

Mapping the Expectations of the Dutch Strategic Partnerships for Lobby and Advocacy

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Commissioned by: Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Preface

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Social Development Department/Civil Society Organisations Division (DSO/MO) commissioned this research project to us as a team of external researchers to assess the expectations of the participants in the new policy programme 'Dialogue and Dissent: Strategic Partnerships for Lobby and Advocacy'. The team assessed the expectations about partnerships of NGOs, Department contact persons, Embassy staff and NGO partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries. This report presents the results of this research, which was conducted between February and November 2016.

We thank DSO/MO for the trust placed in our team, the valuable discussions and the support we received. We also thank the staff members of the NGOs, Ministry Departments, and the Embassies for making time for us and for their open conversations. Jelmer Kamstra was a very supportive and committed contact-person. We also thank the respondents to the online survey amongst partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries. Thanks are also due to Pieter van Groenestijn of the Research Technical Support of the Faculty of Social Science of Radboud University in Nijmegen for his invaluable assistance in formatting and analysing the partner survey.

The partnerships are in the making. With this report, we hope to provide a useful contribution to the further development of these partnerships and of the 'Dialogue and Dissent' programme as a whole.

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This research was commissioned to Wageningen University & Research, Radboud University Nijmegen and the Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University, by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs
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Executive Summary

Between 2016 and 2020 the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs are working together with civil society organizations to implement a new policy programme for international cooperation: 'Dialogue and Dissent: Strategic Partnerships for Lobby and Advocacy'.

With lobby and advocacy as the central focus, the overall goal of the programme is to strengthen civil society organizations in low- and lower-middle-income countries in their role as advocates and lobbyists. By working with their national and international partners, and through their multilevel networks they potentially contribute to sustainable and inclusive development and fight against poverty and injustice.

From the 65 applications, a selection process in 2015 led to the identification of 25 strategic partners, primarily consisting of Netherlands-based NGOs or NGO-consortia. Subsequently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs linked its Departments with the consortia to work on similar themes and related approaches with the purpose to building partner relationships and collaborations. After consultation with the Departmental contact person, the consortia further developed their programmes. Following a dialogue between NGOs and Departments, the roles for the Departments and the Embassies were specified. In addition, countries as well as partners were identified in these low- and lower-middle-income countries. The role of the Royal Netherlands Embassies was to engage with NGO consortia and their partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries in order to explore potential collaboration.

The programme offers new opportunities for acting together and achieving mutual goals. The focus on partnership between the Ministry and NGOs is a new and more central element in the present programme. It is more explicit than in previous forms of collaboration. By developing new types of relationships, the strategic partnerships aim to achieve results partners cannot achieve on their own. The policy framework envisages partnership based on jointly defined strategic goals, equal and reciprocal relations, with space for flexibility. Risks are taken together and partners can hold each other accountable. Moreover, differences of opinion are not only accepted but welcomed for the energy generated by friction, which can contribute to achieving change.

The various partners often step into unknown territory, although they can often build on a history of collaboration in different forms. Defining who is to perform which role, in what type of contexts, and with what level of responsibility, has been done in collaboration. The same goes for the management of risks and other challenges. There is a clear need to learn across partnerships about what partners can expect from each other, where strategic opportunities and challenges lie, and how to engage with these effectively.

The Civil Society Division (DSO/MO) at the Social Development Department of the Ministry commissioned a team of four academic researchers to assess the expectations of NGOs, Department contact persons, Embassy staff and NGO

partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries of the partnership element in the programme. This report presents the results of this research, conducted between February and November 2016.

Research questions

The central research question was:

- *What expectations do Ministry, NGOs and their partners have with regard to partnership within the programme 'Dialogue and dissent. Strategic partnerships for lobby and advocacy'?*

This research question was specified in the following sub-questions:

1. *What forms of collaboration and added value thereof do participants envisage, when it comes to partnership between the Ministry, NGOs and their partners?*
2. *What specific opportunities may partnership, as envisaged in the programme, offer?*
3. *What are expectations with regard to risks and other challenges involved with partnership as envisaged in the Strategic Partnerships programme?*
4. *What themes and questions for a common learning agenda across partnerships can be identified?*

Objectives

The objective of this research project was primarily to establish a baseline regarding the expectations of partnership as a strategic instrument to achieve policy objectives. A second objective was to identify key issues for a learning agenda for the Ministry, Alliances and their partners.

An overview of expectations of the partnership between Ministry and NGOs (within the context of the Dialogue and Dissent framework) may provide a better idea whether extent assumptions underlying partnership are shared among participants. It can also provide a view on the nature, spread and background of convergences and divergences amongst participants.

This knowledge can be used to feed into strategies to realize the full potential of partnership, addressing added value, opportunities, risks and other challenges. The analyses emerging from this research will facilitate reflection amongst participants and, where needed, reconsideration of assumptions to help developing and refining approaches and practices with regard to partnership.

Getting to know the various expectations allows DSO/MO to better substantiate its forum function in promoting this learning agenda for the strategic partnerships.

The research project also will be a reference point regarding the mid- and end-term evaluation of the strategic partnership mechanism.

