is how the Netherlands will position itself in this situation and whether it will care about the voice of marginalised groups. This requires a new approach and new thinking, she says, otherwise, international cooperation will continue to operate on the margins of a fundamentally unfair world.

‘For me, the new priority is to reposition yourself against those unequal power structures. We can learn from the feminist approach and women’s groups from the South. I learn so much from the conversations I have with them, let that be a starting point for shaping the new agenda.’

If you look at the Power of Voices programme, the Netherlands has a progressive policy with a modest and supportive role. Kinsbergen argues in favour of including the Dutch population (‘the fansbase’) in this new way of thinking and working.

Her colleague Dirk-Jan Koch wrote a column for Vice Versa in which he characterised the Dutch development sector as a Christmas tree that almost collapses under all the lights, baubles and wreaths.

In fact, his research suggests that we should spend less time on yet another bill, yet another new programme, but more on improving what we are already doing — in order to combat fragmentation and ‘projectisation’. So: more pruning, fewer decorations.

‘I want to add,’ says Kinsbergen, ‘that it now mainly needs good fertiliser, because a tree also needs nutrition. That means we have to give citizens a mature world perspective. It pays to look at Flanders for that sense of community, which really does exist.

‘So much has been invested there, in schools and universities. Look at the campaigns of 11.11.11, the umbrella organisation of Flemish NGOs: that is really fantastic. They join forces of volunteers, organisations and partners worldwide and inform the population about complex international issues.

‘It is no coincidence that the climate campaign has gotten off the ground in a much more sustainable way. Civil society sparkles with wealth and diversity and they are also a lot further than here in terms of debates about decolonisation.

‘That is why, according to the cheerful Kinsbergen, it is time to close the gap and involve citizens in urgent solidarity thinking. Because otherwise, she warns, it will be very difficult for a new Minister to steer a progressive course.

‘Then we will be standing on shaky ground, where all those glittering Christmas baubles—and the peak—will soon be thundering!

‘I see so many people with their hearts in the right place and there is so little appreciation for that’

Like Van Paassen, Sara Kinsbergen also thinks it is time for refection and a reframing of what international cooperation stands for. She sees that many people in the Netherlands still think that there are hardly any computers ‘in Africa’, that ‘they’ are pathetic and ‘we’ have to give help.

‘That is not the philosophy of the Sustainable Goals that the Netherlands has endorsed, that is not an image that contributes to weathering the many crises of today. It’s about unjust relationships and your own part in it, that’s everyone’s business.’

If that feeling of solidarity is alive again, on the street, in the community centre and at work, then we should already be able to lay claim to that title of top sector.
A participant of the 100WEEKS programme has withdrawn her money.

In this special edition, Vice Versa brings together fourteen Dutch NGOs and knowledge institutions to form an image of what the development sector is capable of. It is a wide range of organisations, of those praised for their drive for innovation, and which together cover the entire field. The editorial selection has not been a competition, it is not a certificate and certainly not a condemnation of the NGOs that were not selected. It is an outline of the sector, not a total report, but we hope that the spotlight will shine on all. Call it an anthology of good deeds and ideas.
‘Cash as the new standard’

100WEEKS is a new platform in Dutch development cooperations with a revolutionary model: giving funds and training to the most impoverished—and they themselves decide how to spend it. According to founders Gitte Büch and Jeroen de Lange, it should become the standard for the entire sector. ‘It has been proven effective. Let others prove that their approach is more effective.’

When Jeroen de Lange first heard of ‘unconditional cash transfers’, he was still working for the World Bank in Uganda. ‘My first reaction was: what a crazy idea, that could never work,’ he says now, looking back. ‘It was such a radically different concept of development cooperation that I just wasn’t quite ready for it.’

The idea intrigued him, though, and he began reading up on the concept. The first studies into the results of direct cash grants came out, and they were extremely positive. Now, so many years later, De Lange considers it perfectly logical.

‘Development cooperation is so complex,’ he explains, ‘because, as outsiders, we will never truly understand the local context. What works if you really want to lift families out of poverty? I think it should even become the standard in development cooperation: use cash as the benchmark. Prove that a different approach is more effective.’

100WEEKS started in Rwanda with ten women from Musanze and Kibuye. Since then, the organisation has expanded to Uganda, to Ghana and to Ivory Coast, reaching 4,600 women with the programme. For one hundred weeks, they receive cash and training and gather in self-support groups of twenty participants.

During this period, they receive eight euros every Monday on their mobile phones. In the training sessions, they not only gain entrepreneurial and financial skills, but also family planning, hygiene, nutrition and parenting are addressed in the programme.

According to De Lange and Büch, weekly meetings are essential for these women, because they often feel isolated and powerless. They give each other advice, support and assist one another and develop various initiatives, such as joint savings, starting businesses and developing activities for the community in which they live.

The combination of cash, training and savings groups makes the programme so successful, says Büch. ‘The women get more money and at the same time more knowledge about how to use it wisely. The fact that it takes place within a social structure is very beneficial.’

De Lange adds: ‘With this approach, we differ from the GiveDirectly organisation, for example, which only provides financial support and no training. The cause of poverty is not only a lack of cash, but often also a lack of knowledge, skills and a support structure.

‘This is no different in the Netherlands. If you want to launch a start-up and have good ideas, you are assisted, in addition to funding, by what is known in trendy terms as a business acceleration programme. That does not contradict the basic assertion that women know what is good for them.’

100WEEKS focuses on the very poorest members of a community. In addition, they deliberately chose to work only with women because research has shown that more money is then spent on the family as a whole.

People become healthier, children go back to school, and businesses are established

After a career with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the World Bank and as a Member of Parliament for the Dutch Labour Party, he founded 100WEEKS six years ago, together with Gitte Büch. She had just returned to the Netherlands, and her interest was immediately piqued.

‘For me, all the pieces simply fell in place,’ she says. ‘I worked for a local ngo in Tanzania and for the United Nations in Vietnam. Time and again, I observed in the field that individuals know exactly how they can break free from poverty. ‘I’m not saying that cash transfers are the silver bullet for all problems, but they are if you want to lift families out of poverty. I think it should even become the standard in development cooperation: use cash as the benchmark. Prove that a different approach is more effective.’

100WEEKS focuses on the very poorest members of a community. In addition, they deliberately chose to work only with women because research has shown that more money is then spent on the family as a whole.

The local partner organisations, such as Caritas or cocoa cooperatives, select the women for the programme. This is done by selection committees. ‘The head of the village and the local church leadership are also members of these committees,’ adds De Lange. ‘Never bypass the local hierarchy; it is the only way to generate community support for the programme.’
This, he says, is no different from other development interventions. ‘Whether it is a well or a new school, these interventions have always led to conflicts, because there is never enough for everyone. It is best to involve the community and local structures as much as possible.’

What also helps, says Büch, is that it is not only the direct participants who benefit: ‘Some have started businesses that provide employment for the community. Most groups have a solidarity programme, and every week they purchase something for someone who is very poor but has not been selected for the 100WEEKS programme, such as a few chickens, water or rice.’ De Lange nods. ‘And they buy their food locally,’ he says. ‘That’s how you drive the economy.’

After six years, Büch and De Lange are satisfied with the results: the cash transfers are affecting various aspects of life. People become healthier, children go back to school, and businesses are established. ‘Things happen when a family suddenly has money,’ says Büch. ‘Our figures show that seventy to eighty percent of the participants do not relapse into poverty one year after the programme’s completion. They have purchased a few pigs or cows, cultivated a piece of land that they have bought, or started a sewing workshop or a mushroom farm. ‘A quarter of them turn out to be truly enterprising and, after a hundred weeks, are helped further with microcredit so that they can continue their growth. We have an agreement with a microcredit institution that they can obtain a loan at half the normal interest rate.’

What also makes 100WEEKS special is that from the outset, not only the approach to poverty reduction itself but also the organisational architecture around it—the platform technology and the outcome measurement—had to be truly state of the art. It is a carefully crafted intervention in which IT plays a crucial role.

After a so-called multidimensional poverty baseline survey, the progress of the participants is measured each quarter. This data is used to adjust the programme where necessary and is shared with the donors in the form of infographics. This provides them with insight into the impact of their contributions.

According to De Lange, you can only scale up a programme at acceptable overhead costs if you work with IT. As the programme is fully standardised and always consists of the same components (cash, the groups and training), it is possible to automate many areas.

The IT platform is fully transparent and has accounts for the local 100WEEKS teams, the donors, the local partners and the data and communications team. ‘Major donors can view their own outcome survey data. No other organisation in the Netherlands has such a dashboard for donors,’ he adds proudly.

The time is right for direct giving, so now it is essential that everyone knows we are here

With the new platform 2.0, which is currently being developed, private donors will also be able to see exactly what the women in their supported groups are achieving through their own accounts. The platform also enables local partner organisations to carry out as many activities as possible themselves and to take the lead in the process. The platform guarantees correct registration, an audit trail and accurate data that indicate the results.

‘It comes down to shifting the power,’ says De Lange, who spends an average of two days a week working on IT. ‘And it is a tip for other organisations: really set up a programme from IT up. Don’t begin by developing the content and then think about the technical part; no, IT must be fully integrated into the programme from the outset.’

Investment capital is required to further develop the IT platform and scale up the programme, but this proves hard to find within the sector. Apart from the Postcode Lottery, few organisations in the Netherlands give “free money”, says Gitte Büch. ‘Would it be nice if Foreign Affairs helped to boost innovations in development cooperation—especially if they are of Dutch origin. It can provide funding and make the connection to relevant networks.’

Looking back, both say they should have done one thing differently: ‘We started with five thousand euros and have now obtained just over six million euros in funding,’ says Büch. ‘Our programme is solid. We spent less time and money on telling the story. First, prove that it works; that’s what we aimed for. My tip to starting organisations: keep a close eye on that balance. Now we have a great product, and we can also help other organisations establish money transfers within their programme portfolio. ‘However, we’re not yet very well known to those organisations. The time is right for direct giving, so it is now essential that everyone knows we are here. Otherwise, you can’t grow, and others can’t learn from us either.’

‘I never want to go back to the old way of life.’ It is an illustrative phrase among the 100WEEKS families in Rwanda. The improvement affects the entire scope of existence; the weekly payment acts as a catalyst: everything improves, as evidenced during a report in the Land of a Thousand Hills. ‘So we thought: we’ll start a shop—and look at us now!’

Text: Cynthia Omondi and Nicera Wanjiru

The landscape is the first thing to catch your eye. The hilly countryside is dotted with lush green forests—and where there are no trees, there are farms. The air here is incredibly clean. Along the road, farmers walk to their shambas, carrying their tools. Suddenly, they stop and spontaneously wave to the travellers. This is Rwandan hospitality at its best.

In the north of the country, where the 100WEEKS programme is in place, the participating women receive eight euros every Monday on their mobile phones—a total of eleven hundred have already participated in Rwanda. Each week, they gather in groups of twenty for training.

After a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Kigali, perhaps Africa’s cleanest city, over meandering roads and through a rolling landscape, we arrive in Musanze. The first visit is to a potato farm, a few kilometres outside the city, where about twenty women are harvesting with their husbands and children.

Last June, this group completed the 100WEEKS programme and then decided to launch their own project to continue the flow of income. ‘We chose agriculture,’ says Mukampunga Ellen, who leads the group, ‘because then not everyone has to be present every day.’

We agree on certain days when we have to plough, plant, weed or harvest. That way, we can work for our own businesses and attend to our other daily tasks. Farming is quite easy here, as the land is fertile.

‘We will sell these potatoes, and from that turnover, we calculate our profit, invest in the project and put some away in the bank. The money is a great help to us, and the members are allowed to borrow at low interest rates, which enables the project to grow.’

Her story is as sharp as it is insightful, a sign of how much the Rwandan metamorphoses
‘All I wish now is that things will get even better’

‘I really struggled with primary and secondary school,’ says Izere Yves, whose parents went through the programme. Nevertheless, he dreams of obtaining a university degree and then going back to his village to help impoverished people.

‘It was not easy for my parents to raise me,’ he says, ‘and there was not always food. I was about to quit school when my mother was chosen to join the 100WEEKS programme—it felt like a miracle.

‘Time passed, and life improved. I went to class from day one in the new year, which I never did before. I managed to stay calm, to expand. Life is much better now,’ she says. ‘My children eat three times a day, we have a good home and everyone has a mattress. The children can even go to school, and I know that if I continue with my small business and the group project, life will become even better.’

Other children could not go to secondary school at all, but as soon as their mothers received money from 100WEEKS, they started vocational training.

‘I never want to go back to the old way of life,’ says Uwase Clementine. ‘Before my mother was accepted into the programme, we suffered for years. All I wish now is that things will get even better. I never thought I would be in highschool, but look at me now: happy and busy with fashion and design.’

A rainy day in the village of Karama. Meet Kamaganju Anaicletta, widow and mother of three. She is busy with printed clothes, called kitenge in Kenya and ankara in West Africa.

‘After my husband passed away, life was hard for me,’ she says. ‘He was the breadwinner. I decided to do some informal work in agriculture purely for the sake of my children. The pay was poor; I received about one thousand Rwandan francs a day (less than one euro, ed.).

‘It was a hard life, and my children and I indeed suffered—until the programme came.’

She is now in her fifty-second week. In the meantime, she managed to fix her leaking roof and spruce up the house. She purchased a sewing machine and took up tailoring, skills she had acquired long ago but had not used since her marriage. She gained quite a few customers in the neighbourhood, enough to start a boutique in the nearby shopping centre.

‘The aim is to get a bigger space one day, where I can store my sewing machines and equipment and sell some household goods. That would boost the income. Currently, I am in three savings groups within the programme.’ She assures us that her hundredth week, she will be a great entrepreneur.

‘Men should change their mindset,’ he continues, ‘because it is perfectly fine for a woman to earn more and be stronger. We live in the digital age, and otherwise, it limits families from achieving their goals.’

His wife Nyirakabyirikye explains how they came to set up the shop. ‘After I heard about 100WEEKS,’ she says, ‘we sat down and thought: what would be profitable? In this neighbourhood, it was difficult to get small things, like salt or even a pencil, because you had to walk a long way to the shopping centre.

‘You can imagine that because of the hills it is quite tiring, so we thought: we will start a shop, with a stock of about six to ten thousand francs—and just look how it is doing now!’ And she still has thirty programme weeks to go.

How life has changed. Arranging health insurance was a big change; they could not afford the basics and sending their children to school was a dream, not a reality. They were day labourers, and sometimes there was no income, but now they have become employers, with a piece of land they cultivate. The plan is to move to the city, later, to expand the business.

True to the 100WEEKS motto ‘Temporary cash for permanent change’, many lives have indeed been saved from the clutches of poverty. The participants’ homes speak volumes, as do their established businesses: they have a better path to follow.

The empowerment of women comes in many forms, but the most powerful is through the wallet. When they are financially stronger, they become a pillar of support for their community.

‘I love working for these women,’ says Gervais Nkurunziza, who leads the programme in Rwanda, ‘and seeing all the transformations brings me joy and fulfilment. I must admit, it is enjoyable to work with villagers, more enjoyable than sitting in an office.’

©
The number of humanitarian crises is growing, there is not enough funding and the planet is heating up. Fourteen Dutch aid organisations and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to join their forces to face these issues head-on, resulting in the foundation of the Dutch Relief Alliance. The question is: for how much longer? ‘We are moving towards a system in which local organisations lead the way. Our job is to accept that.’

As Director of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid, Mariët Schuurman (52) is responsible for the Dutch Relief Alliance. ‘I am very proud of them,’ she says. She believes the DRA deserves to be recognised as the flagship organisation it is. ‘It is not like we are blowing our own horn or anything, but other countries often come to us to ask how we managed to pull this off. This interest is particularly strong in the so-called like-minded countries, such as Germany and the Scandinavian nations.’

For the Ministry, the DRA has a major practical benefit: saving time. ‘Whenever there was a crisis, aid organisations would all begin submitting their own applications. We then had to review each one in turn. That takes a whole lot of time, precisely when time is of the essence. At one point, we asked them if they could come up with some kind of plan to work together. That would allow us to provide more financial stability.’

According to Schuurman, it is no coincidence that an alliance such as this was formed in the Netherlands of all places: it is a good example of the polder culture. The fact that aid organisations reach out to each other to work together is certainly not a given. ‘It is not exactly common for so many organisations to get together and lay all their cards on the table. I believe it has something to do with our nature as a people, our strong tradition of collaboration.’

The goal is to place an increasingly large share of the DRA’s budget in the hands of local organisations. ‘Is direct funding the ultimate goal? In a way, it is—but it is not just about more direct funding for local organisations. The question is how can we give people back their dignity, their resilience and their freedom of choice? That is about more than just the flow of funding.’

‘We have to begin asking ourselves some important policy questions. Who is in charge of the relief agenda? Who bears the risks when something doesn’t pan out? What kind of added value can major international NGOs offer in the future? The DRA asks us to ask these kinds of questions, instead of having to micromanage each individual project.’

As Schuurman is keen to point out: our strong tradition of collaboration. ‘More efficiency’ is sometimes code for ‘more outputs’. ‘We need to ask if the aid system is doing the best job possible.’

According to Schuurman, the alliance serves as a means of experimenting with ways to improve emergency relief projects. ‘A lot of our attention is devoted to innovation: how can we spend our money even more effectively?’

This is where the DRA Innovation Fund comes in: between 2018 and 2021, it invested twelve million euros into various innovative and creative emergency relief projects. ‘More efficiency’ is sometimes code for ‘more outputs’. ‘We need to ask if the aid system is doing the best job possible.’

In 2016, major aid organisations and donors gathered in Istanbul to discuss how to close the budget gap. This resulted in the Grand Bargain Commitments: the emergency relief sector’s good intentions. ‘The number of emergencies has grown so much more rapidly since then,’ she says. ‘The Dutch humanitarian budget is not shrinking, nor do I expect it to in the years to come.’

In the autumn of 2018, the population of Central Sulawesi was struck by a double catastrophe. On 28 September, the Indonesian province was hit by an earthquake with a force of 7.5 on the Richter scale. A few minutes later, a tsunami hit the coast. ‘Central Sulawesi is located in a part of the world that is no stranger to natural disasters. Indonesia is located on the Pacific Ring of Fire and the four-hundred-kilometre long Palu-Koro Fault runs directly underneath the provincial capital of Palu.’

With a death toll of more than four thousand, this was the deadliest earthquake to strike Indonesia in twelve years. The DRA members provided emergency aid to 230,000 people. Food was distributed and emergency healthcare clinics were established to provide urgent medical care to the local population.

The emergency aid operation in Sulawesi is a typical example of a response to an acute crisis,’ Leuverink explains. When an emergency situation suddenly arises somewhere on the planet, it is important to act as quickly as possible. This is done with the help of a rigid schedule: a playbook describes what needs to be done on an hour-by-hour basis. Every DRA member can submit a report to the crisis coordinator when disaster strikes somewhere. ‘Once it has been determined whether the crisis ‘meets’ all applicable criteria, the members are asked within forty-eight hours if they approve the emergency aid operation and if they can contribute to it themselves. Next, the tasks are divided and everyone coordinates their actions with the ministry. ‘The operation can begin in fewer than seventy-two hours,’ she says.

It is unusual for organisations to work together so closely. In 2015, Dutch organisations decided to join forces and collaborate as extensively as possible. All emergency aid operations conducted by the DRA are so-called joint responses: they are set up and executed by various members and their local partners.

A single DRA member is put in charge of overseeing everything: the emergency aid relief in Sulawesi was directed by CARE Nederland. ‘When more than one organisation wants to take charge,’ Leuverink says, ‘they can usually find a workable solution together. If not, a democratic vote is held.’

In 1862, the Swiss banker Henri Dunant described the horrors he witnessed during the bloody battle of Solferino, fought during the Second Italian War of Independence, in A Memoir of Solferino.
Emergency relief organisations struggle to keep up and are looking for ways to make optimal use of the funds available to them. One of the alliance’s goals therefore revolves around efficiency, says TBA president Petra Righetti. The members take turns in appointing a president for the TBA. Righetti works at Oxfam Novib and will serve as president until the end of December.

At the moment, the Ministry is no longer funding aid organisations’ individual projects; everything is instead being handled via the Dutch Relief Alliance. ‘This is a multi-year funding scheme,’ she says, ‘and we have been given the freedom to spend the money as we see fit.’

Last year, Ethiopian and Somali farmers faced the worst locust plague in twenty-five years. During the emergency relief operation set up by the TBA, farmers were taught how to protect their crops against locusts and they received financial aid.

The initial expectation was that the operation would benefit circa two hundred thousand people; the final number was just over three hundred thousand. Righetti says that the quality of their work has improved since Dutch aid organisations began working together.

‘Our emergency aid operations have become far more effective,’ she says.

The coronavirus pandemic made the vulnerability of the interna-
tional relief system painfully obvious. As a result of the outbreak, the number of people in need of emergency aid increased to 335 million in 2021, which is the highest it has been in decades. In its annual report, the TBA writes that the virus has wiped out ‘decades of progress’ in the emergency aid sector in a single blow.

Many emergency relief organisations decided to pull their staff out of crisis zones. ‘The Ministry allocated an additional ten million euros for Corona relief, Righetti says. ‘With the help of our extensive collaborative network of local partner organisations, we were fortunately able to get that money to the people who needed it relatively quickly.’

**Ugandan emergency relief pioneers**

*Every year, the TBA Innovation Fund invests in innovative emergency aid projects. As part of these three projects in Uganda, refugees in the country and its local host community receive aid in creative ways. Local organisations are in charge of the projects.*

Emergency aid is about more than handing out food and blankets. That much is clear in Uganda: with a population of almost one and a half million refugees, it is one of the largest host countries in the world.

Most refugees are from the region, particularly from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Harbouring so many people leads to a variety of complex challenges: from limited access to power in refugee villages to discrimination and conflicts about land.

The TBA therefore wanted to look for ways to improve the emergency aid in the area. The TBA Innovation Fund allocated two million euros for innovative emergency relief projects. The Response Innovation Lab (RIL) was also brought in.

This was an obvious choice for a partner: it is an initiative of TBA members World Vision, Save the Children and Oxfam Novib and the organisation créé: ‘We sent out a call for organisations to submit their project ideas,’ says its manager Charlotte Cabot.

These project proposals could not be submitted by just one organisation; they had to come from partnerships between different organisations. ‘Local organisations play an important role in every instance.’

The competition was held in the autumn of 2020 and consisted of multiple rounds: during various workshops, the participants received help with further substantiating their ideas. ‘They had to pitch their ideas in the final round. Ultimately, six winners were selected.’

According to Cabot, this competition differs from similar initiatives organised by major international NGOs. ‘Everything is usually thought up at the head office, while we made sure that local partner organisations were closely involved at every stage of the selection process. They were also part of the jury that picked the final winners.’

Not only is the global number of humanitarian crises on the rise, so is their duration. Over the last five years, the average duration of a crisis situation has doubled to nine years.

One of the longest ongoing crises in the world is the civil war in Syria. For the last eleven years, the population of the republic has been tormented by war crimes, famine and human rights violations. To date, more than thirteen million Syrians have fled Syria or become refugees in their own country.

In countries such as Syria, the TBA not only executes acute but also long-term responses: projects with a lead time of one or two years. In late 2019, some extra money was available for a so-called cash programme, in addition to the long-term project, Leuverink says.

During that emergency aid project, the TBA members made sure that Syrians were given cash money directly to pay for their basic needs. ‘The organisations all used their own approach: they would transfer money directly into people’s bank accounts or distribute vouchers. Afterwards, we looked at what approach was most effective.’

