For better or for worse…
Partnership between Dutch Humanitarian NGOs and implementing local partners

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Let's get together?

Humanitarian aid starts from the principle of humanity: 'the desire to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found…'. In recent years, however, the practice of humanitarian aid has become far more diverse than the extension of food for the starving or care for the wounded. A number of humanitarian organizations maintains a strict definition of what constitutes humanitarian aid, namely to save lives in a neutral and impartial way. Other organizations have taken on a broader view and want to address underlying causes of conflict and vulnerability by broadening humanitarian mandates to include disaster preparedness, development and peacebuilding objectives. Goodhand and Leader have labelled these approaches the minimalist and maximalist approaches (2001).

In both approaches, a case can be made for channelling humanitarian aid through neutral and impartial *local* organizations. In a minimalist view, using local channels for relief aid is (in principle) more efficient and cost-effective because organizations are already established locally, and more effective because it builds on local knowledge. It is recognized that pre-existing local coping mechanisms like family networks and the input of indigenous knowledge are best understood by local people, and best linked by local networks, *if* these local people, networks and organizations are able to operate. Capacity building can be part of partnership in a minimalist approach, but is functional and geared to enhance the effectiveness of NGOs that may have to deal with a sudden expansion of scale and services during humanitarian emergencies.

A maximalist approach puts partnerships more central, because it is based on the desire to enhance the preparedness of societies to deal with disaster. Disasters, be it natural hazards or outbreaks of war and violent conflict, are not humanitarian disasters per se. As Cuny (1983) puts it: 'a disaster should be defined on the basis of its human consequences, not on the phenomenon that caused it'. This means that the capacity of societies to absorb, deal with or mitigate natural hazards or political conflict, is a crucial element in the (wake) of a potential humanitarian catastrophe. Hence, increasingly international NGOs providing emergency assistance adopt the notion that it is more effective to try to help societies deal with circumstances, than to rush in when a humanitarian catastrophe has occurred. This line of reasoning goes beyond the use of available local channels, and argues for investing in building local capacities for relief, preparedness, development and peace. It is a twofold strategy of using societies' own knowledge and potential to provide more effective assistance, and at the same time to increase coping capacity and potentials for future contingencies.

We can thus distinguish between two (ideal-typical) approaches to partnership. One approach is functional and views partnership as a means to get a humanitarian job done. The other approach views partnership and capacity building of partners as a value in and of itself,

a major goal of intervention. In the latter case, partnership becomes a discourse. It is a discourse around the concepts of *self-reliance* (preparing organizations to work independently in the future), *ownership* (capacity building is not only more sustainable but also just) and *equality* (between the local NGO and the INGO). Partnership then becomes important too for the INGO's identity and legitimacy: a central value on which they build their own worth.

From different angles then, there are good but different reasons for organizing humanitarian aid locally or forming partnerships with local organizations. The question is how this happens and works in practice. This paper reviews some of the practices of partnerships and makes an inventory of issues that organizations come across in working with local partners. The paper was prepared on the basis of interviews with representatives of 12 Dutch humanitarian NGOs[1], and incorporates discussion which took place during the PSO seminar on 26 June 2003 on "Cooperation with Implementing Partners in Humanitarian Assistance".

What's in a word?

Partnership is the term most frequently used for relationships where INGOs fund local NGOs to perform humanitarian work. The term is being used for many different kinds of relationships. Relationships between INGOs and implementing agencies take on different shapes and intensity. Some examples will denote the diversity:

- A contractual agreement based on a tendering procedure where local organizations simply implement a job for which the parameters are fixed by the funder. No capacity building is involved, the bidders need to prove that they possess the required capacities for the job.
- A short-term incidental project applied for by a local NGO engaged in relief or rehabilitation. Functional capacity building may be part of the project.
- A longer-term partnership whereby the INGO commits itself to support an organization in the long term, possibly including a trajectory of capacity building.
- A long-term partnership where the parties engage in a horizontal relationship in which, ideally, the partners have a say in the policies and decision making of the INGO as much as the other way around.