Methodology

The research questions were answered employing the following methods:

1. Document analysis: an analysis of all 25 programme documents, plus partnership agreements and annexes;
2. Analysis of background data regarding the involvement of Embassies;
3. 33 semi-structured (group) interviews with NGO staff, their contact persons at Ministry Departments and Embassy staff;
4. An online survey amongst 538 partner organizations in low- and lower-middle-income countries (with a 40% response rate).

Summary of findings

Collaboration and added value

- The basic idea of the Strategic Partnership is accepted as legitimate: Ministry and NGO staff overall approach it rather positively, with openness to exploring possibilities, including the reshaping of relationships and roles.
- Collaboration is expected to happen in a range of areas: information exchange, brokering and facilitation, mutual influencing and joint lobby & advocacy.
- NGO Alliances generally aim for more intensive collaboration than the Ministry or Embassy staff. I.e. they see added value to lie in the capacity of the Ministry to open doors; its convening power; its capacity to act as an ally and target for partners; its capacity to help protect activists. The perceived leverage of the ministry thereby plays an important role in NGOs' expectations regarding added value of partnership.
- Ministry staff see more practical added value in the partnership: strengthening the capacity of civil society, adjustment of NGO programmes to match their activities, and access to local information and networks.
- While the programme title 'Dialogue and Dissent' suggests a central place for differences in viewpoints and interests, expectations for collaboration and added value are predominantly rooted in perceived alignment of agendas and approaches.
- Expectations of partnership are influenced by existing role conceptions and practices of collaboration. Considering partnership from a more conventional perspective, some interviewees wonder 'what is really new here'?

Opportunities

- The Strategic Partnership programme is expected to offer more open and equal relationships, interactions and open-ended forms of working relationships.
- Based on this, new collaborations are expected to offer opportunities: (i) to make use of synergies more strategically; (ii) to make potential frictions more productive; (iii) to combine capacities of all actors involved, contributing to empowerment of local partners; (iv) to provide space to reconsider evaluations more from a

partnership perspective.

- NGOs are more outspoken on these opportunities; this also may be read as an invitation to their governmental partners to think more strategically and to make the most of the potential of new collaborations.

Challenges

- Partnership may lead to a loss of autonomy, so the challenge is how to safeguard autonomy and how to mitigate or prevent the negative consequences of a partnership.
- Additional risks concern uncertainties around the degree to which partnerships as envisaged can continue to count on political support after the 2017 general elections in the Netherlands, and the handling of sensitive information between partners via the IATI system.
- Another challenge is the question how to be partners: how to develop shared understandings of partnership in the light of differences in the levels of ambition, stakes and capacities?
- A point of attention identified was how effectively partnerships will come about. The challenge is to realize effective management, communication and trust-building within the programme.
- There are concerns whether the open space of the partnership tallies with political accountability demands; several Ministry staff members are concerned about how to account for the results of the programme.
- NGOs are concerned about the gap between the stated ambitions and the capacity (of the Ministry) to realize these.

Local partners

- Local partners (in low and lower-middle income countries) strongly support the Strategic Partnership programme, and have high expectations of its outcome.
- There are many new local partners engaged in the programme, with a strong record on lobby and advocacy, largely at the national and sub-national level. The majority of the local partners were familiar with the Strategic Partnerships and had been involved in its programme design.
- Local partners largely see the involvement of the Dutch government as useful in forwarding their causes at international events or in helping to protect their staff. They trust the added value of the Dutch government involvement but are also less sure whether it will materialise in practice.
- Even though local partners consider that they have highly developed capacities on lobby and advocacy, they do see room for further capacity development.
- Concerns of local partners are related to: the delinking of lobby from service delivery, financial continuity, and the feasibility of the programme in view of national politics.

Learning agenda

- A learning agenda predominantly will have to focus on the effectiveness of the programme in carrying out lobby & advocacy and capacity development.
- Other questions focus on the protection of autonomy, building and maintenance of trust, and the ambitions of the programme.
- There is silence on important potential learning issues: integration of capacity

development and advocacy; the role of partnership in capacity development; the role of local partners; and how to secure the focus on capacity development.

Themes for further development and monitoring of the programme

Based on our analysis and taking into account the ambitions of the Strategic Partnerships programme, five themes are proposed for further developing and monitoring partnerships. These themes offer questions and issues that have cross-cutting relevance for the programme: (1) how to be partners, (2) how to deal with friction, (3) capacity, (4) effectiveness and (5) evaluation.

How to be partners

A key question is whether a more strategic approach by the Ministry is possible and desirable. NGOs clearly see the strategic added value of the Ministry and the Embassies, but this is less evident for the Department contact persons. Ministry staff members may more explicitly explore the synergies between the work of NGOs and their own work, as the collaboration with the NGOs also may help the Ministry to achieve its diplomatic goals.

The Strategic Partnership programme focuses on enhancing the advocacy capacity of partners in low- and middle-income countries. However, the expectations of the partnership largely focus on Northern NGOs and their advocacy. This generates questions about the space in the programme for partners in low- and lower-income countries. It also points at the need for making adequate connections between the initiatives of NGOs and the Ministry, as well with the needs and voices of their constituencies.

How to deal with friction

While the programme title 'Dialogue and Dissent' suggests a central place for differences in viewpoints and interests, we rather observed expectations for collaboration rooted in the alignment of agendas and approaches.

