



WORLDCONNECTORS THE ROUND TABLE FOR PEOPLE AND THE PLANET

## Civil Society's role in development

Statement on the role of civil society, in response to the Report on International Cooperation "Less Pretension, More Ambition" by the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR).

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This statement complements two earlier statements by the Round Table of Worldconnectors that were prepared in response to the WRR report: 1) Coherent policy to manage the global commons - Dutch International Policy requires a new approach; and 2) Worldconnectors Working Group Business & Development Cooperation: More entrepreneurship, coalitions and ambition.

Both documents are available on: [www.worldconnectors.nl](http://www.worldconnectors.nl)

### *Preamble*

In the report "Less Pretension, More Ambition" by the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) there is little attention for the role of civil society in development. Also, in its paragraphs on civil society, the report focuses on the organisational and financial set-up of Dutch civil society. The report lacks a reflection on the fundamental role that civil society plays, in each and every society, in the processes of social and societal development. With this statement, the Round Table of Worldconnectors (RTW) wants to draw attention to the crucial and autonomous role of civil society in development processes and in shaping a just and sustainable world – a role that is under increasing pressure.

We emphasise that civil society is not one entity; civic action has many forms. Moreover, civil society groups operate on the basis of different values. We too, are not value-neutral. In this statement we therefore do not only describe the various roles that civil society organisations and

initiatives can play, but we also promote a basic set of values that we believe should guide civic action.

Acknowledging that different civil society organisations operate on the basis of different interests and values, we explicitly subscribe to the Earth Charter and the Millennium Declaration. We believe that national and international civic initiatives that are based on the core values of justice, sustainability and connectedness play a crucial role in shaping the world of tomorrow. With this statement we call upon the Dutch government to acknowledge this unique strength and to use it.

#### *The basics: civic action*

Civic action is the basis of civil society. It starts with the agency of citizens as members of society, of those who want to act based on their responsibility as citizens. The United Nations uses the following definition: 'Civil society refers to the associations of citizens (outside their families, friends and businesses) entered into voluntarily to advance their interests, ideas and ideologies'<sup>1</sup>. The term does not include profit-making activity (the private sector) or governmental activity (the public sector). Of particular relevance to the United Nations are mass organisations (such as organisations of peasants, women or retired people), trade unions, professional associations, social movements, indigenous people's organisations, religious and spiritual organisations, academic and non-governmental public benefit organisations. But, civil society is not only about large groups. Also, small groups of people (in neighbourhoods, slums, etc.) with specific aims and interests who organise themselves to achieve these goals, are part of civil society. Sometimes individuals express their agency by addressing issues and challenging existing structures of power.

Civil society groups do not always play a positive role; they can also function as a source of conflict or violence. Some civic movements have an outspoken dark side (such as racist movements) and recent experiences in Kenya and Nigeria illustrate how fragmentation and internal conflicts among civic actors have the potential to paralyse development processes. But with this statement we highlight the crucial role of civil society initiatives that aim to create 'social profit': a more vibrant society in which communities and networks flourish. We stress that organised citizens have played a crucial role in history. Important social changes (labour-rights, gender-issues, anti-discrimination legislation) are the result of civic action by individuals and communities. Just as the state and the market, civil society is a vital pillar in societies all over the world.

#### *Global citizenship*

Civic actions related to international development issues are often based on the notion of global citizenship; citizens give voice to their connection with people and communities elsewhere and to the fact that people share the planet and therefore bear a shared responsibility for the future. The notion of global citizenship is directly linked to the notion of the global common goods, which is becoming central in issues of global development.<sup>2</sup> Global citizenship does not mean that people detach themselves from the concrete reality in which they live. Global citizenship is rooted in local realities and in connections to these realities. Global and local are not opposites: the global reality is present in the local and the local reality is present in the global.

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<sup>1</sup> The OECD uses in essence a similar definition: "The multitude of associations around which society voluntarily organizes itself and which represent a wide range of interests and ties".

<sup>2</sup> See statement of the Worldconnectors entitled "Coherent policy to manage the global commons - Dutch International Policy requires a new approach" and chapter 8 of the WRR report.