The Netherlands is home to a large number of humanitarian organisations: from Oxfam Novib, which mainly focuses on the fight against poverty, to War Child, which specifically works with children affected by armed conflict.

‘The situation in Syria underscored the importance of collaboration,’ Leuverink continues. Instead of launching different projects at the same time, the TBA members all worked together as one.

‘We would refer the different groups of victims, such as children or abused women, to the organisation that had the most experience working with that specific demographic. The TBA members also organised training programmes for each other about their respective areas of expertise. ‘In the past, there was far less collaboration.’

Emergency aid expert and columnist Paul Carrison wrote at The New Humanitarian about the ‘original sin’ of the modern emergency aid industry: humanitarian aid would perpetuate old colonial power relations and often be paternalistic in nature. He characterised international care givers as colonial administrators who always claim to know better than the local population.

During emergency aid operations, people in crisis situations are also often depicted as the ‘post-colonial Other’: needy people without any self-reliance who largely depend on their Western benefactors to survive their disaster-torn lives.

Within the emergency aid sector, the discussion about a transfer of power from the North to the South has been going on for some time. Partly for that reason, Oxfam International decided to relocate its head office from Oxford to Nairobi in 2017. Righetti says that the decolonisation movement has received a new impetus in recent years.

‘I view the Black Lives Matter protests as the direct instigators of that debate.’ One of the priorities of that movement was to decolo-
nise our society—from education to government institutions. ‘In,
spired us to take a hard look at what we were doing as well,’ she says. ‘All too often, major international organisations view themselves as saviours in a time of need.’

During its emergency aid operations, the Dutch Relief Alliance works together closely with local partner organisations, which often give the TBA advice on how to further improve the work that it does. ‘Still, they don’t always immediately feel free to speak their minds,’ Leuverink says: ‘Many local NGOs are financially dependent on the major international organisations, which makes it harder to express yourself if you disagree with how things are being done.’

This past year, the TBA members organised workshops during which they spoke with local organisations about the latter’s role within the alliance’s operations. ‘We made sure that the interna-
tional organisations that fund the local partners were not present for those discussions. It was clear that this made it much easier for them to speak freely.’

This goes to show that decolonisation is largely a matter of who is holding the purse strings. Today, one quarter of the TBA’s budget is managed directly by local partner organisations, Righetti says: ‘That figure should increase to at least 15 per cent by 2024. The goal is to incrementally raise the percentage.

Are international aid organisations putting themselves on the sidelines by doing this? ‘I think it is just the reality we are now living in,’ Righetti replies. ‘We are moving towards a system in which local organisations lead the way. Our job is to adapt to that.’

If the current trend continues, major international emergency relief organisations will gradually become less prominent. Nevertheless, Righetti believes they still have an important job to do for the foreseeable future.

‘I think we still have enough to offer: at the moment, major inter-
national NGOs have easier access to funds controlled by Western governments. We also have an extensive network that we can utilise to support local organisations.’
Playing football for peace

Project: Sport for Peace
Supervisory organisation: Center for Conflict Resolution (CECORE)
Partner: Right To Play (RTP)

Trade brings people together. The same is certainly true for another social activity sport, the ‘greater equaliser’. The Sport for Peace project uses football and netball (a hybrid of korfball and basketball, which is particularly popular in the former British colonies) as means of conflict resolution. ‘Such conflicts not only arise between refugees and the host community,’ says programme coordinator Johnfrith Mawa of CCORE. ‘But there are also tensions among the refugee population itself. Youths from South Sudan with different ethnic backgrounds all live together.’

The German dramatist Bertolt Brecht once wrote that food is the first thing, morals follow on. Although this statement was mostly meant as cynical social criticism, Atalawa Mawa of the Community Empowerment for Rural Development (CICFORD) believes there is some truth to it as well. ‘Having a full wallet and a full stomach are the most important things; everything else comes later,’ he says. ‘A hungry man is an angry man.’

As part of the Youth Livelihoods and Conflict Transformation project, experiments are conducted with new forms of agriculture that allow youths to earn their own living. ‘Much of the agricultural land in Uganda is highly fragmented. People all work their own small plots of land and don’t pay much attention to market demands.’

The project mainly targets the northern districts of Adjumani and Obongi, the region with the youngest refugee population. ‘Half the group consists of youths who are struggling in some way: from dropping out of school to dealing with radicalisation. The other half is made up of young people who do have their lives in order.’

The youths receive personal guidance and a series of intensive training sessions, during which they can share their personal traumas and are taught about conflict mediation. Afterwards, they return to their communities to share everything they have learned. ‘That made a big impression on people: youths they knew to be drug addicts and extremists were suddenly advocating peace.’

Tumwesigye sees it as a positive development that local organisations are in charge in many of the projects. ‘International organisations can sometimes have a superiorty complex—as a local organisation, they do not see you as their equal. By giving these local organisations more responsibilities, the balance of power shifts. Suddenly, you are clearly each other’s equals.’

The essential agricultural revolution

Project: Youth Livelihoods and Conflict Transformation
Supervisory organisation: CICFORD
Partners: ECCO Cooperation, Hivos/DR and COOSS COUGANDA

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Youths are trained in conflict resolution, the Ugandan legal system and the constitution. ‘Afterwards, they visit neighbourhoods to see what problems youths are dealing with. Together with the residents, they look for local solutions.’

At CICFORD, the cizx grant resulted in more confidence. ‘We feel empowered. We see the fact that our project was selected as a major compliment,’ Mawa says.

The organisation plays an increasingly large role in the region’s humanitarian field. ‘We now also lead the Charter for Change in Uganda—a cooperative alliance between organisations in the Global South who fight for more localisation within the emergency aid sector.’ This project has given us a lot of visibility and it has opened quite a few doors.

Green cash

Project: CloudGreen
Supervisory organisation: thinkIT’s CloudGreen
Partners: Fyniwave and Sparkly Dryer

According to the UN Refugee Agency, Uganda is the most refugee-friendly country in the world: the Ugandan government encourages refugees to start their own business and even gives them land to do so. Eighty-nine percent of all refugees in the country have access to their own patch of land, which the vast majority uses for agricultural purposes.

The CloudGreen project supports female entrepreneurs and farmers. ‘We help both refugees and Ugandan women,’ Juliana Lanyero (28) of thinkIT’s CloudGreen. ‘Many of them face the same problems. They often lack the time or the means to bring the food they grow to the local market, for example. As a result, an enormous quantity of food ends up spoiling.’

CloudGreen helps the women turn their business into a success in a sustainable way. ‘We give them Sparkly Dryers: energy-efficient solar dryers that they can use to dehydrate their food to extend its shelf life.’ The organisation plays an increasingly large role in the region’s humanitarian field. ‘We mainly play games that revolve around collaboration rather than competition.’

Right To Play has developed an educational model that uses sports to open personal and difficult themes up for discussion in a light-hearted manner. ‘Such sports programmes are often organised by schools. We focus mainly on youths that are not going to school.’

CECORE is also training sixty so-called peace champions, young ambassadors of peace that include refugees and Ugandan youths. ‘Half the group consists of youths who are struggling in some way: from dropping out of school to dealing with radicalisation. The other half is made up of young people who do have their lives in order.’

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He says the project involves more than simply organising a few football tournaments. In fact, the focus is clearly not on tournaments at all. ‘We mainly play games that revolve around collaboration rather than competition.’

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Like ‘his’ Partos, director Bart Romijn advocates a sustainability-objectives test for the government and calls on the members of the sector association to also test their own work for unintended effects. A frank conversation about the state of affairs in the development sector. ‘It is a key sector, but we can make mega strides if we listen to groups more closely.’

Text: Marc Broere

He has been the face of Dutch development cooperation since 2014. Bart Romijn. We meet at the Partos office in Duivendrecht. It is in a somewhat deserted and chilly industrial estate, which contrasts with the cosy layout of the office. A good time to review the state of affairs with the man who (see opening article) calls development cooperation a key sector.

What does he see when he thinks about it? ‘I see organisations that are working very hard,’ he says, ‘determined to make an impact. And I also see a lot of innovation and openness to look at the issues that organisations face – think of #MeToo, Black Lives Matter and the debate about the decolonisation of aid. This is not dealt with cosmetically, no: they really look at the possibilities for the sector to take action.’

Romijn also sees that in the Netherlands, distrust of the government and institutions is on the rise. ‘The world is changing rapidly, and organisations are under pressure. One of the reasons is that the government has made huge mistakes; it devises many control-oriented policies based on suspicion.

‘The tax benefit affair is, of course, is a good example of this. It causes citizens to distrust the government, which also affects institutions and organisations, including the development sector. Fortunately, there is a growing awareness that you need to stay in touch with the people you work with. You should not talk about people, and invoke all kinds of policies, but talk to people and work together. It is increasingly a quest for points of contact and interaction on an equal footing.’

Is the designation as key sector justified? Romijn: ‘Certainly in a number of areas; many Dutch development organisations have a good international reputation. I also really like the strategic partnerships between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and social organisations.

‘It is not a question of “here is your money, and you have to do what we want,” no: you establish a number of goals together and afford the partners space to implement them in their own way.

‘On the one hand, you still see a management approach and the Ministry feels obliged to render account to the Court of Audit and the Lower House. Therefore, there are many accountability mechanisms, and capacity building sometimes seems to be more about being accountable to donors instead of supporting to enable you to get your work off the ground.

‘At the same time, I can certainly see the motivation within this Ministry to think about a good balance between making an impact and being accountable for the achieved results. I see quite a few people at the Ministry wanting to maximise the scope for social impact and social transformation. The strategic partnerships are a clear result of this.

‘These partnerships also explicitly include the subject of more control for southern partners. Within the world of donors, the Netherlands really plays a pioneering role in this area; we give partner organisations space and think about participation in partnerships. Who makes the decisions within such alliances?

‘It is not yet where it should be, but I am positive about it. Until recently, Keystone conducted an annual study comparing European and American development organisations in particular.

‘Dutch organisations always fared well there, too, when it came to the way we work with partner organisations worldwide and that there was much more of an effort to work together as equals than with organisations from other countries.

‘I just mentioned the big movements that have arisen, such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and decolonisation of aid. I am not saying that we are in the lead worldwide, but I think we have taken more significant steps in this respect than the Anglo-Saxon countries, where they very much remain stuck on sexual exploitation and abuse.’

What if it’s about the other 99.3 percent?

Zooming out with Romijn: ‘The biggest steps aren’t in the 0.7 percent for Development Cooperation’
‘Let’s set up an integrity system to tackle this broader aspect of power as well’

Or look at climate financing, for instance, which is still primarily allocated to the private sector, without looking at what is actually needed in terms of adaptation on a local level.

The biggest steps we can take are not in the 0.7 percent for Development Cooperation, but in the other 99.3 percent of the policy. It has to be more coherent and sustainable—and those are goals we are working hard on, aimed at politicians and government.

We, therefore, go beyond pure, basic advocacy.

We can also be quite provocative towards our members. Take, for example, the dialogue series we organised on decolonisation of aid or the discussion on why there are so few migrants working for development organisations. Or the debate about integrity that deals with complicated and recalcitrant subjects that have been a problem for as long as humanity has existed.

One of the themes behind which Partos is a driving force in the Netherlands is the shift the power debate on more equal cooperation between donors and recipients within international cooperation—by having people who determine and people who lose out. There are a vast number of groups that have no or too little access to governance, services, resources and justice. All of this is about power.

Which differences, and who is then excluded as a result? I think that we, as development organisations, should focus on this. Look at where the power lies and where it is being misused. And how can you distribute it properly and fairly so that we can work together towards a better world? That is the bigger story that I believe is at the heart of everything we do.

At the same time, you must also look internally, such as at the financial flows. I am firmly in favour of transferring money from rich countries to less fortunate countries; you can use it to carry out specific projects to combat poverty and inequality.

However, this also goes hand in hand with some negative aspects, such as an excessively rigid accountability system. Social organisations in the South are sometimes more busy accounting to their donors than to their supporters. And, he who pays, decides. That is inherent in this system, whether you like it or not.

I see many Dutch development organisations which are honestly and sincerely trying to find out how they can best organise the dialogue with their partner organisations. However, they are often too busy and thus lack the time because there is a timeframe in which proposals must be written.

And we usually do have a “we know better” attitude; that is undeniable present, and I see it in myself as well—I often think I know how to do the work. On the other hand, some recipient partner organisations have a kind of undue humility, so it’s a two-way street.

How do you tackle that conversation in concrete terms?

We have developed a power awareness tool for our members, with which you can see exactly how decisions are made and what you can do to improve the dialogue and participation of the people concerned.

A second step is the organise learning sessions and webinars on the principle of community-led development, where the starting point is “the most affected in the lead.” These are things we are constantly looking for: localisation, community-led development, power awareness. How can you better invest in that in your organisation and in your partnerships?

It is a conversation we frequently conduct with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This has had an effect because, in the current grant for the strategic partnerships, these power issues are also covered, and organisations have to address them in their project proposals. In short, it’s about walking the talk.

I believe that the focus of Dutch organisations should be on combining the power of society worldwide in order to fight abuses as much as possible in an equal manner and to give people who are excluded access to services. This also includes examining the internal aspects of the system you are currently maintaining.

That is not always attractive because people are busy making an impact and feel that they are doing a good job. But not looking at the systems you are a part of and that you sustain is one of the reasons why the pace of transformation and change is so slow. This applies to every sector.

So, what are the next steps?

The first one I already mentioned, but I think it is very important: map out and look at how decisions are made within your organisation, but also within the cooperation. If you don’t do that, you will quickly take cosmetic measures, and if you skip that step, it will not work.

A second step is a realisation that shifting the power is not the same as transferring power and decisions about money from a Dutch to an NGO in the South—that, too, is too superficial. No, you have to look at how to tackle power issues together.

That is not just North-South, that is also local, and that is also something that runs through societies in both the North and the South. Look at how you can shape that optimally. I believe that we still think in terms of segments and themes too often and that thinking in terms of power is not sufficiently addressed. I would like to do more attention to this political power analysis in development cooperation.

Also, take a good look at what the effects and goals of your intervention are, and how it can possibly have a negative impact. There is a great study by Dirk-Jan Koch on unintended side effects of development interventions; it shows many positive side effects, but also negative ones. That is something worth thinking about.

The question that Partos poses to the Dutch government, in terms of policy coherence, is to test the impact of all new policies on developing countries. That is actually what we as a development sector should do. What are the primary and side effects of our plans and projects? Both the positive and the negative.

It may sound theoretical, but you can make it practical by simply paying careful attention to it, reflecting on everything you do. Not only on your primary plans to fight poverty and inequality but also on what you as an organisation trigger through money flows and through control.

‘Listen to all those involved, locally or in a chain. What are their ideas, what do they need?’

Is that still not happening enough?

Yes: because of time, money and accountability considerations, but also because of something in our own way of thinking. What I said before: we often think we know better and then make our plans based on that.

Dutch development cooperation is a key sector, but we can take giant steps if we listen to groups even better. Listen to all those involved, locally or in a chain. What are their ideas, what do they
It is great fun to have travelled around or done an internship in Africa or Asia, but the type of work is different nowadays than it used to be.

This is an enormous challenge, but also an opportunity for the sector. In this sense, in addition to humanitarian and emergency aid and cooperation with developing countries, development cooperation has a third focus: reducing our “western footprint”. It is a road that we have not yet sufficiently traversed.

We conclude. Romijn himself is the father of two young adult sons. Does he advise young people to look for a job in this sector?

“Absolutely,” he says, “but I think development cooperation is a much broader concept than just our members’ field of work. It does not have to be within an organisation or Ministry: you can also do it through science or business.

“There are so many universities working on development issues or all kinds of sustainability issues. Whether you are socially, ecologically or economically educated: there is a lot of urgency and benefit in working together for a better world, and it is also a beautiful profession.

“Even if your focus is somewhat less on development organisations, I can certainly recommend it. I think that those who have a lot to gain from attracting young people. I also noticed this in my small team: we have interns who contribute really good ideas. They learn from us, and we learn from them. I like to make time to talk to young people who are interested in this type of work, to show them the ropes.

Too often, the problem is how to get in. In the past, you had to have experience abroad before you get a job. It’s like in Amsterdam: you only get a residence permit if you live there, so it’s actually impossible to get in—and yet many people manage.

“For young people, the opportunity lies in the fact that experience in the field no longer the only thing that counts in development cooperation. It is great fun to have travelled around or done an internship in Africa or Asia, but the type of work is different nowadays than it used to be.

“If you have financial expertise on tax avoidance or real knowledge of how social movements work, then that is a form of work experience that is just as useful. The question of how to mobilise social movements is particularly important in development cooperation.”

Romijn bursts out laughing. “You don’t need people like you who don’t yet know how to log on to a webinar!”

He continues: ‘But to come back to your question, yes: I would definitely recommend and encourage young people to do that. Young people have so many new skills, but at the same time, you also see so many experienced people who move with the times and stay ahead of the game when it comes to thinking.

“Take someone like former Minister Jan Pronk; every time I read something he has written, it inspires me so much. I recently read a piece in Vice Versa about the overload of worldwide, in which he analyses generalisation and inequality. Then I think to myself, how amazing is that!”

Romijn: ‘First of all, raise the status of policy coherence. Really highlight the consequences of the Dutch policy on the rest of the world. We keep handing over perverse subsidies to the fossil industry, and our tax policy is not changing sufficiently. If we can shift things around, the world will also shift in the right direction’.

“I also hope that the Sustainable Development Goals will be given a prominent role in the coalition agreement. You can make a lot of justified criticisms about those goals, but for the time being, they are the conceptual framework that will take us further in our cooperation with other parties, from the business community to knowledge and financial institutions. Secondly, restore the budget for Development Cooperation so that it once again reaches 0.7 percent of the GNP. And, thirdly, give social organisations in the Netherlands and internationally a much more active role in shaping and implementing development policy.”

Policy coherence

Bart Romijn already said it: policy coherence for development is an important campaign project of Partos. What is his view on the results so far?

‘With our capabilities,’ he says, ‘I am very proud of what we have done. A Sustainable Goal test has been introduced to assess new government policies on their impact on developing countries and on gender.

Furthermore, 32 Members of Parliament have all adopted a Sustainable Development Goal. They promise to commit themselves to it, and they often do. At the very least, we can discuss this with them.’

But if you look at the larger coherence debate, it is not conducted enough, according to Romijn—and certainly not at a high enough level of power. The latest coalition agreement places the Sustainable Goals under Development Cooperation, just like the special tax coordinator. They don’t actually belong there.

‘I find the coherence approach of other Ministries marginal and minimal. If you look at the big steps we can take in terms of tax policy, international climate policy and financial interventions, it has been very sparse... It is up to the new cabinet to organise it better.’

He likes to refer to Finland, which has a different approach. ‘They have placed Sustainable Development Goals under the Ministry of Finance. All other Ministries have to report to Finance on how their—total—expenditure fits in with the goals. And the Finnish Court of Auditors has to approve it. In my opinion, this is the ultimate form of mainstreaming the sustainability policy, both internationally and nationally.

‘There is an increasingly strong call from society for the government to prominently embed the coalition agreement’s Sustainability Goals. There is literally and figuratively still a considerable amount to be gained.

‘We look at the discussions in the Lower House, there is still too little discussion about this—and when there is, it is not sufficiently translated into concrete sustainable policy. You see this happening with development cooperation and with, for example, a topical theme like climate change.

‘The existing government policy is too focused on the short-term interests of Dutch companies. Nevertheless, there are also glimmers of hope, and there is perspective: see the agreement to stop using export credit insurance for fossil projects.

‘In that respect, climate justice is a term that points in the right direction. In policies to mitigate climate change, you especially offer vulnerable groups and areas—who feel their impact most strongly—the means to take action.’

Isn’t it possible for the 32 adoptive MPs to stand united? ‘They have promised to work for the cause they have adopted. Their next step is to jointly make a case to the government regarding the goals, both nationally and internationally.

‘But we realise that the stick is not always their main focus. No matter how you look at it, short-term and national interests prevail.

‘At the same time, going back to what I said earlier, society is increasingly calling on the government to support the Sustainable Development Goals, including support from the business community and financial institutions. That is why it is important that the social organisations continue to nurture the MPs.”
ODA expenditure per channel (2020)

ODA is the official expenditure of the Dutch government in the field of development cooperation. The amounts are rounded off to millions of euros:

- Governments in partner countries and other countries: 94
- Dutch government: 193
- Social organisations: 857
- Public-private partnerships and networks: 125
- Research institutions: 162
- Companies: 247
- Multilateral institutions: 1.970
- Research institutions: 1.100
- Other: 3
- Subtotal channels: 3.651
- Total: 4.751

Allocations include first-year asylum (493 million) and contributions to the EU budget for development cooperation (330 million).
The world needs Enschede

The ITC, a faculty of the University of Twente, is a breeding ground for active scholars. The faculty, students and thousands of alumni reflect upon practical solutions for the greatest challenges of our time: from pandemics to sprawling slums. ‘The fingerprints of climate change can be found on the disasters we are witnessing today.’ And yet the tone is brisk: they’re taking charge of the future now. Text: Elian Yahye

A network of individuals in senior positions all over the world, all connected to a single institute in some way. It may sound like the headquarters of a Rotary Club or even a mysterious Masonic Lodge, but it is in fact the University of Twente’s faculty.

The ITC (in full: ITC Faculty of Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation) specialises in everything concerning aerial photography, urban planning and land use. Six ITC alumni hold ministerial posts, including Indonesia’s Minister of Environment and Forestry and Zimbabwe’s Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology. This year, the institute celebrates its seventieth anniversary. Ambitious students swarm to ITC from far and wide like bees to honey. Each of these students has already reached an advanced stage in their academic career: the faculty only offers Master’s and Doctoral programmes.

When the first international students began visiting the local shops in the seventies, it caused quite a stir. The ITC students have since become an integral part of the Enschede community. ‘Everyone in the neighbourhood knows who they are,’ says Tom Loran.

Enschede

The world needs Enschede

One of the research fields in which the ITC is leading the way is ‘Geo-Health’, a cross between geography and public health. As a university lecturer, 35-year-old Carmen Anthonj is a specialist in this field. ‘At Geo-Health,’ she says, ‘we look at health through the lens of place and time.’

That still sounds abstract, but the pandemic illustrates the field well: ‘Within a few months, a virus that originated locally in Wuhan spread all over the world. In terms of “place”, we look at how governments and health systems in different countries deal with the virus. In terms of “time”, we look at how the virus mutates and adapts to new circumstances.’

Anthonj is not intimidated by the breadth of her research field. ‘Tobler’s Law of Geography reads, “Everything is related to everything else.” I find that connectedness fascinating, which is precisely why I became a medical geographer.’

She mentors Kasandra Poague, a Brazilian PhD student with a background in environmental engineering and epidemiology. Together with two other lecturers, they are working on a PhD project in Brazil in the field of WASH, the acronym for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene.

‘Water and health,’ says Poague, ‘are related in many ways. You can become ill from polluted water or from mosquitoes and insects that live near water.’

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, most people sneeze into their elbow and ‘aerosols’ have become a part of people’s daily vocabulary. ‘This crisis is also a WASH crisis,’ Poague previously wrote in an article.

Poague and Anthonj’s research reflects this: using their PhD project, they want to look at the water and sanitation facilities in Brazilian schools before, during and after the pandemic. ‘Schools,’ she says, ‘can be superspreaders of information, but also of infections.’

They are still in the initial phase. ‘They are still in the initial phase. Poague: ‘We want to assess the “sanitary infrastructure”. Are there any toilets? Can you wash your hands with soap? Is there any clean drinking water?’ They are also investigating how those facilities can be improved.

