



Learning from Evaluation

A meta-analysis of the Dialogue
and Dissent Strategic Partnerships
with DSH



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Table of Acronyms

| | |
|---------|---|
| AINL | Amnesty International Netherlands Office |
| AWEPA | Association of European Parliamentarians with Africa |
| CICC | Coalition of the International Criminal Court |
| COs | Country Offices |
| CSO | Civil Society Organization |
| D&D | Dialogue and Dissent |
| DMM | Multilateral Organizations and Human Rights Department |
| DRC | Democratic Republic of the Congo |
| DSH | Department for Stabilization and Humanitarian Aid |
| DSO | Social Development Department |
| GPPAC | Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict |
| HQ | Headquarters |
| ICRtoP | International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect |
| MFA | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands |
| MTR | Mid-term Evaluation |
| N-CSO | Northern CSO |
| NIMD | Netherlands Institute for Multi-Party Democracy |
| OH | Outcome Harvesting |
| PDIA | Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation |
| PEA | Political Economy Analysis |
| PMEL | Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning |
| RBF | Result Based Framework |
| S-CSO | Southern CSO |
| SP | Strategic Partnership |
| SROL | Security and Rule of Law |
| TOC | Theory of Change |
| TOR | Terms of Reference |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| WFM-IGP | World Federalist Movement-Institute for Global Policy |
| WWF | World Wide Fund |

Executive Summary

This working paper researches the central question: “does adaptive programming contribute to better results compared to more traditional approaches to programming?” It focuses on the case of five Strategic Partnerships (SPs) under the Dialogue and Dissent (D&D) funding window (2016-2020) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (MFA) for which the Department for Stabilization and Humanitarian Aid (DSH) has been the contact point.

The implementation of the adaptive approach by the five SPs thus far has been enough to have generated better results, at least in some countries inside the SPs.

1. When contextualized and frequently reviewed from a learning perspective, the TOC approach delivered modifications in intervention strategies that
 - a. got country programs unstuck after contextual events prevented them from delivering outputs or
 - b. improved intervention strategies based on the realization that outputs were not translating into outcomes.
2. A combination of informal interactions with local actors and formal studies conducted by PMEL and knowledge teams allowed the SPs to adapt well to their contexts.
3. When flexible processes of annual planning and reporting with the country partners were put in place that eliminated the requirement for country partners to deliver as planned and granted them flexibility, SPs also avoided wasting resources in highly political spaces as contexts changed.

Nevertheless, gaps remain in the implementation of the adaptive approach by the SPs and in the role of the MFA as an enabler of adaptation, which has likely prevented the adaptive approach from delivering even better results. None of the SPs has implemented the adaptive approach in its entirety. The SPs have taken on board the approach of understanding and acting relevantly in the context and set processes to review their TOCs for learning purposes.

1. None of the SPs has rolled out rigorously the Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation or similar processes for systematically exploring problems and testing and recording the results of different interventions.

2. Performance in facilitating and enabling locally driven processes was ambiguous, with a strong drive in that direction combining with persisting barriers and limitations. Dilemmas around power imbalances between N-CSOs and S-CSOs remain in models ostensibly founded on collaboration. One such example is the N-CSOs' practice of contracting S-CSOs on annual contracts based on defined outputs.
3. There were gaps in the implementation of the TOC approach for adaptation. Few of the SPs conducted annual, participatory reviews of their TOCs, and even fewer conducted experiments where different approach were tested empirically before being rolled out.

The main recommendations emerging from these findings and conclusions are:

1. Lead N-CSOs in the SPs should conduct an internal review to identify and overcome the remaining administrative constraints to adaptation and to the localization agenda.
2. The SPs should continue implementing and learning on the TOC approach at multiple levels: organizational, programme-wide, and country level.
3. The SPs should continue trying out (and be given the space to try out) experimental approaches to learning.
4. The SPs should recognize and value the complementarity between the formal learning processes mentioned in recommendations 2 and 3 and informal learning taking place at the level of programmatic staff.
5. The SPs should define and co-create partnerships together, explore coordination platforms with the MFA outside the usual annual planning and reporting, and avoid over-ambitious programs that spread funding over too many countries.
6. The SPs should continue to improve the practice of Outcome Harvesting, strengthening the evidence that supports their outcome claims and feeding back better the evidence into practice.
7. DSH should build the capacity of the DSH contact point for coordinating multiple embassies and MFA departments, reporting against multiple results framework effectively, and establishing, where relevant, ad hoc, high level of effort coordination structures for joint planning on DSH priorities so that embassies and central MFA departments can also be involved in the informal learning.
8. DSH should consider how to utilize external learning facilitators in inter-consortia /cross-programmatic learning (external to both the consortia and DSH).
9. DSH and DSO should review the contractual space allowed by its other tender and delivery modalities for implementing the adaptive approach.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Objective

This working paper focuses on five Strategic Partnerships (SPs) under the Dialogue and Dissent (D&D) funding window (2016-2020) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (MFA) for which the Department for Stabilization and Humanitarian Aid (DSH) has been the contact point. First, it explores the extent to which the adaptive approach has contributed to better program results. Second, it reviews how learning outcomes and the partnership dynamics of the SPs have influenced their capacity for adaptation, which is a precondition for unlocking the positive effects on program results. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the hypothesis guiding the working paper.

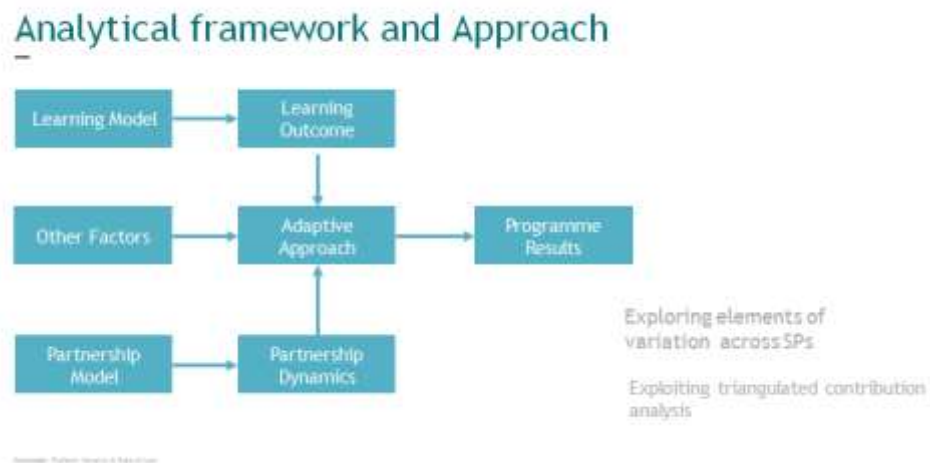


Figure 1 Guiding hypothesis

Table 1 clarifies key terms used throughout the working paper.

Table 1 Key terms

Dialogue and Dissent window: The D&D window aimed to strengthen civil society organizations (CSOs) in low- and lower-middle-income countries in their role as advocates and lobbyists. The aim was to enable CSOs to voice alternative or dissenting views in a dynamic and increasingly global context and holding policymakers and companies to account and, in turn, to reduce inequality and contribute to inclusive growth and development.

Strategic partnership: The SPs were the delivery mechanism for the D&D funding window.¹ An SP consists of the MFA and one or more CSOs (or a consortium thereof) working together in pursuit of a common strategic goal that is difficult for a partner to reach through individual effort. This goal must complement the Ministry's agenda on foreign trade and development. While the CSO(s) receive a grant, SPs have more than a financial dimension. They must be based on mutual trust and respect for each other's identity, expertise, experience, and networks, as well as respect for each other's independent roles and responsibilities. The D&D window is based on two assumptions: first, that strategic partners can enhance overall effectiveness of their lobbying and advocacy by joining forces and coordinating their instruments and methods, and, second, that the flexibility of the SP suits a complex, politically sensitive intervention strategy such as lobbying and advocacy.

Adaptive approach: The following elements defined the adaptive approach referenced here:

1. An intentional process of problem driven analysis, testing of solutions, and learning from testing.
2. Avoiding the presumption to know at the outset the best intervention model.
3. Building interventions around the people available on the ground.
4. Casting the partners based in the North in the role of enablers of locally driven change.
5. Establishing a process of real-time monitoring connected to learning and adaptation.
6. Exploring the entire system of actors and rules in which the problems, intervention, and actors are situated.
7. Introducing mechanisms for understanding and dialoguing with political actors.
8. Establishing a feedback channel with beneficiaries.

