Final report

Field presence of Dutch NGOs: What is the impact on civil societies in the South?

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Executive summary

In the last years, PSO has noticed that a number of Northern NGOs (NNGOs) have established field presence in the South, guided by the conviction that proximity to the target groups and the partners in the South would make their organisations more efficient and effective. However, there are also some negative views on the move, which has even been referred to as a new form of neo-colonialism. The strengthening of civil society is a priority for PSO and its member organisations and has motivated the present report.

"Field presence" is defined as keeping field offices with a building and an administrative structure and/or permanent officers at the site of the projects (consultants and advisors in the field for a short time are thus excluded). A distinction is made between operational NGOs, doing mostly humanitarian work and post-conflict rehabilitation through field offices and officers, and those doing structural development work, usually through local partners.

A total of 29 PSO members have taken part in this report. Unless expressly clarified, they reflect the views of their organisations rather than their own personal opinions. The organisations were selected by PSO: all member organisations with some kind of field presence were invited to participate, as well as some organisations without field presence. Two experts were interviewed: Chiku Malunga in Malawi and Alan Fowler in South Africa.

The motivation and impact of field presence of Dutch NGOs in the South was analysed from four angles. First, the trend towards the structural decentralisation of development organisations, defined as the transfer of responsibilities and authorities to lower levels of the organisation (Fowler, 1992). Decentralisation admits three levels: deconcentration (transfer of responsibilities but not authorities), delegation (transfer of both to lower levels) and devolution (transfer of both to local autonomous agents). The second line is the analysis of changes in the international aid chain generated by the establishment of field presence of Dutch NGOs in the South, drawing from Biekart (1999). The third line is the tension between institutional and developmental imperatives facing NGOs and outlined by Edwards (1996). The former are the priorities that the agency thinks it has to take to survive and the later are what it should be doing to fulfil its mission statement. Finally, the fourth line of analysis is the five capabilities on which systemic capacity rests, according to the ECDPM approach conceptualised by Morgan (2006): the capability to act, to generate development results, to relate, to adapt and self-renew, and to achieve coherence.

The report categorised the Dutch NGOs that participated in the study into five groups, according to their actions and visions in terms of field presence. The decision of whether to have field presence in the South lies at the heart of the tension between institutional and developmental imperatives. Like all categorisations the one presented contains some degree of arbitrariness. Some organisations use various structures for different types of work and their categorisation responded to the main modality.

The first category is the group of NGOs that neither have nor wish to have field offices in the South, either because they find it unnecessary or as a matter of principle. They are neither convinced of the gains in efficiency nor the improvement in information gathering that are attributed to field presence. They contend that it has a negative impact on the capacity building of civil society actors in the South, though they also admit they may be losing funding opportunities. They are therefore giving priority to development imperatives at the expense of institutional imperatives.

The second one is formed by NGOs with field presence. Presence in the South is sometimes explained by the specificity of the work they do in capacity building and post-conflict rehabilitation or by the conviction that a decentralised structure will improve the work of the organisation. These NGOs emphasise that field presence makes their work more efficient and effective and it lets them access better information and funding opportunities. However, they also admit that field presence may be disempowering civil society actors in the South. To avoid it, some are furthering the decentralisation of their structures into delegation and refrain from applying for funding or intervening in areas where SNGOs are present. They thus give priority to the institutional imperatives above the developmental ones but with various degrees of efforts to achieve a balance between the two.

The third group is composed by relatively smaller Dutch NGOs that keep long-term partnerships with a horizontal network of more or less independent NGOs in the South and sometimes in the North. They give limited funding and are active at a low scale. The members stick to the network of organisation by agreement and mostly place high relevance on the joint accumulation of knowledge. This seems an optimal method of empowerment for the civil society actors in the South under certain conditions. The Dutch NGO should not be too dominant or else the SNGOs are unable to develop its capacities. There are also some doubts regarding to what point this model is replicable at a larger scale (i.e. a larger organisation) and/or in places the minimum capacities are not readily available in the South.

The fourth group is formed by Dutch NGOs that form part of large global organisations working on most areas of development, from humanitarian to structural poverty alleviation. Humanitarian work in their various forms (emergency aid, post-conflict rehabilitation, etc) almost always places NNGOs in the field. Some of these NNGOs give more autonomy to their field offices and partners in the South than others, but in general institutional imperatives seem to take priority over development imperatives, at least in relation to long-term development work. There is little evidence of change in a different direction.

The fifth category is formed by only one NGO that integrates a global organisation started in the South, with headquarters in the South and partners in the South. This is an unusual case of growth and empowerment among SNGOs moving North, in opposite direction as the other organisations interviewed. It represents a further modification of the international aid chain which may become more common in the future.

What is the motivation for field presence of NNGOs in the South? There seems to be a wide consensus that direct field presence is necessary for humanitarian relief work because it makes responses faster, more effective and legitimate. However, critics of field presence consider that capacity building needs to be given priority as soon as possible and for this it is often convenient to foresee an exit scenario in the medium term (2-3 years).

In relation to structural poverty alleviation and long-term development, opinions are more divided. Those NNGOs with field presence assure that it generates gains in efficiency: organisations become more cost-effective, increase access to funding opportunities and improve their information gathering. Critics of field presence argue that efficiency gains and information gathering are not straightforward but do admit that field presence improves funding opportunities. All in all, the motivation for field presence is related to the internal needs and pressures of the NNGOs and their donors -the institutional imperatives rather than the developmental imperatives-. Extra funding, reporting on measurable and quick results, avoiding mistakes and proving effectiveness fall on the side of institutional imperatives.

What are the effects on civil society actors in the South? Dutch NGOs see both positive and negative effects of field presence on civil societies in the South. On the <u>positive side</u>, arguments again concentrate on effectiveness: field presence can become a catalyst for capacity building and reduce a lengthy learning process. A partnership with a NNGO gives SNGOs access to networks in which they normally do not participate and provides a role model in terms of organisational capacities. However, in view of past experience, it begs the question of whether taking shortcuts is actually possible in development processes. On the <u>negative side,</u> the presence of NNGOs in the South reduces the central role of SNGOs in their own field, depressing the need for local civil society actors to organise themselves, to grow and to push for social change. It also represents extra competition for funding and development intervention. There are risks that field offices and officers may distort needs' identification, pose excessive control and interference on the work of SNGOs and reinforcing the perceptions of inequality.

Some Dutch NGOs emphasised that they only hire local staff in their field offices to improve their local embeddedness. However, this provokes a drain of qualified human resources from local NGOs that cannot compete in terms of wages and working conditions. So far, none of the interviewed organisations has found a solution to that problem.

The positive and negative effects for civil society actors in the South make the decision on field presence a difficult one. The positive effects in terms of institutional imperatives only appear when worked out deliberately and while the negative impacts can be dampened. All in all, the crucial point is not whether to establish field presence in the South or not, but rather what those offices or officers would be doing. If what they do is mainly supporting SNGOs from a distance and without tampering their independence, then there will be more positive than negative effects for the civil society actors in the South.

The question thus needs to be rephrased: under what conditions does field presence lead to both gains in efficiency for NNGOs and in capacity building among the civil society actors in the South? How can the organisational decentralisation of Dutch NGOs be turned into a win-win situation for both? Good starting points are transferring as many decision powers as possible to local partners, avoiding an overburden of controls and interference by field offices, refraining from applying for funds where SNGOs are present and pre-defining a time span for field presence. Power asymmetries between field representatives of NNGOs and the local SNGO partners is inevitable but can be constrained by limiting numerical presence (i.e. keeping minimal personnel in the field office), transferring decision-making powers over the use of funds and keeping similar wage levels. All in all, it means not taking actions in line with the institutional imperatives alone but considering the development imperatives as well.

Introduction

In the last years, PSO has noticed that a number of Northern NGOs are opening offices in the South, engaging local organisations as representatives or establishing other forms of physical presence. The assumption behind it is that this would make their organisations more efficient and effective, being nearer the target group and the partners in the South. However, there are also some negative views on the move, which has been referred to as a form of neo-colonialism. The strengthening of civil society is a priority for PSO and its member organisations and the main justification for its interest in the motivation and impact of field presence of Dutch NGOs on the civil societies in the South.