Some organizations use the term partnership for all these arrangements whereas others reserve the term partner for more intensive relationships. Also, the term partnership is not always restricted to local NGOs funded for relief or rehabilitation, but is also applied in practice to local networks, community-based organizations or other forms of civil society, and occasionally to INGOs with a presence in the field. Besides, we need to mention that INGOs in some cases also fund government agencies like health institutions.

In the interviews it appears moreover that partnership is closely associated with capacity building. The two are, however, not necessarily interwoven in practice. The term capacity building implies that local NGOs lack capacities, which is often, of course, not the case. In those cases where partnership is accompanied by capacity building, it is good to take into account that there are many forms of capacity building, starting with functional-technical assistance such as the provision of material or human resources for a project. Adam Fowler further distinguishes organizational development, sectoral development and institutional (or civil society) development. In this way the scope and purpose of capacity building strategies differ from strengthening individuals, a community or an organization, a greater agricultural

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[1] Euronaid is not formally an NGO but an association of NGOs.

or healthcare sector, or even an entire subset of society or civil society as a whole (Smillie 2001: 10).

This paper focuses on the role of INGOs as funders and facilitators of local implementing NGOs. Although many of the issues raised may equally apply to funding local implementing government bodies or community based organizations, this is not explicitly addressed.

Dutch humanitarian assistance

The practice of creating and maintaining partnerships in Dutch NGOs vary according to the type of humanitarian mandate, existing networks and funding relationships Dutch humanitarian agencies have. Seven of the twelve organizations have operations in the field, but most of them also allocate funds for financing other implementing agencies. These need not be local, they may be for projects of other INGOs. Both Cordaid and Care have a policy to reduce their field operations and to increase the proportion of support for local NGOs. MSF has a policy to restrict funding of activities of other organizations to a maximum of 7% of their operations.

Table 1: Mandates of Dutch INGOs

Organization	networks	activities	relief	rehab.	struct.
Cordaid	Caritas Int.	A, B, D,C	X	X	X
Care NL	Care Int.	A, D	X	X	
World Vision NL	WV Int.	B, D	X	X	X
Dutch Red Cross	IFRC	A, B, D	X	X	X
	ICRC*	B			
ZOA		A, B, D	X	X	
NOVIB	Oxfam int.	B, D	X	X	X
Healthnet		A, B, D		X	
MSF-Holland	MSF Int.	A	X		
KerkinActie/ACTNL	ACT Int.	B, D	X	X	X
Tear Fund NL	Tear Fund Int.	B, D	X	X	X
War Child		A		X	
Euronaid	Members	C, E	X		

A: operational in the field
B: expat -managed or assisted local channels
C: material assistance / logistics for local NGOs
D: funding of local humanitarian NGOs
E: assistance funds of EU food security budget line

Some Dutch NGOs belong to families that leave them no choice in the local partner. IFRC and WV practically always work through their local family affiliates. In cases of immediate emergencies, WV has the practice of sending in Rapid Response Teams to assess the options for giving aid and to beef up the capacity of their local branches with knowledge and experience. They temporarily take over the management of the local WV operation. When it works with other partners, this is arranged through the local WV. Other NGOs derive from their family network or tradition a group of natural or preferred partners, but also work through other channels. Care NL prefers working with the local Care organization, if necessary strengthened by expats, but also considers requests from other organizations in affected countries. Cordaid, Tear Fund and ACT Netherlands (a humanitarian cooperation between KerkinActie and ICCO) make use of long established church-related networks but have also developed numerous contacts with other NGOs.

Another possibility is being part of a family network without operational cooperation. For instance Novib has the Oxfam network, the local partner network deriving from the Oxfam family, and their own local partner network from their structural development sector. In most cases requests for assistance come from contacts in those existing networks, which means that finding new partners is not an issue. In exceptional cases, Novib pro-actively searches for new partners, for instance during the Turkey earthquake, when Dutch-Turkish organizations requested Novib to take action in the affected region.