1.2 Data collection and analysis

The meta-evaluation included a literature review of publicly available information on the adaptative approach and learning in development programs to construct an analytical framework to guide the review of the evaluation material.²

¹ <https://www.government.nl/topics/grant-programmes/documents/regulations/2014/05/13/policy-framework-dialogue-and-dissent>

² The literature used is available in the annex to this paper.

The following material was analyzed to create this meta-evaluation:

- 1 Five final evaluations of SPs for which DSH has been the contact point. The SPs have been led respectively by the CSOs CARE, Cordaid, Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), Netherlands Institute for Multi-party Democracy (NIMD), and Pax.
- 2 The Operations and Evaluation Department's Inspectie Ontwikkelingssamenwerking en Beleidsevaluatie's (IOB's) evaluation on the quality of partnerships under D&D.³
- 3 The IOB's evaluation on program results obtained by three programs on the theme of peace and reconstruction.⁴

Building on the document review, this meta-evaluation included 10 key informant interviews:

- 1 One validation interview with each of the SPs' representatives (8 representatives).
- 2 One validation interview with the DSH contact points (3 representatives).

Afterwards, the evaluation conducted a validation and dialogue workshop with representatives of the SPs, DSH, DSO, and IOB.

The meta-evaluation mapped out the elements of commonality and difference across SPs in partnership dynamics, learning, adaptive approach, and contribution to program results. Some of these patterns of commonalities and variations were meaningful for the identification of contribution factors, both positive and negative.

N.B. The learning questions for the meta-evaluation were developed after the evaluations of the partnerships had been completed. The topics explored in this meta-evaluation and the terms of reference (TOR) of the evaluations did not align perfectly. The meta-evaluation overcame the resulting limitation, in part, by including interviews with key staff in the implementing partners, but nevertheless areas remain where the implications of the evaluations were not completely clear.

³ IOB, 2019b. *Strategies for partners: Balancing complementarity and autonomy.*

⁴ IOB, 2019a. *An evaluation of the Reconstruction Programme (2012-2015), the Strategic Partnerships in Chronic Crises Programme (2014-2016) and the Addressing Root Causes Tender Process.*

Chapter 2

Findings

2.1 Partnership

The section explains how the (strategic nature of the) partnership concept worked, with specific attention to the roles that the MFA, DSH, and the embassies played, including in the creation of an enabling environment for learning and adaptation.

Most of the SPs used the partnerships with Southern CSOs (S-CSOs) to develop actions and projects that resonated in the local contexts, and they did so with different partnership models.

Cordaid, NIMD, CARE, and Pax relied on the Northern CSOs (N-CSOs) to play a strong leading role, as well as collaborative planning and dialogue structures at the country level. They ensured relevance to the context through thematic and context studies as well as informal data gathering by their own dedicated knowledge teams and program staff. Cordaid, for example, also through its country offices (COs), led and facilitated participatory learning and review processes with all of the in-country partners, but the collaborative approach required strong moderation and facilitation as well as capacity in the use of theory of change (TOC) approaches, organically connecting to the stronger leading role of the N-CSOs.

By contrast, GPPAC adopted a more member-driven, decentralized partnership model, which achieved relevance through informal action and direct ownership by members of the network, enabled rather than led by the lead N-CSO. GPPAC's SP was complex at the international level, with the presence of another international umbrella partner, the World Federalist Movement (WFM), which itself included two networks: the Coalition of the International Criminal Court (CICC) and the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP). The partnership's network provided the members with resources, knowledge, connections, and introductions to forums of dialogue for pursuing their actions. Inside this SP structure, the GPPAC Secretariat devolved most of the decision making to regional Secretariats who then worked with CSOs and dialogue platforms at country and thematic levels.

While GPPAC's partnership was more member-driven than the other organizations', the N-CSO did not singlehandedly determine the course of the other SPs.

For example, CARE relied on context studies by a knowledge team based at headquarters (HQ) and included representative organizations of target populations of advocacy in the SP network. Over the course of time it increasingly granted freedom to these representative organizations to autonomously define their priorities.

NIMD has supported some of its country offices on a trajectory to become independent S-CSOs and granted them considerable autonomy and flexibility in planning.

Pax had a more fluid partnership structure at the country level that built on connections with local institutions and stakeholders to define projects from the bottom up. Its international partner, Amnesty International Netherlands Office (AINL), had a lot of freedom in setting its own program priorities. But AINL's internal regulations prevented it from conducting advocacy directly or in partnership with local partners using government money. AINL's support was therefore limited to developing capacity of local partners through existing programs, but it tried to be responsive to partners' needs within the thematic constraints of these existing programs.

All SPs relied on country partners for intelligence gathering on the context. This worked well but by no means perfectly. In some cases, the information collected was then used at the international level without the involvement of the local partner to protect them from retaliation by national authorities (as in the cases of Pax and AINL). In other cases, intra-organizational barriers prevented closer partnerships with local partners. For example, the Amnesty Network has a complex internal structure wherein the regional office responsible for South Sudan connects with local partners to collect data on human rights violations and also with AINL which is the direct SP's contractual partner. But the Amnesty researchers who assemble and disseminate reports for advocacy are housed in another, dedicated office. Connecting local partners to international forums, such as AINL had hoped to do for African Union meetings, thus required going through the Researchers' Office as well. However, the Researchers' Office's key contact left the organization, and the scheme floundered. By contrast, GPPAC facilitated the country partner in conducting international advocacy on its own, which in this case was more effective.

Across the evaluations, Southern partners reported they were overall satisfied with the partnerships. However, they also noted that the lead N-

CSOs continue to have more power than they do in defining their relationship and joint activities.

The causes of power imbalance in the SPs include the fact that contractual and reporting responsibility towards the MFA gave leading N-CSOs leverage other partners did not have. Likewise a number of S-CSOs received annual contracts from the lead N-CSOs to review their performance, creating power asymmetry between those partners.

The more an N-CSO drove a partnership, the more it seemed likely to generate unequal power dynamics, in spite of claims to focus on collaboration. “Enterprising” country offices (as recognized by N-CSOs’ HQs) foreclosed the autonomous functioning of Southern partners and slowed down their pace of adaptation to a changing context by requiring consultations and adopting a strong coordination role. Cordaid’s Southern partners, in particular, lamented the fact that the SP structure involved them in local decision making but not in overall decision making for the partnership.

Table 2 presents the relative strengths and weaknesses of the different partnership models:

Table 2 Strengths and weakness of different partnership models

| | Strength | Weakness |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| Collaborative model | Strong planning through effective facilitation Strong TOC review processes | In some instances, autonomy offered to S-CSOs was limited |
| Autonomous – bottom-up model | Allows representatives of target populations to work on the most relevant initiatives | Keeping track of informal adaptation and changing initiatives more complicated for learning purposes |

The program-level partnerships between N-CSOs also proved complex and fragile, and not always equal and complementary. The reasons for these challenges seemed to relate to the differences between the missions of the partners into one complementary program and to create aligned planning and monitoring processes.

The partnership between the Association of European Parliamentarians with Africa and NIMD would likely have been strongly complementary inside a joint program if it had been implemented. This SP aimed at expanding the political space for CSOs, with a clear, complementary division of responsibilities as NIMD meant to focus on political parties and AWEPA on

parliaments and parliamentarians. Unfortunately, the SP could not be implemented because AWEPA incurred financial problems in the second year of program implementation. Fortunately this was isolated, and no other partner in the SPs under evaluation incurred similar problems.

However, the partnerships between Pax and its international partners, Impunity Watch and AINL, were less complementary. Pax focused on peace, AINL on human rights violations, and Impunity Watch on transitional justice. They failed to create a truly co-designed program. As a result their SP was essentially closer to a collection of different programs. Pax and Impunity Watch ultimately agreed that their difference in focus could not be reconciled and the partnership was discontinued. Pax and Amnesty have embarked on a more collaborative process of mapping joint interests and complementariness in designing a more integrated SP under Power of Voice (2021), which may prove more successful.

Cordaid proceeded without international partners, relying instead on its country offices and country CSOs. This could be partly connected to the fact that Cordaid hosts the Secretariat of the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and State building, with its connections to hundreds of CSOs' members in the Global South.