Two concrete questions emerged from the interviews: (1) how to manage friction, and (2) how to make friction productive? Key ways of managing friction are to keep each other informed in a timely fashion so that partners can prepare to respond, facilitating dialogue to overcome friction, and in particular cases creating distance, while maintaining good partner relations and communications.

Using differences in viewpoints and interests as a way to strengthen the voices of civil society may be undermined by the present emphasis on partnership based on alignment.

Capacity

Limited capacity (staff time, expertise) with the Department contact persons and the Embassies may restrict the development of partnerships. This has already led to frustrations with at least some NGOs. The partnerships may benefit from further reflection on how the available capacity can be used more effectively. Options are a more strategic focus within the partnerships, differentiation across the partnerships in order to establish collaborations there where the highest added value lies, and coordination across partnerships to attain efficiencies.

Effectiveness

An important concern shared among the interviewees is the effectiveness of the Strategic Partnership programme. When is the programme to be considered effective? By what criteria? Here, we may want to acknowledge the built-in tension that effectiveness and results are to be defined by the Alliances themselves. However, the Dutch Parliament will eventually decide about the success of the programme, which may result into pressure from within the Department to show tangible results. One of the solutions to this may lie in developing Theories of Change for the collaboration taking place between the Ministry and the NGOs within the partnerships. Such Theories of Change would help partners in defining mid-term and longer-term common strategic goals. This would also stimulate a clearer sense of mutual responsibilities and accountabilities within the partnerships, and provide a basis for dialogue, reflection and adjustment over time.

Evaluation

Two important concerns emerged about the evaluation of the programme. In particular, from the NGO interviewees the question was: what is to be evaluated? This relates to the question 'how to be partners'. Are the different programmes the responsibility only of the NGO Alliances, or also a collective responsibility? A key issue is what the role of the partnership element actually will be in the evaluation of programmes.

The second question emerged from both the Ministry and the NGOs: how to evaluate? The intangible nature of outcomes of advocacy and advocacy capacity development makes measurement of outcomes a key challenge. NGOs as well as Department contact persons would be interested to learn more about the ways of establishing effectiveness. Evaluation of advocacy initiatives requires special competences, for example, being able to identify outcomes that do justice to the long-haul nature of some efforts and the intermediate nature of many advocacy outcomes. This may also contribute to programme legitimacy and commitment from the Ministry, as well as enhance the mutual confidence in the partnerships.

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1. Introduction: a baseline of expectations on partnership

Between 2016 and 2020, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and civil society organizations are working together in a new policy programme: 'Dialogue and Dissent: Strategic Partnerships for Lobby and Advocacy'. With this programme (budget € 920 million) the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs continues its role as a funder of civil society organizations working in development, but with a new focus.

Lobby and advocacy are central dimensions of the programme, which is reflected in the title. However, the overall goal is to strengthen civil society organizations in low- and lower-middle-income countries in their role as advocates and lobbyists. In addition, working with their national and international partners, and through their local, national and international networks they can contribute to sustainable and inclusive development for all and fight against poverty and injustice (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014:2). The policy framework sets out the programme's underlying logic:

Civil society organisations are the voice of citizens at local, national and international level by which government can be made more accountable to citizens and increase its legitimacy. In doing so, they contribute to greater social cohesion, stronger and more open democracies, a better response to environmental problems, a better business climate, more opportunities for all and less inequality. In recent years, a considerable number of low- and middle-income countries have enjoyed substantial economic growth, but this has not resulted in the same level of development for all. Often, the gap between rich and poor has only widened. Reducing inequality – not only economic, but also in the social, political, religious and ethnic domains as well as inequality based on gender and sexual orientation – is a key aim of the new policy agenda of foreign trade and development cooperation and of the vision on an international, post-2015 agenda for development. CSOs are prominent players in this field. They can provide for checks and balances in society. In their dialogue with governments and companies, they advocate inclusive and sustainable growth and development and put these issues on the agenda. At the same time, they act as watchdogs to ensure that government and private parties follow up on agreements and commitments made. CSOs therefore have an indispensable lobbying and advocacy role to play in society, and this policy framework sets out a strategy to help them fulfil this role, through engaging into strategic partnerships with the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014:1).

From the 65 applications, a selection process in 2015 led to the identification of 25 strategic partners, primarily consisting of Netherlands-based NGOs or NGO-consortia. Subsequently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs linked its Departments with the consortia to work on similar themes and related approaches with the purpose of building partner relationships and collaborations. After consultation with the Departmental contact person, the consortia further developed their programmes. Following a dialogue between NGOs and Departments, the roles for the Ministry and the Embassies were

further specified. In addition, countries as well as partners were identified in these low- and lower-middle-income countries. The role of the Royal Netherlands Embassies was to engage with NGO consortia and their partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries in order to explore potential collaboration.

Even though the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a long history of collaboration with civil society organizations, the focus on partnership is a new and more central element in the present programme. By developing new types of relationships, the strategic partnerships aim to achieve results partners cannot achieve on their own. The policy framework envisages partnership based on jointly defined strategic goals, equal and reciprocal relations, with space for flexibility. Risks are taken together and partners can hold each other accountable. Moreover, differences of opinion are not only accepted but welcomed for the energy generated by friction, which can contribute to achieving change. The programme thus offers new opportunities for acting together and achieving mutual goals.