This report focuses on the crossing of two issues. On the one hand, there is a question on the structural design of Dutch NGOs: what is the best way of distributing responsibilities and authorities across the organisation in order to achieve its goals? Is it preferable to have a decentralised structure with direct field presence or rather to define broad guidelines in The Netherlands and let local organisations do the rest? On the other hand, there is the issue of capacity building and the development impact in the South. What are the best ways of building capacities and strengthening the civil society actors in the South? Is it more effective in terms of impact to be present where the action takes place or rather to keep a distance and let civil society actors in the South do their own learning?

These two questions have often been studied separately, leaving a gap to be explored between them. At first sight, there seems to be a relationship between the organisational design of Dutch NGOs and the extent to which they support the development of capacities in the civil societies in the South. This report focuses on the field presence of Dutch NGOs: what motivates their physical presence in the South? To what extent does it affect civil societies in the South? In what areas or circumstances is there an impact?

For the sake of this report, direct "field presence" means keeping field offices with a building and an administrative structure and/or keeping permanent officers at the site of the projects for communication and control purposes (consultants and advisors in the field for a short time are thus excluded). A distinction is made between operational NGOs, doing mostly humanitarian work and post-conflict rehabilitation, which automatically places them in the category of organisations with field offices and officers, and those doing long-term development work, usually through local partners.

It is worth mentioning that every Dutch NGO interviewed for this report uses the term "partners" to refer to their counterparts in the South, even if they are just short of subcontractors. In addition, all mention doing diverse forms of capacity building with them, from simple training and sharing of systematic reporting methods to joint applications for funding and intelligence gathering.

A total of 29 PSO members have taken part in this report, through face to face or telephone interviews with top managers. Unless expressly clarified in the questions, they were asked to reflect the views of their organisations rather than their personal opinions. The organisations were selected by PSO: all member organisations with some kind of field presence were invited to participate, as well as organisations without field presence. Two questionnaires were used, one for NGOs with direct field presence in the South and another one for those organisations without direct field presence. All questions allowed open answers. In addition, some interviewees were asked for their

personal opinions on statements gathered in the literature review which support or reject field presence of NNGOs in the South. Finally, two experts were interviewed: Chiku Malunga in Malawi and Alan Fowler in South Africa.

To simplify the reading of this report, a summary has been included at the end of each section highlighting the main points and reflections. These are shaded in grey and do not contain information that had not been presented in the main text.

Theoretical background

In the eighties and early nineties, the international aid chain used to be fairly simple, as depicted in the graph below. It used to allocate aid funds from the governments and citizens in the North to Northern NGOs (NNGOs) and other private aid agencies, to domestic organisations in the South (SNGOs). The central actor in the network (the one connected to the highest amount of other actors) was the NNGOs, as can be seen in the figure below.
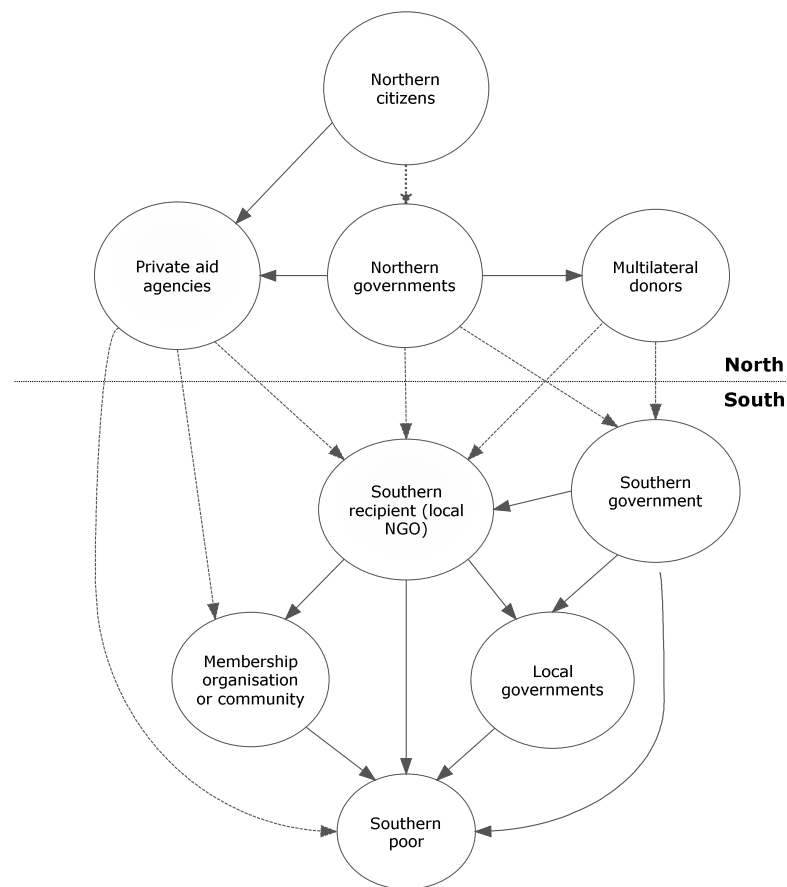
Figure 1

Simple Private Aid Chain
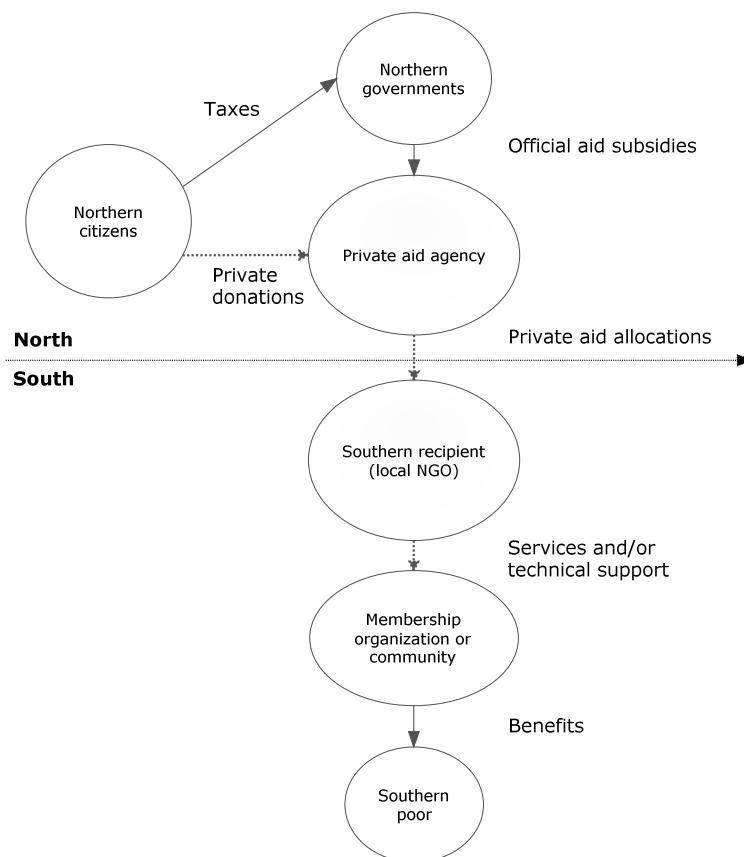
Source: Biekart, K. (1999: 79). The politics of civil society building,
International books and the Transnational Institute

At the turn of the millennium, an identity crisis has taken over the international aid system, as reflected in Bebbington et al. (2008) last book's title "Can NGOs make a difference?". Far-reaching

attempts at reform to improve performance now pervade the system. Public opinion questions the legitimacy of NNGOs and their effectiveness in managing the aid resources entrusted to them. One result of this change is the priority given to improving NNGO achievement and measurable impact through quantitative results (Bebbington et al, 2008: 18). Another result is governments' and donors' pressures driving a "depolitization" of the NGO sector: instead of agents of change, they are retreating to doing service delivery (Rahman, 2006: 435). Equally contested are roles of NNGOs, responsibilities, and accountability (Fowler, 2000), particularly in relation to (international) governance, advocacy, and civic participation (Edwards, 2000).