In the sphere of development, civil society groups can realise changes that state and market cannot. Micro-credit, for example, would never have been developed without civil society initiatives. The same is true for women's empowerment or the rights of a range of minorities such as inter-gender groups and/or indigenous peoples. Such civic actions tend to be guided by basic values of justice and sustainability. With this orientation, many civil society groups that are active in development have a much sharper profile with regard to their values and objectives compared to civil society in general.

*Civil society as a strategic actor in development*

The role of civic actors is indispensable in development, based on our view that the triangle of state (with its different layers and institutions), market (in all its diversity of self-employment, small and medium enterprises and large multinational companies) and civil society (in all its variety as already explained) is fundamental for a balanced and healthy society. This role is particularly crucial in a time when many societies are facing rapid social changes that affect solidarity and trust. These rapid changes are not only affecting economic and political structures but are also turning the social structures of societies upside down. For the social dimension of development, civic actors are more important than either state or market. Together, these three pillars are all needed for the balanced development of societies. We believe that civil society has at least five roles in development:

(i) Civil society as countervailing power

Civic actors play important roles as countervailing powers, advocacy agents, and watchdogs on issues such as human rights, child labour, trafficking, gender violence etc. Organised civic awareness and civic actions are key to the checks and balances in any society. The role of civil society organisations to monitor and pressure large multinationals is evident, but civil society organisations also foster democratic processes and good governance, and strengthen accountability and transparency in development processes. In development good governance is one of the key issues. Rampant corruption, lawlessness and irresponsible exploitation of natural resources are the most important impediments to sustainable development. The role as countervailing power is continuously challenged from a legitimacy-perspective: to what extent is the advocacy and lobby of civil society organisations the genuine expression of the people or to what extent has civil society become a self-appointed part of the rituals which we know from large international gatherings and conferences?

(ii) Civil society as steward of culture and identity

Many societies are facing rapid social changes and the breaking up of existing social patterns. Civil society groups play an important role in connecting diverse social systems and supporting people in coping with social change. Activities that may strengthen people's identities help to stimulate self-confidence and social participation, especially among people from vulnerable social and economic backgrounds. At the same time, herein lies one of the biggest challenges of civil society organisations. In safeguarding social patterns and the culture and identity of communities, some civil society organisations may become divisive and exclusive within societies, creating gaps between groups of different cultures, social class, sexual identities and religions (*cf* racist groups).

We believe, however, that civil society organisations can and should stimulate social cohesion and social empowerment of communities, and create connections and relations between different

communities. Building healthy societies cannot be a zero sum game in which strengthening one group means disempowering another.

(iii) Civil society as service provider

The provision of services is an often overlooked role of civil society. In providing basic social services (education, health care, housing), civil society is an important alternative next to profit-driven providers and state provisions. The role of governments is to guarantee access, affordability and quality of social services, but that does not necessarily imply that the state itself should take on the provider's role. On the contrary, from the perspective of checks and balances, a distinction between standard-setting/control and the actual provision of services could be highly relevant. Service provision by civil society groups can strengthen people's ownership. For example, Trade Unions and Parents Associations can do much to increase the quality of education. The provision of services by civil society groups may be particularly important in fragile states in the absence of state institutions. In countries like Sudan and the DRC, Christian and Islamic groups play an important role in providing basic services, thus functioning as a safety net for the populace.

We believe that the balance between subcontracting and autonomy is crucial. Fitting into a nation-wide system of basic social services can be compatible with the autonomy of civil society groups when there is mutual understanding, acceptance and dialogue with regard to their roles. When it is merely a subcontractor of the state, a civil society organisation loses its added value.

(iv) Civil society as incubator

Civil society groups may pressure state and market actors to develop new answers and to address social injustices. But they can also be the breeding ground for new and innovative answers which point the way forward. Examples are numerous. Just imagine where the issues of climate change, gender equity and micro-finance would stand if civil society groups had not been so actively involved. Likewise, civil society groups create new standards in international relations, for example the Fair Trade/Max Havelaar standards which are stimulating corporate responsible behaviour, and advocacy work around debt cancellation and the proposed financial transaction tax.