The various partners often step into unknown territory, since working directly with the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a partner in lobby and advocacy (rather than only as a funder) will be a novelty for many civil society organizations. Defining who is to perform which role, in what type of contexts, and with what level of responsibility, has to be done in collaboration. The same goes for the management of risks and other challenges. With the novelty of the programme, there is a clear need to learn across partnerships about what partners can expect from each other, where strategic opportunities and challenges lie, and how to engage with these effectively.

The Civil Society Division (DSO/MO) at the Social Development Department of the Ministry commissioned us as a team of external researchers to assess the expectations of NGOs, Department contact persons, Embassy staff members and NGO partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries of the partnership element in the programme. This report presents the results of this research, conducted between February and November 2016.

1.1 Research questions

The research project aims to answer the following main research question:

What expectations do the Ministry, the NGOs and their partners have with regard to partnership within the programme 'Dialogue and Dissent: Strategic Partnerships for Lobby and Advocacy'?

This research question has been specified in the following sub-questions:

1. What forms of collaboration and added value thereof do participants envisage, when it comes to partnership between the Ministry, NGOs and their partners?
2. What specific opportunities may partnership, as envisaged in the programme, offer?
3. What are expectations with regard to risks and other challenges involved with partnership as envisaged in the Strategic Partnerships programme?
4. What themes and questions for a common learning agenda across partnerships can be identified?

1.2 Objectives

The objective of this research project is primarily to establish a baseline regarding the expectations of partnership as a strategic instrument to achieve policy objectives. A second objective is to identify key issues for a learning agenda for the Ministry, the Alliances and their partners. The Ministry intends to use this knowledge for a set of different purposes with which the Strategic Partnership programme can be further developed:

(i) An overview of expectations of the partnership between Ministry and NGOs (within the context of the Dialogue and Dissent framework) may provide a better idea whether assumptions underlying partnership are shared among participants. It can also provide a view on the nature, spread and background of convergences and divergences amongst participants.

(ii) This knowledge can be used to feed into strategies to realize the full potential of partnership, addressing the added value, opportunities, risks and other challenges. The analyses emerging from this research will facilitate reflection among participants and, where needed, reconsideration of assumptions to help develop and refine approaches and practices with regard to partnership.

(iii) Getting to know the various expectations allows DSO/MO to better substantiate its forum function in promoting this learning agenda for the strategic partnerships.

(iv) The research project also will be a reference point regarding the mid- and end-term evaluation of the strategic partnership mechanism.

1.3 Theoretical framework

If we look at available research on partnerships as envisaged in the policy framework for the Strategic Partnerships programme, we notice that there is little knowledge to build on. The programme is rather unique and therefore the exemplars, manuals, toolkits, evaluations and academic discussions that often help policymaking are simply not available. Publications on partnership integrating lobby & advocacy and/or capacity development for lobby & advocacy are rare, even though there are numerous publications on civil society advocacy initiatives towards states. These provide knowledge on incentives, strategies and other factors shaping this lobby & advocacy for both states and civil society organizations (see e.g. Unsicker 2013; Rugendyke 2007, Raustiala 1997). They provide important insights into the reasons why each side may wish to collaborate in the shaping of policies. But few look into partnership-like state-civil society collaborations and as 'partners' in lobby & advocacy. Those that exist, provide some insights on the added value such collaborations may have in specific contexts, such as joint lobby & advocacy of international institutions. The most well-known partnership-like action revolves around the 'boomerang pattern'. This may involve a form of partnership in which civil society organizations, barred from state influence in their country, request support from stronger non-state and state actors to influence their country's government (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 1999). Some of the literature looks into incentives for civil society organizations to partner with states. Such factors include, for example, the relative power of the state partner at international institutions that partnerships seek to influence, or the accessibility of the

state partner (Pallas and Uhlin 2014). However, these publications tend to focus on the agency of civil society organizations and the added value of these collaborations. The agency of states, and the added value of partnership in lobby & advocacy for the states that civil society organizations partner with, are underexposed. Moreover, these publications focus on situations in which partnership is developed on the basis of a strategic consideration concerning specific issues and policy processes, rather than that it is integrated into more structurally embedded relations, as in the Strategic Partnerships programme.

With the Strategic Partnership programme, the Ministry and civil society organizations are committed to partnership as an ongoing relationship with many dimensions. This adds complexity to the partnerships concerning matters of alignment and strategy, as well as to the way in which collaborations are embedded in political and bureaucratic relationships. On the one hand, the policy framework is imbued with social transformation logic (Elbers 2012: 174-175). Within this logic, development is viewed as an indigenous process aimed at changing power relations which must be locally owned to be effective and sustainable. It is thought that civil society is only able to challenge vested interests and contribute to development processes when it is able to operate autonomously from the state and from donors. Partnerships are seen as the translation of these premises into operational practices. The social transformation logic recognizes the intrinsic value of partnerships, and this recognition is apparent in the policy framework, providing space to civil society organizations to make their own choices and advance their own objectives, collaborating with the Ministry as equal partners. At the same time, the policy framework also expresses managerial logic, promoting effectiveness in terms of the attainment of objectives pertaining to capacity development and programme results.