Figure 2

Multiple Aid Chains

Source: Adapted from Biekart, K. (1999: 90). The politics of civil society building,
International books and the Transnational Institute: Amsterdam

The international aid chain has also changed. Bilateral and multilateral agencies now emphasize the importance of involving a wider array of non-state actors in development processes to build the capacities in the South and achieve sustainable development. Official funding has grown for NNGOs favouring the direct financing of local organizations in developing countries (INTRAC, 1998). In turn, NNGOs take greater account of the differences in country-specific conditions and

opened the 'ownership' of development policies and processes to those for whom change is intended (Beckwith et al., 2002).

The aid chain is thus integrated by more actors and more relationships, adding complexity to the system. Depicted in Figure 2 above is a more current description of the aid chain than the original one in Figure 1. This was adapted from Biekart (1999: 91) to highlight that SNGOs have become the central actor of the international aid chain (the one with the most connections), at least in theory. In practice, this centrality is bypassed when other actors relate to each other directly. Crucially relevant for this report is one way of bypassing the centrality of SNGO: when NNGOs have their own field presence.

NNGOs are now pushed to reconsider their position in the aid chain and re-organise their structures. Edwards (1996: 4) presented the problem as a tension between "institutional imperatives and developmental imperatives – between what the agency thinks it has to do to survive in an increasingly difficult environment and what it should be doing to fulfil its mission statement". On the side of institutional imperatives, NNGOs need to show measurable results, efficiency and cost-effectiveness. They need to align themselves in terms of the needs and interests of their donors. On the side of developmental imperatives, NNGOs commit themselves to strengthening the civil societies in the South, supporting their emancipation, empowerment and capacity building.

All of the goals on the side of developmental imperatives are long-term and non-measurable. Consequently, Biekart (1999:77) notes, it is non-surprising that NGOs attend their institutional imperatives in order to survive and leave developmental imperatives to be served afterwards. While doing so they may also downplay the negative consequences of their actions on the goals they wish to achieve.

Decentralisation of the Northern organisations

The organisational structures adopted by NNGOs reflect this tension between institutional and development imperatives. NNGOs are confronted with the decision of decentralising their organisational structures to become more effective. That implies setting up multi-country regional and national structures, transferring authority and responsibility to them. Alan Fowler (1992, 1999) presents the choice in a continuum. The author defines that "an organisation can be said to be centralised or decentralised by the degree to which responsibility for and authority over decisions are either concentrated at the top or spread downwards within it" (1992: 122).

The question is not simply to what extent it is best to decentralise across countries by transferring responsibilities and authority to the field offices and officers, but there is also a choice to be made on the modality in which decentralisation takes place. Fowler (1992: 122) distinguishes three variants. The most limited form is *deconcentration*: responsibilities are moved downwards and outwards within the organisation but the distribution of authority does not similarly change. A step further in the scale is *delegation*: both responsibility and authority to make decisions are moved down to lower levels. Finally, the most far-reaching type of decentralisation is *devolution*, in which responsibilities and associated authority are transferred to rather autonomous parts of the organisation. In other words, the central organisation loses the monopoly to make decisions over certain matters and other bodies embrace those functions.

For development organisations, a critical issue is the geographical distribution of authority across the globe. The responsibilities to be undertaken are by definition located in the South, the countries where development interventions take place. In turn, decision making powers usually stay in the hands of those who provide the funding, the organisations in the North. NNGO define what areas it

considers important to work on, what needs to be developed and what is the best method to achieve those results. For this, the organisation in the North frequently engages an organisation in the South to perform the development intervention. The extent to which SNGO can also take authority (ownership) over the development action defines the empowerment and capacity building they achieve.

Capacity building

Aware of the importance of capacity building for successful development actions, NNGO now make efforts to generate ownership among their Southern counterparts, combining the transfer of responsibilities and demands for accountability, with some sharing of decision-powers and autonomy with SNGOs. This move was greatly influenced by Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, which argues for the necessity of going beyond the conventional development targets and taking into account improvements in human potential. Development, from this perspective, is fundamentally about developing the capabilities of people by increasing the options available to them and their freedoms to make their way. Sen turned conventional thinking on development as generating means, rather than ends.

Capacity building for development rests on the principle that investing in the human and social capital of marginalised individuals and groups enables them to develop the capacities needed to thrive and to play an autonomous role in developing and renewing their communities (Bentley et al, 2003). Morgan (1998), who has done extensive work on capacity building and contributed to current debates and practice, defines capacity as the 'organisational and technical abilities, relationships and values that enable countries, organisations, groups and individuals at any level of society to carry out functions and achieve their development objective over time'.

There is a myriad of definitions and focus on what capacities need to be developed, but definitions mostly focus on the need to approach capacity-building efforts from a systems perspective that recognises the dynamics and connections among various actors and issues at the different levels, as part of a broader unit rather than as loosely connected factors (Baser, 2000). First, there is a clear recognition on the need to understand the context in which the capacity-building efforts take place. Secondly, emphasis is placed on capacity building at various hierarchical levels (individual, organisational, network, sector and the overall enabling environment). Thirdly, to be successful, capacity-building efforts must respond to the relationship among these levels, all of which are systemically interlinked (Morgan, 2006). The model PSO uses for capacity building is in line with this new development in international thinking.

Capacity-building approaches have focused on improving the leadership, management and/or operation of an organisation: the skills and systems that enable an organisation to define its mission, to gather and manage relevant resources and, ultimately, to produce the outcomes it seeks. Central characteristics of capacity building are empowerment and identity, which result in a collective ability to reach a potential state.

According to the ECDPM, capacity is built on five core systemic capabilities. These are: the capability to act, to generate development results, to relate, to adapt and self-renew, and to achieve coherence. The capability to act is assessed by the degree to which decisions are implemented, the degree and use of operational autonomy, the action orientation within the system, the integrity of the organization, its leadership and staff, and its effective human, institutional and financial resource mobilization. The second capability, to generate development results, is embodied in the strengthening of public institutions and services, the generation of substantive outcomes such as

better health and education, and the improvement in the sustainability of development results. The third pillar, the capability to relate, is reflected in the degree of legitimacy in the eyes of its supporters and stakeholders, the ability to protect the core interests of the system, and the operational autonomy. The capability to adapt embeds in an adaptive management culture, the ability and discipline to learn, the confidence to change, and the ability to balance stability and change. Finally, the capability to integrate needs to solve the tension between the need to specialize and differentiate versus the need to bring things together and achieve greater coherence, integrating structures inside the system, a well-defined set of rules that govern operations and a shared vision of the intent of the organization. These five capabilities are separate but interdependent. (Morgan, 2006)

Analytical framework

In short, this report analyses the motivation and impact of field presence of Dutch NGOs in the South from four theoretical angles:

- The move towards the structural decentralisation of development organisations, in the three modalities (deconcentration, delegation and devolution) advanced by Fowler (1992, 1999).

- The changes in the international aid chain generated by the establishment of field presence of Dutch NGOs in the South, in the form of direct field offices, officers or exclusive partnerships. Thinking on the international aid chain is based on Biekart (1999) and Bebbington (2008)

- The dichotomy between institutional and developmental imperatives outlined by Edwards (1996).

- The five capabilities on which systemic capacity rests on, according to the ECDPM approach conceptualised by Morgan (2006): the capability to act, to generate development results, to relate, to adapt and self-renew, and to achieve coherence.

How do Dutch NGOs structure their organisations?

Amidst the changes in the international aid system, most Dutch NGOs have also been juggling between institutional and developmental imperatives. They have to balance a) the need to improve the effectiveness of their own organisations and b) the impact on the capacity building of civil societies in the South. Some have decided to decentralise their structures and establish field presence through their own offices or officers in the South, while others stay operating from The Netherlands.

This section presents what Dutch NGOs do and what kind of field presence they keep for their long-term and humanitarian work. The 29 organisations that participated in the report are grouped into five categories: 1) without field presence, 2) with field offices or officers, 3) central partners of a network of independent South and North NGOs, 4) members of global NNGOs, and 5) Northern partners of SNGO. Each group explains the main reasons for the presence or absence in the field. Like all categorisations, the typology presented below also contains some degree of arbitrariness. Some organisations structure their interventions in several modalities for different countries or types of work. To place them in a certain category, the most common one is given priority.