‘We also involve school directors, parents and pupils,’ says Poague. ‘What would they like to see changed?’ The hope is that the schools will become more disease-resistant in the future. ‘Because this is not the last pandemic we will witness.’

Anthonj says that initially, she did not aspire to a career in academia at all. During her studies, she worked extensively with international organisations such as the WHO, UNICEF and the World Bank. At a certain point she realised: if I want impact, I need to go into science.’

With a smile, she continues: ‘I also notice now that the higher my title, the more people listen to me.’ Since the pandemic, the value of her field has been increasingly recognised by others. ‘Before, other scientists didn’t really understand why I, as a geographer, was involved in public health. That has changed.’

She also thinks that policy makers have started to listen to scientists more frequently. ‘In an increasingly complex world, society expects more from scientists. It also means that they cannot remain active solely in their own niche. It is becoming increasingly clear,’ she says, ‘that multidisciplinary research is the future.’

According to Poague, this approach is very much encouraged at the ITC: ‘That is the greatest insight I have had here. You can’t approach everything from your own little island; you have to seek out cooperation with people who have different scientific backgrounds.’
Loran is a veteran of the ITC; he has been involved since 1985. Sitting next to him is Munyaradzi Shuro, a 25-year-old Spatial Engineering student and member of the faculty board. ‘I heard about the ITC through one of my lecturers in Zimbabwe,’ she says. ‘He is an alumnus.’

‘The room boasts photos of all the rectors the ITC has ever had, including former Prime Minister Willem Schermerhorn who founded the institute in 1950. At the time, it was not yet located in Enschede but in Delft.

‘The UN asked the Netherlands to provide assistance with aerial photography to the governments of countries that had recently gained independence,’ Loran explains, ‘so that they could make topographical maps.’ This sound like a niche, but aerial photography was the satellite image of the time. ‘In those days, the ITC plane was flying all over countries.’

In the decades that followed, the ITC developed into an institute that deals with all manner of geographical research topics. In 2010, it became a faculty of the University of Twente.

‘We have become more academic,’ says Loran. ‘The core mission, however, has remained more or less intact. ‘It’s still very much about the ITC plane was flying all over countries.’

The room boasts photos of all the rectors the ITC has ever had, including former Prime Minister Willem Schermerhorn who founded the institute in 1950. At the time, it was not yet located in Enschede but in Delft.

The ITC recently launched a new research centre: the Centre for Disaster Resilience. ‘With this, we aim to unify everything we are already doing in this field. We have a huge network of students, researchers and alumni who are working on these questions. It must be more structured.’

‘As an alumnus,’ adds Kuriakose, ‘I hope that the importance of local action will become central. It would be nice if the Centre, in collaboration with the alumni, could give communities worldwide the tools to prepare for disasters.’
Drones for research in slums

Since the ITC plane flew over the Global South in the 1950s, the number of themes the institute has covered has grown exponentially. The research conducted by Caroline Gevaert, however, still bears some resemblance to the original mission. During her Master’s studies, the Dutch-American did an internship in Bolivia, where she used satellite images to research floods.

‘Naturally, there are many clouds in the tropics,’ she says, ‘so it was difficult to take any pictures. At a conference, I discovered that drones could also be used for this kind of research which inspired me. Later on I discovered that the ITC offered a PhD position using drone photography to survey slums.’

Around one billion people live in slums, which are sprouting up like mushrooms in the Global South. ‘In the past, they were often levelled,’ says Gevaert, ‘but now the main objective is to renovate the neighbourhoods, as much as possible.’ That is easier said than done.

‘Slums are often constructed informally and the houses are close together. As a result, there is often little information available about the neighbourhoods. Satellite pictures are not accurate enough to capture the situation. Drone pictures are much sharper, they are accurate to within four centimetres. You can see laundry hanging.’

For her PhD project in 2015, she conducted research in one of the slums of the Rwandan capital Kigali. ‘Of course, I was the news of the day with my drone. People walked with me and applauded when I managed to get a picture of a hard-to-reach spot.’

Not all local residents were equally enthusiastic about Gevaert’s arrival. ‘Some people,’ she recalls, ‘thought I was taking pictures of the neighbourhood because I was planning to build a hotel there, or that I was an American spy.’

Once the pictures are merged with the help of AI programmes, detailed maps of the slum can be made. ‘A few years later I returned and saw that the pictures were on the walls of the neighbourhood office. The district council used them so they knew where to build roads.’

She has since also worked for the World Bank, which is particularly interested in how drone technology can be used in developing countries. Flying drones over places where many people live raises questions about privacy.

And sentiments differ: what one person considers an intrusion into private life, another does not see as a problem. In Kigali, no one minded their clothes being displayed,’ says Gevaert. ‘But they did not want rubbish in gardens or on roofs photographed.’

There was also a cultural reason for this: ‘Rwandans like to stress that they live in a clean and safe country—dirty gardens don’t really fit with that statement. After the research, she decided not to publicise the pictures of the neighbourhood online. You can only see them on request.’

Last year, she was one of ten young researchers at the University of Twente who were awarded a Veni grant by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). With this grant, she wants to do more research into the ethical issues in her field.

‘The world of drone photography and artificial intelligence is still something like the Wild West,’ she says. Privacy is not the only concern. ‘There have been many discussions about how facial recognition technology recognises light-skinned people but not dark-skinned people. You see a similar effect when you apply this kind of technology geographically.’

Algorithms that are made to recognise buildings also discriminate: houses in slums are often not registered. ‘If flooding then occurs, those neighbourhoods are often not properly mapped, so they run the risk of not receiving help.’

In some countries, the alumni even have a big say when it comes to government policies. Such as Siti Nurbaya Bakar, who became Minister of Environment and Forestry in Indonesia in 2014. She is known for her aversion to corruption and bureaucracy: in a previous position as Secretary-General of the Indonesian Senate, she was happy to take on recent graduates to supplement the experienced staff.

Bakar is not the only ITC alumna walking around the Ministry. At present,’ says Tom Loran, ‘we have 140 people working there who have previously studied with us.’

The corona crisis has put a global emphasis on the importance of scientific expertise in policymaking. In the Netherlands, the Oort-break Management Team became the main advisor for national crisis management. In the US, the—now controversial—Anthony Fauci was catapulted to national prominence.

The political role for scientific experts is not undisputed: critics point out the danger of an expertocracy. Loran sees it differently; according to him, there is no dictatorship of the white coats.

‘What I see,’ he says, ‘is that there is much more doubt surrounding science.’

He clearly experiences a difference with the past when it comes to trust in scientists and the effort they have to put in to convince the general public of their findings: ‘These days, after five minutes of Googling, you can always find sources that support your point of view.’

He sees this reflected in the lectures he gives at the ITC. ‘When I started teaching, I hardly ever got a rebuttal—no matter what I said. Nowadays, the questions students ask are much more critical. That is, of course, a good development, which we encourage.’

This critical attitude of students may also have another cause. ‘The relationship between the students and the faculty has been changing recently,’ explains Loran.

‘In the past,’ he says, ‘the ITC worked differently when it set up the programmes based on what we think is good for the world. The students could come to us, learn that and then go back to their own countries and apply it. Now things are different.’

Advice for the policy note

‘Most of the major challenges that concern us,’ says Tom Loran, ‘require a global solution: from migration to climate change. In the Netherlands, much expertise and knowledge is available for sustainable solutions.’

The knowledge institutions—combined with the global alumni and partner networks—form a very valuable sector in this. ‘We must mobilise that network on equal terms.’

‘With our partners, we can build an innovation infrastructure to strengthen the chain of education and training between North and South. In our focus countries, this is a prerequisite for effective and sustainable cooperation.’

‘It requires a tailor-made approach, surely, in which the local context and the local need for knowledge are leading. There should be long-term cooperation, supported by a broad and flexible scholarship programme.’

‘Finally, achieving change and impact is a question of perseverance and continuity. So a longer-term approach (for example, ten years) will be much more effective.’

Foreign students can sometimes get a scholarship from the Orange Knowledge Fund, which is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. ‘But that has become a lot rarer.’

Often, these scholarships were related to themes that the Ministry considered important at the time. ‘The subjects were therefore mainly political,’ explains Loran.

‘Students are increasingly having to do their own fundraising, which makes them look more critically at the programmes offered by the ITC. They only come to us if they truly think it’s necessary. Our education must therefore align even more closely with the needs that exist in the students’ societies.’

The ITC is therefore experimenting with new forms of education. ‘For example, we are trying to tailor Master’s programmes to students’ needs,’ says Loran. ‘The help of the extensive alumni network is also called upon for this.’

It also applies to the new online academy that the ITC is currently working on, which will make it possible to follow the lectures on the internet. ‘One of the key lessons of the corona crisis was that we can do much more online than we thought.’

Caroline Gevaert

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In the early 1980s, a recently graduated hydrogeologist travelled to Burkina Faso to survey the water situation there. Where are the water sources? How deep are the wells? The information was collected by hand and processed by the young Jeroen van der Sommen into one of the country’s first digitised hydrogeological maps.

Looking back, the now 64-year-old water expert sees his years in Burkina Faso—and later in Indonesia and Mozambique—as the starting point for a long career in which the collection of crucial data for development interventions plays the leading role. The importance of data is reflected in the Netherlands Water Partnership (NWP), which he has led since its inception in 1998 and at the launch of Akvo in 2008.

‘In the first years following the turn of the century,’ says Van der Sommen, ‘in the Akvo office in Amsterdam, you see a revival of all kinds of new innovative technologies. The Internet took off, the mobile phone became commonplace. ‘But when I looked around me, I noticed that these technologies were rarely reaching the development sector in a professional capacity. It is for precisely this reason that we founded Akvo: a club with sector specialists who have a thorough knowledge of the field and IT professionals who see the importance of digital data in transforming development aid.’

Data collection has taken off in a big way over the last fifteen years. Where did Akvo start?

‘In the early days, we concentrated mainly on making mobile telephony accessible to NGOs and governments. Mobile phones are an excellent way to collect data and to demonstrate what you are working on in a project.

‘If you are going to visit all kinds of water points and schools or collect information in the field, you might as well store and organise that data immediately. It will then be much more useful in the future.’

Nowadays, according to Van der Sommen, many organisations are collecting their data and there is plenty of accessible software for processing.

‘It’s great that we are now collecting a great deal of data as a sector, but what happens to it? And are any decisions taken based on that data? In recent years, Akvo has been focusing on this next step, on a more holistic approach to data and its importance for development!’

The Data Journey is Akvo’s approach to the role of data in development. It is an information journey in which a great deal of emphasis is placed on collecting and analysing data before a project is put into action.

‘It is a cycle in which you first consider carefully what you want to achieve: what exactly do I want to know, and perhaps the data is already available? In the next step, you go to the field to store data and then you process the data to gain a better understanding of what is really needed. It is only the final step that involves taking action.’

Has there been a situation or a case where data could truly make a difference?

‘A good example, a wake-up call, was a project in which we were involved in Nigeria five years ago. Akvo surveyed the water situation there, all the water points, systems...’

‘What exactly do I want to know, and perhaps the data is already available?’

Which challenges are involved in such a process?

‘Data can sometimes be painful. For example, the study in Nigeria showed that many water systems were defective. The research was paid for by the World Bank, which in turn collated a large amount of data alongside ours.

‘It turned out that half of the people in Nigeria have no access to water and sanitation! It also calculated the impact on the country’s economy—and as it was in black and white, recorded in figures and on maps, no one could ignore it.

‘As a result of that report, enormous investment programmes were started in Nigeria: by UNICEF, the European Union and by the World Bank itself, to improve the situation.’

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Which challenges are involved in such a process?

‘Data can sometimes be painful. For example, the study in Nigeria showed that there might have been many water points in a region, but they were all clustered around the village leader’s house. The Nigerian government, embarrassed, preferred to keep the findings under wraps. Not everyone benefits from the facts. That makes data collection—and especially the transition to action—challenging.’

What do you think is the biggest data challenge in development cooperation?

‘The biggest? I would say the use, re-use and especially sharing of data. In the development sector, we are all more or less doing our own thing. We are far too confined within our own individual areas.’
Remote data collection

Burkina Faso, or ‘the land of the honest men’, was long known for its successful and peaceful survival. But since 2017, the security situation there has rapidly deteriorated. In a spiral of terror and violence, 1.4 million inhabitants have fled, out of a total of twenty million. So how do you determine the water needs of these people? Anyone wanting to develop good water and sanitation projects for the crisis areas in Burkina Faso needs reliable data, says Abdoulaye Semdé. He is responsible for Akvo’s West Africa programme. Reporting from Ouagadougou, he is keen to talk about the importance of data in this turbulent situation.

‘Without reliable data, you run the risk of making wrong decisions,’ he says. ‘By collecting and analysing data, we can make decisions about the water needs was necessary. Together with UNICEF, Alvo therefore developed an approach to collect and organise this data in the best possible way.

What did you want to know about the people?

‘We wanted to survey access to drinking water, hygiene and sanitation,’ says Semdé. ‘Because of the conflict, a new inventory was needed. How many wells are there and are they full? Which water pumps are broken? Are there enough latrines for the displaced people? If not, what are the alternatives for relieving themselves? Is there enough water left over for the host population taking in the refugees? We collected all this data.’

Due to the deteriorating security situation—Burkina Faso suddenly finds itself in third place of the world’s deadliest terrorist countries—this was probably not an easy task. ‘No, certainly not,’ says Abdoulaye Rabdo, a direct colleague of Semdé’s who is responsible for carrying out this challenging project. ‘Because the area is unsafe, we gathered all the data by phone. In twenty communities, we managed to identify 93 people as “key informants”: people with a certain social status, such as teachers, doctors and nurses. Through a telephone survey, we questioned them about access to drinking water, hygiene and sanitation.’

What was the biggest challenge in collecting this data in conflict areas?

‘It was not easy to find people who wanted to be interviewed,’ says Rabdo. ‘Not even by phone. You have to imagine that our population is in the middle of a complex conflict, a phone call from an unknown number is not easily answered. ‘So first we had to create trust and that takes time. Respondents were also reluctant to make calls from home, as this could have aroused suspicion among their neighbours. ‘What did we do? We made an appointment to call on a market day: the respondent travelled to the weekly market, where he or she could blend into the crowd anonymously, and then we called for the interview.’

That sounds challenging.

‘Definitely. Add several practical complications to this, such as dead batteries and a failing phone signal, and you can understand that we had to have a lot of patience.’

In the end, the data was collected. What is going to happen now? In conflict situations, water and hygiene are vital,’ says Semdé. ‘The most important factor, I must say. Water is what people need—and right now the wssn situation is critical for many in Burkina Faso. ‘Women, men and children sometimes spend half the day trying to get a few litres of water for the family. Through our data collection, we have identified the gaps in access to water and sanitation. We now know which wells need maintenance and where latrines are needed. ‘We have shared the information with UNICEF, which will ensure that wssn actors can start data-based action here.’

He grabs a PowerPoint presentation to make his point. Data, he shows, is collected by all manner of parties, from the World Bank to UN organisations, NGOs and national governments, but the data subsequently remains stuck in those institutions. It is rarely shared.

‘Most of the data is also stored in the countless individual NGO projects. In Mali alone, there are now more than fifteen hundred! So an NGO receives money from a donor and then carries out its project. Once the report has been written and the accountability approved, that’s it. The data disappears. Such a pity! ‘Imagine if we had kept the data from all the years I worked in the sector. What would we have learned about development processes?’

The donors often don’t look beyond these limits either, he observes. ‘They pay a lot of money to have data collected, but do not take the next step. Well, I think that is the biggest scandal of the sector, that we handle data so badly, the importance of which everyone is aware of. You won’t see that within the private parties, they grasped the importance of it much sooner.’

Actually, the sector is still data-illiterate. Van der Sommen analyses. The NGOs and donor countries, but also the developing countries themselves. They are all still in a transition process towards a more data-driven approach.

What is the Netherlands’ position in this story when it comes to data for development? Are we progressive?

‘Fortunately, you can now see this shifting at the international level; the World Bank, for example, published a report this year that clearly states the importance of data for development. It’s called Data for Better Lives. There is also a fund associated with it, the Global Data Facility, which opens early next year. Money will therefore be available for data projects: that’s what the situation requires.’

‘Once the report has been written and the accountability approved, that’s it. The data disappears. Such a pity!’

But it is somewhat lacking, there is no funding behind it. The hope is that data-driven processes will be incorporated into projects by default, but that hardly ever happens. Akvo has also noticed how difficult it is to obtain funding for data projects.

‘In development cooperation, we still think a lot in terms of compartments such as agriculture, water, youth unemployment and climate, but “data” runs through everything. A donor will ask, “Is your project about water or more about youth employment?” We often fall between the two.’

Abdoulaye Semdé
Abdoulaye Rabdo
Easing the impact of Covid

If anything has put the importance of data for development on the map, it is the pandemic. Which hospital needs what? In which region are resources in short supply? For the Ugandan government, Akvo collected and organised crucial data in the fight against Covid-19. Engineer Franky Li has been working as a data specialist in the developing world for over twenty years. His arrival at Akvo coincided more or less with the start of the pandemic: there was work to be done. In Uganda, where Akvo runs several projects, the Covid approach proved to be in dire need of more oversight.

“As you often see in large-scale crises,” he says, “there are many organisations that want to help. The local clubs are usually the first on the scene and after a while, foreign NGOs also flood into a country or crisis area.”

This also happened in Uganda, where the government and large UN organisations like the WHO and UNICEF found it difficult to keep track of all the aid activities carried out throughout the country.

“As a data and information technology NGO,” says Li, “Akvo looks at the information gap. In this case, it was clear: the Ugandan government wanted to have a better understanding of how sanitation and water aid products were distributed for the pandemic control.”

How were you able to help?

‘Akvo developed a digital platform—an online storage facility—that keeps track of current data on resource allocation. “This allows the Ugandan Ministry of Health to make better-informed decisions in the Covid response. This enables them to determine where too few or too many resources are going and to distribute them better.”

What kind of resources are involved?

“It starts with the basics: gloves, face masks and disinfectants. Are there hospitals with a shortage or a surplus of basic resources? As a Ministry, you want to know that, of course. “The platform also assesses the sanitation and water needs. In Uganda, it may occur that a health clinic has room for more patients, but does not have enough water supplies to care for them. Or perhaps there is a shortage of toilets. “We also monitor online training activities. So you can review what has been achieved for medical staff in terms of Covid knowledge transfer.”

How do you collect the data?

“Organisations can enter their data themselves, or we offer to do it. It is quite detailed. Under the heading ‘Hygiene’, the system literally records how many pairs of rubber boots were issued and where.”

Retrieving this data seems quite difficult.

“The people working in the field are often extremely busy. Their minds are on the wells that need to be dug or the masks that need to be on-site as soon as possible. “In such a situation, collecting the data can indeed be a challenge. It’s not that it’s considered unimportant... sometimes the priorities are elsewhere.”

So why is it so important?

“All these organisations do not always know about each other’s activities. Sometimes five different clubs approach a hospital with a water offer, while a neighbouring hospital has nothing. It is in the interest of all parties to make that transparent and to distribute the resources more fairly.”

Why is your data platform concept innovative?

‘It solves several problems in finding, using and sharing reliable data. We support organisations that seek data and we believe that if you need new data, you need to involve young people in the communities in collecting it. 

‘With this platform, we want to move towards a system of professional data collectors: youth in the field, who are trained and paid. That also generates employment in the villages.

‘And at least equally important: the platform will ensure that all data remains accessible to the people in the community so that they themselves can make better plans for the future, based on good data. In doing so, we will engage local, new start-ups to provide data services and ensure that data from completed projects is not lost.”

When you reflect on your own organisation, what would you like to improve or change?

“The importance of data for development has become well-established, now we would like to contribute to more action. The Netherlands is entering into an increasing number of large, long-term development projects. These are multi-million dollar programmes that sometimes run for ten years.

“This trend is also seen among other donors. It offers an excellent opportunity to jointly harness more structural data management in the programmes. If you set to work in a village, region, province or country for ten years, you have to do something with data collection on a structural basis. We would like to address that better.”

Which lesson would you like to pass on to others based on your working methods?

‘The biggest lesson is for the donors and is in line with what I just mentioned: donors, integrate data collection and analysis in the large programmes. Try to create a data infrastructure that will allow you to collect and preserve valuable information for the future of development interventions.’

If you could write a single passage in the policy paper of the new Minister for Development Cooperation, what would it be?

“I would include a statement that we recognise the incredibly important role that data play in development cooperation—and that we should therefore also invest in data for better livelihoods.

‘From now on, a percentage of each programme budget will be set aside to properly store and share the data generated. If we don’t do that, we destroy capital and this awareness will have to be reflected in a new policy document. Also set aside resources to train people and promote “data literacy”, and invest particular attention in cyber security.”

‘In the coming years, there is going to be so much unimaginable change in the area of data... All the big IT companies from the US and China are already rapidly sucking up agricultural data in Africa. The development sector has a lot of catching up to do and a contribution to make in order to make the countries and people resistant to this form of “data colonisation”.

‘We can at least try to ensure that data is not being used for the profits of a small group of shareholders, but rather with the motivation to help people move forward.”

‘If you set to work in a village, region, province or country for ten years, you have to do something with data collection on a structural basis’

Aided by machine learning

Those responsible for providing drinking water to as many people as possible will want to know which water points require maintenance. Ideally, you would like to know when a tap or pump is about to fail so you can repair it in time, but can this be predicted?

In Sierra Leone, Akvo conducted a pilot project using artificial intelligence for self-learning machines. Using data collected in the past, machines can be taught to recognise patterns and even make predictions.

Using this technique, Akvo can now predict with 85 percent accuracy which water points will fail. This way, as many people as possible can be supplied with safe drinking water.
Keeping a foothold in the communities hardest hit by climate change and the run on resources. Not speak for that community, but inform her properly and let her decide. Legal assist her where necessary and simultaneously use the knowledge and skills of other activists worldwide.

This working method—in short, the core of the activist work of the Mozambican NGO Justiça Ambiental (JA!)—takes time, but in the end, it delivers the most, says founder and coordinator Daniel Ribeiro: ‘It is crucial. There is always a chance that we can no longer support such a community. She has to do it; the change starts with her, we support her capacity.’

JA! is one of 73 national member organisations of the international network Friends of the Earth International, the world’s largest federation of environmental movements. It brings together more than two million activists worldwide who work for climate justice and human rights. Building and strengthening a grassroots movement is in the genes—also at the Dutch branch of Milieudefensie.

‘A timber and plantation company were after the land of four communities in one of the largest and last remaining rainforests in southern Africa,’ Ribeiro says, to illustrate. ‘These communities were weighing their options. With whom would they do business?’

‘They are free to decide with whom they enter into a contract, but in guiding those negotiations, we try to ensure that they at least keep their land rights. Should such a company’s project fail, they at least still own their land.’

These are lengthy processes, sometimes lasting years, he continues: ‘We inform them about the options and their consequences, organise webinars with community representatives, for which you have to arrange translators. We help them to unite, register, connect them to small funds and show them the options of other income-generating activities, such as keeping bees or chickens.’

‘We really work from the ground up,’ Ilham Rawoot, coordinator of the gas campaign at JA!, also stresses: ‘I think a lot of organisations say they do, but in reality, they don’t. JA! is very good at it. We work on what is needed at the community level—and we are supported internationally.’

Ribeiro: ‘You soon see the tendency among the large NGOs to take over, to speak on behalf of the communities. That does not demonstrate any confidence that these communities can make decisions themselves.’

If an international company is involved, the global Friends network quickly comes into play. And in resource-rich Mozambique, that’s a pretty big deal, says Ribeiro.