CARE included international technical partners in its SP. However, it envisioned these partners at first as service providers rather than equals. Their task was mainly to transfer skills that would unlock advocacy capacity of the program's stakeholders. For example, CARE commissioned Dutch partner RNW with illustrating adaptive management. Ultimately CARE included RNW and others more in learning and adaptive programming activities, although never truly as strategic partners.

GPPAC's SP was a network of networks, bringing together GPPAC's network and two networks coordinated by the WFM-IGP, namely the CICC and the ICRtoP.

Table 3 summarizes the relationships between the international partners.

Table 3 Summary overview on partnership with international partners

| SP lead | Presence of an international partner | Complementary | Administrative / Financial Issues |
|----------------|---|----------------------|--|
| NIMD | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Pax | Yes | No | No |
| CARE | Yes | Yes | No |
| Cordaid | No | No | No |
| GPPAC | Yes | Yes | No |

Despite an open commitment to flexibility, the MFA struggled to establish a partnership with the SPs that went beyond the donor-implementer relationship. This in part reflected the absence of coordination and joint planning mechanisms adequate for co-designing interventions.

Interviews with the MFA and SP program staff unearthed instances of success in partnership between the MFA and the SPs, such as the joint learning pilots conducted by Pax and DSH in Lebanon, Iraq, and Mali, and on the theme of protection of civilians (which gave rise to a follow-up strategic partnership between Pax and DSH on that topic), and the involvement of the Embassy to Ethiopia in opening the door for NIMD's involvement with the country's democratization process. Box 1 presents Pax's learning pilots in more detail.

Box 1 Show cases in the context of Pax's SP

Pax started the learning pilots in 2018, after the Ministry decided (with the SP's consent) to transfer the Strategic Partnership from the Multilateral Organizations and Human Rights Department (DMM) to DSH. The decision was based on a joint exploration of mutual interest between the SP and DSH. For example, the SP chose countries where there was mutual interest, such as Iraq, and excluded countries, such as South Sudan, where only one partner had interest.

DSH held a kick-off meeting to explore four areas it determined would be "showcases": protection of civilians, human rights of Syrian refugees, Iraq, and Sahel. The DSH expressed the following goals for the ensuing 12 months:

1. At least one joint initiative/activity would be undertaken in each of the four showcases in which the SP and DSH demonstrated relevant cooperation that offered added value.
2. Within each showcase there would be regular exchange of information and contacts and, where possible and relevant, coordination would be sought, although everyone would still meet their own responsibilities.
3. A joint field visit would occur in at least two of the showcases.
4. At least two policy documents relevant to the parties involved and presented within DSH would be written by the SP.
5. The SP would communicate with Dutch Parliament and the public about results.
6. The parties involved would make use of their own publicity capacities to make cooperation within the showcases visible.

For each of the showcases, SP and DSH contacts were paired and tasked with creating and sustaining momentum on the collaboration.

In the end, only the protection of civilians and human rights of Syrian refugees sustained a visible and strong strategic cooperation. The protection of civilians was in fact a continuation of an already-strong collaboration between DSH and the

protection of civilians-team within Pax. DSH and Pax also have a separate strategic partnership on protection of civilians with the Dutch MFA.

The partnership seeking to secure the human rights of Syrian refugees led to collaboration on protection and return issues facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Coordination and exchange of advocacy ideas and interventions has occurred on these topics. The two successful showcases blended into the rest of PAX's programs.

The reasons the showcases in Iraq and the Sahel did not materialize were distinct. The maternity leave and subsequent transfer of the MFA contact on Iraq prevented that SP from coming together.

During the kick-off DSH determined to monitor progress during the yearly policy dialogues, but this did not occur.

The evaluations reported that interactions between the MFA and programming partners happened primarily through annual planning and reporting processes, and through visits and exchange on information on the country context with the embassies. Instances of joint planning and of truly complementary programs have been rare. For example, the annual planning and reporting processes regarding the Pax reports were not conducive to content discussions. DSH's comments on the reports tended to be on financial issues rather than content.

Partners felt that mutually complementary partnerships seemed to depend on:

- 1 Personal interest and chemistry between DSH contact points and their counterparts.
- 2 The complexity of the coordination challenge and the capacity of the DSH contact point to coordinate across MFA departments and embassies. The SPs varied in the extent to which they connected thematically with departments other than DSH and in the number of countries included in the program. At the extreme Pax was connected to five different MFA departments; Pax and AINL's program had 24 countries while GPPAC had 16 clustered in five priority regions, and CARE and Cordaid had identified six priority countries⁸ each.
- 3 Establishing dedicated coordination and planning mechanisms beyond the annual planning and reporting mechanisms, which helped partners to move beyond the traditional donor-implementer relationship. The joint pilots in Lebanon and Iraq by Pax and the MFA, which required dedicated planning and an additional level of effort from MFA contact points during the joint planning and designing moment, were partially successful in

this, even if some elements of the learning pilot model, such as monitoring through policy dialogues, were not implemented.

- 4 The SP stance, whether of dialogue or dissent. There were some ambiguities about how the MFA responded to dissent stances. Under the D&D funding window, CSOs were allowed to take lobby and advocacy stances that did not align with the MFA's official stance. Mostly, CSOs followed a dialogue stance, as reported by the IOB's study on partnership dynamics in SPs. However, Pax took a dissenting view on humanitarian disarmament, which meant that the partnership on that topic was weaker with the relevant department. Box 2 provides more information on Pax's experience with a dissent stance on humanitarian disarmament topics.
- 5 Consistency of target countries between DSH and the SPs. Under the D&D, CSOs were also allowed to work on topics and countries that the MFA had not prioritized, either centrally or in the relevant embassy. The interest in DSH in priority countries and in embassies on the Security and Rule of Law (SROL) agenda determined the closeness of the partnership. SPs at times phased out countries that they considered relevant because they were not DSH or D&D priority countries (for example, NIMD phased out Georgia and Ghana).
- 6 Whether a country's embassy had a strong thematic match with SROL. In such cases the embassy would have less expertise and often interest in the work.

Box 2 Pax's experience with a dissent stance on humanitarian disarmament topics

Pax reported that in general the partnership with the MFA is good on almost all humanitarian disarmament projects, which does not imply that Pax and the MFA have always been in agreement on all disarmament-related topics. In most cases a good partnership and disagreement existed side by side. When there was more agreement, Pax and the MFA worked more together, which could be described as a stronger partnership on some disarmament topics, and less on others.

Having disagreements is quite in line with the idea behind the SP. A stronger partnership built on agreeing on everything does not reflect the intentions behind D&D.

The evaluation reported that differences on humanitarian disarmament topics have come with tensions at times. For example, with respect to humanitarian disarmament, Pax was involved in a legal action over exports that could be used in the Yemen conflict that was not in line with the MFA position. However, Pax and the MFA often cooperated on the international stage when it came to influencing other states and international actors.

The case highlights how there are different perspectives among MFA policy officers on how to react to critical comments by CSOs. One view from an MFA policy officer interviewed as part of Pax's evaluation is that some officials are not appreciative of critical comments from CSOs, particularly when they are in receipt of government funds, but that other MFA staff take it more positively and feel that such engagement is part of the democratic process and the essence of what D&D is supposed to be about.

2.2 Learning

How was learning embedded in the programs (TOC development, learning agenda development, learning agenda implementation) and how did it work in practice?

A 2014 high-level evaluation of the World Bank's learning practice categorized learning relevant for programs into⁵

- 1 **Relevant knowledge to be included during intervention design**, which could include knowledge of the relevant context, conflict, theme, operating system, and/or political economy analysis (PEA).
- 2 **Relevant knowledge and reflection during implementation**, which could include informal knowledge collected as part of staff routine activities, learning by doing, formal studies on context, conflict, and system, as well as real-time monitoring and evaluative information collected through annual reviews or mid-term evaluation (MTR).
- 3 **Feedback from practice into new programming** in the form of end-line evaluations and other evaluative studies (for example on outcome harvesting) that inform future interventions.

The World Bank evaluation concluded that the elements that increased the uptake of learning in the Bank the most were

- 1 The **shape of the network** that connected knowledgeable staff members and those who were interested in using it. The Bank's global thematic practices and country teams must include staff with the experience and knowledge sought after and connect them with the staff looking for that exact expertise and knowledge.
- 2 The **quality** of the evaluative and context research.
- 3 The **availability of moments of reflection** in staff's busy schedules.
- 4 **Management support and leadership** that encouraged (or not) working in an evidence-based way, especially requiring that learning and

⁵ World Bank, 2014. *Learning and results in World Bank operations*. The framework is loosely relevant because it is purely about learning inside organizations rather than connected to the Bank's specific activities. Also, the complex organizational structure of the World Bank, divided both geographically and thematically, raises issues relevant for learning inside multi-country, multi-theme CSO partnerships.

reflections feed into the programming decisions as a criterion for approving funding decisions.