1. Dutch NGOs without field presence in the South

The organisations without field offices in the South are not directly operational outside The Netherlands and do mainly structural poverty alleviation and long-term development work. They

vary in scale of operations, type of work and time span of their development interventions. What they have in common is that they do not have field offices at present as the result of a strategic decision of the organisation. All the persons interviewed for this report express their belief that having field offices is mostly unnecessary (in part thanks to the new communication technologies) and, more than that, it is disrespectful to the civil societies in the South. They consider that field presence is detrimental to the development of civil society actors in the South. They acknowledge that their absence from the field might lead them to fund projects that eventually do not deliver, but they consider this is a risk inherent to all development aid action.

The sentiment against having permanent field presence is quite strong across all these organisations, though for slightly different reasons. For some, it is a matter of principle. One of them expressed: "We need to let the South make its own mistakes and learning process. If we or they make a mistake, it would not be the first time in the development sector. Let's consider that the beginning of what is today the fair trade scheme was then seen as a failed project. Hindsight shows that there was something left, that civil societies in the South built capacities that we did not see immediately then but that in the long run gave us a very useful tool to foster development. If they are allowed to do their own trial-and error process, there is always something left. Our own Northern presence cannot do any better".

Cordaid	Structural development work through and by autonomous local organisations. Humanitarian work through field presence.
CMC	Structural development work through and by autonomous local organisations
NiZA	Structural development work through and by long term partners.
Agriterra	Structural development work through and by long term projects and partners (3-5 years)
Edukans	Structural development work through and by long term partners.
SKN	Structural development work through and by long term partners.

To a certain extent, an exception in this group is presented by Cordaid's humanitarian work operations. In some cases of a humanitarian emergency, Cordaid may open an operative field unit with local and foreign workers and Dutch funding. However, Cordaid keeps an exit policy of closing their humanitarian field offices 2 to 3 years after their opening. This time frame presses the temporary field office to do capacity building while attending humanitarian work, knowing it will have to support the development of a local organisation to take over. In specific cases in which the emergency extends beyond that period, Cordaid created the figure of the "liaison" officers to do only technical assistance, support local NGOs and/or subcontract specific needs (e.g. rebuilding houses after a war). These are also withdrawn after a certain time. The strategic decision is to let it in the hands of the civil societies and governments in the South as soon as possible.

2. Dutch NGOs with field offices/officers in the South

While this group is composed of organisations with very different areas of work, scale and sources of funding, it is possible to distinguish three sub-categories.

2.1 Dutch NGOs in specific areas of capacity building

The first one is composed of organisations that strongly focus on capacity building in very specific areas of knowledge like health and sexual rights or environmental sustainability, to the point that their assistance can only be delivered by experts in the field. NSL, SNV, MilieuKontakt, and WPF are included in that group. All of these NGOs, however, declare that they make an explicit effort to hire as much local staff as possible, with Milieu Kontakt as extreme of hiring local staff exclusively.

SNV experts claim that "to work with our beneficiaries and be effective in building their capacities, person to person contact is necessary. Our being there increases the effectiveness of our organisation and our work". In other words, these organisations consider that their area of expertise is so specific and focused that they can only achieve results if delivered to local organisations through their own personnel.

NSL	Structural development work through partners
SNV	Structural development work through field offices and local organisations.
Milieu Kontakt	Structural development work through field offices and local organisations.
WPF	Structural development work through field offices in some countries and local partners managed from The Netherlands in others.

2.2. Dutch NGOs in post-conflict rehabilitation

The second group is composed of NGOs that do post-conflict rehabilitation work, often through specific psycho-social methods. WarChild, Dorcas and ZOA fall in this category. Although working through local organisations is the first choice, it is often impossible to find one doing similar work or able to do it after a short period of training. An interviewee explained that "in most post-conflict societies the social networks have been decimated by years of fighting, violence, repression and fear that, in general, initially prevent people from trusting each other. It takes quite a while for the local population to be able to trust each other again to the point of forming their own organisations".

As in the previous sub-group, these organisations are active in very specific areas of capacity building, delivering skills that local organisations do not have. Nevertheless, the extent to which they concentrate their efforts on developing local organisations to take over in the medium term varies according to their strategic decisions. Besides, chances of withdrawing depend also on the country, type of post-conflict situation in which they operate, and the scars left in the civil society by violence.

In this sub-group, WarChild stands out for its efforts of withdrawing or at least limiting its influence on the civil societies in the South. On the one hand, it has very autonomous field offices, which identify needs and projects with their local partners, apply for funds internationally, and are allowed to decide on their expenses to a certain limit. Their mandate is to empower local organisations to the point that the Dutch managers of some field offices act only as brokers among local NGOs. "We are trying to get to a point in which WarChild in The Netherlands will only set some quality standards and the field offices decide on all the rest", the NGO claims. On the other hand, this has led to some of the field offices of WarChild becoming legally independent organisations with only local staff. There have been two cases of this happening in Eastern Europe. In both, WarChild has called back the Dutch directors and left the local managers to continue the work. The main problems encountered in this process of "nationalisation" of field offices have been in terms of leadership

(people that started at the same level had problems in accepting that some of them were finally managing the organisation, so daily work became conflict-laden) and the failure to adapt the programme to the changing circumstances of their regions (after the first wave of rehabilitation, the incapacity of the organisation to adjust made their work obsolete and the relevance of the organisation decreased).

Dorcas	Humanitarian and post-conflict rehabilitation
WarChild	Post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction
ZOA	Post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction

2.3 Dutch NGOs with decentralised structures

The third sub-group is composed by Dutch NGOs that have gone the furthest in decentralising their structures without directly withdrawing their field presence. They are active in a wide spectrum of development actions and feel they need their own field presence in the South. However, they are also aware of the possible negative impact their decision can have on the empowerment of the civil societies in the South. Therefore they have designed decentralised structures that could be described by Fowler's definition of *delegation* explained above: responsibilities and authorities have been transferred to the offices in the South, staffed almost exclusively with local personnel with decision powers over the identification of needs and projects, areas of intervention and implementation. At the same time, they have neither withdrawn nor have given complete autonomy to their offices in the South.

In the case of ICCO, the re-structuring is ongoing. The functions retained in The Netherlands are planned to be restricted to developing a strategic plan, a reporting system and obtaining most funds. All other functions will be transferred to the South and ICCO is thus establishing regional offices with decision powers in several countries. For example, there are regional offices for Latin America and another one for East Africa. These are led by regional councils composed of individuals with outstanding knowledge of their civil societies and their development needs (academics, faith-based and trade union leaders, entrepreneurs). They are responsible for establishing priorities, defining projects, and choosing local partners with their own regional budget. To the question of whether this would tamper the ownership expected from civil societies in the South, the interviewee answered that "although the general framework for ICCO is still defined in Utrecht, the regional councils will have the chance to introduce changes for following strategic plans and if possible also sit at the board of ICCO in the Netherlands. This was unthinkable some decades ago, but now the civil society actors in the South are strong and mature enough to participate in defining our worldwide policy". If the strategy pursued by ICCO at present is implemented at its full scale, it may become a case of devolution and it may pass into the third category of Dutch NGOs to be described below.

ICCO/ Kerkinactie	**Restructuring since 2005,** heading to devolution towards independent regional offices. Structural development and humanitarian work
MCNV	Structural development work (only Vietnam and Laos) with field offices and autonomous local partners
Hivos	Structural development work through a small number of autonomous regional offices for some countries and management from NL for others

Another important characteristic of this sub-group is that the regional offices receive both a lump sum of money known to them a couple of years in advance and the freedom –within the mission and areas of intervention of the Dutch NGOs- to decide on how to spend it. In HIVOS, for example, the budget is informed three years in advance and the regional offices make decisions on how to spend it within the guidelines given. The reporting format on how the funds have been used is the same across all the regional offices and developed by HIVOS. The business plan for 2007-2010 has been submitted in Dutch and after approval has been translated into English. "We are still a Dutch NGO and it is important we don't become an empty shell. Local offices have a lot of freedom within the limitations of our bonds. The regional offices resolve for us the creative tension between centralization and decentralization", concluded the interviewee at HIVOS.

