

A bold donor or a bold strategic partner?

With the start of a new Dutch government early 2022, new policy notes start being written, among them one for international cooperation. This note is the responsibility of the minister for foreign trade and development cooperation, Liesje Schreinemacher.

The new minister is still keeping her cards close. She is open to advice and suggestions. In this context, a broad consultation round is now underway. An example: today was the last day one could fill out an online consultation format ([Share your ideas on the Netherlands' new foreign trade and development cooperation policy | News item | Government.nl](#)). The format is built around ten questions. It challenged me to raise some thoughts, not exactly answering all the questions, but hopefully providing some food for thought for the team who will work on the policy note.

Taking a closer look at the questions there is relatively much attention for foreign trade & corporate sector. Since 2012, foreign trade falls under the minister for development cooperation. A recent, timely, evaluation indicates that there is no actual assessment framework to assess contradictory interests in the Dutch trade and investment policy, development cooperation policy or foreign policy. (Trading interests and values Evaluation of the international trade and investment policy of the Netherlands, IOB evaluation 442, September 2021). This will probably be taken up in the new policy note, because a coherent policy is obviously very desirable.

Another observation on the consultation format is that in the questions the required knowledge seems to be focused substantively on the Dutch expertise available.

In the consultation format there is not much attention for the current bigger picture of international cooperation. How will the minister position her paper in a time in which traditional cooperation is no longer tenable (Charles Vandyke, interview with Marlies Pilon in VICE VERSA The litmus test, how good is our development sector really? Topspecial 2021/2022) and in which the development sector is confronted with movements like Black Lives Matter and Decolonizing Aid? The minister does mention the importance of systemic change as an issue she is working on (question 9), but doesn't make it explicit how, nor asks for advice or consultation.

Yet she could leave a legacy when she would address her intended investments on systemic change.

As far as I'm concerned, important elements in this systemic change should be that they lead to a new model in which the countries of the Global South initiate, guide and sustain their own development path. It has been often stated that this is the way to go, but if there is anything stagnant in international cooperation, it is this.

Strategic partnerships

Recently, there has been a resurgence of attention to ownership and leadership in the Global South. In part, this is reflected in the instrument of strategic partnerships funded by the Netherlands. To a certain extent, the Dutch government and Dutch civil society rightly flaunt the progressive nature of these programmes. Within these programmes, which have been implemented since 2016, good steps have been taken to gradually allow Southern organizations to be more leading. But it is not happening by itself. A critical and candid reflection of Mohammed Awal Alhassan and myself on the daily practice of working on Southern leadership in a strategic partnership, will be published soon as chapter in a volume on reconsidering international cooperation. As practitioners, we were right in the middle of it. Part of the complexity was that new relationships had to be realized in a system that was not designed for them.

After all, the fact remains that the strategic partnerships are still situated within a system in which themes and countries and in-country regions can be determined every four years depending on political developments and priorities in the Netherlands. Fragmentation and discontinuity are often the result. In some countries, strategic partnerships tumble over each other.

The tender system on which the partnerships are based is at odds with an effective agenda in which the countries in the Global South themselves have a say and can give direction to where and by whom the funds are spent, and in which they steadily build on what already exists. The same applies to the lack of influence that countries in the Global South have over the entire donor field in their country.

Despite an increasing degree of flexibility, the bias on finance in case of accountability is another barrier to realize the concept of strategic partnerships to the fullest. Accountability should be trust-driven instead of control-driven. And the Global North should be equally accountable to the Global South. Finally, governments in the countries are usually not involved as stakeholders, yet they are key in the realization of systemic change. These conclusions can be, together with other findings, found in the forthcoming article by Mohammed Awal Alhassan and myself.

It can be interesting for the policy note to take a closer look at the barriers mentioned here and to discuss them with stakeholders from civil society, government, corporate sector and knowledge institutions in the countries.

Knowledge and expertise

In terms of knowledge and innovation the consultation will no doubt yield well thought-out and innovative suggestions. However, too much emphasis on Dutch branded knowledge in a Dutch policy note may run the risk of stimulating supply-driven mechanisms.

It should always be kept in mind that the aim should be for knowledge and expertise to be developed in and by the Global South even more than is being done already. This aim can be tricky, because a lot of knowledge and expertise has been and is being developed in the Netherlands. Such knowledge and research is undoubtedly valuable, can play a role and shouldn't be ignored. However, it cannot be denied that there is therefore also an institutional interest. The same goes for Dutch-based NGOs, and the Dutch corporate sector. And there must come a time when we enter into a dialogue with the Global South on how we envisage the systemic change regarding knowledge and expertise, if we want to stay credible and trustful. Also here, the policy note could make a contribution to new thinking.

I mention this, because I think we are still, in many cases, too present from the Global North, even when we are engaged in self-critical movements like #ShiftthePower or RINGO. It reminds me of situations in my younger years when I had the greatest difficulty with men starting all kinds of initiatives to give women more space, before we could indicate if and what space we wanted. The comparison is flawed, but I think you understand what I mean.

So, can we at least start by making more room and less noise, just listening before coming up with amazing ideas? Don't take me wrong, I think many of these ideas may indeed be great, but let's keep the balance. There is a wealth of creative brainpower in the Global South that does not have to come from us. Moreover, we in the Global North do not always have sufficient inside knowledge and experience of the contexts in question.

New approach in Dutch constituency building

With systemic change a new approach is needed to commit politicians and the general public in the Netherlands to the new approach. Such a commitment is another crucial element to make systemic change work. A commitment to global equity connected to a global commitment on climate in particular. The commitment to global equity, expressed in growing Southern leadership on Dutch funding in Southern countries, might still be small. In the seminar 'Taking the right path: An ethical perspective on the decolonisation of aid' organized in October 2021 by PARTOS KUNO and ISS Hugo Slim argued that a paternalism-free system hinges on a fundamental mindshift with regard to the money that is transferred to those in need: An understanding that it is not *our* money. "It is money held on trust for the people who need it. So really, it is their money [...]" This mindshift however has not landed in the majority of Dutch society.

It is high time that an inspiring policy on strengthening the support base in society and politics is formulated.

Finally

A final suggestion: perhaps it would be interesting to use the announced new Africa strategy as a pilot case to see what needs to change systemically for a Global Southern-led strategy. And what kind of model should replace it.

It would be a great legacy.

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Will also be shared as LinkedIn article