All this implies that the expectations of the partnerships will not necessarily be straightforward nor shared by everyone. Even though participants may see potential added value, likely there will be important sensitivities that are rooted in the complex relationships between Ministry and Alliances. There may also be perceptions of potential risk and diverging understandings, many of which may be implicit or not effectively engaged with so far. The fact that cooperation is not only with the Ministry and Dutch civil society organizations, but also with local partners and the Embassies, will add to the complexity of the relationships. The Ministry is operating in a context in which results – and evidence of these results – are of primary importance to pursue the legitimacy of development policy programmes (Heinrich et al. 2016; Riddell 2014). All these dimensions of complexity, plus the novelty of the programme, underline the relevance of the research programme.

1.4 Structure of the report

Chapter 2 will describe and explain the methods used for the research. Chapter 3 discusses forms of collaboration and added value that actors envisage when it comes to partnership. Chapter 4 will present opportunities identified by participants. Chapter 5 discusses four types of challenges to partnership as identified by the various: risks, unknowns, points of attention and limiting factors. Each of these chapters outlines

the spectrum of expectations that we recorded, as well as the ways in which they converge and diverge across actor categories. Chapter 6 presents views from the partner organizations in low-and lower-middle-income countries, whereas Chapter 7 will identify suggestions for a learning agenda, considering learning agenda points mentioned by interviewees, and points emerging from the interviews in a more implicit sense. We also identify points that we consider as ‘silences’: themes that interviewees did not address but that we believe require attention considering the ambitions of the Strategic Partnership programme. Chapter 8 integrates the insights into the conclusions and recommendations.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data collection

The research questions have been addressed by employing document analysis for preliminary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and an online survey of partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries.

We analysed 25 partnership programme documents and partnership agreements on the key themes identified in the introduction. First insights on the expectations of the Alliances were listed. A preparatory group interview with all staff at the Civil Society Division of the Social Development Department (DSO-MO) provided a useful starting point for the round of interviews.

Informed by the documents and the preparatory interview, an interview guide was developed to collect opinions from NGOs, Department contact persons of these NGOs, and Embassy staff members. The interview guide addressed questions around added value, forms of collaboration, risks and other challenges, and a learning agenda, but also allowed for the necessary open discussion essential in the exploratory phase of the research.

Based on explicit criteria, 14 NGOs or NGO consortia were selected for a group interview. Selection criteria included thematic focus, orientation towards dialogue & dissent, complexity of the consortium, core business of the lead party (service delivery or lobby & advocacy), geographical orientation, and length of relationship with the Ministry. In addition, relative 'outliers' (focus on particularly sensitive themes, or Southern-based lead NGO) were included to provide the widest possible spectrum on the programme expectations. Group interviews were conducted with two to four closely involved staff members of the consortium; most interviews took place at the NGO head offices, and in one case by Skype.

We also interviewed 12 'thematic' policy officers at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who serve as liaison persons for one of the fourteen selected NGOs or NGO consortia. These interviews were sometimes individual conversations, and sometimes group interviews with up to three policy officers. Furthermore, we interviewed staff members at 5 Royal Netherlands Embassies. These were selected considering geographical spread, level of involvement with the partnerships and the number of partnerships. Interviews took place over phone or skype and were with one or two staff members. Interviews were recorded, when possible, and subsequently transcribed. For confidentiality reasons, we do not disclose information on the identities of the interviewees other than basic data regarding their organisational background.

A survey with 539 partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries was conducted as well, as we also wanted to include the perceptions of the Alliance partners. The survey was designed with input generated by the NGO interviews and by two group interviews with one of the Alliances based in low- and lower-middle-income countries. Since the research was largely exploratory, the research process was iterative in nature,

Table 1. Organisational background of the interviewees

Programmes	Lead organisation	# Alliance partners
Fair green and global alliance	Both ENDS	5
Global alliance for green and gender action	FCAM	2
Towards a worldwide influencing network	Oxfam Novib	1
No news is bad news	Free Press	1
Shared resources, joint solutions	IUCN	1
Partnership for rights, inclusivity, diversity and equality	COC	-
Freedom from fear	Pax	1
Convening and Convincing	ICCO	5
Conducive environments for effective policy	NIMD	1
Right here, right now	Rutgers	6
Fair Wear alliance	Fair Wear	2
Green livelihoods alliance	Milieudefensie	2
Advocacy for change	Solidaridad	-
Capacitating change: empowering people in fragile contexts	Cordaid	-
MFA Departments		
Multilateral Organisations and Human Rights Department (DMM)		
Inclusive Green Growth Department (IGG)		
Sustainable Economic Development Department (DDE)		
Social Development Department/Health and Aids Division (DSO/GA)		
Social Development Department/Civil Society Organisations Division (DSO/MO)		
Department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid (DSH)		
Royal Netherlands Embassies regional locations		
Southeast Asia		
Central Africa		
East Africa		

in which team decisions on methodology were taken in due course as the research proceeded (often in consultation with DSO/MO).

This report is meant to be a contribution to the further development of the programme. It intends to chart the development of partnership development during its first year and to provide learning inputs for partners and for monitoring the programme. The Ministry will stimulate the learning process by writing a response to this research report, as a start for further discussion between the Ministry and its partners.