(v) Civil society as learning space

Civil society organisations are spaces to link and learn, to develop the knowledge, the attitude and the behaviour of citizenship. In connecting to communities and in positioning their own issues and concerns within the broader society, people develop the virtue of citizenship. When people get engaged in development cooperation they learn about global citizenship and its consequences for what the WRR rightfully labels personal coherence<sup>3</sup>. Universities and knowledge centres are important as reference-institutes for civil society. They provide knowledge and are critical advisers for civil society. Secondly, universities provide a learning environment in which people can develop themselves to become critical citizens who may later become leaders in civil society organisations, businesses or politics.

Besides this, civil society organisations appear time and again to be a learning ground for leadership. Part of the success of the transformation of South Africa from an apartheid state to a rainbow nation is due to the lessons learned by the leaders in the anti-apartheid struggle. The same goes for the transformation in Chile after the Pinochet dictatorship.

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<sup>3</sup> See WRR rapport page 273.

*It starts with one*

The notion of global citizenship is a call to action for everyone. Each individual, in her or his capacity, can contribute to a better world. As the WRR report states, many of the world's problems are in some way or another connected to our own personal decisions. This is particularly true in the sphere of consumption – buying cheap clothes made in Asian sweatshops and the environmental effects of meat consumption. Civil society organisations play a crucial role in raising awareness about such issues by providing reliable information on the origin, environmental, social and gender impacts of products. .

The potential of individuals to contribute to a more just and sustainable world is not limited to their role as consumers; individuals also make a difference through acting as 'responsible world citizens' at their place of work. It is often (small groups of) individuals from within a company, who are the main driving force behind a transition towards more sustainable business. For this the innovative force of young people is needed, but their creativity and energy would be greatly helped if established leaders too have the courage to take responsibility and come forward with unconventional proposals.

Civil society organisations play a role in bringing concerned individuals – both as consumers and professionals – together in new groups and networks. Moreover, civil society organisations make use of individual citizen's ideas and leverage (for example through signing petitions). Individuals may also stand at the basis of new social movements. Here, the power of social media can not be underestimated; one critical individual posting her or his concerns may result in a virtual community of thousands of people within only a matter of hours. Recent examples in Indonesia have shown that Facebook communities can generate significant political pressure.

*Civil society as a dynamic force*

Citizens put forward those issues that they think are important and, in so doing, they challenge the rest of society, which may effectively disrupt any existing status quo. Many civil society groups do not take for granted the comfort zones of institutions. Hence, they are crucial in shaping societal dynamics. But civil society itself is also dynamic, comprising a multitude of interests, norms and values, which may change over time. Also, civil society organisations tend to be dynamic in their way of operating. From an international perspective, for example, civil society organisations are more flexible than governments, who depend on either bilateral relations or slow and bureaucratic multilateral relations. The dynamic character of civil society is illustrated by the increasing number of local, national and international civil society networks, where different groups meet to exchange knowledge and to develop joint (lobby) activities based on common values. The dynamics of global civil society networks have been increased tremendously by the ICT revolution. Information on human rights violations, illegal logging, ethnic and/or gender violence are distributed worldwide in a split-second, coalitions are built and maintained, and knowledge and good practices are shared. New mobile technology will further enhance the connections between civil society organisations worldwide.

*Civil society as global actor*

The contemporary world is faced with many challenges of a global nature. Think of climate change, energy scarcity, financial and food crises, inequality and poverty, migration, security and communicable diseases. These global challenges, in their turn, have clear local consequences, felt by people 'on the ground' – from a farmer in Ethiopia having to deal with increasing climatic

variability to a Dutch child who grows up in a neighbourhood that is increasingly fragmented along ethnic lines. This inspires us to make a plea for a truly global perspective, which is grounded in the realisation that everything is fundamentally connected. The local and the global can not be separated – the global includes the local.

This implies that we should do away with North-South thinking. The typical North-South perspective, which (implicitly or explicitly) is based on the idea that we in the North know what is best for the poor people in the South, is still all too common. In the modern world, however, this is an increasingly outdated view and this has implications for the relations between civil society groups and requires critical thinking about the relationships within the global civil society. Civil society organisations face a huge challenge to overcome the tradition of donor-recipient relationships and to strengthen the role of Southern civil society groups as the main actors in the development of their own societies and as the main advocates for their own interests in the global arena.