All SPs have generated learning about the context, its evolution, and what is possible inside the context.

Importantly, there exist multiple workable pathways to learning effectively about the context.

All SPs established a formal Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (PMEL) system of TOC development, monitoring and result frameworks, MTR, and end-line evaluations. They also conducted additional knowledge and learning activities, including conflict and context analysis, peer review, learning trips, and internal learning days. They all combined these formal systems with informal learning and intelligence happening at the level of program staff, which relied on personal interactions between experienced program staff across SP partners and with their local contact points and stakeholders.

In each SP, the balance between formal and informal learning processes was a little different, connected likely to organizational culture and preferences.

- 1 **Learning by doing/relational learning has worked well for GPPAC, Pax, and NIMD in leading to learning about the context, accessing networks and forums relevant to the context, and developing context-specific interventions.** This pathway works largely through informal, poorly captured interactions between program staff from different organizations and, at times, country stakeholders. (Occasionally, requests for modifications of annual plans and annual reports partially capture such exceptions.) Contacts with senior staff who had access to specific knowledge or networks, academics, and country stakeholders were especially valued.
- 2 **More formalized knowledge management systems have worked well for CARE and Cordaid, but less well for NIMD.** CARE's evaluation reports several instances of applied learning from its knowledge products. NIMD's evaluation, by contrast, reports that staff sometimes considered knowledge products as an imposition by The Hague, and that local partners preferred locally led activities such as peer reviews and learning trips. A bottom-up, collaborative, and formalized review and planning process worked well for Cordaid in terms of making plans more relevant and inclusive given the context. The organization also succeeded in using the TOC to identify opportunities for advocacy by mapping the actors to pursue with advocacy but retaining flexibility to change programming.

Fewer SPs had in place learning processes to learn through experience how to modify the intervention logic. In learning on the intervention logic, the formal learning model mentioned worked better (when applied in a context-sensitive way).

- 1 **The SPs' staff appreciated the MTR and end-line evaluations as opportunities to learn about the validity of the overall TOC and approach.** One example is NIMD realizing that it needed to change its approach to working with political parties and include working with CSOs in contexts where political parties are unresponsive. NIMD's MTR also helped clarify how NIMD activities connected to social change. Cordaid's evaluation helped Cordaid realize that their TOC had ambitions too wide to be achievable. The SPs appear to have been responsive to the MTR recommendations. For example, NIMD implemented seven out of 11 MTR recommendations by the end of the program.
- 2 **Annual TOC reviews** were conducted only by CARE, Cordaid, and NIMD (at the level of country TOCs). Other SPs should engage in similar reviews. Sections 2.5 and 2.6 delve into how effective these reviews have been in leading to better adaptation and results.
- 3 **Learning about the intervention logic was more difficult when the TOCs did not spell out all assumptions relevant for learning about the intervention in its context.** For instance, GPPAC's evaluation reports that the TOC and assumptions underpinning specific interventions were often not clear, limiting the opportunities for learning whether the intervention was working well. This was also influenced by the complexity of GPPAC's network structure and consequent proliferation of interventions strategies across the partners. But even in Cordaid's and Pax's more successful cases, TOCs developed along thematic pathways did not contain context-dependent assumptions. It seems that assumptions were not corrected during implementation because determining the logical strengths of TOCs requires a specialized judgement that few aside from professional evaluators are comfortable making. CARE and NIMD, which did make context assumptions explicit, benefitted from understanding why the intervention strategy was stuck in Rwanda and Mali respectively.
- 4 **There are still improvements to be unlocked in how the SPs use the TOC approach, such as defining a cascade of TOCs at the right levels and employing useful formats for the TOCs.**
 - The evaluations pointed out that defining an SP-wide TOC is important for creating a joint program and learning at the program level. Indeed, all SPs had an SP-level TOC.
 - Underneath the program-wide level, the evaluations stressed the importance of contextualized TOCs at the country level since these contained assumptions at the right level on expected effectiveness of intervention strategies in their context.

- The findings on the usefulness of thematic TOCs, by contrast, were mixed. However, there was wide agreement that thematic TOCs were not substitutes for country-level TOCs as context-dependent assumptions were important for learning.
 - Pax's intervention identification process relied on projects to be identified from the bottom up, but it also had project level TOCs. Whilst a project-level TOC has the highest chance of being concrete and well-defined, finding time to create and review TOCs for all projects might nonetheless become difficult.
 - NIMD and Cordaid introduced elements of an actor-based TOC, meaning that their TOCs traced how the SP meant to change the behavior of well-defined actors. It appeared that country partners as well as others appreciated the actor-based TOC innovation, finding it more concrete. Nevertheless, it remains too early to tell yet what difference the change made in terms of learning.
- 5 **Pax's evaluation reports that the organizational and thematic TOCs were used mainly as way to communicate choices** already made at the organizational level rather than to track and explain change. This is also the case for NIMD's original formulation of the TOC. Clearly, a TOC developed for communication purposes is not likely to be particularly helpful for learning.
 - 6 **CARE's and Cordaid's evaluations credited outcome harvesting (OH) with making the SP more reflective about the scale of their ambitions, understanding progress, nuancing change pathways, and finding unexpected outcome areas.** A good practice was mapping the harvested outcome statements against the TOC model, checking in this way its validity. **However, critiques have been raised in the evaluations surrounding the use of OH by the D&D SPs.** It was reported that using OH without quantitative indicators to check its findings and focusing exclusively on the best outcomes led to biased findings. Additionally, some SPs reported that the feedback loop was not closed because they had not yet conducted a study to interpret the long list of unsubstantiated outcome statements they had collected (as NIMD experienced).
 - 7 **Including country partners in annual planning and learning activities** increased the relevance of the TOC's reviews for learning, as for example Cordaid experienced. Contrariwise, NIMD conducted midyear reviews at HQs based on country partner reports, but not with their physical presence, with the consequence that these reviews became "shallow," as NIMD staff described them.
 - 8 **The monitoring frameworks for reporting to DSH are seldom credited as having helped with learning.** All SPs had a monitoring framework that connected to the D&D reporting framework and to the DSH result-based framework (RBF). To this framework, the SPs all decided to add qualitative monitoring, usually in the form of OH. It was not a requirement (and sometimes not used) for reporting to DSH. The

reporting on DSH's RBF was judged unhelpful, for two reasons. First, SPs are complementary interventions to the MFA objectives rather than directly aligned with them, which means that the SPs might have slightly different aims than those recognized in DSH's RBF indicators. Second, DSH's RBF might be too prescriptive, with quantitative indicators at the output and outcome level, leaving little space for tracking and reporting the most relevant information. On the other hand, the results reported in D&D indicators were too vague (such as number of laws changed, or civil society organizations strengthened) to be helpful to either SPs or DSH, as D&D worked across sectors and departments. Box 3 provides more information on the discussions on results and reporting on DSH's RBF between the DSH contact points and the SPs.

- 9 **Unifying the monitoring frameworks for the entire SP (in the cases of NIMD and Cordaid) or keeping separate monitoring frameworks and monitoring practices (in the cases of CARE, GPPAC, and Pax) was a choice and a challenge.** NIMD and Cordaid spent time developing a monitoring framework specific to the SP, with HQ developing tools, coordinating, building the capacity of SP members to use the tools, and aggregating inputs for the MFA. In Pax's and GPPAC's SPs, the N-CSO partners maintained independent monitoring frameworks. CARE also did not fully integrate monitoring practices with its tier 1 partners and country offices. **Overall, the SPs' evaluations were more positive about the contribution to learning of monitoring frameworks integrated across the SP partners rather than SP partners using separate monitoring frameworks.**

Box 3 Practices by DSH contact points: Reporting against the RBF framework

Interviews with DSH contact points reveal that there is no standard approach in DSH on reporting on DSH's RBF. In fact, the three contact points interviewed for this paper reported three different approaches.

1. One contact points asks the SP to report directly on the DSH RBF.
2. A second contact point reports against the RBF by adapting the information provided by the SP according to the DSO's and the SP's RBF.
3. A third contact point asked the SP to choose the few indicators from the DSH's RBF that best fit their SP. However, the contact point also asked partners to explain what the data reported meant in terms of trends and context. (For example: What do the indicators' numbers mean? Why and how were they realized?)