In fact, HIVOS combines organisational forms of intervention. It has a small number of regional offices overlooking actions in several countries and at the same time runs projects in other countries directly from The Netherlands. Headquarters receive regular reporting on the latter and further monitoring is done through visits. There is no evidence at the moment that one system turns better results than the other in terms of development impact.

3. Dutch NGOs with a horizontal network

This category is formed by smaller Dutch NGOs that have structured horizontal networks with long-term partners in the South. They provide only partial funding and technical assistance for capacity building, and in this sense SNGOs are considered relatively autonomous entities. "We are an important provider of funds for our partners but they have some funds of their own too. They may be able to stand on their feet", explained an interviewee in STRO. That is, relatively autonomous SNGO would likely be able to withstand the eventual withdrawal the Dutch NGO, obviously at a cost.

In addition, this group of Dutch NGOs do similar activities at home as the other partners do in the South. For example, TIE in Amsterdam gathers information on the workers' movement in The Netherlands, while the Brazilian and Chilean partners do the same in Brazil and Chile respectively, and so on. In the case of STRO, the Dutch NGO promotes the use of community currency systems worldwide together with its partners in the South in Brazil, Costa Rica, etc. While the work done is basically the same for all the members in the STRO network, the Dutch NGO has better access to resources and consequently "subsidises" the activities of partners in the South.

STRO	Structural development work through long-term strategic local partners
WEMOS	Structural development at health systems' level, through long-term local partners
Solidaridad	Undergoing restructuring since 2007. Structural development work and human rights
ETC Foundation	Structural development work through fully independent field offices and local partners
TIE	Structural development work mainly in terms of capacity building and training with long-term local partner.

Another characteristic of this group is that the accumulation of knowledge is a crucial interest in common for the entire global network. All member NGOs gather and share intelligence,

contributing to an expertise that is perhaps the main asset of the whole network. This strengthens the organisations in both South and North. For example, TIE's main asset is the knowledge base on the labour movement transnationally, which they use for providing training to trade unions and workers around the world and justifies further fund-rising. STRO boasts one of the largest databases in the world on experiments with community currency systems worldwide. Naturally, the extent to which these organisations feel that their main asset is knowledge varies.

The picture today roughly corresponds to Fowler's (1992) devolved type of decentralised structure, showing various trajectories. Some SNGOs were never dependent of the NNGOs but developed from long-term preferential partnerships. Others decentralised their structures into full-scale devolution. ETC has already some experience in a devolved organisational model. In the 1980s it decided to create independent offices in the South whose staff was mainly local, with the long-term goal of developing local capacity and eventually devolving responsibilities and authorities to the South. This was accomplished in 2002, when the offices became legally, managerially and financially independent. The network then became the ETC International Group, which collaborates on joint-proposals, projects, learning and sharing of facilities and is ruled by a membership agreement similar to a franchise.

In turn, Solidaridad represents an example of an organisation that is moving into this category from the group of Dutch NGOs without any field presence. Their work in structural development and capacity building were done until now from the Netherlands through local partners. It is now establishing autonomous regional expertise centres in Latin America, South Africa, East Africa, India and China. These are expected to function as independent organisations. The direction of the move is significant but its results and implementation modality are still to be seen.

4. Dutch members of global NNGOs

All the Dutch NGOs that are members of international networks in the North have a broad spectrum of activities in the South, involving humanitarian work (sometimes in post-conflict situations) and structural development action. Their very large worldwide networks are formed by members and offices spread out in North and South. However, the distribution of power across North and South partners varies considerably from one NGO to another. The Red Cross has a rather exceptional organisation, explained at the end of this section.

In general terms, the SNGO partners mostly execute plans defined in the North for the entire global organisation. In principle, each one is allowed to do its own fund-rising but in practice most of the resources are collected in the North and transferred to the South. This obviously limits the autonomy of the field offices in the South, which basically implement plans designed by boards in the North. Although they operate locally, they are still mostly seen as foreign agents.

Some of these Dutch NGOs claim that their function is mainly to provide development services and an interviewee suggested: "It is not our task to empower the civil societies in the South in relation to their governments, for example". Most staff in the South is recruited locally and work is done through local partners whenever possible. Clearly, not all agree with this position and Oxfam, for example, considers it is part of its identity as an organisation "not to keep quite in the face of oppressive political situations".

In a similar manner, the Dutch members of some of these global organisations are less enthusiastic on field presence than other partners in the North. For example, the Dutch Tear Fund does not have its own field offices and is more comfortable working through local partners and field officers, but

may use the offices of Tear UK if necessary. Oxfam-Novib has withdrawn many field offices in the South, while Oxfam UK keeps adding new ones.

CARE	Humanitarian and Structural development work through field offices and local partners.
VSO	Structural development work through field offices and local partners.
World Vision	Humanitarian and Structural development work through field offices and local partners
Tear Fund NL	Humanitarian and Structural development work through local independent partners (mostly local churches)
Oxfam Novib	Humanitarian and Structural development work through field offices and local partners
NRK	Humanitarian work through RC/RC head-quarters. Structural development work through bilateral agreements with members in the South.

The degree of autonomy each NGO confers to their field offices in the South also varies; some of them are much more than merely implementing offices. In VSO, the headquarters in the North define six main programme areas and the country offices decide multiannual strategies and projects to implement in line with those. In contrast, Care and World Vision give their field offices barely enough independence to make operational decisions.

A separate case in this group is the Red Cross. It is organised as a federation and the rules state that each country member has equal decision powers. Also established in the statues of the global RC/RC, no member North is allowed to establish field presence in another country unless expressly authorised or requested by the national Red Cross of the recipient country. If there is a humanitarian emergence, the request for aid goes through the RC/RC board in Geneva and other country members are then asked to step in to do relief work by becoming operational in that country. This has been criticised as bureaucratic but to some extent guarantees the autonomy of all members. However, there are also parallel provisions for bilateral agreements between member countries and these follow the distinct North - South direction that was described for the rest of this category. For example, the Dutch and Kenyan Red Cross run structural development projects together, for which the Dutch Red Cross has its field office in Nairobi. Though authorised by the recipient country, this may undermine its own capacity building. "Some national RC members are more mature than others. Where civil societies are strong, they are jealous of their autonomy and limit other members' field offices. In countries with weaker civil societies, the situation is different", said the interviewee in the NRK. The strength of the recipient civil society thus stands out as a critical limitation for field offices, a point that is expanded below.

5. Dutch members of SNGOs

This last category is, in fact, made of one organisation alone: Amref. It has a relatively similar organisational structure as the fourth group, but with the crucial difference that it was started in the South, its headquarters remain in the South, and the Dutch office is an offspring in the North of the SNGO. This constitutes it into a category of its own. The international aid chain depicted above is also not applicable to Amref.

As argued by Michael (2004), SNGOs reach maturity when they achieve a certain scale and scope of action in and out the borders of the country of origin, accumulated assets, reputation and the capacity to redefine the rules of the aid system in the North. In addition, they position themselves in such a way that there are none or few substitutes for what they do. Amref is one of the few successful examples that fits into the characteristics outlined by the author as a "mature" SNGO. None of the SNGOs analysed by that author has transcended to the North in contexts in which there were competing organisations doing the same work in the South.

Amref	Structural development work through local partners, mainly in health care. Kenyan headquarters.

Summing up: NGOs and field presence

This section has linked the organisational structures of Dutch NGOs to the kind of work they do and/or mission statement they proclaim. These organisations were then categorised in five types, which carry some degree of arbitrariness, and are the following:

1. The first group is composed of NGOs that neither have nor wish to have field offices, either because they find it unnecessary or as a matter of principle (they think it is detrimental for the civil society actors in the South).

2. The second one is formed by NGOs with field presence. They show various levels of decentralisation, some well into delegation. For others, presence in the South is explained by the specificity of the work they do in capacity building, like post-conflict rehabilitation.