HNI, ZOA, and War Child are more stand-alone organizations. They belong to identity-based networks but these are less institutionalized than the organizational families. HNI mostly takes over running operations which have entered a rehabilitation phase, and find local organizational structures in place. ZOA refugee care is not operational in the immediate emergency phase, but shortly thereafter and in the rehabilitation phase, and works with different kinds of partners (GO, NGO, church-based, CBO) with the intention to facilitate their capacity building until they can operate independently and effectively. War Child policy is usually to start its own organization, and try to create an NGO around it in the field. It's a trajectory of training local staff, letting them become more involved in the projects, moving towards owning and implementing their own projects fully independently.

Looking at the field of Dutch humanitarian NGOs, a diverse picture emerges. The classic image of humanitarian organizations that enter an area, establish themselves and their contacts and go again is hardly applicable to most Dutch NGOs.

The nature of the emergency
Whether or not to engage and invest in partner relations depends partly on the context and the nature of the emergency. Humanitarian crises have many faces, thus the humanitarian response will as well. There is a difference between disasters caused by natural hazards and conflict areas. And there is a difference between rapid-onset disasters with a short duration and creeping disasters or complex emergencies. In the case of rapid-onset disasters there is no time to check out partners thoroughly. This means that local capacities may be overlooked as channels for relief or, the flipside, channels are used that are not sufficiently capable. Different INGOs deal with this situation by giving a local NGO the benefit of the doubt, and start funding an operation immediately, with an agreement to improve the project application in the near future. In the event of incidental disasters it makes little sense to invest a great deal in local disaster preparedness, but in the many regions where the vulnerability to disaster is persistent and disasters like flood or drought occur regularly to compound everyday vulnerabilities, building disaster preparedness capacity is imperative. Partnership and capacity building as a means or an end thus also depend on the context.

In the case of rapid-onset emergencies, the access to affected people is important. Areas most in need of aid may not coincide with the reach of existing partners. Hence, Cordaid often finds that the available partner network in an emergency country is often physically far removed from those provinces where aid is most needed, so new partners or externally operated aid still needs to be provided. Relying solely on local partners bears the risk that aid is concentrated on areas and target groups that the partners can access rather than on a needs analysis of the victims. Hence, having local partners does not guarantee access to victims and may still need to be complemented by direct humanitarian operations.

Time horizons for partnership
The policies around partnership are related to the mandates of organizations; whether they are oriented towards relief or rehabilitation. Relief programmes are different from rehabilitation programmes in many respects. Relief programmes are typically meant to alleviate the immediate basic needs of survivors of an emergency and are directed towards the delivery of material, provisions and physical structures. Relief is short-term, not embedded (external), quick, incidental, donor-driven and top-down. Rehabilitation, especially in a maximalist approach, is more like development: directed towards achieving quantitative and qualitative changes in ongoing socio-economic processes. It is long-term, embedded, structural, and recipient-focused.

At first sight, the distinction between relief and rehabilitation seems logical and necessary. In the immediacy of a crisis, a humanitarian job must be done and there is no time

to waste on assessing or training local capacities. INGOs with a mandate aimed more towards rehabilitation can afford to spend more time assessing partners and their organizational or operational capacity. This explains why strengthening partners is more often an objective of rehabilitation NGOs than relief NGOs.

In practice, of course, the distinction is not so clear. Many relief situations last very long, with Operation Lifeline Sudan as the prime, but certainly not only, example. Relief, rehabilitation and development are often not sequential but take place in erratic patterns and often simultaneously. This has several implications. It means that INGOs with different mandates and working styles work alongside each other in crises, and may interfere with each other's work, for instance when one organization gives away food while others try to provide credit for agricultural inputs. It also puts local NGOs in a difficult position because they may have to adjust from being merely an implementer to a partner or have to work with different funders demanding different approaches at the same time.

The time horizon of relief operations is thus important. The longer organizations stay in a country, the more sense it makes to invest in the local capacities of partners. This means that humanitarian organizations should as quickly as possible estimate the time horizon for their stay, and adjust their style accordingly. Otherwise, it is quite possible that organizations end up staying in a country for years and with hindsight regret that they failed to make a more lasting contribution.

Assessing partners

In many cases, INGOs fund or channel relief through their structural development partners in a country. This has the advantage that they already have a long-standing partnership, where issues such as accountability, trust and assessment are already established. On the other hand, few of these partners may have the capacity for relief work. Several organizations, including Tear Fund and Novib in immediate crises still work through partners even though they do not meet their quality relief standards, but make it a point to enhance the capacities of these partners once the immediate crisis is over.