Barriers to sharing learning inside and outside the SPs remain.

- 1 From the N-CSOs' perspective, templates to report to DSH were too short for the many requests for explanations received from MFA staff, especially as to why or why not an action had occurred, such as one that diverged from the plan. In general, the SPs had good reasons, related to events changing the context, for diverging from the annual plans. But explaining this to the DSH contact point required more space than the reporting formats allowed.
- 2 From the DSH side, reporting was useful when it gave insights into the country contexts and why some choices had been made. DSH is aware that reports provide a lot of information they could not get elsewhere. At the same time, the annual reports did not always clarify the meaning of the summary results or what the SP contribution had been. For example, SPs might report several CSOs had been strengthened without indicating where, how, and why.
- 3 Reporting formats inside the SPs were sometimes similarly unhelpful. Country partners also complained about annual reporting focused on the activity level and emphasized financial compliance (rather than focus on results and the reasons for adapting).
- 4 Barriers inside the SP's network have prevented some members of the SP from participating in relational learning activities because they were not aware of them or had no dedicated budgets for them (as with GPPAC) or because learning products were not shared externally (as with CARE). In the GPPAC case, the barriers seem to arise from the complexity of the partnership model and the informal nature of some of the interactions. In the case of CARE, this was due to the absence of clear mechanisms with DSH for sharing the learning products further (also outside the SP).
- 5 Keeping the knowledge team distinct from program staff and country partners was the main reason the NIMD evaluation found NIMD's knowledge activities not always relevant. This was compounded by a lack of proper inclusive process to define the learning agenda and learning needs. For NIMD, one of the most interesting thematic studies (on the political party space) emerged from one of the country partners. More broadly, across the SPs, the PMEL team was partially decentralized to the country level with the appointment of PMEL officers in COs or S-CSOs. Instead, knowledge officers with a wider learning mandate remained, by and large, in the HQs.
- 6 Sharing information across partnerships worked well in the cases of NIMD and Cordaid, whereas CARE's evaluation reported that more could have been done. NIMD, for example, entered helpful partnerships with UK-based democratization partners, such as the Westminster Foundation and the Overseas Development Institute.

Outcomes in terms of capacity for country partners have been overall positive, better in building capacity to conduct advocacy and on PMEL and worse in building the core of S-CSOs as autonomous organizations.

SPs offered PMEL’s capacity building in connection with the requirement to use standard PMEL tools inside the SP, and capacity building on advocacy tools (policy analysis, maintaining trust, mapping relevant actors) as a precondition for the S-CSOs’ advocacy activities on the thematic priorities of the SP. However, the SPs did not provide capacity building with modalities that would have been better suited to build the core of the S-CSOs’ capacity as autonomous organizations representing priorities coming from below, such as combining core funding, long-term funding, and no thematic headlines.

At one extreme, AINL employed capacity building focused on providing a specific set of skills on finding proofs of human rights violations, despite attempts to meet broader partners’ requests when possible. At the other extreme, GPPAC’s model stood out in terms of effectiveness as it was more focused on facilitating autonomous actions by members of the network and providing all sorts of knowledge, connections, and expertise required for such actions (albeit without core funding).

Table 4 provides an overview of the main elements of variation in the learning approach explored in this section.

Table 4 Summary overview of elements of variation

| Item | NIMD | Pax | GPPAC | Cordaid | CARE |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|---|---|--|
| TOC level | SP-wide, country level | Thematic, project level | SP-wide | SP-wide, thematic | SP-wide, country level |
| Balance | Formal | Informal | Informal | Formal | Formal |
| Positioning of knowledge team | Separate from program and M&E, at HQ | Integrated in program staff | Integrated in program staff, PMEL at regional level | Connected with M&E and program staff, at HQ and country level | Connected with M&E and program, at HQ and PMEL at country level. |
| Knowledge activities | Thematic studies, peer review, learning trip, internal days | Context analysis, Pilot evaluation, OH summary study | OH summary study | Storytelling study, internal days | Context analysis, case studies, meta-research, social norms study, internal days |

| | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|---|----------------------------|---|
| Level of inclusion in annual planning and review | Reviews at HQs, joint planning | Reviews at HQs, joint planning | SP members driven | Joint reviews and planning | Joint review of planning, including review of country-level TOC and advocacy strategy |
| Capacity-building model | PMEL, based on capacity gap analysis | PMEL, based on capacity gap analysis and informal interactions (Pax), narrower (Amnesty) | Systematic, learning by doing, on everything needed | Capacity for advocacy | Capacity for advocacy |

2.3 Contribution to adaptive management

This section discusses how and to what extent partnership and learning led to (good practices of) adaptive programming in fragile contexts and the challenges the SPs faced.

The SPs implemented the adaptive approach partially. While they did not systematically test, review, and iterate alternative options for interventions they adapted to the intervention’s context, making their work relevant and flexible. Feedback suggests the main reasons were resource constraints, as piloting more than one intervention strategy would be costly, MFA requests to indicate the intervention strategy by the end of inception phase, and implementing partners’ staff’s capability and interest in using innovative, formal learning and adaptive management approaches.

Table 5 lists the main elements of the adaptive approach that emerged from the inception literature review, together with summary information about the extent to which the SPs implemented them.

Table 5 Implementation of adaptive programming

| Element of adaptive programming | Presence of adaptive programming elements |
|---|--|
| An intentional process of problem driven analysis, testing of solutions, and learning from testing | No formal testing of small bets or Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation process. Pax conducted a joint pilot project with the MFA in Lebanon and Iraq. |
| Allow the intervention model to emerge from an analysis of the context and trial and error | MFA pushed SPs to define the priority themes for advocacy early rather than allowing them to emerge from the ground up. |
| Building interventions around the people available on the ground | Pax connected well to communities for project identification also through local institutions such as the Catholic Dioceses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. CARE included representative associations directly in the SP structure. GPPAC allowed members of the network to define their actions autonomously. |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Casting the partners based in the North in the role of enabler of locally driven change</p> | <p>Ambition to build trust and long-term relationships with country partners, but in practice offering them short term contracts.</p> <p>NIMD had a conscious approach of giving flexibility to local partners to change outputs defined in the annual plans based on context.</p> <p>CARE provided capacity building and let tier 2 partners identify autonomously advocacy campaigns.</p> <p>GPPAC's regional secretariat took a hands-off enabling role.</p> |
| <p>Establishing a process of real-time monitoring connected to learning and adaptation</p> | <p>CARE and Cordaid reviewed their TOCs annually.</p> <p>NIMD reviewed its program TOC during the MTR and end line, and its country TOC annually.</p> <p>Pax's and GPPAC's evaluations did not question in sufficient depth the assumptions underlying their TOCs. (Pax's management response to the evaluation and the evaluators conducting GPPAC's evaluation recognized this.)</p> |
| <p>Exploring the entire system of actors and rules in which the problems, intervention, and actors are situated</p> | <p>Adapting to the context at country level through a process of informal, non-formalized interactions with local partners. Conducting some form of context or conflict analysis and relying on staff's intuitive understanding of context.</p> <p>Early-stage uses of system-wide analytical tools such as PEA by NIMD, and thematic study on the role of social norms by CARE.</p> |
| <p>Introducing mechanisms for understanding and dialoguing with political actors</p> | <p>NIMD built its country programs around dialogue platforms that included representatives of political parties, but the most important political parties were not always represented or involved.</p> <p>Pax mentions reliance on politically savvy tools and informal interactions by program staff with local political actors.</p> |

| | |
|---|--|
| Establishing a feedback channel with beneficiaries | No presence of a clear feedback channel with target populations of advocacy, although CARE's tier 2 partners and Pax connections with local institutions came close. |
|---|--|

Much as described in the learning section, **both the formal and informal models seems to work well in adapting to the context.**

In an example of the formal learning model, Cordaid's collaborative planning at the country level allowed them to adapt to changing contexts. When South Sudan experienced an outbreak of violence in 2017, necessitating a review of ambitions and strategies, Cordaid and the SP were able to reorient the program to have some activities carried out at the local level rather than nationally. Also, the extractives trajectory in South Sudan shifted focus toward addressing environmental problems caused by oil spills. In Nigeria, the extractives trajectory increased its efforts for participatory management of the cleanup in the Niger Delta.