2.2 Data analysis

The data analysis was qualitative and quantitative in nature. Analysis of programme documents, agreements and annexes was qualitative by identifying the spectrum and prevalence of the expectations presented in the documents. The analysis of the background data of the Embassies was qualitative and quantitative in order to provide a proper overview of the Embassies' involvement in the light of capacities. The interviews were analysed qualitatively, using the qualitative data analysis software programme ATLAS.ti. Interview notes were analysed looking for expressions concerning expectations on added value, forms of collaboration, opportunities, different types of challenges and suggestions for a learning agenda. This generated a spectrum of expectations on each of these dimensions, and facilitated a subsequent analysis of the ways in which expectations converged and diverged within and between the three main interviewee categories (NGO, Ministry Department contact person, or Embassy staff member).

The survey data were analysed in the last stage of the research effort, as it required time to prepare the survey questions, translate these into three languages (English, Spanish, French) and to discuss these with a few pilot participants. Collecting the contact data of partner organizations was rather time-consuming, but this careful process eventually generated a very high (40%) response rate. Both quantitative survey data (most questions) as well as qualitative data (one open question) were analysed and are presented in Chapter 6.

Throughout this report, the anonymity of all the interviewees and all the organizations involved has been carefully respected and guaranteed. The interview data will remain confidential, and the data management is the responsibility of the researchers and their institutions.

2.3 Limitations of this research project

For this research project, we interviewed NGO staff closely involved in the Strategic Partnership programme. We also interviewed Departmental contact persons who are closely involved in the programme. Individual NGO staff members did not necessarily represent a more broadly shared set of expectations regarding the Strategic Partnership programme within their organization. In a few cases, not every

organization that was part of an Alliance was present at the group interview. Along the same lines, Department contact persons did not necessarily represent the only or most important representative (or Department) engaged with NGOs. In many cases NGOs also engaged with many other representatives within the Ministry: those actors were generally not interviewed.

Another limitation was that the interviews were conducted in the Spring or Summer of 2016, at a time when the development of the partnership was still ongoing. By the time of the report's completion, partnerships may have advanced considerably.

A further limitation was that we were not in a position to do justice to the context from which interviewees approached the partnerships. For example, developments around Embassy financing and control over financing may well have played a role in the way Embassy staff sometimes discussed partnerships (e.g. as being imposed), without such developments being explicitly mentioned. Neither was it always clear how and to what extent expectations expressed by interviewees were shaped by their expectations of partnership alone. The Strategic Partnership programme works with a Theory-of-Change approach that leaves room for flexibility. This approach may create uncertainty which may be seen as potentially problematic by interviewees, who are perhaps used to a more controlled way of collaborating. This may have impacted on their expectations of partnership within the programme more broadly, without this becoming more explicit.

With regard to the survey among partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries, it is important to point out that not all Alliances participated and those that did not necessarily provided contact details for all their partners. As such, it remains unknown how many partners are involved in the entire Strategic Partnership programme and, consequently, it is not possible to determine the representativeness of this part of the study. Nonetheless, the large response rate (40%) makes us confident that the answers are indicative of the importance attached to the study by local partners.

3. Collaboration in partnership and its added value

This chapter presents expectations regarding the forms of collaboration that interviewees foresee, as well as the added value they associate with this form of collaboration. We start with a brief discussion on expectations identified in programme documents, partnership agreements, and annexes, and then continue with the interview results. In the subsequent sections, we will discuss different forms of collaboration and the added value that interviewees associate with these: more collaborative relations; information exchange, brokering and facilitation; mutual influencing, joint lobby & advocacy; protection of activists. In a separate section, we will discuss how and why interviewees differ when it comes to collaboration and added value. In a concluding section, we will focus on the nature and the implications of the patterns identified.

3.1 Document analysis

The programme documents, partnership agreements, and annexes present a wide range of expected ways of collaboration. Since the NGO Alliances were in charge of their programme designs, we will start with their documents. There is no clear pattern of the foreseen collaboration between NGOs, departments of the Ministry and Embassies. Some documents present detailed descriptions of this collaboration, whereas others only make a few general statements. Descriptions often remain generic, with little specification of concrete opportunities, divisions of labour, policymaking arenas or policy processes.

Documents describe partnership as a relation between equals, with collaboration to take shape through collective strategizing. However, NGOs often appear to place themselves in the driver's seat, with a support role for the departments of the Ministry and the Embassies. Overall, documents describe a wide range of ways of collaboration related to lobby & advocacy and contributing to an enabling environment.

Documents commonly speak of *dialogue*; some express the need for relatively frequent contact, also depending on particular developments. Others foresee less interaction and limited to a few times a year, and apparently not to be geared towards running needs.

Documents often mention *information-centred interaction*: mutual information-sharing, focusing on NGOs providing the Ministry with policy input. This often concerns the promotion of NGO viewpoints and evidence towards the Ministry, in which case the Ministry is either an ally or a lobby & advocacy target for the NGOs.

Documents also speak of *brokering and facilitation* to provide NGOs with possibilities to interact with third actors (including policy and private actors) and to get access to policy-making arenas. The role of the Ministry or the Embassies is in these settings an interlocutor between NGOs and other actors. Diplomacy is mentioned in some cases,

mostly in relation to strengthening in-country enabling environments for civil society groups. Joint lobby & advocacy efforts are sometimes mentioned, with the expectation of complementary rather than collective acting; sometimes the synergies to be gained by the collaboration are highlighted.