3. The third group is composed of relatively smaller Dutch NGOs that hold long-term strategic partnerships in a network of independent North and South NGOs. It roughly corresponds to a devolved type of structure, in which each member may stand on its feet on its own. In these networks, the joint-accumulation of knowledge is an important source of strength for the entire network.

4. The fourth group is formed by worldwide organisations of which a Dutch NGO is member. They work in a wide spectrum of areas, from humanitarian work to structural poverty alleviation. Some of them give more autonomy to their field offices and partners in the South than others.

5. The fifth group is a Dutch NGO that integrates a global network started in the South and with headquarters in the South. This is a very rare case of growth and empowerment among SNGOs.

Motivation for field presence

The representatives of the 29 Dutch NGOs that participated in this study were asked directly about the motivation for the field presence of their organisations. In general, it was found that field presence is related mainly to the effectiveness of the NGOs and their accountability to donors, the main of which is the Dutch government. In the internal struggle between institutional and development imperatives described above, the motivation exposed by the interviewees clearly leans towards the former side. This section first analyses the field presence of organisations doing humanitarian relief work and subsequently deals with structural poverty alleviation and long-term development work.

Humanitarian & relief work

For humanitarian aid, field presence allows a quick response and is easier to operate. Even among organisations that feel reluctant to establish field presence, there is an explicit recognition that most humanitarian work is an exception that requires direct field presence. "Then you can get people, resources, prepare a programme and become operative right away, because they are all professionals who know what to do and go with enthusiasm. The risk is that once you are there, why bother doing capacity building? This is why you need to shift to local organisations immediately after", said two interviewees in the organisations of the first group.

Among the global NNGOs with field presence (category 4), there is hardly a perception that their presence per se affects the civil society in the South. They not only mentioned that being there is absolutely necessary but added that it improves their public image and, in this way, allows the expansion of their action. "Making our work more visible improves our image and also makes it easier to access future funding. Besides, results are easier to report on and more obvious to show to donors", said an interviewee in a global NGO.

Others considered that a positive image was not so much to secure future funding but to create legitimacy: "Southern NGOs are happy to see us get our shoes dirty. They believe it makes us understand their situation better. They truly appreciate it and gains acceptance", explained a representative of an NGO doing post-conflict rehabilitation (category 2.2)

Interviewees generally against field presence were asked to state in what conditions they considered that there was no choice but to be in the field. They agreed that it is necessary where there is a very weak government (or virtually no government), no infrastructure, and where the social ties that allow people to grow trust in each other and their civil society actors have been broken by repression or conflict. Examples include Darfour, Liberia, Sierra Leone and other areas undergoing civil wars. A second set of circumstances refer to natural disasters and emergency situations that are clearly too large for any single state or civil society to be able to respond alone. Examples of this are the Tsunami, hurricanes amd earthquakes.

Fowler also expressed that natural disasters and war are situations that justify starting direct field presence but this emergencies do not necessarily define that NGOs need to stay for good. Terminating field presence at some point is usually possible and remains an open question to be answered by the organisation. When and how should an NGO pull out? When does relief end and rehabilitation or eventually structural development start? For the expert, therefore, most field presence is ultimately decided by strategic decisions of the NNGO boards, rather than as objective responses to external circumstances.

In other words, in the medium run it is a matter of choice to let local organisations do humanitarian relief work. In the short run, although many admit it is preferable, SNGOs are not always ready or available. Then NNGOs need to set their own field presence and send their own volunteers, experts, and resources. For those reluctant to stay in the field as a matter of principle, there is a clear awareness that capacity building needs to take priority soon after the disaster. NNGOs need to envision an exit scenario in the medium term in which local organisations can take over (2-3 years). Chiku Malunga in Malawi supported the fixing of a period of presence, after which the local partner should take over "A partnership that doesn't specify by when and what has to be achieved does not work. In fact, an open-ended partnership to do capacity building loses its target", he thinks.

Structural development work

Interviewees repeatedly emphasised that their organisations obtained <u>improvements in efficiency</u> by maintaining field presence in the South and this was the main reason why they kept a decentralised organisational structure. Though not necessarily expressed in the same words, several mentions were made to the way in which direct field presence improves the quality of the work, makes it easier, quicker, more cost-effective and less conflictive than working with local partners from the headquarters in The Netherlands. Specifically, the answers collected are: "it takes less time than developing a long term relationship of trust", "it is faster than building up the capacity of local NGOs", "we can use the same monitoring system across the world and get the information we want", "it is more cost-effective: when you're there you know the project will run well", "there are less risks of something going wrong because you can support the project directly", "we avoid the problems of the South partners changing leaders or priorities", and "we make sure the same quality standards are met everywhere". In short, answers centre on the institutional imperatives: field presence helps Dutch NGOs to perform better, to achieve results faster and ultimately to survive.

The <u>first-hand collection of information</u> was second among the most mentioned reasons to justify field presence. Interviewees said it allows Dutch NGOs to be better tuned to the local reality and closer to local perceptions or needs. However, when asked what type of information they were interested in or what they used it for, answers concentrated mostly on data for accountability to back-donors (quantitative data on results for reporting, monitoring and evaluation). Qualitative data for future identification of needs and projects came second.

Although not strictly the same, Holvoet at al (2003) made a study in which they compared the perceptions and screening in the field offices and in the headquarters of several NNGOs in Brussels. They found that the perceptions and evaluations at the headquarters based on reporting from field offices and from partner SNGOs were not significantly different. This means that in terms of the assessment of development intervention, field presence does not necessarily guarantee a superior quality of information. In terms of information to identify needs and future projects, the evidence in the study was less conclusive.

Thirdly, interviewees said that direct field presence improves <u>funding opportunities</u>. Some back donors, like the EU and several private foundations directly require field presence of NNGOs in the South to allocate funds or give preference to "NGOs we are used to dealing with". Some said that it was costly to keep field presence but access to additional funding made it cost-effective. Most said this is not the main reason for their field presence, which responds to a strategic decision but it is a welcomed consequence of being in the South. Besides, being in the field reduces the risk of failure, which in itself facilitates future funding.

A few interviewees also mentioned that field presence poses a risk of fragmentation within the organisation. That is, the NNGO could lose some of its unified identity and purpose: "Field offices sometimes create their own reality. This is in part because they are inserted in different contexts and it is good that they are a bit different. Too different becomes a risk", explained an interviewee. For this report, a concern for fragmentation or disunity of field offices was voiced only among NGOs with a devolved type of structure. Another author, (McPeak, 2001) analysed how problems arose in the restructuring of PLAN, a NNGO that also adopted a devolved type of structure. The author concluded that a first wave of decentralisation lead to pressures for a second wave of decentralisation which could not be stopped. Still, the author admits that the organisation eventually improved its effectiveness.

In terms of tensions, interviewees in organisations with devolved structures (category 2.3) also mentioned that an important issue is to make it as clear as possible from the start for managers and officers in the field what they can and cannot do.

Both interviewed experts Alan Fowler and Chiku Malunga agreed that Dutch NGOs establish field presence seeking efficiency gains. Specifically, they mentioned the goal was to achieve a better gathering of local intelligence on which to make decisions. Fowler added that the main advantages for the NNGOs are more flexibility, more sensitivity to the development problematic in the South and a faster general response capacity.

While it is clear that field presence increases the effectiveness and efficiency of NNGOs, what do Dutch NGOs lose by deciding not to keep field presence? Among the NGOs without field offices (first category), two points were raised. The first one focused on the need to make a deep assessment of local capacities and eventually make up for the absence of field presence. However difficult, if this can be done field presence becomes unnecessary. The second point raised by this group was the likelihood of losing funds from donors. While one interviewee said "mistakes happen more often when you're not in the field and this is alright because mistakes lead to learning", another one interviewee admitted that "when you make mistakes you are punished. Donors see you could not achieve what you promised and they withdraw their funding. Your partners in the South also suffer with that and this needs to be thought in relation to their gains in autonomy when you're not there". This is not a small point that may justify field presence.

Finally, interviewees in the first and fourth categories added that the gains in effectiveness from having direct field presence are not that clear. Field offices and officers are perceived as a possible source of distortions. **"**Who defined the needs that got us there in the first place? It has to be considered that field offices and officers have their own agenda too. What is funded by our government is mostly decided by the Dutch embassies under the influence of the lobbying in the South of the large NNGOs", argued an interviewee in this group.