In an example of the informal model, Pax identified highly relevant projects from problems defined and reported by the communities themselves through established intermediary institutions. Pax's SP was facilitated in using a bottom-up approach based on context because Pax's program was a collection of stand-alone but inter-related projects rather a collection of top-down country programs. In DRC, communities living on the banks of the River Congo had started fighting over land after flooding had forced one of the communities to move onto the territory of another. Pax got involved in the dispute because community authorities had asked for support from the Catholic Bishopric and the Bishopric referred them to Pax, which was then flexible enough to create an intervention to solve this problem.

Adaptation of the logic of the intervention was less common and took place mainly after the MTRs, except for CARE's and Cordaid's annual TOC review processes.

For CARE and NIMD, the MTR was important for processes of program-wide adaptation. NIMD conducted an MTR and end-line evaluation that explored the likelihood that the assumptions in the TOC were holding in practice. They yielded program-level adaptations such as expanding NIMD's work beyond political parties to support civil society actors and addressing the gaps in NIMD's intervention and its outcomes. For CARE, the MTR recommended the incorporation of social norms work, which led to a major program adjustment. CARE partnered with RNW Media to launch several studies to better understand social norms dynamics and identify future program responses.

For Cordaid and CARE, the evaluations noted examples where partners could pinpoint aspects of their work that were adjusted, improved, or changed because of the iterative process of reviewing the TOC or because of evaluative or research studies conducted as part of formal knowledge activities (such as, for CARE, five blogs, three learning events, and partnerships with Partos/Spindle and collaboration with Tufts University). The adaptations that were unlocked included a new media campaign in Somalia and the Rwanda team changing advocacy tactics that resulted in countrywide improvements in the national planning process.

Opportunities for partnerships with universities, think tanks, or the MFA to explore assumptions more systematically and in a way that would be relevant for policy were limited. CARE partnered with Tufts University and Cordaid connected with scholars at the University of Wageningen to develop a methodology for reviewing storytelling around advocacy.

The evaluations did not mention the use of learning facilitators to support the process of inter-consortia and portfolio-level learning, even though some SPs had knowledge management teams at HQ for intra-consortia learning. Whilst inter-consortia learning was not a requirement, it might have been a missed opportunity for portfolio-level coherence and feedback into policy for DSH.

Performance in enabling locally driven change was mixed. All SPs had the ambition to put local actors in the driver's seat, but the extent to which they really did so by taking enough of a step back from leading was variable.

GPPAC HQ and the regional Secretariat effectively enabled SP members at the country level as needed, and CARE's role also evolved towards providing capacity building and knowledge products and letting partners choose what they wanted to advocate for.

Cordaid also aimed to enable the actions of its local partners but its country offices retained a bit more control than the other SPs on how the collaborative planning process unfolded and what changes S-CSOs could introduce.

Table 6 provides an overview of the factors that contributed positively and negatively to the SPs' performance in implementing the adaptive approach, which, as mentioned above, was strong in adapting to the context, weaker in testing and learning on the TOC and on policy implications, and mixed in enabling locally driven change.

Table 6 Contribution analysis to adaptive approach, contributions from learning (left) and partnership (right)

Positive contribution from learning

Informal learning and reflection processes and interactions with local partners contributed to adapting to the context (as experienced by Pax, GPPAC, NIMD). Feedback on service delivered also contributed. These elements worked because program staff had an intuitive knowledge of context, were in touch with partners regularly (weekly), and maintained a good network of stakeholders.

The formal knowledge management model contributed to adapting to the context and adapting the intervention model. This model appears better for understanding what works and does not work (as in the case of CARE). It worked through the checking progress at the level of outcome, rather than output, and checking the TOC regularly and iteratively at the country level and its assumptions (as in the cases of Cordaid, CARE). The contribution was stronger when the data collected combined qualitative and quantitative data. Whilst Cordaid and CARE iterated their intervention logic frequently, the other SPs iterated mainly at the MTR and at the end line for the new programming. This was because NIMD, Pax, and GPPAC had no established processes connecting strong, real-time monitoring of the TOC to sense-making and adaptation. The experience with the MTR was generally positive, but the end line was perceived as too focused on accountability.

OH helped in being realistic about what is possible to achieve (according to CARE) and in understanding progress

Positive contribution from partnership

Collaborative planning approaches with country stakeholders identifying inclusive and relevant plans that were more likely to succeed (than approaches led by HQ without their involvement).

The role of country partners, especially the spider in the web model adopted by NIMD's partner in Mali. This model increases flexibility to conduct different activities; the Catholic Bishopric took a similar role for Pax in the DRC project highlighted above.

Giving contractual and planning flexibility to country partners. They had the latitude not to deliver projected outputs and outcomes if it materialized that they would not support the goals.

The contractual flexibility between the N-CSO and the MFA allowed for a long-term timeframe and flexibility to adapt plans.

The bottom-up approach to project identification allowed S-CSOs to autonomously identify project priorities.

when plotting the outcomes reported against the TOC (according to Cordaid, CARE). However, combining the OH **with other forms of monitoring or with more robust sampling during evaluative moments** would have made a greater contribution (as in the cases of CARE and Pax).⁶

Contextualizing approaches and tools (TOC, advocacy tools, etc.) to the local and national contexts.

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Negative or no contribution from learning</p> <p>Timing of the studies. Studies conducted later in the program produced lessons because there was little time to put into practice (as in the case of CARE).</p> <p>The absence of mechanisms for sharing knowledge at the portfolio level with other SPs.</p> | <p>Negative or no contribution from partnership</p> <p>The practice of signing annual contracts. Whilst annual contracts offer the lead N-CSO the opportunity to check the continued relevance of the partnership, they restrict the flexibility of partners, increase administrative burden, and restrict long-term independent decision making.</p> <p>Securing change based on learning inside partnerships (and at HQ) requires extensive management discussions, especially if change connects to the core of an actor’s mission (as NIMD experienced with working with actors other than political parties) or if the change would transfer focus and resources from one member of the SP to another. Additionally, some SP staff are resistant to the more formal knowledge management approach, as they see no added value when they have their own networks to share knowledge and skills (according to Pax).</p> <p>The absence of established mechanisms and divisions of roles for moving beyond donor-</p> |
|--|---|

⁶ Even though focusing on areas of positive deviance is helpful, ignoring cases representative of less successful outcomes makes it difficult to understand what is not working.

| | |
|--|---|
| | <p>implementer relationships with MFA. While joint planning between the N-CSO and the MFA required dedicated moments that went beyond the annual reporting, planning, and high-level dialogue, mechanisms of this sort were the exception.</p> <p>The number of embassies that the DSH contact point had to coordinate constituted a burden on the DSH contact point.</p> |
|--|---|

In addition, partnership models provided both positive AND negative contributions to adaptation.

Relatively centralized network learning structures had the advantage of sustaining professional, quality research through knowledge teams based at HQ. However, they risked identifying learning studies that were not relevant for country needs (in the case of NIMD), limiting the sharing of useful learning studies with the country partners (in the cases of CARE and Cordaid), and being poorly connected with the parts of the network that worked directly with country partners (in the case of AINL). Sometimes monitoring practices were conducted at HQ on the work of country partners and excluded them from the review. The centralized model slowed down the pace of adaptation by local partners by requiring that adaptive modes be discussed with HQ before obtaining approval.

GPPAC's decentralized network structure was particularly suited to engage the network members in connections through which learning by doing could be generated and empower them to rise to the international level. However, it also contributed to creating complexity in the intervention strategy and making it difficult to identify the intervention strategy at any given time, which is essential for learning from a TOC approach.

2.4 Contribution to program results

This section discusses whether the adaptive approach contributed to better results.

The benefits of adaptive programming in the evaluations included

1. Allowing country programs to move forward after changes in context.
2. Delivering outcomes rather than outputs by adjusting, often completing, the intervention strategy.
3. Avoiding wasting resources on irrelevant activities.
4. Identifying more relevant, locally driven initiatives for which there was momentum for change.

For instance, NIMD achieved better programming in Mali by changing its intervention strategy and approach such that it was no longer working with political parties or relying on the direct partner to deliver most of the work. Working with civil society, NIMD established the country partner in the role of enabler, with authority to contract the work to specialized S-CSOs. This allowed the country program to return to its work after the Mali coup d'état in 2019. NIMD avoided wasting resources on topics that had become irrelevant by allowing country partners to eschew certain planned activities if these were deemed irrelevant in the changing context.