INGOs that concentrate on funding requests of local NGOs without being in the field themselves rely on advice from contacts in their network about the requesting organization or the assessment of local experts. In addition, several organizations are working on organizational assessment tools. Two kinds of tools can be distinguished: quick scans for rapid appraisal of possible partners and elaborate self-assessment tools which are more applicable to longer-term partners that have already established a relationship with the INGO. The usefulness of these tools for humanitarian emergencies has not yet been systematically established.

Organizational realities

Working with local partners means working with organizations with their own historically developed working patterns . Local partners have distinct organizational cultures and operate in particular state-society situations and legal frameworks. Understanding these realities and how they change in an emergency situation is important for INGOs engaging in partnership. Because these working styles affect humanitarian work in terms of its strengths and weaknesses, it is important to find out the nature of organizations during 'normality' to develop more realistic expectations about their effectiveness in emergency situations (Bakewell 1999). This includes gaining an insight into the divisions in civil society and how these divisions are related to politics. The local ties of NGOs may enhance their effectiveness but can also have adverse and harmful consequences, especially in situations of armed conflict. As one of the interviewees mentioned: 'ask yourself some very realistic questions about the nature of wealth and the nature of power in that society and how your actions will

contribute to the cycle of power and wealth'. Another point mentioned in the interviews is that in areas with a humanitarian history many NGOs are the offspring of INGO operations. In these cases, interested INGOs may have to pay special attention to the social sustainability of these NGOs, in particular to what extent they are rooted in society, and to what extent they really represent the intended target group.

Furthermore, it is important to realize the effects that long-term crises have on local NGOs and civil society (Harvey 1998). Complex Political Emergencies break down civil society and this has implications for developing partnerships. Organization building is never quick or easy. The depletion of local resources, a lack of organizational capacity and the atmosphere of suspicion in which civil society organizations have to operate makes organization building in conflict or post-conflict situations even more difficult. One interviewee argued that capacity building in emergency situations bears the risk of focussing too much on strengthening the capacities of local partners and may shift the focus too far away from relief and the people/beneficiaries it is intended for.

Partnership in a larger institutional field
The influx of international organizations in emergency situations has a profound impact on the local organizational field. As many of those interviewed mentioned, the influx of INGOs, money, and material in post-war zones is immense. Existing operations are blown up or overwhelmed as a result. The situation also attracts new, opportunistic NGOs that want to share in the resources. Coordination among INGOs and the formation of coordination networks among local partners is considered important to remedy negative effects, but remains difficult in practice.

The interplay of different INGOs leads to problems that affect the working of local NGOs and is an expression of competition between INGOs in the field. A problem often mentioned (especially by smaller players) is that big INGOs who are merely engaged in acute relief assistance use local organizations as subcontractors for their short-term relief activities, selecting local NGOs who were already in a process of capacity building with other INGOs. This is exacerbated when institutional donors push INGOs to certain disaster sites or specific conflict areas. The INGOs relationship with their back donors then drives them to spend more money and resources in a given situation than needed.

These kind of processes have led ZOA, for instance, to deliberately choose less obvious partners in terms of capacity for delivering humanitarian aid. However, the situation remains problematic in different ways. For instance, some local NGOs are pushed out of the field because the big INGOs have beefed-up other locals with an enormous stock of goods and money, as happened with a local partner of ACT NL. The danger is, especially in the context of sustainability and capacity building, that when the immediate calamity is over, and the funds dry up, these bigger local organizations disappear again, and the region is still lacking local capacity for humanitarian aid. For this reason ZOA distinguishes between tactical and strategic partners, the former as contractors available due to the emergency and the latter as partners whose capacity will be strengthened on a more structural basis.