The global perspective of civil society organisations active in development positions them as important actors in relation to managing the global common goods. For example, to protect the natural resources on which the whole of mankind and future generations depend, civil society organisations raise awareness and build alliances between people.

#### *Civil Society in complementary governance*

The Worldconnectors wholeheartedly support the WRR's plea for a focus on managing the global commons. Managing the global commons requires increased and improved collaboration between the private sector, governments and civil society. This has been labelled complementary governance in the Earth Charter. In the last couple of years we see more and more hybrid organisations where strict lines between state, market and civil society have been blended, often in the form of public private partnerships such as the Dutch Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH), whose goal is to mainstream the social and ecological sustainability of the trade chains for a number of important commodities. There are older examples of hybrid forms too. One could argue, for example, that civic and private interests merged in Dutch (farmer) cooperatives – being value-oriented civic organisations that have a market perspective at the same time. Hybrid forms are there between all the three pillars (state, market, civil society). Political parties may be considered a hybrid form of civil society and the government. Organisations in basic social services (education, health) that have started as independent civil society organisations have become implementers of government policies and regulations. And parts of the state have been privatised and operate as private entities within state structures.

We believe that, despite promising developments where different sectors meet and look for common ground, there is much scope to improve the collaboration and coordination between the different pillars of society. Multilateral agencies such as the UN and OESO, for example, are still failing to adopt a truly multi-stakeholder perspective. The same holds true for some civil society organisations that do not enter into a dialogue with others. We call for more (and more structural) attention to collaboration between the private sector, the government and civil society, based on the explicit recognition of the added value of each. In this light we would like to refer to the statement, prepared by representatives of the business community in response to the WRR report, entitled: 'More entrepreneurship, coalitions and ambition'.

#### *Civil society in Dutch development policy*

In the Netherlands civil society groups played and play an important role and the Dutch 'poldermodel' reflects the multi-stakeholder approach that is a basic feature in the Dutch society. The important role of civil society in development cooperation is not an exception; it is the application of the Dutch societal model in this domain. Therefore we endorse the analysis of the WRR that civil society's role in international cooperation can be a niche where the Netherlands can present itself as a leading actor, deepening and renewing the role of civil society. The initiative to invest in a knowledge centre on civil society is an important building block for the Dutch profile. This initiative has been taken by civil society organisations, knowledge institutes, universities and networks to deepen and exchange the knowledge on the role of civil actors in processes of development.

Civil society organisations have played an important role in Dutch policy on development cooperation.<sup>4</sup> Their share in spending ODA has always been smaller (20-25%) than bilateral and multilateral aid, but they have been the most visible part of development cooperation in Dutch society. For most Dutch citizens the work of civil society organisations is the most visible component of development cooperation, so that this to a large extent determines its image.

We believe that civil society organisations are important actors in a Dutch Society that is increasingly facing the challenge of how to cope with the globalised world. There is a tendency towards a more inward looking attitude in our society as a response to the economic, social, cultural and religious changes in society. Civil society organisations working in development have a role to play in creating an open society, in which the notion of global citizenship is the cornerstone of our living together in the diverse reality of today's world.

The policy of the Dutch government regarding civil society has increasingly been driven by subsidy systems in which financial regulations and accountability systems are dominant. Over the last decade an in-depth debate on the role of Dutch civil society organisations in development cooperation and its relation with the Dutch government has been absent, despite the existence of a regular dialogue and many meetings. There is an urgent need for a fundamental rethinking of that relationship. Dutch civil society organisations also need to reconsider their own role in a rapidly changing environment in which the North-South divide is becoming obsolete, the donor-recipient relationship with partner organisations needs transforming and the issues of the global common goods now appear as pressing as the basic social services that have been at the centre of their policies and practices to date.