Interviews with CARE staff revealed that reviewing its country-based TOC for Rwanda led to the realization that due to gaps in the intervention strategy the Rwanda program was delivering outputs but not outcomes. Consequently, CARE adjusted the strategy, adding a component, combining different interventions, incorporating additional power holders, and shifting allies.

Pax's case is one of identifying projects that were locally driven and highly relevant to community problems by responding flexibly to problems raised through trusted intermediation. A more top-down planning process would likely not have allowed Pax to recognize or understand some of the opportunities to intervene successfully.

The SP evaluation reported that Cordaid adapted its Burundi country strategy so that it better aligned with government, thereby reducing resistance to change and allowing more space for advocacy.

Box 4 The case of Cordaid in Burundi

This case has been explored by a study conducted jointly by Cordaid and Wageningen University.⁷ The general conclusion is that advocates in fragile states

⁷ Van Wessel, M., Ho, W., Marty, E. and Tamas, P., 2021. *Advocacy in context*. pp. 26-32.

are constantly improvising to find space for influencing power holders and that in the Burundi case collaboration with local authorities was carefully managed in order to achieve (sustainable) results.

Cordaid supported access to justice for Burundians by supporting the establishment of a network of paralegals at the local level to support people to mediate disputes or access legal redress mechanisms. Advocating for the establishment of a legal framework for access to legal aid was the first step of engagement, after which Cordaid's local partners involved the central and local governments in the selection of paralegals and the drafting of documents that would guide the paralegals' actions.

Legal aid was a priority in the policy of the Ministry of Justice, as well as being a right recognized in the Burundian constitutions of 2005 and 2018. Additionally, the SP took the stance of involving the central administration and local government all throughout the process.

The case highlights the challenges of working closely with an authoritarian government, such as Burundi's. Advocates cannot have a dialogue with government authorities if they position themselves as clearly against government policies, meaning that they would not be able to advance on change processes. However, Cordaid and local partners must consider whether it is still in the interest of their beneficiaries if they collaborate with authorities on their terms and priorities.

Cordaid's staff in The Hague did not have enough information on local dynamics (and they still do not now that the program has ended) to determine the best way to solve the trade-off in this case. Local advocates, therefore, had much room for independent judgement and decision making, with the trust that they would be making good judgements based on the local context.

Cordaid's Burundian colleagues and partners suggested that constructive collaboration with local government institutions and authorities has been possible without having become an extension of the authoritative regime. The Burundian staff judged what topics could be discussed and what topics were too risky. In this case, they judged that weak accountability, corruption in the justice system, and weak capacities to deliver were safe to discuss with local stakeholders.

The case study leads to the question, however, of whether clear criteria should be formulated that help track the do-no-harm principle in working with authoritarian regimes. .

Similarly, in Nigeria, Cordaid's Nigerian country partner identified the right entry point in the Office of the Vice President to advocate to prevent and clean up oil spills in a complex federal and state-based network.

Table 7 presents a contribution analysis of the elements of adaptive management that contributed (positively or negatively) to the success cases outlined above.

Table 7 Contribution of elements of the adaptive approach to better program results

Elements providing positive contribution

The realization of being ‘stuck’, either in one country or from a program point of view. When an SP is stuck there is no longer space to deliver outputs. This arose, for example, after the coup d’état in Mali. Or an SP may be stuck in that outputs are successfully delivered, but outcomes do not change. For example, successfully holding community consultations does not mean the results of the consultations affect national planning.

Creating a TOC that makes explicit the links between the intervention strategy and the desired changes in the context, so that the process of review is easier and more useful. Such a theory described how advocacy and connected strategies reached the advocacy outcome, but also how the advocacy outcome would trickle down into societal changes.

A regular process of TOC review that uses country-based assumptions, and where needed qualitative and quantitative data allows the realization of being stuck to arise earlier on in the process.

Contractual and planning flexibility for local partners to avoid wasting resources.

Relating to local communities or actors through trusted intermediaries, such as ‘spiders in a web’ type of long-term partners.

Elements providing negative contribution

A lack of funding dedicated to an intentional process of problem driven testing and iteration due to having to deliver results in the short term and prove early on that the intervention model works.

The MFA asking SPs to define their themes and levels of advocacy too early during inception rather than letting them emerge from dialogue with partners.

The fact that expenditure on service delivery was prohibited. The IOB review on the partnership dynamics inside SPs recognized that this expenditure might be necessary to achieve the goodwill of communities, at least in some contexts.

The process of internal transformation may be complicated by internal resistance to SP members who stand to lose. For example, the MTR found that CARE’s tier 2 partners were more connected to change than its tier 1 partners.

■
Connecting SP members with expertise to other SP members who are looking for such expertise.

Capacity building for country partners combined with autonomy to use the capacity for their priorities.

The D&D funding window was a long-term program with flexibility for moving budget across years and budget lines when necessary.

Chapter 3

Conclusions

3.1 Implementing the adaptive approach

All the SPs have adopted elements of the adaptive approach, but none has implemented the approach in its entirety. None of the SPs has rolled out formally the Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation or similar processes for systematically exploring context and problems and testing and recording the results of different interventions. However, some of the SPs experienced a positive change during program implementation, such as NIMD introducing a PEA approach at the country level towards the end of the program and CARE exploring the role of social norms in the second half of SP implementation.

Instead, the SPs performed well in understanding and acting relevantly in the context, often problematizing the TOCs set at the start of the SP as too ambitious and adapting.

Performance in facilitating and enabling locally driven process was ambiguous, with a strong drive in that direction combining with persisting barriers and limitations (explored in the next section).

3.2 Partnership contribution to learning and adaptive approach

Relevance to the local context was achieved through different partnership structures, such as CARE's tier 2 partners, Cordaid's collaborative approach, Pax's informal interactions with country stakeholders, GPPAC's network of networks and space for autonomous action by S-CSOs, and NIMD's connection with long-term country partners.

Partnerships with local partners had a positive contribution to adaptation, especially when they took the form of long-term partnerships with a spider in the web style partner. This key partner then connected with multiple local actors as required. Supportive, informal interactions and dialogue inside the SP network and holistic capacity building helped as well.

Nevertheless, dilemmas around power imbalances between N-CSOs and S-CSOs remain in models ostensibly founded on collaboration. This is likely to persist if the N-CSO drives the collaboration process and restricts country partners to dialogue at the country level.

■

The practice of signing annual contracts with country partners was detrimental because it institutionalized power imbalances. The preference for annual contracts in N-CSOs seems connected to internal rules for audit and financial reporting (as in the case of NIMD), standard administrative practices that are not questioned (as in GPPAC's case) and wanting to use short-term contracts to get to know new, local partners working on marginal areas before committing to a longer term partnership (as reported by Pax). Progress on the adaptation agenda is going to require dialogue with management, finance, and administration departments to find acceptable ways to scrap rules and practices that are not aligned with being adaptive.

Results in building partners' capacity were good when it came to building capacity for advocacy and PMEL, despite enduring challenges in using TOC approaches. However, weaker capacity building results were shown when it came to building the core of civil society organizations. None of the SPs seemed to have implemented a capacity building model that included core funding, even though GPPAC's model was the one that was most holistic.

In the best-case scenario, a constructive partnership between the MFA and N-CSOs contributed to adaptation, learning, and better results. The MFA, with DSH as a contact point, was a flexible, long-term donor, and at times a committed partner.

However, barriers connected to the MFA's bureaucratic rules and structures, as well as availability of resources, remain.

Some barriers are operational, such as the lack of staffing in the embassies, the complexity of coordinating several MFA central departments and multiple embassies, or the lack of mechanisms for joint dialogue that went beyond annual planning and reporting and high-level dialogue at HQ.

Some barriers were strategic, such as when focus countries were not aligned or the embassy did not have a thematic focus on something relevant to the SP.

Some barriers were likely embedded in the MFA's bureaucratic procedures and processes, such as the inability to use D&D funding for anything other than lobby and advocacy, the MFA's push for the N-CSOs to identify the thematic focus for advocacy early in the inception phase rather allowing the themes and priorities to emerge from interactions with country partners and experimentation, and barriers connected to the reporting formats.

DSH's and D&D's RBFs were too prescriptive and detailed at the output level and did not leave enough flexibility for the SPs to monitor and report in a way that was relevant and useful for programmatic learning. The imposition

of DSH's RBF did not recognize that the SP as a delivery model is supposed to complement MFA objectives rather than directly delivering on them as with a normal grant. The D&D RBF, instead, was too vague to monitor anything useful, including quantitative indicators such as number of laws changed and civil society organizations strengthened.