‘For the natural gas alone, companies and investors come from all over the world, including France, Italy and the United States—and from the Netherlands, through export credit insurer Atradius Dutch...’
State Business. Sometimes more than twenty countries are involved in what is happening in our nation. If such an organisation or institution does not take the environmental and labour standards very seriously, Ribeiro is happy to use the knowledge and capacity of the Friends network and the household it has done.

‘If a particular company is active in our country,’ he says, ‘we investigate where else it operates. Then we ask the local Friends partner how the company operates there and who finances it. Whether its behaviour is the normal course of business or that of a specific subsidiary. We can use research that has already been done and build our campaigns on it.’

Take Green Resources, Ribeiro says: ‘A Norwegian timber company that manages large tracts of land in Mozambique, also active in Uganda and Tanzania. There, too, the company is responsible for land grabbing and conflicts, as we have learned from the partners. The company works the same everywhere.’

We always work at the request of the Global South, Donald Pols, director of Milieudefensie at the office in Amsterdam, says. ‘That’s in the true of the network, and I genuinely check it. There has to be a request, a referral or a contract between the director of a partner and me.’

This is how Friends of the Earth arrived at its strategy, which is developed every two years in an international meeting where southern partners are represented, Pols told us.

The input of southern partners during one of these meetings has proved crucial in several cases, says Isabelle Geuskens, programme officer at Milieudefensie. For example, the Just Energy Transition programme, part of the Global Livelihood Alliance, which aims to combat deforestation and pollution, has gained an important new pillar through this southern input.

Previously, the focus was mainly on fossil fuels, but now, renewable energy has been added—and this is not just about access but also about the responsible mining and use of raw materials for this purpose.

‘Making this energy transition genuinely fair is the priority for the next five years, says Geuskens. ‘That we are not sitting here doing our green thing, while the South suffers the negative consequences because of it. For example, our South American partners in particular raised the issue that energy transition would also involve a lot of mining—with land grabbing and pollution. Thus, they would provide the raw materials for the transition of the West, while being left in a state of poverty.’

‘Our energy transition must be ambitious,’ says Pols, ‘but also fair to developing countries. We must consider the transition onto them. The extraction of raw materials, such as cobalt, nickel and lithium for our batteries, solar panels and wind turbines, is still being performed by Congolese children, and has to change.’

‘Not only should the export to Europe meet the sustainability standards, but the South must not become a dumping ground for the waste from our green technology. We want to put this on the agenda in the Just Energy Transition programme, among others.’

‘That is the negative side of the story, but we also have a positive message. If we shape the energy transition cleverly, it can also contribute to economic progress. Developing countries don’t have to make the same mistakes we did, and they can develop their own sector.’

‘Break a product down into parts and see what can be produced in the South. We haven’t had this opportunity before in our modern economic history. Because these sectors are new, you can now shape them however you want—but you have to be present from the start.’

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\[46\] At a number of other NGOs organised a campaign, visited financial and got a group of shareholders to sell their shares because of these issues.

‘We are a small organisation with eleven people,’ says Ribeiro, ‘and cannot invest in long-term lobbying campaigns. This consultation with other organisations helps us to better understand what is going on, and that way, we can develop good campaigns.’

The network also helps the organisation to formulate positions. ‘Such as climate change, a complex issue about which everyone has their own idea,’ he says. ‘There is always room for discussion and debate within the international network. ‘Much of our understanding results from these processes.’

This cross-border cooperation can also give campaigns an interesting twist. For example, we started the gas campaign in Mozambique. We charted the course with the support of Friends of the Earth. But the campaign gradually expanded to France because the French energy giant Total turned out to be the largest natural gas extractor in the country.

‘The international campaign now focuses on Total, but also Shell, ExxonMobil and Eni and the network of financial players, including credit insurers such as Atradius. We are working together with Friends of the Earth and the US.

‘Each member organisation determines its own approach to the campaign, and we support each other. That way, we can run multiple campaigns, internationalise our campaigns or implement international campaigns locally, which works really well.

‘Conversely, we also introduce topics through elected and rotating representation in the network. Each region has two volunteer representatives on the executive committee of Friends of the Earth—it’s a way of influencing and being involved. With two members from each region, the steering committee runs campaigns and is a forum for consultation on issues affecting the continents.’

Without this bottom-up participation, without this information from ‘the field’, such a gas campaign would be a very white, European-driven campaign aimed at white European powers, Rawoot adds. ‘The local communities are the basis of the campaign. Vice versa, organisations like us get access to the power structures where our information needs to land. This way, we reinforce each other.’
if you only convince one Member of Parliament, they can make a big difference.

Our southern partners identify the priorities, says Pols. ‘Our role here is then to plan and work out these priorities. Partners are supported in, for example, conducting research. If a club is good at activism, mobilisation and campaigning, he says, they have to be provided with funds so that they, in turn, can do a good job. Sometimes, you don’t want them to turn into a research agency. So we出资 that to professional research groups, preferably together with a local agency or university, so there is also a knowledge transfer. Our partners help us supply the data, figures and issues and help us think about the message we then need to propagate.

The partners receive a lot of support, says Pols. ‘I have a large team here that does some of the planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning. We take over some of the bureaucracy so that they can do their important work.’

‘With the best of intentions, but it does have a downside, he admits. ‘The balance of power sometimes shifts. We help partners build capacity so that they can write the reports and raise funds for themselves. ‘The Ministry could stop providing funds at any time, so partners should not be dependent on you. After five years, they should be able to operate completely independently, but it is an unequal relationship, especially in the beginning. I am struggling with that—and I don’t have a solution for it.’

According to Pols, it is the tension between political work and management thinking—the urge to make results more and more measurable, which mainly comes from an important donor, the Ministry. ‘But the systemic change we are striving for is always more difficult to measure,’ he says, ‘especially our specific role in it—I call it the paradox of measurability. ‘You can eat less meat, and then the CO2 impact can be measured down to the exact gram of CO2, but the impact of your signature on the issue of this work is therefore placed in the hands of a smaller group.’

Ribeiro also sees similar developments in the NGO world in Mozambique. NGOs are becoming larger, more business-like and are increasingly opting for the best achievable aids; the traditional ‘development work based on philanthropy, he observes. ‘More and more organisations work on uncontroversial problems; he says, ‘such as healthcare and education, or take part in those multi-stakeholder dialogues where there is a lot of talking. ‘The safe bets. ‘Activist work—and finding funds and cooperation partners for it—does not become easier, but more dangerous,’ he says: ‘The risk of this work is therefore placed in the hands of a smaller group. According to him, the reasons he partly in the West.
In Sumatra, illegal logging is detected by hanging old, discarded mobile phones high up in the trees and by listening for the sound of motor saws.
It starts with biodiversity

Thirty percent of the land and the oceans should be protected by 2030, to save a million endangered plant and animal species from extinction. IUCN NL is unstintingly committed to this goal, because nature conservation is at the basis of all the Sustainable Goals, says Coenraad Krijger. If you don’t take care of biodiversity, water and sanitation, and climate, the rest will not succeed either.

Text: Pieter Verbeek

Ever since his childhood, Coenraad Krijger has been a true nature lover. It was therefore a logical step to study biology in Wageningen, after which he conducted field research in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America.

At the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), he gained experience in policy and international cooperation—experience he has been using since 2016 for IUCN NL, the Dutch branch of the global nature organisation, known for its Red List of Threatened Species.

How does IUCN NL work as a nature organisation in the field of development cooperation?

‘If you look at the more traditional development cooperation, it is often about stimulating economic development. From the point of view of nature conservation, it is almost always about reclamation: taming nature and creating and cultivating fields to enable economic growth.

‘Such development is usually focused on achieving the immediate needs of people, forgetting the long term. Nowadays, fortunately, you see that it is increasingly about restoring nature, or preserving nature to enable local development. ‘In the past, IUCN NL mainly worked on ecosystems and the green environment, now we look for alternatives, for other ways of making a living. That is why we often focus our protection on indigenous people who live in and around a nature reserve. ‘They look at nature differently than we do in the Netherlands. There you often don’t go into nature for fun, there are diseases and dangerous animals. There are elephants that destroy your crops.

‘That is why it is so important to build up and disseminate knowledge about how important nature conservation is and to take that knowledge into your projects. It makes no sense to close off a nature area with a fence and tell the local population to go fend for themselves. That’s not a solution and it’s not ethical.’

How do you see the role of IUCN NL versus that of civil society organisations in Africa, Asia and Latin America?

‘As a conservation organisation, we have been working for more than 25 years with local organisations worldwide that protect, manage or advocate for people who depend on nature.

‘Here, we have an eye for the local situation and let international networks and perspectives connect to it. For example, we have had a land acquisition fund for twenty years, with support from the Dutch Postcode Lottery. This enables us to enable local organisations to purchase land for the protection of endangered species and ecosystems.

‘The condition is that it has a strategic location for the connection of nature. That produces very cool, concrete results. Because the organisations are anchored locally, there is no tension—it belongs to the communities themselves. Their children grow up there, they start eco-tourism projects.’

Are your partners financially dependent on IUCN NL?

‘Many of our partners have developed into independent, professional clubs. Recently, for example, the Fundación para la Conservación y el Desarrollo Sostenible—from Colombia—took us on a project where it is the lead agency. We are proud of this.'
The Kayan River basin, on the Indonesian island of Borneo, is experiencing increased flooding. Residential and working areas and agricultural crops are lost in the densely populated area in the river delta. To support the local government in redeveloping the area, IUCN NL provided its partner Sawit Watch with advanced drones. As the area has recently acquired a new district called Bulungan, the local government decided to review the land use planning, says Maxime Eiselin.

‘Only, the government had no idea what was happening there in terms of deforestation, or expansion of palm oil plantations and cities. That should be the basis of your planning.’

That is why IUCN NL has supported the Sawit Watch NGO with advanced, airplane-like drones that can cover truly great distances and make aerial photos and GIS analyses from great heights. For years, the partner has been working within Indonesia to preserve ecosystems that provide sufficient water, food and resistance to climate change.

With the drones, it can help the local government in Bulungan to map land use in the area and design land-use planning so that enough forest is spared in the catchment to ensure the natural water regulation needed to prevent flooding. IUCN NL funded the project and advised on the procurement of the type of drones and on the training of Sawit Watch staff, among other things.

‘Our goal was to at least protect the forest in the upstream area of the Kayan River,’ Eiselin says. ‘Thanks to the Sawit Watch aerial photos, this has moved up on the agenda. It is under pressure from encroaching palm oil plantations.’

The forest at the top of the Kayan catchment area naturally captures a lot of water during heavy rains, protecting the downstream population from flooding. But with climate change, the showers are getting heavier.

The felling of forests for the expansion of palm oil plantations in the catchment area is at the expense of the natural buffer capacity to absorb water during rainfall. As a result, downstream flooding is becoming more frequent and more intense. ‘The urgency is growing,’ emphasises Riza Hartajadin, head of the social department of Sawit Watch. ‘Only last year the Kayan delta suffered severe flooding, which forced the evacuation of about seven thousand residents and the provision of emergency aid by the local government.’

Not surprisingly, the local government realises that something has to be done to counteract the problems resulting from ecosystem degradation. That is why they sought cooperation with IUCN NL partners Sawit Watch, Walhi and Padi to protect forests and biodiversity in the Kayan river basin.

‘The area now needs careful spatial planning, in which the locations for nature, agricultural land and habitats are harmonised and sustainably designed. Because Sawit Watch could help with data on land use, it won the trust of the government. That is why they took the NGO’s advice not to grant concessions for forest clearance and plantations in the upstream areas.

‘Thanks to the drones,’ says Eiselin, ‘there were good arguments for it. The aerial photos showed how important the forest is for the water supply in the downstream area. Now there is a land-use plan, where the development of the area goes hand in hand with maintaining sufficient green infrastructure to protect the population from the floods, which are becoming more frequent due to climate change.’

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Discarded mobile phones against deforestation

Innovation does not always have to be about the latest technology. In Sumatra, IUCN NL’s partner works with old, used mobile phones to record the sounds of illegal activities in the forest—whether from chainsaws, motorbikes or trucks. This way, local communities can quickly take action to protect their forest.

The idea of using discarded mobile phones to protect tropical forests came from American whizkid Tophar White. While doing volunteer work with gibbons, he saw with his own eyes how the tropical forest is threatened.

Back home, he developed software in his garage to pick up sounds from the forest day and night. He tinkered with a device: it contains old mobile phones with the software in a protective case, and they are linked to a good microphone and solar panels that provide them with power.

If you hang these devices high up in the trees of the forest, they catch the sun’s rays, along with the sounds of illegal loggers. Meanwhile, White and his organisation have installed the devices in several forest areas worldwide.

In Mudiak Baduo, in West Sumatra, upstream of the Batanghari and Indragiri Rokan rivers, Komunitas Konservasi Indonesia (KKI) Warsi—the local partner of IUCN NL—has hung them up together with White’s Rainforest Connection. The old mobiles are called Guardians there, as protectors of the forest.

A total of 27 Guardians have been installed around nine villages. Together, they can monitor an area of 23,878 hectares, along with the forest guards and local police who patrol it.

With the mobile phones, KK Warsi is helping to roll out a programme of the Indonesian government, the Social Forestry Scheme. With this, the government wants to involve local communities more in the management and protection of the tropical forest.

And this is needed in Mudiak Baduo, says Rainal Daus, of KK Warsi: ‘Much of the forest has already been cut down here, due to illegal logging and mining activities. We want to protect the remaining areas from further deforestation and degradation.’

Under the government programme, each participating village receives a licence to act as forest manager. ‘A number of villages, says Daus, already carry out regular patrols, checking the forest for illegal activities. But they can’t do the checks all the time—and what we often see is that illegal activities take place precisely when they are not on patrol.

‘Illegal logging usually only comes to light when it is already too late. That is why we needed a method to continuously monitor the forest, and also to expand the area. ‘Thanks to the Guardians, this is possible for the local population. The benefits are great. The villagers are able to detect crimes more quickly by recording the events, and this in turn can be used as evidence in court cases. In Indonesia, electronic evidence counts in cases of illegal deforestation.’

The village teams working with the Guardians are called parimbo. Each team monitors reports of chainsaws, vehicles or weapons. If suspicious, they upload the sounds into an app with their location, so that they can reach the patrol teams in the forest.

Evidence of crimes is reported to the local government and to foresters, who can take better action against offenders. ‘It gives the local communities more capacity to collect evidence of crime in their forest,’ says Daus. ‘A network has therefore developed between the patrol teams to share knowledge. And the old local knowledge of how to protect the forest is thus better passed on from generation to generation.’

Meanwhile, thanks to the evidence collected by the parimbo teams, many successful patrols have already been out and about preventing logging in the Mudiak Baduo forest.

Can we still combat the loss of biodiversity?

If you look realistically, a lot of things will die out and be destroyed. It works the same way if we were to stop emitting CO2, now, the earth would still continue to warm up for the next thirty years.

The advantage in this is that if you stop deforestation, the loss of biodiversity on the ground really does stop. But unfortunately, the machinery and the system work in such a way that it will still do some damage. I am afraid of what is still to come.

‘At the same time, fortunately, you do see that it often works when there is a specific focus on nature conservation. Of course, there is a certain limit that you should not cross, but you can actually bring back species that are close to extinction.

‘There are plenty of examples of this: nature can recover, it is resilient. Just look here, in the Netherlands. We have recovered a lot of nature, such as beavers and sea eagles, and the wolf is back. That is an effect of nature conservation.’

Reflecting on your own organisation: what would you like to do better or change?

‘I see three challenges. You notice that the importance of nature and biodiversity is not yet in people’s minds. We can do more to promote this, as can our members.

‘Also, nature conservation has long been in its own scene, with its own discussions and challenges, while we are in the middle of major transitions, such as sustainability and gender equality. These are major social issues that are all reflected in our work. We need to position ourselves more in those areas, connect more with them in our work.

‘We are reconsidering our own role. In recent decades, we have become big because we managed Dutch or European tax money well and passed it on to local organisations, which did great things with it. That worked fine for years.

‘Now we notice that many organisations can and want to do it themselves and that donors like it, too. If we think less like a financier, how can we offer added value? I am convinced that with our international network and our expertise, we have great added value.’

You notice that the importance of nature and biodiversity is not yet in people’s minds

If you could write one passage in the policy paper of the new Minister for Development Cooperation, what would it be?

‘That is obvious: that international biodiversity becomes one of the spearheads of the policy. Water, climate and food security are in the policy, but biodiversity and the protection of tropical forests are included with climate change—while they are the basis of all these other major issues.

‘It really doesn’t need a separate name, but now there is no money for it at all. We have been advocating it for some time and have had talks about it with the government. The Netherlands should actually take the lead in an international investment agenda for the large ecosystems. Think of the Congo basin, the Amazon forest, the coral reefs.

‘These are areas that require an international approach, transcending the borders and sovereignty of countries. The Netherlands is very much embedded in these multilateral systems. We are extremely well suited to make such an approach possible, and that is what I would really like to call attention to.’

Vice Versa
Amref Flying Doctors, together with Philips and the government, is working on ‘revolutionary’ healthcare in the Kenyan province Makueni—and it has captured local hearts. *Vice Versa* went to take a look. ‘Patients are treated with respect, not like in the hospital here, where the doctors and nurses shout at you. This is really our centre.’

**‘After my first week at work, I thought: these people are organised, from beginning to end’**

‘Your baby can be born in a safe environment, you can get a really good check-up if you have health problems, and you get aftercare from a local healthcare provider. This centre is truly an oasis in the desert.’

Text: Marc Broere and Nicera Wanjiru

Emali is a city in eastern Kenya situated along the busy highway between Mombasa and Nairobi and has roughly twenty thousand residents. Large container trucks roar past, and they often stop there to spend the night or buy something from the numerous roadside fruit and vegetable vendors.

The popular train that transports tourists back and forth to the coast also stops here as Emali is a good base if you want to go to the Tsavo National Park. One can derive from the many new builds under construction, still covered by scaffolding, that the city is booming.

The Emali Model Health Centre is located a hundred metres from the main road. The surroundings are green, and a cool, fresh breeze is blowing. At the centre, patients come and go, and the atmosphere is friendly. Joseph Karumah Muia, a young man aged 35, who has been working here for a year, is the clinical officer in charge—before that, he was a doctor at Sultan County Hospital. He did not have to apply for his new job; doctors and nurses, like teachers, are appointed by the government.

In his small office, he starts talking enthusiastically: ‘I would like to characterise what we do as revolutionary healthcare. We have several things here that you cannot find in other health centres, pharmacies or even large hospitals. I am not just talking about the equipment we have here, but also about how everything is organised. After my first week at work, I thought: these people are organised, from beginning to end; this is how a health centre should operate.’

The Makueni province, where Emali is located, has over one million inhabitants. According to the doctor, it is a district with many health problems. ‘Lung problems occur among children because of the bad things they inhale, for example, while cooking. Also, children often eat without washing their hands, and you see many with bad skin caused by malnutrition.’

Adults have different ailments. ‘We see many people with diabetes, stomach ulcers and hypertension. Sexually transmitted diseases are also common here because Emali is along the way from Mombasa to Nairobi; truck drivers often spend the night here and have unprotected sex with women.’

And then there is a new issue. ‘Climate change,’ he says, ‘has created many additional problems because people are no longer sure of their harvests—poverty has become absolutely catastrophic. There is no money to buy food, and eating healthy is a prerequisite for your health. If you do not have money for that, you certainly do not have money to go to a health centre clinic or hospital.’

Karumah Muia is silent for a moment and continues: ‘Look, this is a health centre that also has a mental impact on people. You have absolutely nothing and have to fight for your daily bread. But then you have the opportunity to get healthcare practically for free because you have chosen to enroll for an insurance policy.’

Your baby can be born in a safe environment, you can get a really good check-up if you have health problems, and you get aftercare from a local healthcare provider. This centre is truly an oasis in the desert.’

He believes it is the combination of the partnership between the provincial government, Philips and the African health organisation Amref Flying Doctors that makes this possible.

‘Amref has organised all the care, from the centre to the patients in the communities, all through a system of community health volunteers. Philips ensures that we have the best equipment imaginable—not only medical, but also a good computer system that has enabled us to digitise all of our patient data.

‘The success of our centre has encouraged the Makueni government to do more in the field of healthcare. However, the same government sometimes fails in providing essential services, such as supplying medicines. Its staffing policy is also unpredictable; last year, two nurses were suddenly transferred, so now we are short-staffed.’

Joseph Karumah Muia

© Nicera Wanjiru

**The impact of a healthcare centre**
that several things come into play here, including first and foremost the demand side of healthcare. ‘Can people actually find the care when they need it? Do women know that it is wise to go to a clinic if pregnant or if their child has diarrhoea?’

Then there is the supply side. Dubbeldeman: ‘Is that clinic within reach, and do people know how to find it? Is there medical staff to help them? Are there enough medicines and equipment?’

And there is a third side, the financing. ‘You want these facilities to still be there in five or ten years’ time. These are three elements that you need to address together if you want to achieve a sustainable and transformative change in healthcare. Traditionally, Amref Flying Doctors has mainly looked at the impact of the healthcare itself, but now we are also explicitly looking at how we can structure it so that it is also bankable.’

Dubbeldeman explains how the partnership came about. ‘We had one with Philips, which was actually set up very traditionally; we received a donation from Philips and in return mentioned them in our communications.

‘When the partnership ended, and we needed to determine whether we should continue together, we had a brainstorming session, and Gitahi Gitahi—managing director of all Amref offices—was also present. He is a very inspiring man with a vision of genuinely transformative partnerships.

‘Philips had also sent over high-level people for this brainstorming session. We approached it with open minds. Imagine you combine the qualities of Philips and Amref, and you also get the mandate from the government to organise their primary healthcare. You can really go a long way in organising primary healthcare properly. And suppose you can do that in a financially sustainable way.’

‘Philips is a large company, and they have had to go against, for example, the vested interests of the insurance companies in the quality of the care that is being delivered. So it is a very different approach. But if it works, you can say you are doing something that is really bankable.’

‘Amref has a government with a vision, which is also open to sustainable change,’ says Dubbeldeman. ‘The governor is not afraid to make decisions. He is a very inspiring man with a vision of genuinely transforming healthcare.”

‘It is important that all partners really benefit from the programme,’ she says, ‘but if it fails, that you all also only suffer a little’

After a short search, the clinic in Emali was selected to serve as a pilot project, together with two other clinics. The project partners observed the clinic and saw that it was not functioning the way it should. ‘It was all very ineffective,’ Dubbeldeman says.

‘Patients had to queue up for a long time, only to be told that they were in the wrong queue when it was their turn. Or people could not be helped at all, because there were no staff or medicines. If you cannot be helped, you will not return to the clinic again.

‘We then made a design of the clinic. What does the facility need to do that in a financially sustainable way?’

‘Philips have had a long experience in this, and Philips and Amref, and we also get the mandate from the government to organise their primary healthcare. You can really go a long way in organising primary healthcare properly. And suppose you can do that in a financially sustainable way.’

‘Philips is a large company, and they have had to go against, for example, the vested interests of the insurance companies in the quality of the care that is being delivered. So it is a very different approach. But if it works, you can say you are doing something that is really bankable.’

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During a short break, we talk to one of the nurses, Jemina Makau, who worked here before the partnership began. ‘We sit on a chair under a shady tree, she enthusiastically talks about her experiences and work.

‘What really motivates me,’ she says, ‘is to see that patients almost always leave our centre very satisfied. They have received what they needed: medication, a good examination, and they feel that they have been treated well.’

‘The differences compared to the past are huge. ‘We often had to turn away women who came to give birth if we suspected they needed further examination. They were then sent on to Makindu, which is fourteen kilometres away. That was particularly difficult for women who already had very few financial resources.