Over the last decade there is a new form of civil society emerging in the Netherlands. The increase of Dutch citizens' contacts in developing countries (tourism, jobs) has led to private initiatives supporting concrete and small-scale projects in developing countries. These projects are characterised by direct personal contact, visibility and tangibility, private funding and little apparent overhead costs. Besides bilateral, multilateral and NGO channels in development cooperation, we could speak of a fourth channel: the 'do-it-yourself' sector.

The rise of 'do-it-yourself' sector has triggered policy discussions on how to deal with increasing fragmentation. From the essence of what civil society is – and regardless of the effectiveness criteria that guide the allocation of financial means – the increasing number of citizens that is

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<sup>4</sup> See a.o. the policy paper of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs on civil society by Pieter Lammers ([http://www.ontwikkelingsverandering.nl/uploaded\\_files/1Civil\\_society\\_en\\_structurele\\_armoedebestrijding.pdf](http://www.ontwikkelingsverandering.nl/uploaded_files/1Civil_society_en_structurele_armoedebestrijding.pdf))

active in development cooperation can only be applauded; it is a sign of active global citizenship. From a narrow perspective, i.e., related to the financing of civil society organisations, there is a real question about the extent to which the financing mechanism can follow this fragmentation of civil society. Here the question of effectiveness is at stake. We believe that Dutch development policy regarding civil society should start with a fundamental discussion on the role and contribution of civil society in development processes before formulating a policy on financing civil society. Principles that can guide such a policy were recently drawn up in the 'Istanbul CSO Development Effectiveness Principles'.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Civil Society: partner under pressure*

There is broad acknowledgement of the role of civil society in international cooperation. The Accra Agenda of Action stated that they are 'development actors in their own right' and should be included in processes of policymaking and implementation. International networks like GCAP and Civicus are strengthening their positions in the international arena and are more and more acknowledged as relevant and indispensable actors. The stronger position of civil society, however, may provoke counter-reactions from governments and the private sector. By challenging the state or the market, or by questioning existing power relations (gender, economy, military, ethnicity), civil society seems provocative. Therefore, those in power often try to oppress civil society organisations who are advocating for change and for more justice. Too often these civil society organisations are seen as undermining and subversive and are treated accordingly. Space for civil society is shrinking and the state-security discourse (and hence the easy blaming of opposition groups as terrorists) is increasingly hampering civil society in bringing issues of injustice and poverty into the open and into the public and political debate. The shutting down or administrative control of civil society organisations, censorship and internet controls, the blocking of visas, break-ins, threats to families, rape, imprisonment and other human rights violations are becoming increasingly common.

#### *Recommendations*

##### For civil society

1. Civil society organisations should develop a clear **multi-stakeholder** strategy for engaging with government institutions and the private sector.
2. Civil society organisations working in development need to **reposition** themselves in the changing global environment in which both the North-South divide and the donor-recipient distinction are becoming obsolete. Global civil society should focus on strengthening civil society within each individual society and offering them the opportunity to present their case in the international arena.
3. Civil society organisations working in development should integrate issues related to the management of the **global commons** into their policies and practice. Projects and programs should be developed within a global common's framework and should link the local and global realities.

##### For the Dutch government

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<sup>5</sup> These principles are part of a worldwide initiative to formulate standards of effectiveness for civil society in response to the Paris and Accra principles. See: [http://www.concordeurope.org/Files/media/0\\_internetdocumentsENG/3\\_Topics/Topics/20\\_CS0\\_effectiveness/Final-Istanbul-CSO-Development-Effectiveness-Principles\\_footnote.pdf](http://www.concordeurope.org/Files/media/0_internetdocumentsENG/3_Topics/Topics/20_CS0_effectiveness/Final-Istanbul-CSO-Development-Effectiveness-Principles_footnote.pdf)



4. Dutch development cooperation should develop a clear policy for its relationship with civil society. The focus during the last decade on subsidy regulations has suffocated a profound and **holistic debate** on the role in development processes of a broader range of civil society organisations (in the Netherlands and in developing countries).
5. Dutch development policy should **capitalise** on its worldwide historical investments in civil society by strengthening research on the role of civil society in development.
6. In international politics the Dutch government should work tirelessly within its bilateral and multilateral networks to uphold the principles of fundamental **human liberties** (freedom of speech, freedom to organise oneself) which are crucial for civil society.