As was expected, ways of collaboration appear to differentiate, depending on the alignment between the NGO Alliance and the Ministry. In some programme documents alignment between the Ministry and the NGO Alliances is seen as evident and as a basis for collaboration. Other documents present alignment as a condition for collaboration; when absent, collaboration is either considered to be unfeasible, or the Ministry itself becomes a target for the promotion of programme objectives. Discussions of these types of differences tend to remain generic, without identifying actual areas of contention. Several documents propose to engage with the Ministry both as a target as well as an ally.

Dissent is generally not discussed. In a few cases statements are included on *space for dissent* as part of the proposed partnership. In other cases, documents present the NGO Alliance relationships with the Ministry as a 'critical friendship' in which critical input is offered serving an apparently shared objective.

The degree to which documents mention *added value aspects* generated by the partnership between NGOs, Departments of the Ministry and Embassies is diverse. The following added value aspects can be identified. Partnership can contribute to enabling in-country environments, mostly concerning the protection of local civil society groups and the creation of operational space (particularly by the Embassies). The departments of the Ministry and the Embassies can open doors and offer possibilities for interaction with third actors (including policy and private actors), next to providing access to policymaking arenas through brokering and facilitation. Sharing information (or intelligence) can generate input for both sides and can also contribute to learning. The documents mostly focus on the ways in which this input can help to promote NGO viewpoints in national and international arenas. Collaboration between the departments of the Ministry (plus Embassies) and NGOs includes synergies (building on each other's activities) and mutual support activities, adding to overall effectiveness. Added value is expected in relation to issues concerning lobby & advocacy, but not linked to contributing to an enabling environment.

Below, we present the interview results and identify different ways of collaboration and their added value discussed by the interviewees.

3.2 More collaborative relations

The general picture is that NGO interviewees expect, and experience, that the Strategic Partnership programme will generate easier access to Ministry and Embassy staff. This access does not depend on personal contacts as much as before, has more legitimacy, and is provided more swiftly and systematically.

There is the realization: one has to do something together, it feels different.

In the case of [country] of course at the Ministry there are people working on it and then we also have really easy access, you see an interplay coming about between us local and here in the Netherlands and with the Ministry here and in the Embassy.

In the past it was more diffuse and depending a lot on personal contacts, and it was not structured. There are also examples where we did not have those contacts at all. Now it is simple: it has to happen, there is really a framework that gives space for this kind of conversation.

Expected ways of collaboration are based on the understanding that the Strategic Partnership programme will generate dialogue-based and more collaborative cooperation between NGOs and Ministry/Embassies. Interviewees expect relationships with the Ministry to become more equal and already experience this in practice:

We sit around the table with the Ministry a lot more to talk about all kinds of topics. That in itself, by definition, leads to a much more intensive and balanced relationship between the Ministry and us.

Interviewees also expect that the Ministry will become more supportive (accommodating, helpful, pro-active) than in previous programmes:

Under the Co-Financing Programme (MFS), collaboration was more reactive, under the spur of the moment [...] Partnerships are now just beginning, but the expectation is that it will become more systematic. Not just when people get killed, but also looking at situations of major risk and working out with the Ministry and the Embassies how to make sure that people will not get killed.

We have had a deficit in the annual account, but the Ministry now tried to come to a common solution. This kind of accommodation was not present during the MFS programme. Now we are looking with controllers how particular procedures can be simplified.

This also applies to designing the programmes together in which the Ministry appears to be more than just a donor. To a certain extent, the Ministry designs the programmes in dialogue with the NGOs. Even though interviewees disagree whether this actually happens, some do see a different interaction emerging, rooted in more dialogical relationships as the foundation of the partnership.

In the past, we always tried to contact the Ministry as much as possible. The fact that we now, every three months, sit around the table with our interlocutors at the Ministry is new. In that sense, it is also a collective construction of a framework, and how to detail that. That is different from the past when one had to tender, write documents and implement programmes. This is much more constructing it through dialogue.

Department contact persons reflect in a similar way on the new relationships emerging from the partnership programme setup. Interviewees reflected on the new role that the programme allocates to them compared to the regular practice:

There is now a new framework that legitimizes that we work with [partner] and there is money for this as well.

There is a common purpose: you are in the trajectory together and you are much more involved in the programme.

The use of Theories of Change, instead of log frames, makes the whole thing more programmatic in nature and makes it possible to work more within the context. Trust is also more important, since the role on both sides is different. It is more about equal partners facing a job together.

This perception of a 'new foundation' is not shared by everyone. Several interviewees from NGOs as well as the departments of the Ministry believe they simply continue the same practice. This is even more evident with Embassy staff, who generally do not perceive the Strategic Partnership programme as a novel way of working.

NGOs generally do see the added value of more open and equal relationships, interactions and open-ended work modalities. These relationships provide the foundation for a range of opportunities to engage with the Ministry as a source of knowledge, brokerage and facilitation, target and ally. Partnerships appear to have a clear strategic value. Interviewees from the Ministry often identified similar added value aspects in the partnership: more equal and more dialogical relationships were perceived as useful and positive. At the same time, staff of departments of the Ministry expressed this added value generally in less strategic terms, or they identified fewer added value aspects. In the following paragraphs, we will elaborate on each of these ways of collaboration and the added value attached to them, according to the interviewees.