‘Nowadays, we have all the equipment we need to do the examinations. We can now make ultrasonics to see if the baby is brachied, and we can also administer oxygen if necessary. We used to have four deliveries a month, now we have about forty.’

‘The government is sometimes an uncertain factor, says the nurse. ‘Sometimes people are transferred unexpectedly. We lost two nurses last year which created extra work pressure. Now Amref Flying Doctors has had to provide two new nurses, while that is actually the government’s job!’

‘At the Leiden office, Dubbeldeman emphasises that the partnership is an equal one. ‘All three of us own it, and all three of us have invested in it. The prerequisite is that you really need a relationship of trust and that you have to be very honest and open with each other.

‘The government’s story’

On behalf of Kilifi West Sub-County, Mercy Kikata (Strategist for community health) and Clement Mwenda (from the nursing side) respond. ‘They tell us that healthcare is a priority of the district government and that most of the money is allocated to it.

‘The government is proud of the centre and especially of its capacity development, management, training and services. Kikata and Mwenda call it a “centre of excellence”.

‘Particularly the fact that communities now have access to the quality healthcare they could never have afforded otherwise is special. “This centre is a beacon of hope and proof that a partnership can effect big change.”

‘Both understand the criticism towards the government, but counter that the government did agree to the partnership and that it was essential to be able to start. “It could also have said no—and the government takes care of the logistics and access to insurance.”

‘The government promises that the two transferred nurses will be replaced, but points out that there are 42 healthcare centres in Kilifi West Sub-County. “We cannot favour Email”.

The trust of the government is essential for this. The government had to get used to the fact that this is not a traditional, donor-funded project. No, it also has to provide a budget if we are going to turn it into a transformative process. That understanding was paramount.’

‘She pauses and says smiling: “I do not know if you are familiar with public-private partnerships, but they do not happen overnight. You need serious expertise and also the political decision of a government to enter into such a process.”

‘Scaling up across the entire province is necessary now. Do you turn one oasis in the desert into a proper green zone with functioning clinics throughout Makueni? The three partners are in the process of concluding a twelve-year contract with each other. “In which way will we gradually include a roll-out plan for the whole province, based on the pilot project”, says Dubbeldeman. It involves a total of 214 clinics and 234 groups with local providers. “Actually, it has become a kind of telephone book, a life’s work, in which we have worked out in detail for twelve years who takes...
WaterStarters

Kiboko, about a thirty minutes drive from Emali, is one of three locations where Amref Flying Doctors has started a pilot project in collaboration with MegaGroup under the name WaterStarters.

The basic philosophy is the same as in the plans for scaling up the Emali Centre: to work with the broadest possible range of partners, which at least includes the government, and to have a fund that is filled with ‘blended finance’: money that comes from donors, the government, banks and impact investors.

Ken Omwaka of Amref explains that one in four Kenyans has no access to safe water. People depend on dirty water, and safe sources are often far away, so girls and women, in particular, spend hours each day fetching water.

Over the next five years, WaterStarters wants to give one and a half million people in remote areas of Kenya access to clean drinking water and help entrepreneurs and water committees to invest in water. This also provides them with income, which guarantees long-term sustainability.

A total of thirty million euros is required to raise that money as we go along. The existing tank broke down recently. The new pump works on solar energy, which means that high electricity costs are no longer an issue.

There are still a few obstacles to overcome. The water is pumped from a source ten kilometres away and distributed to three kiosks in the community. The committee wants to install pre-paid meters or giving people the opportunity to pay their water bills by mobile phone. That way, they can collect more money from the community themselves.

In Kiboko, a local water committee is negotiating with Omwaka for an investment. This committee is responsible for supplying drinking water to fifteen thousand people. The water is pumped from a source ten kilometres away and distributed to three kiosks in the community. The committee wants to improve the supply with a new pump and an additional tank funded by WaterStarters. The new pump works on solar energy, which means that high electricity costs are no longer an issue.

There are still a few obstacles to overcome.

Another part comes from the Netherlands. ‘We are negotiating with the Drive programme of the RVO (now Invest International) and with impact investors to fund the collaboration. It is the first primary healthcare project in Africa to run under IRR-legislation—so it is something revolutionary,’ she says proudly.

Looking to the future, Danny Dubbeldeman thinks that this is the type of programme you will see more and more within international cooperation. ‘It is great to see how you can bring the qualities of different parties together to achieve great things. This partnership is about healthcare, but you can also do it in a WASH context.’

What is her main lesson for other parties aiming to do something similar? ‘It is important that all partners really benefit from the programme,’ she says, ‘but if it fails, that you all also only suffer a little.’

‘The lesson is also that you can use donor money much more strategically in some programmes than is often the case now, within development cooperation. In this programme, we use it as leverage to unlock other money. My experience is that once you have a good model, funding will follow automatically. It is all about the part before that.’

Back to Email more time. At the clinic, Ann Munyao has also arrived. She is talking to Elizabeth Joel, a patient she knows well. Munyao is one of the community health volunteers who form the bridge between the healthcare centre and the patients. Her job is to identify sick people in the communities and register people for health insurance via mobile phone. That is also how she came to know Elizabeth Joel.

‘I used to go to Sultan Hospital with my baby,’ says Joel. ‘One day, what risk, who has what responsibilities and when payments are made.’

Of course, this comes with a price tag of eighteen million dollars a year for the total primary healthcare costs. ‘The government has various sources of income for this,’ says Dubbeldeman. ‘Part of it comes from the health insurance premiums they will collect, and that income will increase because we will be helping the government to register people with health insurers. And the government also has a budget for healthcare that it receives from the national government.’

Advice for the policy note

Dubbeldeman: ‘The Netherlands must continue to invest in issues that we are good at. The Netherlands has exceptional expertise in the fields of water and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

‘And we must continue to look for innovative ways to help us achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. To do this, we must continue to invest in development cooperation.’

Ann was making house calls in the community where I live. She saw that my baby was not healthy and told me to come to the healthcare centre here to have an examination. My baby and I were treated very well, and Ann called me every day for a week to ask how the baby was doing.

‘If my child is sick, I can call her at any time of the day, even in the middle of the night. Every doctor and nurse in this centre knows my baby. Moreover, patients are also treated with respect, unlike in ’the Sultan’, where the doctors and nurses shout at you. This is really our healthcare centre.’

Ann Munyao takes us into the city centre of Emali. One usually assumes that a community health volunteer only visits remote communities in the countryside, but that is one-sided, she says. Cities also have communities, such as the large apartment building that is part of her working area. She visits a patient to measure her blood pressure and listens to her story at length.

Munyao is a woman with a remarkable story. During the ethnic violence that broke out in 2007 after the Kenyan elections, she narrowly escaped from Nakuru and fled to Emali. Here she built a new life with her three children that she is raising on her own.

She runs her own business selling locally produced soap, but she otherwise spends all her time volunteering. As one of Kenya’s one hundred and fifty tuberculosis champions, she educates people about the disease and is also one of the community volunteers at the Emali Model Health Centre.

After having finished several patient rounds, she talks about her motivation. ‘I was almost a victim of the post-election violence and am extremely grateful that I survived and was able to build a new life here in Emali—that is why I want to give something back. I believe in volunteering because it comes from the heart. It is beautiful to give without expecting anything in return. Because of the love for your community.’

And volunteering for the centre adds another dimension. ‘I think it is something to be proud of,’ she says. ‘The centre is better than a hospital in all aspects, both in terms of service and quality of care. I am happy that I can contribute and save lives. Such a position makes you visible in the city!’
`We are both trying to improve people’s lives’

Anyone drinking a cup of coffee at Randstad’s head office, located between Amsterdam and Diemen, sees a remarkable message printed on the cardboard cups: ‘Imagine what we can do together.’ It is the slogan of the partnership between Randstad and VSO.

Jacques van den Broek, who will hand over the reins to his successor next spring after leading the company for eight years, explains the thought behind this message. ‘We want to show that this kind of partnership is something we all contribute to,’ he says, ‘instead of it being a random and disorganised. As a result, there were few people who always a successor available. This took the wind out of a project’s sails. ‘It happened all the time,’ Van den Broek says. ‘It was all too random and disorganised. As a result, there were few people who shared their knowledge and expertise within the projects and offer advice about recruitment and selection and ways to strengthen the organisation.

In the past seventeen years, more than three hundred employees spent anywhere from six weeks to nine months sharing their expertise—and enjoying an unforgettable experience in the process—as part of one of VSO’s programmes.

‘The knowledge that Randstad brings to the table truly complements our own,’ says VSO director Erik Ackerman. ‘It mostly has to do with what we call career guidance. How can you prepare for your future career, where do your opportunities lie, how can we analyse the employment market? It helps us better understand what the private sector in, say, Kenya or Tanzania need, so we can prepare young people for that.’

‘The knowledge that Randstad brings to the table truly complements our own’

A long-term partnership like this, with the two parties combining their strengths all over the world, might lead one to believe that Randstad and VSO have been happily married for seventeen years.

That quickly leads the question to the extent behind their partnership’s success is.

Van den Broek, on a small side note: ‘Things did not go quite that smoothly at the start of the project. That was the added value that their partnership can offer is carefully considered, as are the knowledge and skills needed to make the project a success.

That sounds logical, but in the past this was done on location or usually too late. ‘As a development organisation, we have a tendency to hop from one organisation to the next,’ Ackerman says. ‘That means VSO has had to adopt a new perspective.

Especially in the last two years, we began looking at exactly how we can systematise the methods we employ in our programmes to help young people find work, so we do not have to reinvent the wheel every single time. Randstad certainly contributed to that.’

He gives an example of a programme in Tanzania that revolves around vocational training for marginalised youths. ‘Even before the start of the project, we clearly mapped out what was needed and where the opportunities on the employment market could be found.

They established a career centre and began helping young people with their preparation to enter the employment market. They are taught how to present themselves, how to write a CV and how to prepare for a job interview. It was a success and we have since begun using the same approach elsewhere.’

Advice for the policy note

Van den Broek: ‘It would be good to openly share ideas and exchange thoughts. The Ministry could explain what it wants to work on and invite businesses and NGOs to provide input.

At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we did the same thing for the Challenge Fund. You could regard it as a public-private development summit, designed to facilitate more openness on both sides of the spectrum. Many businesses are quite willing to contribute, but you have to find the right approach.’

Ackerman: ‘I believe (vulnerable) youths should be the main focus when developing new programmes. Far more than is currently being done, you should start by asking yourself what is best for the young people.

Meanwhile, the Minister should ask themselves how they can optimally support that movement. Look for channels that allow you to support young people’s ideas far more directly and for organisations that work together closely with young people.’
According to Van den Broek, what helps is that Randstad and VSO share some fundamental similarities. ‘Every year, Randstad helps two million people find work, among them are many who need support in some way. To a certain extent, our goal is the same: we are both trying to improve people’s lives.’

There are also plenty of differences, he says with a smile. ‘Person-ally, I believe in getting to work, taking care of the problem at hand and once it has been solved, you’re done. Look at the problem of youths and employment in Africa, though: with this partnership, we have been able to help four to five thousand people build a better future for themselves.

‘It is little more than a drop in the ocean. I have a tendency to think that we will never be able to solve this problem, but VSO has a different mindset. Working hard every day and keeping yourself motivated; I think that is really impressive.’

Ackerman: ‘Development organisations often do things thorough-ly, although some might call it slow, while businesses are used to getting things done much faster. You have to know that about each other. Many partnerships revolve around projects with a lead time of just three or four years.

‘We took a much longer path, but it helped us get to where we are today. Instead of only thinking about your own interests, you also have to ask yourself what you really want to achieve together and what results you want to be able to look back on with pride at the end of the year.’

Soon, those same lessons will be applied as part of a new project in Cambodia, where VSO and Randstad target poor fishing communi-ty. ‘The work available in that region is far too limited,’ Ackermen says.

‘Not everyone can become a fisherman and there are many labour migrants returning from Thailand, who also have to find new work. Together with Randstad, we are looking for ways to prepare young people, many of whom have no formal education, for other professions, perhaps in a sector that is not immediately obvious.’

Where do the opportunities lie over there? ‘There’s a strong need for craftsmen with various technical skills. We also try to improve the youths’ digital skills, although “tech” is a major hurdle at the mo-ment because the infrastructure is not good enough in all countries.

‘Nevertheless, it is a very promising sector. In the Ugandan capital of Kampala, we have launched a new tech programme that is design-ed to help fifteen hundred young people find work.’

Van den Broek adds: ‘In our projects with VSO, we often saw people being trained for jobs in sectors where the supply already far outweighs the demand. We would then open up the discussion: this training programme is set up a certain way, but isn’t there something else we can do for these people, perhaps in IT? We always begin by looking at what the employment market needs and then sit down together to find the right solution.’

Ackerman believes that the current approach keeps both Randstad and VSO on their toes. ‘We want to realise economic growth in the areas we operate in, but we must also be mindful of social inequality and reach out to vulnerable demographics. That is exactly what this partnership is all about.’

An NGO should keep doing what it is best at, he emphasises, in-stead of suddenly changing its course just because it is working well in another part of the world. ‘This kind of partnership is all about keeping your professional vision.’

‘This kind of partnership can be a real win-win situation for NGOS and businesses alike.’

If it is up to Randstad and VSO, their partnership will be around for quite a while yet. ‘How do you keep things innovative and effective? That needs to be hard, says Van den Broek. ‘Get together every year and evaluate where you stand and how things are going. Sometimes, a partnership is like a marriage.’

Still: if Ackerman and Van den Broek could switch jobs for a day, wouldn’t they try to make a few changes in each other’s organisati-ons? Not necessarily, they claim.

Ackerman: ‘If I were to spend a day in Jacques’ shoes, I would visit a VSO project and utilise that knowledge of Randstad’s management for the good of the partnership. I would also think about how we can keep taking our projects to the next level over the next five years.’

Van den Broek: ‘I would certainly want to discuss the questions of what you can use your partners for and how we can improve our effectiveness. I believe there is more VSO can do to benefit from the knowledge that Randstad already possesses. During the corona crisis, we learned a whole lot about how to continue projects remotely. I would try to expand that structure. We have been looking for ways to improve your collaboration, because it is not always given in a public-private partnership. Even after seventeen years, you have to keep each other’s eye on the ball.’

The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched the Challenge Fund to tackle the major shortage of jobs for young men and women in West and North Africa, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Following a tender, VSO, Randstad and Palladium Europe were assigned to manage the fund for a period of five years and improve the future perspectives of local young people. Their goal is to help two hundred thousand of them find work. This goal can be realised by creating new jobs, by matching young people to an employer or by improving the work that is already available in myriad ways.

Ultimately, half of all jobs must be given to young women. A core principle of the Challenge Fund is that the partners not only think about solutions for young people, but that these young people actually get to take part in the discussion themselves. During every project, young people are consulted and involved from the very begin-ning to ensure that their needs are the main focus.

Since 2019, VSO, Randstad and Palladium have been working together on an ambitious project to help two hundred thousand youths in Africa and the Middle East find work: the Challenge Fund for Youth Employment.

‘It finally feels like all those wonderful words about young people and work are actually leading to concrete action.’ The voices of the youths in question are finally being heard.

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Thus far, the Challenge Fund has been rolled out in more than ten countries. After Uganda, Nigeria and Egypt, similar projects were launched in Kenya, Jordan and Sudan. Next up are Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Morocco, Tunisia and Senegal. In each country, the project partners assess the current situation, find out what local youths need and what sectors present the most opportunities.

Once those questions have been answered, businesses and social organisations are asked to propose ways to help young people find work. In return, they get funding and technical assistance (including contributions from volunteers of VSO and Randstad).

How can you get as many young people as possible involved in such a major project? How do you make sure everyone’s voice is heard? The so-called youth champions play an important role in that: sixteen youths from four different countries who think a-long about the question of how all young people—including those without a formal education and those living in marginalised re-
They go out to ask youths from all layers of the population about what they hear, what problems do you encounter in your country? He does that just as all of the other stakeholders: the adults, the employers. We believe that all those voices will truly allow us to help two hundred thousand young people find sustainable employment.

Hosea Tumwine nods his agreement. ‘I think that the Challenge Fund’s strength lies in the fact that it did not hire a few experts to conduct some studies,’ he says. Instead, a conscious choice was made to have the young people do that themselves. ‘We had to learn everything from scratch. When I first got involved, I had no idea how to set up or conduct a study. To me, that was the only thing we could do. And we found that we were able to learn a lot about the voice and the quality of the sound.

‘Only by truly getting young people involved will their voice be heard. They are both looking forward to the time when their hard work goes to show that this project is not like most others. Hopefully, future partners will realise that as well.’

They are both looking forward to the time when their hard work will be听见. ‘We have learned from the projects that we have been involved in so far,’ says Fridah Okomo. ‘We have learned that involving the youths in your programme will make it more successful and sustainable. ‘We cannot easily “sell” the idea that the focus should be on young people, no matter how urgently that is needed. It is about showing businesses that we are offering them a concrete solution that they can work with and that the time, money and energy they invest in business will be paid off by them.’

Despite the lofty ambitions, it proved difficult during the start-up phase to reach out to youths from every layer of society, let alone actually get them involved. That is exactly where the youth champions come in handy.

‘We began working together with them,’ Tumwine says, ‘because our initial focus groups consisted of a handful of well-educated youths who had primarily been part of the rural or marginalised areas, whom we also wanted to involve, were not part of the project.’

In Kenya, Esseen Tighhe works as part of the Challenge Fund Social Impact Team on behalf of VSO. Together with businesses and young people, this team comes up with innovative solutions that help businesses optimally invest in decent work for young men and women.

Tighhe initiated the collaboration with the youth champions, all of whom come from VSO’s network of youth volunteers, and explains how their role was created. ‘During the project’s start-up phase, we immediately wanted to put the young people first and make decisions based on their preferences.

‘That is important, because all too many employment programmes come up with solutions for young people based only on assumptions, without actually getting them involved. We believe that involving the youths in your programme will make it more successful and sustainable.

‘We cannot easily “sell” the idea that the focus should be on young people, no matter how urgently that is needed. It is about showing businesses that we are offering them a concrete solution that they can work with and that the time, money and energy they invest in it will pay off for them.’

Hospita Tumwine from Uganda is one of the youth champions who contributed to the very first pilot project that was launched. He quickly realised how diverse the difficulties are that youths have to deal with.

‘I am convinced that once people begin to realise that, truly great things will happen.’
Vice Versa asked the young Ugandan artist Najuma to depict the idea of global solidarity. What does her illustration show?

‘This one has more of an abstract concept where I try to convey the message that we are all in this together, regardless of gender, nationality, race, et cetera. I used manipulation of photography to bring out this point. I also used a lot of lettering to put across one single message in different languages — “together”. Because solidarity, global or otherwise, is acknowledging the fact of existing and working together as humanity.

‘There are five raised fists of different skin complexions and also five circles, because the number five symbolises many beautiful things, including God’s grace, goodness, humanity, balance, curiosity and adventure, according to different beliefs. In addition to these, the circles also allude to the Olympics, which were started to promote sports in education as well as to build courage, endurance and a sense of fair play in all who participated.

‘The zipper is representative of the idea of bringing a broken world back together and the image of the earth with a rising sun represents the hope there is of being able to fix our world and our communities if we come together and put humanity’s well-being above our selfish wants and needs.’
Share-Net International, the knowledge platform for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), unites individuals from different countries and backgrounds to make better policies. It proves to be a good foundation for equality, say the coordinators from Colombia, Burkina Faso and the Netherlands. ‘Every voice deserves to be heard, including those of young people and women in rural areas.’

Lack of access to safe abortion means that many girls and young women undergo illegal and unsafe abortions. Many of these women die as a result, in Burkina Faso.

It is one of the first things Zalissa Bandé mentions when asked about the SRHR issues in her country. Lack of adequate sex education and access to information, especially in rural areas, are also important, she says. ‘Politically, there has been a change in that area,’ she explains. ‘Many laws in favour of SRHR have been introduced, but unfortunately many of them have not been implemented. For example, there is a law that allows safe abortion, but in practice women do not have access to it.’

Yet Burkina Faso is progressive in other areas: contraceptives have been available for free to everyone in public hospitals since 2019. Carolina Peña from Colombia also cites safe abortion as a top priority when it comes to improving sexual and reproductive health and rights, in addition to combating sexual violence and promoting the rights of the LGBTI community.

Bandé and Peña are the coordinators of the Share-Net International (SNI) hubs in their respective countries—the international knowledge platform on SRHR, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Equality is ingrained in Share-Net’s structure, more so than in organisations working with local implementers, says Thomissen: ‘We are a global partnership, a network of organisations from different countries. That offers opportunities for equal cooperation.’

This brings out the strengths of all the partners, Thomissen says. ‘The fact that there are free contraceptives for everyone in Burkina Faso and that there is such strong female leadership in Colombia is something we in the Netherlands can learn from.’

For the hubs in Bangladesh and Jordan it was about preventing child marriages and for the one in Burundi about teenage pregnancies. The participants created a knowledge product that makes reliable information available in an accessible way, such as through an informative video or animation, a website or campaign.

Knowledge exchange can generate new ideas, says Carolina Peña: ‘Menstrual health was not a big issue in Colombia until the corona pandemic came along. Because of the economic consequences, it became more difficult for people to buy sanitary pads here.’

‘We had no experience with this, but in African countries—where the problem has existed for longer—they do. Because we are part of Share-Net International, we were able to learn from them about ways of tackling the problem.’

Zalissa Bandé says she learned a lot from the exchange between the countries. ‘Not only about SRHR, but also about how to set up cooperation and raise funds. A major innovation is that much more is done online, since the pandemic, says Bandé.

‘Digitalisation has gone really fast in Burkina Faso and also enables us to have more contact with organisations abroad. We have many new activities on new topics, all online. SNI is seen as an innovative platform here and it gets a lot of interest.’

‘They speak different languages and come from different cultures, you have to take that into account’

The objective of SNI is to link research to policy and practice, so that the research is used to improve SRHR programmes, says Dorine Thomissen, the coordinator of Share-Net International in Amsterdam. ‘This requires exchange between researchers and policy makers, but also with the people whose sexual and reproductive health and rights are at stake. Every voice deserves to be heard, including those of young people or women in rural areas.’

Exchange takes place in different ways at SNI, such as around specific themes in so-called communities of practice, about infertility, menstruation or the health of LGBTI people. Organisations from different countries work together in these communities.

It is also stimulated by the Share-Net International Rapid Improvement Model, a learning method developed with partners where people from other countries come together to solve a concrete problem in the field—and later evaluate it together.

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Carolina Peña confirms that equal cooperation between the network members is also important within the countries. The hub in Colombia brings many together, such as youth-led organisations and civil society organisations, but also researchers from universities or policy makers from Ministries, NGOs and other platforms on SRHR.

‘You might think,’ says Peña, ‘that a Ministry has more say than a youth organisation, but with us they have an equal voice.’ Youth input must be significant, she believes. ‘We don’t want them to implement our agenda, we really want to know what they want and need and support them to achieve their goals. To do that, you have to truly listen to the other person.’

SHARE-NET

Carolina Peña

Dorine Thomissen

Zalissa Bandé

Truly listening

Text: Joris Tielens

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Combining insights with co-creation

For information or campaigns on SRHR to be effective, they must not only be based on proven approaches, but also be compatible with the local context and practice. The practical and useful knowledge products combine insights from researchers with those of policy makers and various people in the field. This happens in the co-creation conferences of Share-Net International.

These are three-day working conferences that are held every two years. Activists meet researchers, civil society and policymakers there.

The first edition took place in 2019 and focused, among other things, on infertility—until then an underexposed topic on the SRHR agenda. One of the results was a video showing experiences of infertility in different countries and raising awareness about it.