In summary, there seems to be some consensus that direct field presence is necessary for humanitarian relief work because it makes responses faster, more effective and legitimate. However, critics of field presence consider that capacity building needs to be given priority as soon as possible and for this it is often convenient to foresee an exit scenario in the medium term. In relation to structural poverty alleviation and long-term development, opinions are more divided. Field presence seems to generate gains in efficiency: Dutch NGOs claim they become more cost-effective, access more funding and improve information gathering. Those against it consider that efficiency gains are not that clear but even so admit they are more prone to losing funding than those NNGOs with field presence. All in all, the motivation for field presence seems more related to the internal needs and pressures of the NNGOs and their donors. Extra funding, reporting on measurable and quick results, avoiding mistakes, proofs of effectiveness fall on the side of the institutional imperatives.

Impact on civil societies in the South

Interviewees were finally asked to assess the impact of the field presence of Dutch NGOs on the civil society actors in the South. On the positive side, arguments again concentrate on effectiveness. Many claim that direct presence makes capacity building faster, smoother and easier, so it supports the development efforts of SNGOs. In this way, civil societies in the South "have only to gain from our field presence", an interviewee claimed. It is almost seen as a short cut to the South's learning process but mainly in terms of the second capability of the ECDPM approach (to generate development results) on which capacity building rests.

Others relate it to the third capability as well (to relate), as a partnership with a NNGO gives SNGOs access to networks in which they normally do not participate. Interviewees saw it as kicking the ball rolling to start a virtuous process: "You develop a bond with Southern NGOs. You know what has been done and how. You create networks with the government, the private sector, the communities and the civil society in which your Southern partners can become integrated and later continue. This is a part of the capacity building that you can only do being there", said an interviewee.

Another perceived positive effect is the opportunity for SNGOs that the NNGOs with which they work may turn into role models in terms of organisational capacities, doing advocacy and reporting systems. This would affect the capabilities to act, to generate development results and to relate. Again, this looks like a shortcut in terms of achieving sustainable development and needs to be assessed critically. Instead of building their own organisational models, SNGOs are encouraged to adopt imported ones from the North. So while supporting progress in terms of those three capabilities, emulating a Northern role model probably undermines furthering the other two capabilities, to adapt and to achieve coherence. The reasons are that organisations can rarely renew or build up on what they have not developed themselves, while achieving coherence is inherently compromised by the fact that the model being emulated is a foreign one, developed in relation to different contextual circumstances.

The list of perceived possible negative effects is quite longer, reflecting that many Dutch NGOs are aware that by being in the field they undermine the role of the civil society actors in the South. The clearest mechanism, judging by the responses obtained, is that offices of NNGOs introduce extra competitors in the local field of SNGOs. In extreme, when a NNGO does structural poverty alleviation work, it means the local civil society does not need to organise itself to do it. This leads to a delay in building up their capacities. "You are bound to take up the space of a local NGO, this is very difficult to avoid. You may keep it from growing or take away funding", said an interviewee. The addition of competitors who are normally more capable relates to the international aid chain presented in the analytical section. That is, the field presence of NNGOs in the South takes over part of the central role of SNGOs in the aid chain. This point is analysed further in the conclusions. Of the five main pillars of capacity building, the capability to relate is the one most affected.

A second type of negative impact is observed when field presence is established mainly to control expenses and push quantitative results on SNGOs. Excessive control and interfere affect all five main capabilities at the same time. "It is common human nature that once you are there, you want to put your hands into it and control what is being done by your local partners. It is important to prevent this", said an interviewee. Chiku Malunga underlines that at times the NNGO representatives interfere because there is insufficient capacity in SNGOs, but argues that this is also often used as an excuse. "Rather that 'you don't have the capacity' it is frequently a matter of 'you don't give us the space'. This idea of partnership is very tricky when your Northern counterpart is next to you and it ends in finger-pointing at each other to explain to the NNGO headquarters who was responsible for what. It is necessary to work out clearly what the role is for the NNGO representatives and keep it to giving support to the local partner", the expert argued.

There is also an issue of the real embeddedness of the field presence of Northern NGOs. As put by Chiku Malunga: "If you can go home as soon as things go wrong, you are simply more powerful than the locals. Those in the South cannot go. So NNGOs cannot have the issues in their blood in the same way. Civil society actors in the South have to stay and do something about the situation", the expert said. Indeed, even if some local staff is hired in field offices, Northern NGOs remain mobile and, as a result, a foreign agent.

A similar reflection is valid in terms of political involvement. As foreign agents, NNGOs should and do avoid getting mixed in local politics. At most, some support the building of advocacy capacities. This creates a circle: they do not get involved because they are foreigners and precisely this distance keeps them foreign. So while undermining the strengthening of capacities among civil society actors in the South, the field offices of NNGOs do not fill in that role.

Some Dutch NGOs emphasised that they hire local staff in their field offices in order to resolve this problem. But the consequence is that they also suck human resources from local NGOs. "The problem of absorption of capacity from SNGOs is very serious and involves not only the funding but mainly the human resources. Working for a NNGO you earn more, have better working conditions, and build up your reputation. So the field presence of NNGO not only prevents the civil society actors in the South from building up their capacities but regularly drain those that SNGOs have built, the qualified human resources that could disseminate knowledge to others", Malunga complained.

Indeed, several NNGOs interviewed complained of the high wages they had to pay "in order to retain the more qualified human resources". They blamed multilateral organisations such as the World Bank and the United Nations for increasing wages beyond a reasonable level. Several Dutch NGOs monitor wage levels and claim they pay "a little bit more than the local wages but less than the UN". However, none of them has really been able to find a solution to this problem. For Alan Fowler, "it is a problem without a solution. You create a bubble of international wages in a local context and inflate the wage market. But what can you do? Otherwise you lose workers". Wage discrepancies have led to a high staff rotation across all field offices. Malunga (2003) calculated that in local NGOs in Malawi half their personnel changes in a period of 18 months. In Amref, a local player in the South, the estimation did not sound surprising. High staff rotation led by the comparatively higher wages paid by NNGOs in the South seriously affects the capacity building of SNGOs, especially the capabilities to act, to relate and to achieve internal coherence.

Finally, there are also ideological reasons against field presence. Some consider it is "simply disrespectful" to the civil society in the South to set up presence in their regions. It undermines mutual trust and does not really pay off. "The main question is whether you are prepared to listen to your partners. If you are, they will give you the information you need and do their own learning process. But if you are not, what would you need the information you gather from field presence for? How sustainable is development in this way? Not all development work needs to be done close to the fire and when you are, you usually compromise ownership".

If there are both positive and negative effects, what conditions define which one of these will prevail? Alan Fowler argues that the crucial point is not whether there is field presence in the South or not, but rather what those offices or officers are doing there. Do they support civil society actors in the South or are they implementing themselves what SNGOs should (or could) be doing? If what they do is mainly supporting SNGOs, then there will be more positive effects than lost opportunities for the civil society actors in the South. If what they do is mainly controlling them, there is a conflict with the development imperatives of Dutch NGOs. To make field presence work for both North and South actors, there has to be delegation of both responsibilities and authorities and, to the extent possible, break the asymmetries of power between field representatives of NNGOs and the SNGO.

To sum up, Dutch NGOs see both positive and negative effects of field presence on civil societies in the South. On the negative side, NNGOs in the South depress the need for local civil society actors to organise themselves, grow, and push for social change. Field offices of NNGOs add competitors for funding and development intervention. There are also clear risks that field presence may distort

the needs' identification and reinforce the Southern perceptions of inequality. However, field presence can become a catalyst for capacity building and reduce a lengthy learning process. In view of past experience, it begs the question of whether taking shortcuts is actually possible in the development process.

Conclusions: Which field presence?

Based on the answers of the interviewees in the 29 Dutch NGOs studied for this report, they were first categorised into five groups. The categorisation is obviously arbitrary and does not fully reflect the complexity of the work and organisational structure of the Dutch NGOs. It is only used to order the analysis.