Lack of clarity in reporting meant that DSH contact points were not always aware of what had been achieved or where they were at the outcome level.

3.3 Learning contribution to adaptative approach

Frequent, collaborative, evidence-based reviews of contextualized TOCs provided the best basis for introducing timely modifications to intervention approaches and TOCs. However, MTRs and end-line evaluations also proved important opportunities for reflection and adaptation of the program-wide approach and TOCs when they used proper methodologies for reviewing TOC assumptions.

The learning by doing/relational/informal learning model worked well in learning about the context.

Outcome harvesting had a mixed contribution to learning, positive in that it offered a more realistic picture than quantitative indicators, but negative in that it often ended up being the only tool used to track change.

The combination learning and partnership model most likely to deliver capacity to adapt has these elements: a decentralized, inclusive network structure that includes representatives of target populations; multiple informal interactions between SP partners; autonomy of action for S-CSOs; and a knowledge team who keep track of the resulting multitude of intervention strategies, recording the assumptions underlying them and summarizing knowledge from the bottom up for policymakers.

3.4 Contribution of adaptive approach to results

The implementation of the adaptive approach thus far is enough to have generated better results, at least in some countries inside the SPs.

When contextualized and frequently reviewed from a learning perspective, the TOC approach delivered modifications in intervention strategies that got country programs unstuck after contextual events prevented them from delivering outputs or improved intervention strategies based on the realization that outputs were not translating into outcomes.

■

A combination of informal interactions with local actors and formal studies conducted by PMEL and knowledge teams allowed the SPs to adapt well to their contexts.

When flexible processes of annual planning and reporting with the country partners were put in place that eliminated the requirement for country partners to deliver as planned, SPs also avoided wasting resources in highly political spaces as contexts changed.

4.

Recommendations

For the SPs

- 1 **Finding:** The practice common across SPs of offering annual contracts to country partners is detrimental to equal partnerships.

Recommendation: The meta-evaluation indicates that the **lead N-CSOs in the SPs conduct an internal review of and dialogue with their administrative and financial staff to identify and overcome the administrative constraints to sign longer term contracts.**

- 2 **Finding:** Implementing a contextualized theory of change approach and review is important for unlocking the effect on learning of the TOC approach.

Recommendation: The meta-evaluation suggests that the **SPs set and review frequently lead to a cascade of TOCs.** The program-wide TOC that sets the key principles and aims for the SP to work across countries and themes leads to country-level TOCs that explore the context and adapt the program-wide TOC with context-relevant assumptions and intervention strategies, which lead to project level or thematic TOCs if necessary. This practice would support learning at different levels.

- 3 **Finding:** Connections with local partners are important for the adaptive approach but power imbalances still exist.

Recommendation: The meta-evaluation suggests that the **SPs should continue giving priority to the localization agenda.** This includes carefully considering who sets the internal learning agenda in the SP, whether there is space for co-creation and autonomous action by country partners, whether actors from different countries can bypass the HQ for cross-country learning, and whether part of the knowledge team could be decentralized at the country level.

- 4 **Finding:** Uptake of experimental approaches is in its early stages.

Recommendation: The meta-evaluation suggests that the SPs should continue trying out (and be given the space to try out) experimental approaches, such as identifying a few options that might work in the same context and experimenting with at least the two most promising. Cross-SP learning would complement the advances made by any one SP on this topic as none of the SPs has reached full potential on this dimension.

- 5 **Finding:** Informal learning processes among program staff are important for adaptation.

Recommendation: The meta-evaluation suggests that the SPs should recognize the complementarity between the formal and informal learning and knowledge processes, leaving space for the latter as they strengthen the former. Additionally, further dialogue is needed with program staff to understand how informal learning happens.

- 6 **Finding:** Partnerships with other N-CSOs and with the MFA have been challenging.

Recommendation: The meta-evaluation suggests that the SPs should define and co-create partnerships together, explore coordination platforms with the MFA outside the usual annual planning and reporting, and avoid over-ambitious programs that spread funding over too many countries.

- 7 **Finding:** Outcome harvesting is important for learning-based monitoring, but there have been pitfalls in how OH has been implemented.

Recommendation: The SPs are keen to improve the practice of OH. Cordaid, Hivos, NIMD, Oxfam Novib, Pax, SNV, Wetlands International, and World Wide Fund launched a survey of how 21 Dutch-funded coalitions and alliances have implemented OH and discussed shortcomings and points for improvement in 2020.⁸ This meta-evaluation suggests that this process of improvement should continue and highlights the following action points for those SPs that use OH for monitoring:

1. **SPs should budget for a final study to make sense of the long list of outcomes from OH.**
2. **SPs should not rely mainly or only on OH during external MTRs, and especially should not sample only the best outcomes.** Other methods could be employed at the MTR and end line that provide an external check on outcome from the perspective of

⁸ Smith, R., 2020. *Use of outcome harvesting for monitoring in Dialogue and Dissent alliances: Findings from a survey and discussions*. Retrieved from : <https://www.outcomemapping.ca/resource/use-of-outcome-harvesting-for-monitoring-in-dialogue-and-dissent-alliances-findings-from-a-survey-and-discussions>

the target groups, such as a qualitative impact protocol based on the contribution analysis methodology.

For DSH

- 1 **Finding:** Being a partner in an SP requires more effort and different dialogue models than the MFA's usual donor role.

Recommendation: The meta-evaluation suggests that **DSH should build the capacity of the DSH contact point for coordinating multiple embassies and MFA departments and establish, where relevant, ad hoc, high level of effort coordination structures for joint planning on DSH priorities** so that embassies and central MFA departments can also be involved in the informal learning. Once the capacity has been built, it becomes important to minimize turnover as much as possible.

- 2 **Finding:** Monitoring and reporting based on D&D and DSH RBFs has not been helpful for either learning or accountability.

Recommendation: The meta-evaluation suggests that **DSH should allow more space to the SPs for monitoring and reporting in a way that supports the SPs' needs.** This includes reforming DSH's RBF so that it is less prescriptive in terms of quantitative indicators at the output and outcome levels and allows more space for capturing richer qualitative data. It also includes taking a meta-evaluation approach to translating the accumulated reporting from SPs and programs into DSH policy-level monitoring and reporting. This could be done by commissioning meta-evaluations across SPs, but also across other programs in the DSH portfolio at critical junctures in the SP cycle, such as end of baseline, annual reporting, MTR, and end line. Finally, it includes becoming more involved in informal learning interactions on context and content outside of the framework of annual planning and reporting.

- 3 **Finding:** DSH's resources for learning and coordination are scarce.

Recommendation: The meta-evaluation suggests that **DSH should consider how to utilize external learning facilitators in inter-consortia /cross-programmatic learning** (external to both the consortia and DSH).

- 4 **Findings:** Contractual requirements in D&D's funding window posed some barriers to learning in the form of inadequate reporting templates, monitoring framework, and the push for SPs to identify thematic priorities at inception.

Recommendation: The meta-evaluation suggests that **DSH should review the contractual space allowed by its other tender and delivery**

modalities for adapting reporting formats, adapting monitoring frameworks, and allowing implementing partners time after inception to identify thematic priorities or the freedom not to have thematic priorities.

For DSOs

- 1 **Finding:** Contractual requirements in D&D's funding window posed some barriers to learning in the form of inadequate reporting templates, monitoring frameworks, and push for SPs to identify thematic priorities at inception.

Recommendation: The meta-evaluation suggests that the DSO should review the contractual space allowed by Power of Voice for adapting reporting formats, adapting monitoring frameworks, and allowing SPs more time after inception to identify thematic priorities or the freedom not to have thematic priorities. Building on this review, the meta-evaluation suggests that the DSO should communicate clearly to DSH contact points and SPs the freedom they have on these issues, allowing creative solutions inside the latitude offered by central government bureaucracy.

- 2 **Finding:** Power dynamics in D&D's SPs.

Recommendation: The meta-evaluation suggests that the DSO should consider whether the lead CSO awarded to SPs should always (or mostly) be Dutch organizations, or if other options are possible or beneficial.

For IOB

- 1 **Finding:** MTR supports learning purposes far more than end-line evaluation.

Recommendation: The meta-evaluation suggests that IOB should consider how to adapt its criteria for end-line evaluation to offer more space for learning rather than prioritizing accountability requirements.

5.

Annexes

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