The video shows that it is not only a medical issue, but also a social and economic one. Moreover, it is also an issue of gender equality, mental well-being and human rights.

In the project, representatives from diverse backgrounds from Bangladesh, Jordan, Burundi and England worked together. Some worked on making IVF affordable, while others dealt with policy issues or raising awareness.

The video is one of many knowledge products that have emerged from the co-creation conferences, such as reports, blogs, films, articles or training materials, says Maria Codina. She is from Spain, but has been working as a country coordinator and knowledge management expert at the Share-Net International hub in Amsterdam for several years.

‘The conference aims to produce concrete ideas for new knowledge products that can fill a gap in research, policy or practice,’ she says. ‘Afterwards, there is a grant round of ten thousand euros each for participants to shape the product.’

Topics for the conferences are selected in a careful process that starts with the hub that hosts them—and next year that will be Colombia. The hub there suggests a few issues that are relevant there and all ten members can vote on them.

For the actual conference, groups of about six participants are assembled to work on the development of concrete products. It is a mix of young and old, with diverse backgrounds and from different countries, she says.

Bringing people together from different countries not only contributes to learning new things, but also makes it easier to share views and approaches that are sensitive in some countries,” says Maria Codina.

In Colombia, for example, access to safe abortion is a difficult issue, but despite this, they are working hard on it. By coming together at the co-creation conference and sharing examples of what works well, others can experience their approach.

It inspires people in countries where the issue is even more sensitive. The same goes for LGBTQ rights; sometimes people have to work under the radar. But there are always ways to make things discussable, even if it seems very difficult.”

The conference is jointly organised by the international secretariat in Amsterdam and hubs in other countries. ‘I find the way we work together with the hubs very innovative,’ she says.

‘They take the lead. We see it as an opportunity to bring people from all over the world together to learn from each other—and all members decide together on the topics to be discussed at the conference.’

But it would be ideal,’ she continues, ‘if the funding were to come from multiple donors and governments over time, including from the countries where the hubs are located. That would give them a stronger position.’

The Dutch government can play a role by pleading with other governments for funding for this subject, Thomissen thinks. ‘And, yes: an organisation to coordinate this network must meet certain criteria, but it does not necessarily have to be based in the Netherlands.’

Pefa believes it would be a good idea if local governments also contributed to the local platforms. ‘We have received training on fundraising,’ she says, ‘and are looking for new donors. If the Colombian government would contribute to our platform, that would be great—and also because it would put the topic of stem more firmly on the government’s agenda.’

‘To move the complete SRHR agenda forward, we have to keep finding a middle ground together’

When you are striving for equality, it is important to be aware of diversity, says Bande. ‘In our Burkina Faso hub, many different groups and stakeholders work together. They speak different languages and come from different cultures, you have to take that into account.’

Even between North and South—in practice between the SNI secretariat in the Netherlands and the hubs in Africa, Asia and South America—the cooperation is equal, says Thomissen. ‘But the fact is that the funding for our work comes from the Netherlands, and that creates a certain power relationship. We try to work together on an equal footing by being open about it.

In the learning process of new hubs, SNI does this by making an analysis of power dynamics and discussing what can be done to make the work more inclusive and equal. For example, by allocating subsidies together, with less and less being decided in the Netherlands. SNI also chooses to make young people part of the network board and translate everything into all languages.

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Dorine Thomissen welcomes the fact that the Netherlands is a progressive donor in terms of stem, with more attention than other donors to controversial themes such as safe abortion and sexual diversity, and sexual education that also covers more controversial topics.

‘It is necessary for the Netherlands to continue to support it financially in the future,’ she says, ‘because otherwise it will easily disappear from the agenda, internationally speaking. We know what the consequences of the Trump administration were for organisations working on safe abortion. Things stagnated in places where dependence on US funding was high.’

At times there is tension between the Dutch progressiveness and the pursuit of equal cooperation with countries and organisations in the South, she acknowledges. ‘That is certainly a challenge.’

Not all members of SNI will pursue a progressive agenda in the same way, with open attention to issues such as sexual diversity. ‘We are a knowledge platform and not lobbyists, but we do feed subsidies with our knowledge exchange. With its donation, the Netherlands has an agenda to make stem as inclusive as possible worldwide.’

At the same time, Thomissen wants to be guided by the needs of members in the network. ‘To move the complete stem agenda forward, we have to keep finding a middle ground together.’

She believes that the Dutch agenda and the pursuit of equal cooperation can go well together, but that requires careful international cooperation. ‘We want to listen to what is needed locally.’

Upon closer inspection, this often turns out to go beyond the familiar conservative agenda. Moreover, the exchange of ideas as organised by Share-Net can set things in motion, she says.

‘In Jordan, a report or video on sexual diversity is not going to be made without a fight, but if you then have people from Colombia around the table, it becomes easier to discuss, because it is a very different socio-cultural context, with other restrictions and possibilities and with slightly more options to talk about sexual diversity.

‘The more diversity there is, the easier it is to identify and connect with something—and a different approach is inspiring. That is the role of Share-Net.’

Whoever is given the floor will also determine a great deal. Thomissen says: ‘For example, women really bring up different themes than men. It is very important that women get and take the lead on this subject.’

It requires, she concludes, true international cooperation, in which everyone’s voice—from whatever context—is heard and the debate is facilitated. ‘And that, to me, is actually the only correct and justifiable form of international cooperation.’
‘Youth must have a say’

Young people should have a say in research, policy and programmes on SRI: making something for young people does not work without involving them. The experiences of two young employees show how SNI goes without involving them. The experiences of Gаіа Zaнаbоnі and Vісtоrу Nwаbу-Еkеоmа, where she worked and raised in Ireland. She studied Global Sustainability. She is currently completing an internship at Share-Net Nederland, where she worked as a communications officer after graduating.

Her personal experience illustrates the way young people participate within SNI. ‘You cannot create something for young people—like a programme or policy—with out involving them,’ she says. ‘Young people from different backgrounds need to have their say and be part of the process. As a matter of fact: nothing about us, without us.’

That alone is not enough, Gaia Zanaboni adds. ‘It has got to be more than just involving young people. Many companies and organisations use young people as symbols, while in fact young people have no say—that is symbol politics. At Share-Net, we really participate.’

Zanaboni is 22, comes from Italy and studies Global Sustainability. She is currently completing an internship at Share-Net Netherlands and she also feels that she has been seen. ‘I am learning to express myself here and to be who I am, without thinking what adults would think.’

Meaningful participation of young people is part of SNI’s strategy, says Hannah Kabelka. She works at Share-Net Nederland as a facilitator of working groups and organises a conference. At 29 years of age, she still considers herself to fall into the category of youth.

To make the voices of young people heard, many young people work at the secretariat of SNI—such as Nwabu-Ekeoma and Zanaboni. ‘I appointed young people to the board and they are also given a meaningful role at conferences and in exchanging knowledge.’

Young people also play a major role in the hubs: the one in Burkina Faso is run entirely by young people and at other hubs, too, young people work in the secretariat and are on the supervisory committee of the hubs.

Kabelka: ‘We want to ensure that all positions in the network are accessible to young people—and that they learn from people with more experience, but also vice versa. At the same time, we want Share-Net to be a safe haven where they can be themselves and come together. And that they can shape that space themselves.’

Active participation of young people also helps to make the work of SNI more inclusive, Gaia Zanaboni thinks. ‘They bring up the controversial subjects more easily. We are open to change and come up with new ideas.’

And the youth often have a hopeful message. Activist movements often come from young people, such as Black Lives Matter, Pride or the climate movement. They truly bring change to society.’

However, young people must be given the space to ask critical questions. ‘Early on in my internship,’ says Victory Nwabu-Ekeoma, ‘I asked why more people of colour were not part of the network. And the young people of colour? I asked. It felt comfortable to do, which is rare.’

Disseminating knowledge and research findings of students and young researchers on sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality and stimulating discussion on these issues, is the aim of the conference Linking Research, Policy and Practice, the academic conference that SNI organises every autumn.

This year, the conference was held for the tenth time—online and in hybrid sessions—with a specific focus on youth input. The conference was also a truly international event for the first time, whereas previously it had only highlighted work by Dutch students.

Bachelor’s, Master’s and PhD students interacted with senior researchers and with policymakers from Ministries and Embassies, as well as with practitioners working for NGOs or youth organisations.

‘We use it to encourage research-based policies and programmes,’ says Hannah Kabelka, who co-organised the conference. ‘It is an important place to network and meet everyone on a cool, interactive online platform.’

Many collaborations have emerged from previous editions of the conference. One of them led to a publication that summarises the experiences gained during the coronavirus pandemic with the online provision of comprehensive sex education.

The pandemic prevented traditional classroom meetings from taking place. It turns out that kissos in Indonesia, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Egypt and Malawi have found all kinds of creative ways and media to reach young people with good information about sexuality despite this.

New digital platform

Share-Net International has launched a new website that works as a social network for professionals in the field of SRI. At Share-netinternational.org you will find the platform that seamlessly brings together news from all country hubs into a single interactive digital space. People can register as members and then they can access a members-only networking section with a list of members worldwide.

It is a kind of Facebook or LinkedIn-like social network for sex professionals. ‘And as far as I know it’s the only digital place of its kind, so it’s pretty unique,’ says Rhian Farnworth, who is a social media specialist at SNI.

Farnworth has worked for commercial companies in digital marketing for the past ten years, but recently completed a Master’s degree in Gender Studies and was happy to join Share-Net International to promote its online presence.

‘I think the platform will enable much more cross-border collaboration by providing a digital space where Share-Net members can connect and share knowledge with each other, regardless of their location in the world.’

In addition to online sharing and meeting, the new platform offers an extensive e-library that is constantly updated, says Farnworth, and brings blogs, news and listings for events and job opportunities.

Members’ security and privacy are taken very seriously, says Farnworth: ‘We check potential members for their identity and ensure they work in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights.’

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‘We used to talk about it, now we do it’

How food is produced, processed and eaten, and who profits from this, must change on a global scale, say Hedwig Bruggeman and Bart de Steenhuijsen Piters. In this, they see a task for Wageningen research institutes and their southern partners, who must take the lead more than before. A conversation on campus.

Text: Joris Tielens

‘We need international cooperation now more than ever. The climate and Covid crises show that we are all connected globally and that combating poverty and inequality is crucial,’ says Hedwig Bruggeman, business unit manager of the Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation.

Wageningen University & Research (wur)—with over six thousand employees—conducts education and research worldwide, and the wcrd is one component of this. It works with partners in the South on practical change in food systems and transformation of agricultural sectors, to provide farmers with better seeds or to professionalise horticulture. It also works on developing the expertise of professionals, with courses in Wageningen or on site in African or Asian countries.

Investing in international relations, adds Bart de Steenhuijsen Piters, makes us more resilient in the future: ‘For a small trading country, that is important.’ He is a researcher at Wageningen Economic Research, the wcrd institute that conducts social and economic research in agriculture and food systems, in the Netherlands, Europe and beyond.

Problems such as climate change, malnourishment, inequality and low incomes of farmers are becoming more acute, says De Steenhuijsen Piters. ‘People in Africa are becoming much more active. When I am in Benin, people ask me why we do so little to combat climate change.’

‘They wonder why their interests are not taken into account. There is a new generation of highly educated people in their twenties and thirties. They no longer accept the old authority. The patriarchs who were always in the right are also falling from their pedestals in Africa.’

Much has changed in Wageningen, too, he continues. ‘The conviction that food systems must change has become paramount—this was not the case ten years ago. At that time, the convention among wur researchers was still strong that the Netherlands is doing well as the world’s second largest agricultural exporter and that it should stay that way.

‘Today, this attitude is diminishing, and the message is spreading that together—including with partners in the South—we need to understand and tackle the major problems in our food systems.’

Unlike in the past, interdisciplinary work has also become established in Wageningen, he says. ‘We used to talk about it, now we do it, because a new generation of Wurgeners has been trained in this field.’

Interdisciplinary research means that scientists with different backgrounds—economists, botanists, sociologists and animal scientists—jointly examine a problem from different angles. ‘And that is necessary, because otherwise we will not be able to solve the complex problems of today.’

The focal point in Wageningen is no longer the scientific background, but the social problem. There are networks of researchers from all corners of the organisation who work together on various countries or research themes.

‘We are involved in systemic change and see the links in food systems; that is what makes us innovative,’ says Bruggeman. ‘It is also about connecting fundamental research and practice, together with people in the South, local partners and development organisations such as troc.’

Wur works on this in multi-year programmes and links it to capacity building through courses or training. ‘Education is very important, not only for students, but also for professionals. Because

Nutritious vegetables

Millions of people in Africa and Asia have a poor diet. They do not lack calories, but they do lack vitamins and minerals. A large wur study showed that the consumption of fruit and vegetables in countries such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nepal, Nigeria, Tanzania, India and Burkina Faso is too low to prevent the risk of malnourishment.

‘Eating more fruit and vegetables is the easiest way to boost people’s health,’ says Bart de Steenhuijsen Piters, who led the study. The research shows that fruit and vegetables are too expensive or unavailable, so people are unable to buy them.

‘Existing investments and projects appear to be doing the wrong things: they are aimed at cultivating grains or tomatoes and onions, which do not contain many vitamins. Those products are traded over long distances by cars and trucks, which usually makes it a business for men.

‘Healthy leafy vegetables—such as spinach or sukuma wiki in East Africa—are less storable and are grown locally and traded by women in the informal economy. This contributes to healthy nutrition in the cities and to incomes for women, but investments and projects are usually not geared towards it.

‘Research such as this can knock over old vestiges and redirect large investments in the right direction,’ says De Steenhuijsen Piters. It was commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. ‘It is a break in the trend for this major investor to focus on healthy nutrition,’ he says.

‘This study looked at the question—how much fruit and vegetables are eaten and how can this be improved?—from all angles. This concerns the entire food system,’ he says, ‘and you can only approach that in an interdisciplinary manner.

Wageningen nutritionists investigated which vegetables have the most nutritional value. Gender experts looked at the role of women in cultivation and trade. Botanists looked at the challenges in production.

‘We need smart ideas to stimulate the production and trade of healthy food in the informal economy, rather than misguided interventions in the formal economy. This is not easy, but it is necessary to prevent malnutrition of millions of people.’
we link it to practical work, the capacity building we offer is continuously renewed.

The Covid crisis has exacerbated the differences in poverty, Bruggeman says, making international cooperation more urgent. Covid has also done something else, she says: it has shaken up the relationship between Dutch researchers and southern partners. ‘The word “decolonisation” is being used more and more often, and people are reflecting upon their role.’

The relations have always been equal, Bruggeman emphasises. ‘And we have been working for a long time towards a different division of responsibilities, with the southern partner taking more of a lead. We are becoming less of an implementation partner and more of a knowledge partner.’

However, between dream and action there are often practical objections. ‘We are talking about programmes of five or ten million euros a year that have to be managed and accounted for.’

Covid has helped, Bruggeman says. ‘We could no longer visit the partners, and then you see that many projects continue to run well and that leadership is taken up by our partners. We already thought so and wanted to implement this, but perhaps we didn’t dare yet. And our donors in particular did not yet have the nerve to do this.’

‘The word “decolonisation” is used more and more often, and people are reflecting upon their role’

De Steenhuijsen Pitters also sees a role for Wageningen Economy in Research in the future, mainly in the back seat, internationally speaking, while research networks in Africa and Asia take the wheel. ‘They pose the question and are the first performers of the research,’ he says, ‘but can fall back on the knowledge and capacity of WUR if necessary. This partly concerns specialist knowledge, but also process supervision and bringing parties together. We want impact, and that is achieved by empowering local research institutes.’

Bruggeman nuances that we are not there yet. ‘At this moment, we do not yet have any major programmes in which a local party is really leading.’ However, a local organisation has been established in Uganda. After eight years of working on improvements in the seed sector, it continues to exist as an independent NGO.

A different division of roles between partners from North and South also demands something from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the largest donor of much of WUR’s international work.

‘Knowledge,’ says Bruggeman, ‘is an important export product for the Netherlands and WUR is among the world’s best, but it is not the case that our partners in the South can simply hire in that knowledge.’ The Ministry and other donors must be prepared to finance sustainable partnerships and to trust that these partnerships will lead to knowledge questions being posed to Wageningen, she says. Donors should also have the courage to finance southern organisations and knowledge institutions directly, says De Steenhuijsen Pitters. ‘We should at least work towards this. It will not happen all at once, because running a programme requires a lot of bureaucracy. But the capacity to carry it out in terms of content is ever-increasing.’

As a follow-up to the UN summit on food systems (the UNFSS) in September, more than a hundred countries are engaged in a dialogue on healthy nutrition, what food people want to eat and how it should be produced.

De Steenhuijsen Pitters: ‘That is truly an opportunity to set the agenda locally as well.’

‘And then you also have to accept that it will not always be our agenda,’ adds Bruggeman. ‘Certainly, if we impose our standards, little will happen.’

It may lead to other choices than those in vogue in Europe. From Africa, for example, comes the theme of food sovereignty, the right of people to decide for themselves what they eat. But also the choice to eat meat.

‘We think that we should eat less meat,’ says De Steenhuijsen Pitters, ‘because the production of meat emits a great deal of CO₂, but in many diets in low-income countries, meat is a welcome addition in terms of nutritional value.’

Bruggeman agrees: ‘In Kenya, you can’t invite guests and not serve meat. Then they haven’t eaten.’

The UN Food Systems Summit also led to self-reflection among the two Wageningen parties. ‘The run-up to the summit, civil society organisations criticised the summit for being overly dominated by multinationals and science, while civil society organisations, citizens’ movements and farmers’ organisations were given too little voice.’

Another question was whether food systems can be changed without calling into question our current liberal and capitalist growth economy. Together with the World Economic Forum, WUR organised an event beforehand and therefore seemed to be siding with multinationals.

Moving businesses to adopt more sustainable behaviour is one way to make food systems more sustainable,’ says De Steenhuijsen Pitters. ‘But there are also other ways of influencing food systems, via social movements, and contact with these has declined in recent years.’

Bruggeman: ‘A divide has emerged between the knowledge institutions and NGOs. Until a few years ago, we regularly carried out large projects together. We want to seek out that cooperation again, so that we can continue to talk to each other about global issues.’

In the past, NGOs such as Oxfam Novib, Cordaid or ICCO received substantial co-financing from the government, which enabled them to hire researchers from Wageningen. This funding stream has been cut back, which means that the link between WUR and NGOs has also largely disappeared.

‘Nevertheless,’ says De Steenhuijsen Pitters, ‘I think that we have to serve all the major stakeholders in the field and the impression may have been created, certainly around the UN summit, that we cared too little about what the civil society thought. And we need to address that.’

Within WUR, there are different views on this and there is also...
The Integrated Seed Sector Development project in Uganda brought lasting change to the country’s seed sector. With support from WUR, the local team developed into a local NGO, independent of WUR. ‘We were still part of what was the implementing party,’ says Oyee.

He hopes to find new donors, however, this has not yet been successful. ‘The Dutch Embassy is now focusing on other matters, but is positive about our independent organisation and encourages cooperation between us and other potential donors.’ The Embassy is currently supporting a horticulture programme.

Oyee says it would be a good idea in the long run if donors would partly fund Ugandan NGOs directly, rather than through an international partner. ‘The capacity to carry out such programmes is available, and if necessary, specialised knowledge can be hired in from elsewhere.’

Since Ugandan consultants’ fees are lower than those of their international counterparts, more can be achieved with the same money, he says. ‘Yes, more use is made of local capacity.’

The formation of a local NGO

Sheila Assisibe-Yeboah likes a professional approach to her work in horticulture. ‘It not only leads to improved performance in the sector, but also gives local businesses a sense of dignity and pride,’ she says. Assisibe-Yeboah is programme manager of HortFresh, which strengthens horticulture in Ghana and Ivory Coast.

Fruits and vegetables are becoming increasingly popular in those countries. Due to economic growth, people have more to spend and the awareness of their health benefits is growing.

But the horticultural sector is struggling to meet demand, both for the domestic market and for export. A more competitive and innovative sector would provide opportunities for many farmers and companies working in the sector.

Since 2014, the Wageneringen Centre for Development Innovation has been supporting programmes in West Africa to strengthen the sector. Until 2017, the programme GhanaFresh was running, and from 2018 until the summer of 2022, HortFresh will run, working not only in Ghana but also in Ivory Coast.

A business platform has been set up where companies can meet regularly and work together on investments that benefit each of them.

The programme focuses on both the local market and exports. Before 2015, Ghana was exporting about five million dollars worth of fruit and vegetables to Europe every year.

That trade came to a sudden halt when the EU closed its borders to fruits and vegetables from Ghana in 2015. According to EU standards, they were too often contaminated with harmful organisms. For Sheila Assisibe-Yeboah, it was the beginning of a major transformation in the sector.

‘There had been a lot of consultation,’ she says, ‘but that had not led to sufficient improvement in 2016, when an inspection by the EU again led to a rejection. Then, with the new Vegetable Export Taskforce, on behalf of all horticultural companies, we took control. We ensured that horticulturalists received training in more sustainable and cleaner working methods and we organised our own inspections to check whether things were going well. Experts from Grenada and Uganda came to help us.’

It led to great improvement. In 2017, the EU import ban was lifted. ‘That brought about a lasting change in the sector. The quality of products for the local market has also improved.’

She has years of experience in improving supply chains in Ghana and saw many projects come and go. ‘Compared to other projects, we have a very professional approach,’ she says. Companies and farmers were often used to getting things for free from development projects, such as fertiliser, seeds or subsidies. ‘We finance investments, but on a 50/50 basis. Companies must contribute half themselves.’

Initially, this was difficult and companies were reluctant. ‘But along the way they have learned to invest. It gives them a sense of pride not to be dependent on a donor, but to own their own investment. Companies now have a better position in the dialogue about the investments they need. Donors no longer decide independently.’

She herself finds the cooperation with the Wageneringen Centre for Development Innovation very positive. ‘It supports my growth as a professional. I have followed various training programmes and I am not told what to do, but I have a voice and am given opportunities. I want to transfer that kind of confidence to the companies I work with.’

How you manage a food system will differ from country to country. A suitable form must be sought through dialogue, where it is beneficial to identify the positive forces and how you can contribute to them. ‘Proper education is crucial. I think that what we are now seeing in Africa, the increased empowerment and self-confidence of young people, can be traced back to a generation that had better access to education.’

Bruggeman would also like to see this emphasis on education reflected in new policies, but she does see added value in combining education very positive. ‘It supports my growth as a professional. I have followed various training programmes and I am not told what to do, but I have a voice and am given opportunities. I want to transfer that kind of confidence to the companies I work with.’

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Bruggeman would also like to see this emphasis on education reflected in new policies, but she does see added value in combining aid and trade. ‘There are good examples where development cooperation and the efforts of companies go hand in hand, but then companies have to take responsibility for the chain.’

She believes that the end of voluntary covenants—in which companies strive for sustainability, but the government does not impose any rules—is nigh: ‘Government policy on corporate social responsibility should be more stringent. Then the Netherlands and its business community can lead the way in sustainable chains.’

Providing trust and opportunity

Shelia Assisibe-Yeboah likes a professional approach to her work in horticulture. ‘It not only leads to improved performance in the sector, but also gives local businesses a sense of dignity and pride,’ she says. Assisibe-Yeboah is programme manager of HortFresh, which strengthens horticulture in Ghana and Ivory Coast. Fruits and vegetables are becoming increasingly popular in those countries. Due to economic growth, people have more to spend and the awareness of their health benefits is growing. But the horticultural sector is struggling to meet demand, both for the domestic market and for export. A more competitive and innovative sector would provide opportunities for many farmers and companies working in the sector.