The first category is composed of Dutch NGOs with no field presence in the South because they see it as a negative move. They are neither convinced of the gains in efficiency nor in information-gathering attributed to field presence. Instead, they contend that it has a negative impact on the capacity building of civil society actors in the South though they also admit their reluctance to move South affects their funding opportunities. They are hence giving priority to developmental imperatives at the expense of institutional imperatives.

The second category is formed of Dutch NGOs with field offices. They are convinced that field presence makes their work more efficient and effective, and gives them access to better information and funding opportunities. However, they also admit their field presence may be disempowering the civil society actors in the South. To offset this, some are furthering the decentralisation of their structures into delegation or even devolution and refrain from applying for funding or intervening in areas where SNGOs are already active. In the scheme presented above, they are giving priority to the institutional imperatives above the developmental ones but accompanied with efforts to strike a balance and come up with a win-win situation. The restructuring experiment which ICCO is undergoing may be a leading case on how to get the best of both worlds, but the final outcome is still to be seen.

The third group is formed by small Dutch NGOs that do not keep field presence directly but integrate horizontal networks with strategic partners in the South. With their partners in the South, they have achieved a fully devolved organisational structure in which all NGOs in North and South are inter-dependent, especially in relation to the joint accumulation of knowledge. In fact, the management of information and expertise with the partners in the South seems an optimal method of empowerment for them. To achieve this balance, the NNGO should not be too dominant or else the SNGO would not be able to develop these strengths. There are some doubts regarding to what extent this model would be replicable at a larger scale (i.e. larger organisations) and in development interventions in which knowledge is not a critical asset.

The fourth group is formed of Dutch NGOs that form part of global organisations doing both humanitarian and structural poverty alleviation work. A lot of good work has been done in humanitarian relief, but a middle-term exit scenario seems the best way of pressing these global NNGOs to invest more in local capacity building, to the point of being able to pull out and hand in development interventions to the local civil society organisations. For long-term structural poverty alleviation work, it seems not enough space is given to local SNGOs. For the Dutch NGOs in this category, it seems institutional imperatives are given priority over development imperatives, and there is little evidence of change.

The case of Amref as a sister organisation of a South NGO is the result of the emancipation of the civil society in the South seeking the solidarity of the North. It is quite unique and represents a

further modification of the international aid chain which may become more common in the future. It is a sign that some SNGOs are finally able to reaching maturity.

For Dutch NGOs, the decision of whether to have field presence in the South lies at the heart of the tension between institutional and developmental imperatives, as defined above. According to the answers collected, there is some consensus that field presence generates practical efficiency gains, raises cost-effectiveness, facilitates access to additional funding, improves reporting and evaluation, supports information gathering and furthers the image of NNGOS, especially for those doing humanitarian relief work. In the views of the Dutch NGOs with field presence, a decentralised structure improves cost-effectiveness in terms of quantitative results, facilitates information gathering and increases access to funding.

In contrast, field presence of NNGOs in the South has negative impacts on the civil society in the South. Field presence of NNGOs in the South adds competitors in terms of funding and absorption of qualified human resources. In terms of the international aid chain, field offices of NNGOs in the South diminish the role of SNGO (compare figure 3 below with figures 1 and 2 in the analytical section). In this modified version of the international aid chain, there is no obvious central figure (the actor connected to the highest amount of other actors). That role is disputed between the field offices of NNGOs and the SNGOs. For the civil societies in the South, the loss of the central role in the aid chain affects their decision making powers and prospects for future empowerment.

For the civil society actors in the South the impact of field presence of NNGOS in the South is most likely to be negative. SNGOs will have to face the competition of actors that normally have more capacity, better paid human resources, a better organisation, more experience, more lobbying capabilities and surely more funding opportunities. These differences reinforce the feeling of inequality between North and South actors and reduce the incentives to push for social change in their societies. In turn, field presence of NNGOs may be perceived as a disrespectful move, create tensions and undermine trust. Field presence of NNGOs disempowers civil societies in the South and hinders emancipation.

Expressed in these terms, field presence would run against most of the development imperatives for which Dutch NGOs have been created. It would appear that the positive effects remain within the NNGOs and serve their institutional imperatives. In reality, the conclusion is not so clear-cut. On the one hand, the efficiency gains of field presence are not straightforward. Dutch NGOs without field offices are not always convinced that their efficiency gains offset the negative impact for the civil society actors in the South. The little research on the topic is far from conclusive. For example, it cannot be stated that field presence generates necessarily better quality of information than regular desk reports. On the other hand, the disempowering impact on the civil society in the South is not inevitable either. Field presence can be constructive and support civil society actors in the South if both responsibilities and authorities are shared. Besides, not having field presence may lead to losses of funding that affect SNGOs too.

The question thus needs to be rephrased: under what conditions does field presence lead to both gains in efficiency for NNGOs and capacity building among the civil society actors in the South? How can the organisational decentralisation of Dutch NGOs be turned into a win-win situation? Good starting points are transferring as many decision powers as possible to local partners, avoiding an overburden of controls and interference by field offices, refraining from applying for funds where SNGOs are present and pre-defining a medium-run period of field presence. In a nutshell, this would mean taking actions in line with the institutional imperatives while respecting the development imperatives. It is indeed a thin balance.

Part of the answer lies also in not seeing civil society actors in the South as invariably immature and weak. In some countries, civil society actors have achieved enough maturity and strength to claim for themselves a central role in development interventions. In these countries, SNGOs make the most of the field offices of their Northern partners and have turned it into a win-win situation for both South and North NGOs. Where the civil society actors in the South are not mature, it is up to NNGOs to structure their field presence in such a way that they would contribute to building their capacities, giving them enough space and allowing for the mistakes typical of every learning process.

Figure 3

Aid Chain with field presence of NNGOs
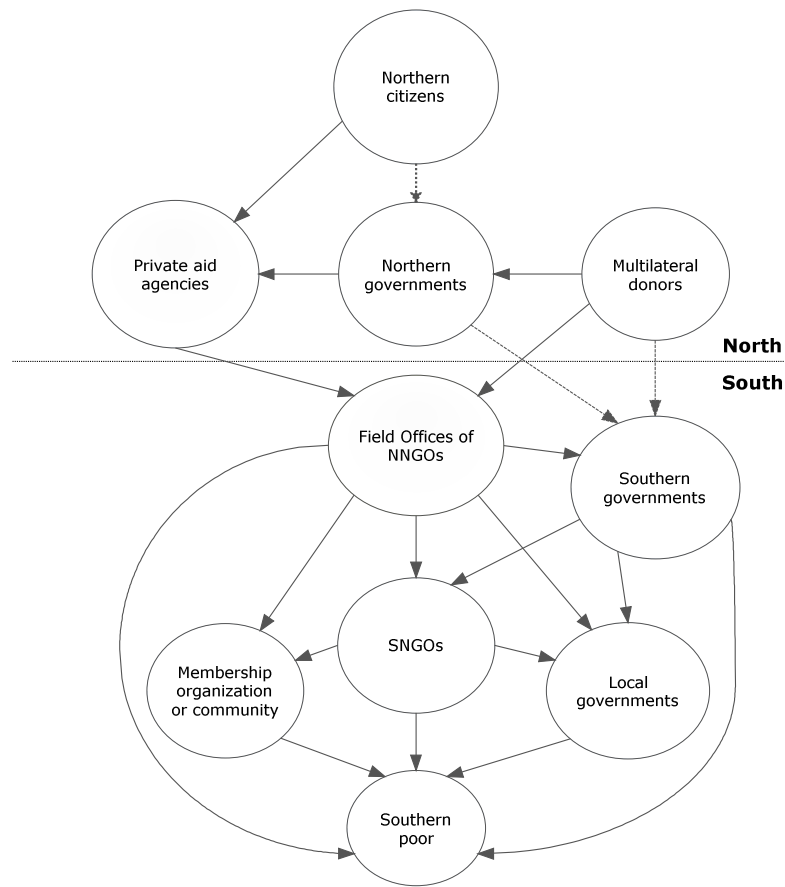
Source: Modified version of Biekart, K. (1999: 90). The politics of civil society building, International books and the Transnational Institute: Amsterdam

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