Policy, Accountability and Standards
Goals and strategies defined in the donor countries differ from the reality in the field. Humanitarian agencies adhere to certain principles, including the notion that aid is given in impartial and neutral ways. They have increasingly adopted operational standards, such as the Code of Conduct, the Sphere Standards and internal standards of organizations or networks. In addition, aid should be delivered according to management requirements, methods of

reporting, participation of target groups and other general norms and strategies related to INGO policies and the demands of their back donors. One of the problems is how to ensure that partners meet these requirements. Apart from a question of how to monitor this, there is also the policy question to what extent policy standards and demands of INGOs can be lowered and still retain an acceptable level of practice.

Another problem is how to avoid mismanagement of funds. Funding attracts opportunists, and well-meaning individual actors and agencies can often become the target of private or political pressure to devolve funds. INGOs have developed several creative solutions to these problems, including strategies such as bringing an expat into the field, managing, advising and reporting for a local NGO and at the same time, training them. Alternatively, to minimize the risk of corruption, misuse or failure, INGOs spread the risk by creating different partnerships in the same region. One of the forms of capacity building referred to earlier, organizational development and the training of individuals in, for instance, management skills, standards and reporting, can also be considered as a solution to these problems.

When capacity building becomes part of the balancing act to ensure partners' adherence to standards and financial accountability, this raises questions about the nature of the partnership. Are partners facilitated to become autonomous organizations, moving towards growing independence or growing ownership for local partners, or are they developing the capacity to become good partners to the INGOs? And what does that mean for the relationship between the partners? Several of the interviewees mentioned that they find it difficult to accommodate all three roles at the same time: being a donor requiring accountability and control, monitoring implementation, and intervening with advice and capacity building measures.

Finally, many interviewees observed that the volume of complex management and reporting requirements of donors creates capacity problems in local NGOs. This is exacerbated by the fact that donors all have different requirements. They recommended that procedures and requirements be simplified.

Conclusion: Is real partnership an illusion?
We started this paper by stating that different meanings are attached to the concept of partnership. When talking about international aid relations, some authors have observed that given the asymmetry between funders and implementers, partnership in development should not be understood as a legal partnership, but more as the type of partnership seen in marriage, involving complementary and different identities. As they put it: "as with most marriages, the relationship is as much an area of struggle as a cause of harmony" (Stirral and Henkel 1997). The nature of partnership itself and the roles and discretion of the partners involved are always under negotiation, and the way in which the partnership evolves reflects the power processes taking place.

In the case of humanitarian assistance, this paper shows that the relationship is perhaps even more complicated. These complications are derived from:

- The immediacy of some of the operations, which may dictate a certain style of implementation and partnership, and the difficulties involved in changing this style in the process following the period of the immediate emergency.
- The standards and operational procedures of humanitarian aid that do not easily comply or adjust to local organizational working styles, decision-making patterns and cultures.
- For several reasons outlined above, capacity building of partners is more complicated, risky and vulnerable to setbacks in conflict situations than in situations of 'normality'.

- The short duration of funding cycles in relief and rehabilitation work compared with developing full partnerships covering process of capacity building. Some INGOs mention that a trajectory of three years is needed to obtain a result in terms of strengthening an organization. In the case of humanitarian relief, funding rarely stretches beyond one year.
- Donor conditions sometimes require the presence of (Western) expats to ensure the effectiveness and accountability of the funded operation. For instance Euronaid, which helps local NGOs[2] to gain access to EU funding, basically states that expats of INGOs are required to receive funding.
- The resource-poor environments of areas in situations of chronic emergency, where the skills capacity of NGOs is negated by a total material dependency on outside resources.
- Finally, a question which is becoming increasingly relevant is how partnership is affected by the interplay between INGOs and military forces. Increasingly, INGOs work almost under the flag of the warring parties (Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq) and what this implies for local partnerships, remains a point for discussion.

In different ways and to different extents, all INGOs act as funding agencies for other local NGOs. The diversity of situations and the risks involved demand that they must be careful and specific in defining the terms of a partnership in different situations. One of the issues is where partnership, in the sense of ownership, participation and equality, becomes an illusion and merely a legitimization of the humanitarian enterprise, and where it can indeed live up to its promise and contribute to more resilient and capable societies.

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Met opmaak: Nederlands (standaard)

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[2] The Food security budget line is accessible by local NGOs as well as member INGOs of Euronaid and other European NGOs.

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