Since 2014, the Wageneringen Centre for Development Innovation has been supporting programmes in West Africa to strengthen horticulture. Until 2017, the programme GhanaFresh was running, and from 2018 until the summer of 2022, HortFresh will run, working not only in Ghana but also in Ivory Coast. A business platform has been set up where companies can meet regularly and work together on investments that benefit each of them. The programme focuses on both the local market and exports. Before 2015, Ghana was exporting about five million dollars worth of fruit and vegetables to Europe every year.

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‘SPARK sometimes is the canary in the coal mine’

Accepting money from the Gulf region, entering unorthodox partnerships and working together with businesses, SPARK is an NGO that does things just a little bit differently. Director Yannick du Pont explains why he has chosen this course for SPARK and what other NGOs can learn from it. ‘Money from the Gulf is often met with a knee-jerk reaction here in the Netherlands.’ Text: Lennaert Rooijakkers

At the end of the conversation, Yannick du Pont has a confession to make. The prospect of collaborating with donors such as Qatar and the Islamic Development Bank or starting projects together with Google, the insurance provider Generali or Heineken probably would have daunted his younger self. In fact, twenty-five-year-old Yannick likely would never have taken the plunge.

‘Perhaps we can even become a social enterprise one day,’ Du Pont muses. ‘I can say that now, but I would have been afraid to ten years ago. That was not done. I believe some of the taboo has been lifted since then.’

He makes his revelation on a late-summer afternoon on a patio along the IJ river in Amsterdam, not far from the offices of SPARK, the development organisation he founded twenty-seven years ago.

Much earlier than many other Dutch development organisations, his NGO sought to collaborate with businesses.

Until a decade ago, roughly 95 percent of SPARK’s donations came from the coffers of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Since then, however, the organisation has begun actively searching for local donors in the regions where it operates.

Much later, the prospects of collaborating with businesses started to become more attractive. Yet, even now, the idea of taking on Gulf money still requires delicately constructing a narrative.

‘Three years in Istanbul, three-and-a-half years in Cairo and back to Turkey, the last twenty-five years away from home,’

‘By endlessly talking to people, we were able to gain their trust and the militia leader even attended the opening of the project. That is how it’s done.’

The locals certainly didn’t hide their feelings. SPARK employees were not just another western organisation that comes here to impose their will on us. You really listened to us.’

‘It requires collaborating with parties whose ideas are radically different from your own, like SPARK did in Kosovo. There, the organisation helped to make a university that was located exactly on an ethnic fault line, right in the middle of the divided city of Mitrovica. Du Pont learned one of his most valuable lessons there: always keep talking to each other, even if you are met with fierce criticism.

‘We were working together with Serbian organisations who were forced to collaborate with the Albanian majority after the war. While many western donors partnered with progressive organisations, we opted to work together with parties that had ties to the Serbian Orthodox Church and armed militias. These people were opposed to the West, to NATO, to the Dutch—and to SPARK.’

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‘We are not doing things just for show or clinging to the Dutch drawing-board logic’

As mentioned, SPARK does many things just a bit differently than other Dutch NGOs. Just look at the funding it receives: circa twenty-five percent comes from the Netherlands, forty percent from the European Union, thirty percent from the Gulf states and five to ten percent from the philanthropists and businesses that SPARK collaborates with, such as Google and Generali.

‘We are not doing things just for show or clinging to the Dutch drawing-board logic. Instead, we try to go one step further and reach out to youths in inaccessible areas. That also involves working together with parties whom you may initially have some doubts about. I have learned, however, that this is sometimes the only avenue that leads to true change.’
By working together with the Islamic Development Bank in the Middle East, we can reach out to communities that would otherwise be inaccessible to us, because the Bank have a presence there. Collaborating with such parties inspires trust among large sections of the population who often view western aid organisations with a degree of scepticism.

That opens many more doors for your programmes and allows you to work on promoting entrepreneurship or education for women in areas that you are not familiar with.

He gives the example of an entrepreneurship programme for beekeepers in Yemen, specifically designed for women.

‘Beekeepers in burkas; we never could have achieved that if we had come marching into the region like a bunch of Dutch people. Because we were working with a local organisation and with mosques, those women got the approval from their community to start their own business and begin generating an income.’

With the help of the Islamic Development Bank, SPARK has initiated projects in such countries as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Libya. Nevertheless, recruiting new, local donors was no easy task.

‘SPARK has been trying to work together with the Islamic Development Bank for at least the past seven years,’ he says. ‘It is only these past few years that our collaboration has become truly effective. Why is it so difficult to gain people’s trust? ‘As a western NGO in the Middle East, you are quickly seen as a bunch of spies,’ he explains.

‘People don’t trust what you are doing and they think you are being used by a western government to gather intel. We have frequently been subjected to careful examination by the countries we operate in, both directly and indirectly. Who are you, what are you doing here? We pulled it off in the end, though, because we had already worked in the Palestinian regions, Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq in the past with help from the Dutch government.’

Its donors from the Gulf have allowed SPARK to venture (even) further off the beaten path. Still, the organisation sometimes faces criticism from the Netherlands for taking money from those parts of the world.

If you keep preaching to the converted, you will quickly find yourself back among the small groups in the big cities who all share your views. That can be dangerous in its own way. Just look at what happened in Afghanistan, where no one saw the rapid rise of the Taliban coming and where the western presence had most of its attention focused inward:

And yet, can SPARK simply announce what it wants to do and how in a country like Qatar and expect results? ‘Although it surprises me somewhat, no one has ever told us: ‘That’s not going to happen.’ We have five donors in the Middle East. If one of them tells us to stop funding employment projects for women, we will stop doing business with them. To date, that has never happened.’

Are their proposals never met with any criticism at all? ‘Let me put it this way: I had expected it to happen more often. Not by donors, but one government did tell us: “If you go ahead with that project in that conflict zone, I cannot guarantee that your registration will remain in effect.” It was purely political. No donor has ever told us: “We are not doing that because of your ideals.”’

Nevertheless, working alongside parties from the Gulf remains a touchy subject and Du Pont often has to explain himself. ‘Just last year, for example, when the topic came up during a gathering of Dutch NGOs.

I saw many people with a questioning look in their eyes and two of them actually called me out on it: “We would never do something like that.” During the discussion that inevitably follows, it is clear that people quickly assume we have to comply with all kinds of requirements, which is not true.

“To top of that, we take extreme care to find out where the money is coming from before we sign any agreements with a donor. We meet with ambassadors and other parties who already receive funding from that party. On occasion, we have walked away from a deal because it simply did not feel right to us.”

Du Pont says that people often have a knee-jerk reaction when it comes to donors from the Gulf. ‘I think their two biggest fears are whether the source of the money is above board and whether we are asked to comply with all manner of odd conditions. When we recently received money from Kuwait, various Dutch government institutions audited us before the deal could go ahead the Ministries of Social and Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior, another service from the Ministry of the Interior. I believe that you should judge everything on its own merits and consider the impact a donation like that can have. On the other hand, how conceivable is it to take money from the United States or Great Britain, knowing that all the ammunition used in Yemen was sold by those countries? Should I have refused all money from USen when Trump took over as President? What good would that do?’

At times, it reminds him of the discussions he used to have about working together with businesses, which SPARK was one of the first to do. ‘Are you an NGO or a company?’ people would say, or: “Why are you working alongside big business?” I would then have to explain the importance of our work and the fact that we were doing it for local youths.

Take our project with Generali, for example, which allocated millions to help refugees in six countries find work, much more than we had initially expected. That does not mean, however, that all we do is merely say “please” and “thank you.”

‘One time during a meeting with the CSR manager, I dropped a report from Pax on the table which revealed that Generali was still investing heavily in, for example, fossil fuels. We had a fruitful discussion about that and I asked them if there wasn’t another way. That if it is one of our donors, you can count on me to make a fuss about it.

Du Pont’s message: look for the common ground, find ways to support each other there and realise that you have clout as an NGO.

Luckily, we are no longer required to constantly defend ourselves, because working with businesses has become an acceptable approach. I do believe there is still room for improvement in the Netherlands, however.

‘We claim to be interested in collaborating with businesses, but we then refrain from engaging in the open discussion that is necessary to get the ball rolling. The Netherlands simply has not gone far enough in that regard.

He says the development sector should reflect on its own actions more often. ‘You can give me a questioning look when I talk about the Islamic Development Bank, but it is sometimes one of the biggest instigators of reform.

On the other hand, a large part of the Dutch sector once campaigned heavily against the rapid spending of money through local parties, when the Van Laar motion was shot down (which stipulated that southern organisations could also serve as coordinator of strategic alliances, etc.).

‘How do we intend to help our southern partners then? You should not neglect to take a closer look at the major conservative organisations in those countries, which represent truly large sections of the population. Ask yourself this: how can we work on such themes as creating more employment opportunities for women from the perspective of their agenda of national reform?’

These are all things that Du Pont himself would not have thought of when he was younger. As he said, they probably would have frightened him. ‘But now I know that it works. It would be a shame to ignore those opportunities, because it limits the impact you can have on development. No one wants that.’
After lagging behind for years, the Middle East is now rapidly digitalising. In recent years, SPARK and its partners have gone all-in on projects that centre around IT and digital transformation in order to prepare (disadvantaged) youths, refugees, students, women and novice entrepreneurs for a job in the tech industry or help them find their way in the digital world—and their work is far from done.

Since March, Samer Haffar from Syria has been working for SPARK as manager of digital affairs in Istanbul. Like millions of others, he fled from his native country to Turkey to escape the civil war. In Turkey, he spent the past few years working for one of SPARK’s partners on entrepreneurship and employment programmes for Syrian refugees.

Turkey is the most important hub out of which SPARK runs its projects in the Middle East; it is the most developed economy in the region and it is where the capital is based that the entrepreneurs whom SPARK supports can benefit from.

SPARK is currently selecting the participants together with the local partners who will be providing the training. ‘We are aiming for a maximum of 250 trainees and 50 entrepreneurs. In general, anyone is welcome to sign up for the programme. Many projects in the region are targeted towards Syrian refugees. They need our help as well, but the refugee crisis has also affected local communities. We should not forget about disadvantaged local youths and try to support them with these projects as well. If we can help two hundred or so people find a job, that would be fantastic.’

The Google project will set the tone for the years to come, during which SPARK wants to explore ways to increase its focus on tech projects and help even more people find a job in this sector. Okan Altasli envisions a period during which SPARK focuses heavily on experimentation, pioneering and developing new models.

‘Over the course of its two-year duration, the project will revolve around two principles: First of all, Haffar says, ‘we will help people who do not make their way to the tech industry to train their digital skills and find a job. We will also try to help entrepreneurs by coaching them and putting them in touch with potential investors. Wherever possible, this will pave the way for the next step in their company’s development.’

At its core, this project does not differ at all much from what SPARK has done many times before, says the manager of digital affairs. ‘Google’s involvement does attract people’s attention, of course. We are still in the preparatory phase, but over the coming months I want to examine how we can involve Google as much as possible. It is such a major organisation with so many resources at its disposal; that has to make a big difference somehow.’

‘It is an uneasy situation, but it does pave the way for the introduction of new technologies’

I am thinking of employees who can support projects and acts as mentors for the trainees or exploring ways to use their platforms and network to make the most of our partnership, so we can offer our participants the best possible programme.’

SPARK is preparing to launch a new project where it will combine a standard education programme with support from Google and other companies. "Here SPARK is working with Google, giving students scholarships to more and more students and, together with our partners, finding new ways to make it easier to acquire funding,” he says.

‘We have appointed someone with thirty years of experience working in Silicon Valley. They know exactly how a start-up should enter the market and where it can go to receive funding. Any method that works can be scaled up and applied in other countries as well. It can all contribute to development.’

Haffar nod. ‘We believe tech will become very important in the future,’ he says. ‘SPARK is really paving the way for that. The more we focus on this, the greater our chances of helping people find a job and improve their economic position. That is ultimately what it is all about.’
Enthusiastic participants from the Change the Game Academy of the Wilde Ganzen Foundation
The best help comes from within

Foreign development aid still too often undermines people’s self-reliance and local solidarity. Wilde Ganzen sees community philanthropy as a solution: local organisations are able to do much more much closer to home than initially thought. ‘Small gifts quickly add up to a lot of money.’

Text: Elian Yahye

It was common for many girls in the Kenyan city of Busia not to go to school for a few days a month, as sanitary pads were too expensive. ‘Unacceptable,’ 19-year-old Sarah Martha thought. She enrolled in the Change the Game Academy, a teaching programme that helps participants create a project for their community and raise money for it themselves.

Within six months, Martha managed to raise four thousand dollars. More importantly, her initiative kicked off a successful lobbying campaign in her region: nowadays the government supplies sanitary towels to schools.

The Change the Game Academy is an initiative by Wilde Ganzen and three partner organisations from India, Kenya and Brazil. Programme coordinator Esther Meester has been involved in the project for several years now. ‘We think it’s important that people can collect their own resources,’ she says from the head office.

‘This has nothing to do with Dutch frugality. ‘Foreign aid has flattened solidarity between people,’ she explains. ‘During training sessions, participants actually say that they hoped for help from Bill Gates or the European Union, but that they now see that a lot is possible close to home.’

Next to Meester sits Kees de Jong, the director of Wilde Ganzen. The foundation was established in 1975 by the Dutch public broadcaster NPO and for a long time had a progressive Christian image. ‘We have become known for the weekly Ganzenvluchten, short commercials calling on viewers to donate money,’ he says.

‘They are still being broadcast — no longer by the NPO, but since 2016 by the EO. ‘We raise money for a clinic, a classroom or a well. Something tangible, usually.’ It is in the DNA of Wilde Ganzen to support mainly small, practical projects worldwide.

For a few years now, the foundation has embraced the idea of community philanthropy: projects should be partly funded by the community. ‘Wilde Ganzen,’ says Meester, ‘is dependent on its loyal supporters for funding.’ That provides a lot of freedom. ‘As a result, we did not have to hop from subsidy to subsidy and we did not have to adapt to changing donor requirements. That got us thinking.’

Ugandan Eddy Balina opposed gang violence in the city of Jinja with his organisation The Non-Violence Project. He developed curricula for schools to help students resolve quarrels and conflicts peacefully.

Meester: ‘We had one problem: how to reach young people who do not go to school? They get the idea of setting up a community school for students who could not afford the fees. Through a Dutch girl he knew, Balina came into contact with Wilde Ganzen and the Change the Game Academy.

He approached parents and told his story at local businesses during breakfast meetings. ‘Unlike the schools set up by international organisations,’ says Meester, ‘people do feel involved in this school.’

In 2007, Wilde Ganzen started an experiment with their three partner organisations in Kenya, Brazil and India. Projects were only approved if part of the money was raised by the community itself. As it turned out: nine hundred out of a thousand organisations were able to collect more than half of a project budget themselves.

The first training courses of the Change the Game Academy were given in 2015, in these three countries — and now they are available in thirteen nations. ‘Local partners adapt the training courses to the context of the country.’

Organisations that want to do something for their community can turn to the Academy. Firstly, they need to map out who their supporters are. Meester: ‘Who benefits from what you do? And how could those people help you?’

Secondly, participants are asked to draw up a concrete plan and are helped to implement it. Since 2018, training courses are also available online. Completing a module also looks good on your resume: after passing an exam, you receive a diploma that is accredited by the Dutch training institute NCC.

Wilde Ganzen also managed to get the Dutch government excited about local fundraising. Over the next five years, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is freed up 24 million euros for the Giving for Change Alliance, a program promoting local philanthropy in eight countries.

‘Our intention is not that governments and organisations in the West can sit back,’ Meester emphasises. ‘We are not against outside funding. When organisations succeed in raising their own resources locally, it shows that their project gets support within the community. We turn it around: people locally figure out what should be happening there and then we are able to support that.’

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The inhabitants of the Ghanaian town of Tumu were not happy with the wood factory that a Chinese company had built near their city. The factory processed rosewood, a precious wood whose trade was officially banned. Their logging activities led to deforestation and the destruction of the local farmland.

The Social Initiative for Literacy and Development Program, a local NGO, has emerged as the leader of the resistance against the factory. But that proved more difficult than hoped, says Meester: ‘There was a lot of mistrust among the population with regard to social organisations.’

The tide turned after two board members attended training courses at the Change the Game Academy. At meetings and in radio broadcasts, the community was enticed to peacefully protest against the factory. The organisation managed to win the trust of the people, and six and a half thousand euros in cash was collected.

In the summer of 2019, residents of the city took to the streets to demonstrate against the factory. With success: the local government ordered the company to leave. ‘It led to self-confidence,’ says Meester. ‘People see that they can also turn to the government themselves.’

The Social Initiative board members not only received training on how to raise money, but also learned how to set up a successful political campaign. ‘Those two are closely related,’ Meester and De Jong say.

‘It is not only in Tumu that there is distrust towards civil society organisations—especially if the money comes from abroad. But if organisations raise funds within their own community, De Jong says, ‘they must also be accountable to the community.’

Moreover, governments in the Global South are quick to see generous gifts from western donors as foreign interference. ‘Look at a country like India,’ De Jong continues. ‘That is the largest democracy in the world. They do not want all that international money.’
A study by the Bridgespan Group found that during the pandemic, donations from African philanthropists were seven times higher than during pre-pandemic years. Many of them are just not used to giving to local organisations: less than ten percent of those donations went to local NGOs.

While the pandemic showed that locally funded organisations have an advantage; they can react more quickly if a crisis erupts. ICMM is a Brazilian organisation of the Wilde Ganzen network that is active in the coastal region of Grande Florianópolis. In 2018 it started setting up a network through which residents of the region and local businesses support each other financially.

When the virus hit a year later, ICMM sent a letter to all members asking if the money could be used for the pandemic. Within a day, a fund was set up. ‘We were one of the few funds in the region,’ the chairman wrote on the website.

Meester and De Jong see that the importance of local philanthropy is increasingly penetrating the development sector. ‘It’s a very actual topic,’ says De Jong.

Local aid organisations, such as Germany’s Brot für die Welt, are interested in the Change the Game Academy’s training model and want to use it for their own partner organisations. They are also heard in other places. ‘Recently, there was a side event at the UN that was all about local philanthropy.’

Local fundraising is clearly gaining ground and it is destroying a worldview in which people in the South are mainly pitiful and in need of help. But isn’t a piece of international solidarity also lost? The fact that many Dutch people are willing to donate money after seeing the Gangerluchten clips is also a form of solidarity. ‘There is indeed a fine balance between paternalism and solidary,’ says Meester. In view of the global wealth inequality, western money is still desperately needed, according to both of them.

De Jong: ‘We shouldn’t throw the baby out with the bathwater.’

Advice for the policy note

De Jong: ‘The government must invest in building up civil society. I am talking about the real civil society. The one which has been put behind 2-0 by our sector. I’m talking about organisations with a following that is supported and recognised locally. They must be supported with flexible financing, which can use for organisational building. The Ministry is already a forerunner in this field, but the effort must be enforced.’

‘There should also be more investment in social support for development cooperation in the Netherlands itself. Look at countries like Denmark and Belgium; there, the government supports information activities and local initiatives. That no longer happens in our country, which creates a vicious circle at some point. From less support in society, to less political support, to less money.’
The Palestinians will sort it out themselves

The Palestinians are one of the largest recipients of development aid worldwide—though it is a euphemism: aid funds are regularly used by Israel and foreign governments as a means of blackmail, and to exert political pressure on the Palestinians. In addition, international aid organisations in fact hold sway in Palestinian territories. This regularly leads to arbitrariness, says Mansour: “At a certain point, donors no longer found the subject of ‘culture’ interesting. From one day to the next, Palestinian cultural organisations were left without a budget.”

Dalia, which is Arabic for ‘vine’, was founded in 2007. The year before, Hamas had won the election in the Gaza Strip, causing much of the foreign money flows towards the Palestinians to dry up. Activists and community leaders decided it was time to take matters into their own hands. Dalia, for example, helps women and young people who want to start their own project or who want a seat at the policy table, by providing grants and offering training. This is primarily financed with money from the community itself. “We were the first to introduce the idea of community philanthropy among Palestinians,” Ismail says. That is not because Palestinians are not used to looking after each other, Mansour emphasises: “I remember it well from when I was a child in the eighties: we all helped each other. I was proud that we as a community were so self-reliant. That changed very quickly.”

Mansour grew up in the US and returned to the Palestinian territories in 2008, where she worked for the US government, among others. “I was very shocked. The situation was so much worse than I expected.” Several years earlier, Israel had begun building a wall around the West Bank. Palestinians became increasingly isolated from each other and Palestinian territory was reduced to “Swiss cheese.” It didn’t do the togetherness any good, says Ismail: “We are played out against each other.” Both women emphasise, though, that it is not only the occupation that is to blame for this. After the neoliberal revolution of the late 1970s, the Palestinian territories were also swallowed up in the global market. Ismail tells us that it undermined the Palestinian sense of community: “We are now copying the West and adopting a consumer lifestyle.”

The billions in foreign aid that the Palestinians have received in recent decades has turned out to be a curse rather than a blessing. For the women of Dalia, local fundraising is about self-esteem, self-determination and preserving the Palestinian identity.

In 1993, the Oslo Accords were signed: a series of agreements between Israel and the Palestinians that were to provide the blueprint for lasting peace, and the start of a two-state solution. Since then, the international community has sent billions of dollars in development aid to the Palestinian territories. An unmitigated disaster for the Palestinians, say Lina Ismail (41) and Aisha Mansour (46). Both women are involved in the Palestinian community organisation Dalia, Ismail as a programme coordinator and Mansour as a board member. Their people have been put on an IV of dependence, says Mansour. “We have even come to see our own country primarily as a commodity,” she says.

International aid organisations are also accountable for this. Ismail explains that large foreign NGOs often look through the same neoliberal glasses when setting up projects in the country: “They are faster to give money to individuals than to cooperatives.”

For both, Palestinian independence does not only mean statehood, it also means economic self-determination. Mansour: “We are not against the economy, but why can’t it be a local, social economy?”

These are values that the organisation itself puts into practice. Dalia manages a small farm next to the headquarters in Ramallah, where food is grown sustainably. Recently, the organisation renovated an old building and turned it into an inn.

The women who work in the kitchen,” says Ismail, “only use indigenous products.” Local organisations and businesses can rent a workplace in the building for a small fee. “The money we earn with this is reinvested in the work of the organisation.”

That does not mean that all outside help is rejected, Mansour: “We work together with several international organisations, but only if they support our values.” For example, Dalia is involved in the Giving for Change Alliance, the programme to promote local giving, that is coordinated by Wilde Ganzen.

According to Mansour and Ismail, it is especially important that Dalia can determine how projects with foreign partners take shape. “All help is welcome, but organisations must respect that we set our own priorities.”

At least there is one form of foreign aid that is welcome. The sizable Palestinian diaspora counts more than six million people: about half of all Palestinians do not live in the Palestinian territories or in Israel. Dalia’s women try to involve them in their work as much as they can. A Palestinian-Australian businesswoman organised meetings with her company to raise money for us. Such initiatives are necessary.”

Dalia released a guidebook for Palestinians abroad, with tips on activities they can organise to raise money: from dance competitions to setting up a face painting booth for children.

The support of the diaspora is heartening for both women, who make personal sacrifices for their work. Ismail could have made a career working for international NGOs and Mansour could have chosen to keep her well-paid job with the US government—but both choose a life marked by the daily humiliations of the occupation.

“It’s kind of like a marriage,” Ismail says. “You say yes to a project that you know is going to take a very long time.” But they are happy to see their story catching on within the community.

Mansour, laughing: “Recently I ran into a high school student who shouted: ‘We need a local economy!’ That made me proud.”
How do you get impact investors and financial institutions to invest in the water and sanitation sector? Aqua for All uses subsidy money to entice them. A conversation with director Josien Sluijs: ‘It has resulted in growth and professionalisation being possible.’

Aqua for All has its office in a historic building on Spaarneplein in The Hague. The stairwell refers to the work of the artist Escher. It is a space with a history, as the former headquarters of the Post Office Giro Institutions.

Aqua for All was founded in 2002 to tackle the global water problem in a socially responsible manner. Founded by a partnership of Dutch water companies and water boards, it was based on innovation, entrepreneurship and sustainability.

Since then, Aqua for All has sought new ways to address the water and sanitation challenges posed by service and financial gaps.

Once the band has been turned on, director Josien Sluijs falls silent for a moment. ‘That makes one a little more uncomfortable,’ she says with a laugh, before summing up the core of her organisation after a moment’s thought: ‘We work to catalyse capital from impact investors—often new water and sanitation activities are developed with subsidy money. If a company then continues to grow and needs capital for the next growth step, it is—virtually—non-existent. To make investments available to these companies, blended finance solutions are needed, a combination of subsidy money and investment capital.’

‘Our subsidy money is used to de-risk private capital by deploying instruments such as guarantees and first loss capital. Subsidies can also be provided for capacity building of the entrepreneur. We are also working on capacity building for local financial institutions so that they can build up a loan portfolio in the water and sanitation sector. All this stimulates the catalysis of private capital for the sector.’

One of the innovative financial instruments that Aqua for All has co-developed is called Impact-Linked Finance for WASH. ‘Incentives, in other words, to generate more impact,’ says Sluijs. ‘The more a company can show that it provides additional impact, the more financing we will grant.’

She illustrates it with a concrete example. ‘We work with water companies in Africa and Asia that are unable to invest quickly in remote rural areas due to the higher investment costs. If a company is interested in those areas, we help make it possible by providing temporary financial “incentives”.’

‘Companies receive a reward based on the impact results achieved—and not just any impact: it is not solely about providing people in remote areas with drinking water, but also about reaching the poorer population there. So we give them a financial incentive for more impact.’

After two or three years, they no longer need it, because then they have a paying customer group. In many ways, it is a win-win situation. ‘We will further develop this instrument for our sector, for example for the benefit of women or to realise the energy transition at water companies.’

‘The agreement we have with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is to support market-based and local businesses that serve poorer or vulnerable people and give them access to drinking water and sanitation. It is important that we strengthen entrepreneurship in these companies, so that they can continue in the future without outside help.’

‘We always make sure that we test the companies on their long-term vision and that our subsidy is aimed at further growth and ultimately at attracting private investment.’

Raising capital is desperately needed, says Sluijs. ‘The water sector is lagging far behind when it comes to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals,’ she says. ‘The sixth goal (access to water and sanitation for everyone by 2030, ed.) is still a long way off. There are still 2.1 billion people who need access to drinking water and 4.5 billion people to sanitation products and services.’

‘At the moment, there’s five billion euros a year in donor money available, while it has been calculated that 114 billion euros are needed annually. The projected annual investment shortfall for the sixth Sustainable Goal is an average of 260 billion dollars from 2015 to 2030. So how are we going to use our grant money to catalyse other capital?’

Here lies another task for Aqua for All, through collaboration with impact investors and local financial institutions. Before discussing this further, Sluijs would like to say that you should always distinguish between humanitarian and economic interventions.

‘Within our sector, there will always be a lot of work that you have to tackle with humanitarian aid. For example, it is not possible to make a business case for water projects in very difficult areas. One shouldn’t even want to exploit water wells in a commercial way in South Sudan.

‘These humanitarian interventions will continue to be necessary, but that is not our area of focus. This piece of work is extremely important, but it will not achieve the speed and scale to achieve the Sustainable Goals by 2030. We can only do that by working together with water entrepreneurs.’

‘Companies receive a reward based on the impact results achieved—and not just any impact’

She knows what she’s talking about, since she comes from the financial world. For many years she was director of the Platform for Impact Finance, which speaks from experience about related sectors, such as microfinance.

‘It was originally also set up and financed by NGOs and governments,’ she says, ‘until it was seen that the capital involved was not nearly enough to take any real steps. Private capital was needed to grow. Parties such as Triodos, FMO and Oikocredit saw the potential to invest in these microcredit institutions and caused them to grow and make more impact.’

‘A lot changed at the time in microcredit institutions. ’They had to report differently, which meant they had to professionalise their internal systems. And they got access to knowledge and technology because investors provided them with money for these investments.’

‘So you see that we have to work in a different way if the conditions of impact investors have to be met. It has led to growth and professionalisation being possible.’

Yet the natural reflexes of working with subsidy money within development cooperation are still lurking, Sluijs has noticed. She recently telephoned other organisations in the Netherlands that also want to cooperate in raising private capital for the water and sanitation sector.
Although Sluijs is not against subsidy money as such. ‘But, in addition to humanitarian interventions, use this mainly strategically, as leverage, to arrange more money. You can use it smartly to get more parties on board, who in turn generate more capital, which gives you more impact and reduces donor dependence.’

**What she also wants to emphasise is that managing investment funds and structuring financial instruments is a specific area of expertise. As a development organisation, do not think that this knowledge can easily be created in-house.**

‘Seek collaborations with organisations that understand it,’ she says. ‘The world of impact investors and related organisations has developed enormously over the past twenty years; not only in managing funds for the development of certain sectors, but also all impact reporting and legislation and regulations. You shouldn’t want to set that up yourself, leave it to the professionals.’

Fortunately, most development organisations understand that, she thinks. ‘A good example is Oxfam Novib, which founded the Triple jump organisation in 1996 together with Saxo Bank to generate more impact in the microfinance sector.’

‘And Hivos wanted to stimulate impact funds thirty years ago. Instead of setting up something themselves, they have chosen to hedge the risks of Triodos Bank’s impact investments. Those are very smart things.’

Aqua for All itself also takes a good look at who has which expertise. ‘For example, we work together with a Belgian impact investor: Incofin, a fund manager that stimulates entrepreneurship in developing countries through its investments and focuses on achieving impact and returns. If all goes well, it will launch a fifty million euro fund for the water sector next year.’

‘Incofin provides the financial expertise and we provide the knowledge in the field of water. If Incofin believes that an entrepreneur is not yet good enough to absorb this type of capital, we can use our subsidy money in such a way that an entrepreneur is strengthened and can handle an investment afterwards.’

In Kenya and Cambodia, Aqua for All works together with banks and microfinance institutions. ‘We support the banks with a guaranty fund for the microfinance building. This enables them to provide loans and working capital to households that, for example, want a water connection at home, and to entrepreneurs who—let’s say—manage kiosks.’

Many banks and microfinance institutions have not served the water and sanitation sector before and therefore need subsidies to conduct market research, adapt their internal systems to new customer groups and train their employees to sell the right products to those customers.

‘In order to get as many financial institutions as possible interested in building a portfolio, we work with impact investors who provide liquidity to those institutions.’

Just as development cooperation is meant to sometimes give the target group just that oneudge to get out of a vicious circle of poverty, Sluijs uses her money to give an impact investor or financial institution a push to invest in something they would not otherwise be able to do—and in this case in the water and sanitation sector.

‘The goal of the four-million-euro loan programme,’ said Loise Mwangi, head of branches at Sidian Bank, ‘was to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic on our customers. We offered them short-term working capital financing and support the WASH services. It enabled households, communities and micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to increase their resilience during the pandemic on many fronts. The bank also delivered a positive, deep-rooted impact through socio-economic empowerment of these enterprises, by breaking down barriers to accessing working capital. And water has become a prime focus area for Sidian Bank during this Covid period.

In August 2020, a few months after the first coronavirus cases in Kenya became known, Sidian Bank partnered with Aqua for All to address the difficulties—and opportunities—that had arisen with the offered Covid-19 Water Loan Facility. The primary purpose of the partnership was to provide short-term working capital financing and support the WASH services. It would undoubtedly help close the gaps in the Kenyan WASH sector.

The desired improvements for the WASH sector in Kenya have never been so obvious as in these Covid times—and then suddenly money was available, you could take a loan from Sidian Bank, which started a partnership with Aqua for All. Visiting a water merchant. ‘The financial stimulus from the bank gave me that much-needed boost, just when I felt I was totally stuck.’

The Kenyan government’s efforts to expand the WASH reach have certainly not been in vain, but they are not enough either; continuous access to it remains a major challenge for both urban and rural populations. The result: ‘players’ from the public and private sectors, such as Sidian Bank, decided to help contain the virus. Sidian provides banking services such as working capital and business loans, asset financing or WASH projects and insurance. All of it enabled households, communities and micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to increase their resilience during the pandemic on many fronts.

Everyone appeared to run into the same problems: ‘There are always organisations that do things with the best intentions, but get in the way when it comes to a more business-like approach,’ says Sluijs.

Aqua for All had once joined forces with Vori (which was established in 2004 by the Dutch water companies to work together with partner organisations in the South) and was at an advanced stage with the national water company of Mali. Not only to provide more people with water, but also to facilitate an energy transition. ‘We had come a long way and had calculated exactly what the investment need was,’ says Sluijs. ‘There was a bank that wanted to provide capital and after a few years the loan would have been repaid, and the benefit of lower costs through cheaper energy would still reap the rewards.

‘The company was enthusiastic, but did not dare to cooperate. People preferred to wait for a donation from the World Bank or another major donor—and I think that’s a missed opportunity. ‘A lot more consultation would be possible here between our kind of parties and major donors,’ she analyses. ‘That you at least agree that you will do part of the project on a commercial basis. Now subsidies sometimes disrupt the market.’

Theprimary purpose of the partnership was to provide short-term working capital financing and support the WASH services. It would undoubtedly help close the gaps in the Kenyan WASH sector. The goal of the four-million-euro loan programme, said Louise Mwangi, head of branches at Sidian Bank, was to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic on our customers. We offered them access to financing for WASH business and, in return, they were able to purchase water equipment to meet the increased demand. It was crucial to invest quickly in the necessary things, such as in handwashing stations, soap or water dispensers and other sanitary supplies to participate in the fight against the coronavirus.’
The Covid-19 WASH Loan Facility, she says, aimed to reach at least two and a half million people in two years from August 2020—and that is already the case, in thirteen months, that target figure has been reached and surpassed.

‘Our portfolio currently consists of 5.1 million euros in loans,’ continues Mwangi, ‘which has been extended to more than six hundred/terms. That is already good for 2.8 million beneficiaries, in just over a year’s time.’ She is visibly delighted when she talks about the results and in particular the socio-economic impact.

‘It shows once again that the WASH sector is understaffed in terms of financing and infrastructure. Not enough attention has been paid to the necessary systems to ensure efficient operation of the water and sanitation infrastructure, putting the sector even further behind achieving the sixth Sustainable Development Goal.

There are social consequences, especially for children, girls and women. Improved access to safe drinking water and better sanitation and hygiene in households directly improves school attendance and water reticulation systems and pipe connections for households.

‘We also manage relationships with water service providers and community-led organisations that provide water facilities. In this way, we can take care of the infrastructure, such as boreholes, water reticulation systems and pipe connections for households.

When we looked at the overall goal of the programme, we noticed that it was very much in line with the theme of the sixth goal to provide clean drinking water, sanitation and hygiene and water management. And after assessing its impact on recipients in responding to the coronavirus crisis, we were able to identify potential customers for the Loan Facility.

“As a financial partner, we like to guide our customers by tailoring solutions for the everyday financial needs of companies. Our ability to do so has enabled us to achieve the objectives of the programme.”

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‘It has social consequences, especially for children, girls and women. Improved access to safe drinking water and better sanitation and hygiene in households directly improves school attendance and school performance—and promotes gender equality, as it allows women to spend more time on social contacts and paid work, which is good for the well-being of their families as well as for their entire community, in a broader sense.

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Loise Mwangi points out that the programme has also benefited from working with local partners, including Davis & Shirtliff, a leading supplier of water-related equipment in East Africa, and Dumu Tanks & Orb Energi, for solar projects. The partners helped enable WASH facilities through affordable and flexible financing from Sidian Bank. Customers also received a discount.

Aqua for All, says Loise Mwangi, joined as a strategic partner to provide grants for technical assistance, including for risk funds so that a loan could be affordably priced. And those who did not have sufficient collateral, but did have a good business model, could still obtain credit through de-risking.

Sidian Bank has continued to support its clients in the fight against climate change, says Mwangi. The bank helps them invest in technology-driven business models that are innovative and move towards cleaner energy.

‘Climate change has exacerbated the already dire state of the WASH sector. It requires innovation, especially in terms of efficiency, cost reduction, digitisation and a shift to clean energy, for a positive impact on the environment.’

On the way to Mombasa County, to get a clearer picture of it all. There waits James Okeyo, who is a recipient of Sidian’s programme on behalf of his water company Neptune. The 36-year-old is a father of two and a bookkeeper by trade, but he felt a desire to dive into the water business after seeing the high demand in the area long before the pandemic broke out.

‘I started my business with money from a microfinance institution,’ he says. ‘At a certain moment, I got to the point that I needed more money to grow, but the institution couldn’t provide it, so I went to my bank—and unfortunately they couldn’t help me either, because I couldn’t provide any security.

A friend introduced me to the branch manager of the local Sidian Bank, seeing my enthusiasm and ambitions for my water company. Until then it had been difficult to grow it. I bought water and purified it. Demand was high and it hurt me that I couldn’t expand to meet all my customers’ needs.’

After that first meeting with the manager, James Okeyo opened an account and submitted an application with the Covid-19 WASH Loan Facility. Within 48 hours, he received a call from the bank saying it had been approved, thanks to the potential of his business. ‘It was just unbelievable!’ he says now.

‘The money came just in time, he says, because he was just having a problem with the pawnbroker. He left and rented a larger space to accommodate his expanding business. ‘My first concern was arranging water bottles,’ James Okeyo says. ‘I rushed to Nairobi to sort out the paperwork, bought the water bottles, a filling station and a packing table. And I made my own borehole.’

‘The financial stimulus from the bank gave me a much-needed boost, just when I felt I was completely stuck and just as the pandemic arrived and water became even more important. As the demand increased, my business thrived and I was able to hire seven others, give them work.

‘So, the company is called Neptune, I’ve prayed for that name and believe it’s God-given. I can now supply my customers with water and do everything myself from start to finish, right down to applying the brand name. As you can see here, these bottles are for a Mombasa Pastors’ Fellowship event.’

After scaling up his business and stabilising things, he hopes to supply other regions with water. ‘I have noticed,’ he says, ‘that it is in high demand in places like Malindi—and beyond—but transportation costs are high. I’m renting a truck now, but it’s too expensive. One day I want to have one of my own, preferably soon, and I will definitely go to Sidian Bank to get the water container financed,’ he smiles.

‘The ultimate goal is to someday be able to spread its water all over East Africa.

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‘James was introduced to me by a loyal customer of ours,’ says Delila Kizina, the branch manager of Sidian Bank in Mombasa, ‘which is exactly why we value our customer experience because we get new customers through the existing ones.

‘We started his journey together. I visited him in his old business premises and immediately saw the potential. He had built a water storage of about ten thousand litres there. But the problems and opportunities that suddenly arose from the pandemic had to be responded to—and rather quickly.

‘It’s amazing to see how much he’s grown. We are proud of his passion, his will to continue to provide clean water—that is also a joy for us, and we will continue to support his ambition to become a regional supplier.’

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Loise Mwangi

Obr. 1. James Okeyo in his flourished water business

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James Okeyo in his flourished water business

Aqua for All
What comes to mind when you think of development cooperation?

Gomez: ‘The development world has not yet adapted to the world we live in now and the world we will find ourselves in tomorrow. For the past ten years or so, we have been living in what futurists are calling the “VUCA world”, which is Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous.

‘In this world, change not only comes from major, formal organisations such as NGOs, but especially from less formal alliances that can form spontaneously all over the world and are given a podium. Just look at the youths who are going on strike every Friday to protest against climate change. Change begins with the Greta Thunbergs of this world.

‘It is now about how we behave in relation to these alliances, without competing with them or forcing them to conform to our framework or our way of doing things. In the future, organisations will no longer have central offices or central leadership. To give the Gretas wings, NGOs will have to transform themselves.’

What is the situation like right now?

‘The help,’ she continues, ‘is currently tied to a system in which countries such as the Netherlands channel money and services to the South through large international organisations. NGOs are filled to bursting with traditionally trained employees who are wired to do things in the typical NGO manner.

‘That means coming up with an idea, writing a proposal, finding a donor, writing reports and logframes and hoping for a year’s worth of funding—or perhaps four years, if you truly knocked it out of the park. There is just one small problem: that is not how transformative change works.

‘Neither is it a model that we should be trying to push others into. During the process of transformative change, we make and break things, test ideas that we are uncertain about, fall, get back up and try again. It doesn’t matter that we “fail”, only that we learn from it.

‘I first entered this world as a human rights lawyer, but I quickly felt disillusioned, because the impact I could realise was so limited. I watched all those experts and specialists narrow their technical perspective and become walking hammers that see nails everywhere they look.

‘Perhaps you don’t need a hammer at all; you might be better off with a nail file, a chainsaw, a pair of scissors or a combination of these. You have to be prepared for that by having a multidisciplinary team. I found myself facing a moral dilemma and decided to take a step back and adopt a fresh perspective.

‘I began learning more about the concepts of futures thinking, design thinking and system thinking for social change. As a futurist and strategy consultant, I help donors, NGOs and activists develop a forward-thinking perspective and a future-proof strategy.

‘No one can predict exactly what the future holds, but you can use the principle of foresight to make plans based on various possible futures, which helps an organisation stay resilient as well as flexible and innovative. You know, the future of development cooperation is here, everywhere around us!’

Charles Kojo Vandyck, does that sound feasible to you?

‘Yes,’ he says, ‘I believe that true change can only come from within. That is the future. I agree with Krizna that traditional development cooperation is no longer sustainable in the world we now live in.

‘International programmes are often formed in the vicinity of a Monitoring & Evaluation Officer in Amsterdam or The Hague. In that structure, the vision and mission are already set in stone and they also come with a long list of compulsory reports and mountains of bureaucracy.

‘Perhaps you don’t need a hammer at all; you might be better off with a nail file, a chainsaw, a pair of scissors or a combination of these.’

Let’s conclude this special by passing the microphone to two leading experts from the South. The Filipino-Dutch Krizna Gomez works as a futurist and helps NGOs prepare for the future. Charles Kojo Vandyck runs the development branch of the West African Civil Society Institute in Ghana. Let’s get straight to the point: the first question!”

Text: Marlies Pilon
‘Partners constantly have to justify their actions to the “money lenders”, at the expense of accountability towards the communities that the programme is actually designed to help. That is not a future-proof strategy for international collaboration.

‘Some ten years ago, I and many of my colleagues from the South already warned that partners had to be given far more room and respect to decide for themselves what success means. ‘At the time, that was not sexy enough, so no one would listen to what we had to say. Now, that door has been opened slightly. It does not constitute a system-wide change yet, but it’s something at least.’

How is the Netherlands doing in that regard?

‘I see a rising trend in the Netherlands’ approach to development cooperation. In the past, the policy revolved around the government’s strategic priorities and the subsidy proposals were traditional: top-down and bureaucratic.

‘Since five years or so ago, I see that the approach is more focused on equality. Many Dutch donors are beginning to understand that equality begins by taking a hard look at your own privilege and breaking free from unequal power structures.

‘That does give you new hope for the future. When you compare the Dutch policy to that of other northern players, it is clear that the Netherlands has a progressive development agenda. I view the Netherlands and Denmark—and Sweden to a lesser extent—as the innovative parties who are leading the charge in this regard.’

What can the Netherlands do better?

Vandyck: ‘Partners do not need charity; they need support to realise their own vision for change. Give them more appreciation and power. Change is only effective when it comes from within, which also makes it more sustainable.

‘In order for a programme to be successful, it is critical that partners are involved in deciding the very beginning of a project is, from the first, in line with the idea of the programme, in which southern leadership and the partners’ ownership are the primary focus, is a minor revolution.

‘Following Black Lives Matter and the necessary discourse about decolonisation and localisation, there is a growing awareness of the poor foundation that international cooperation has rested on for so long. Many Dutch donors are beginning to understand that equality begins by taking a hard look at your own privilege and breaking free from unequal power structures.

‘That does give you new hope for the future. When you compare the Dutch policy to that of other northern players, it is clear that the Netherlands has a progressive development agenda. I view the Netherlands and Denmark—and Sweden to a lesser extent—as the innovative parties who are leading the charge in this regard.’

How does all that translate in terms of funding mechanisms?

Gomez: ‘I am touched by what Charles is saying. That is why it’s a good thing that funding will be more flexible and focused on the long term in the future, instead of being tied to projects. True change happens when you give a group of people money and the freedom decide for themselves what to do.

‘The resulting mental and creative freedom lets people move mountains! What you see happening now is that the decision about who receives funding is shifting from Dutch offices to the South. To a certain degree, that is already reflected in the Dutch policy, but several funds—such as Global Greengrants and Mama Cash—have been doing that for years.

‘Global Greengrants has consultants in communities around the world who decide what groups should receive funding. These are often too small to be visible to the Dutch government or Embassy. Mama Cash has adopted a similar model; it places the decision of who should receive funding entirely in the hands of a global pool of independent feminists.

‘The notion of full funding, whereby groups are free to decide how to spend their money without having to draw up endless reports, might seem like a far-off ideal, but many private foundations have already adopted it. Of course, the situation is more complicated for organisations that receive government money.

‘But it is certainly not impossible! It is simply a matter of redefining how you provide financial accountability and doing so without compromising the freedom of the groups you support.’

Is it not to be expected that donors demand a certain degree of accountability regarding how the money was used?

Gomez: ‘There is a Tanzanian NGO that drew up a single comprehensive policy document, sent it to all donors and told them: “You cannot expect us to write interim evaluations and reports every three months. This is a far more comprehensive and qualitative report that outlines our vision and strategy. We want you to support us.”

‘By doing that, this NGO is able to focus on its goals, but not all organisations have such a strong vision and so much courage. I believe that instead of learning about logframes and M&Ms, they should focus more on how they believe change can be brought about and on developing their vision for the future. We can help them ask the right questions.

How do you do that?

Vandyck: ‘What Krizna just said about alternatives is quite interesting. It is a very scary thing for donors. It is time we open our eyes and ears more to the way in which a community thinks and how it views change.

‘I was once approached by a West-African NGO that launched a project for young women who were unable to go to school due to poverty or an early pregnancy. The organisation was offering them an education and helped them in their quest to build a meaningful future for themselves.

‘I was asked to develop a way to gauge the project’s success, because my predecessor had left for the hills after a couple of confusing discussions about outputs and indicators.

‘So I asked them a simple question: “What did you hope to achieve when you first came up with this idea? What will these girls’ lives look like when you have achieved that goal? What about after one year, or two? You can tell me, do the maths or draw it out—whatever you want.”

‘Together, we came up with a way to hold each other accountable, to make sure that success would look like what we had envisaged. They proposed to form a committee that would convene every month to discuss what was going well and what wasn’t. Just like that, they had come up with their own M&E mechanism!’

Do you have any tips for the new Minister?

Vandyck: ‘Partners have to learn how to deal with emergency situations, so they can move away from their reactive stance and adopt a future-oriented perspective instead.

‘It is also important that you understand the evolution of development cooperation with the Dutch population, so citizens can see and understand why it is so important for us to start doing things differently.

‘But it is certainly not impossible! It is simply a matter of redefining how you provide financial accountability and doing so without compromising the freedom of the groups you support.’
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