3.3 Information exchange

Many new ways of collaboration revolve around information sharing. NGO interviewees foresee enhanced possibilities for contact and increased willingness by staff of departments of the Ministry to obtain information from NGOs. Interviewees perceived new space to provide input 'from the ground', and to share their expertise in order to promote their agendas.

In the preparation of trade missions, you see a shift in the sense that more information is collected on certain issues.

NGOs believe that policy- and politics-related knowledge also can be fruitfully exchanged in the partnerships. Interviewees consider it helpful to know, for example, what the Ministry is planning or what an Embassy's viewpoints are, so that politically relevant information can be provided in order to adjust plans.

Department contact persons at the Ministry consider working with NGO input as a valuable aspect of collaboration which can help to enhance the quality of policymaking:

You know that [working with NGO-produced texts in international negotiations] is effective because it is exactly the constituents who put the finger spot on and explain what the consequences are for them. They are experts in their area. While we as negotiators are more generalist in terms of expertise.

Due to more frequent interaction in the partnership, several Department contact persons and Embassy staff members mentioned that the NGOs more easily and more frequently may be asked to provide information. Importantly, the partnership may be expected to generate knowledge 'from the ground': locally-based knowledge, or knowledge about a sector the Department deals with:

This way of collaboration generates a lot more information on certain topics. Especially from the field, especially here I see advantages [...] These are your eyes and ears in an area, about which you not only get information from the Embassy but also from different NGOs they work with. It is also really good for developing opinions, and when deciding something, that you involve [partner] in such an analysis.

If [partner] had not received the money, the Ministry would probably get information if it would have asked. But now we see each other regularly [...] Because of the partnership a relationship can develop in which we call each other when something big is going on, or when we need input for questions asked by parliamentarians.

NGOs also may exchange knowledge in the form of tools and approaches. This is not necessarily directly part of the partnership programme or of a common agenda, but NGOs do offer other useful sources of expertise.

We had a meeting with all actors involved and we looked at the possibilities for complementarity. How can we collaborate? It was especially about the sharing of tools.

The way of working could inspire us: an alternative approach. If the evaluation shows that it is effective, it could supplement our work. [The partner]'s Theory of Change, how it is built up. We might need to get more involved with that kind of approach.

Some contact persons welcomed critical voices, inviting the NGOs also to act as sparring partners. 'Bring it on', one contact person says, and another, 'I expect at some point there will be highly conflictual discussions, but I would enjoy that. It is something that will strengthen us'. Others stress the independent role of NGOs, and the space for dissent it may generate. Several interviewees rather emphasized NGO dissenting voices as a potential challenge, something to be dealt with and to be resolved properly, likely through dialogue and negotiation.

Embassies expressed their readiness to help partners perform their role by providing the necessary information on the country context and an indication of what the Embassy can contribute.

One job of the Embassy is to help and make sure that the programme can be implemented as well as possible in [country]. To achieve this, until now we mostly have had meetings with partners and local partners to present the context, chart the Embassy policy and manage expectations.

Embassies also convened meetings to explore potentially interesting linkages between interests and plans among the Embassies and the partners. Also advisory meetings on intervention strategies will be convened, and have been convened already. For example, an Embassy may indicate to a partner that a politically sensitive issue like LGBT would best be addressed from a health perspective in a particular country context. Or advice can be shared that is rooted in the Embassies' knowledge of political and policy processes, which the partner can use to its advantage. Embassies considered some partners to be potentially interesting sources of information; often also because they knew these partners from earlier or existing collaborations. This obviously also depends on the (extent of) the NGO presence in a country and the geographic and thematic focus of its work. Information sharing about activities is valued so that the Embassies or the departments of the Ministry are not taken by surprise by an activity a partner may undertake. As an Embassy staff member says:

In some cases, being visible as an Embassy may be counterproductive. We ask those working on certain issues, to come and meet and to do some risk analysis, and we agree on a division of roles. So that we are not reactive. The Embassy does not want to be caught off-guard. We do expect there may be backlashes when people identify the partnership with the position of the Dutch government, and we have to be prepared for that.

NGOs point out that by exchanging information with the government as a strategic partner, they can better relate to the realities of politics, policymaking institutions and processes. It can provide 'reality checks' and it can help to engage with government perspectives. The Embassies can provide knowledge on countries that NGOs do not have. Moreover, the departments of the Ministry and the Embassies can contribute to NGO learning processes by providing alternative perspectives and complementary knowledges, both on particular issues as well as on lobby and advocacy.

For the contact persons and the Embassy staff information exchange can contribute to learning in different ways: local knowledge, NGO expertise and alternative perspectives can increase quality in a range of areas, not necessarily related to the programme only. Added value is generally articulated in terms of learning, often without a clear connection to the Ministry's strategic objectives. It appears that learning is a broadly shared added value of information sharing, even though there are dissenting voices from contact persons of departments of the Ministry and Embassy staff.

3.4 Brokering and facilitation

NGOs expect that the contact persons and others within the departments of the Ministry and the Embassies will facilitate access to third actors, and will help them to create valuable interactions. These third actors can be Embassy or staff members of departments of the Ministry as well as international actors.

We know that the Ministry has different internal bodies and Departments and a lot of contacts with structures and organisations, and people in certain spaces that are important for us. We want to know more about these spaces and learn how to do advocacy there. They can help us connect better as they will have relevant information.

NGOs interviewed also expected that the Ministries and the Embassies will use their convening power to bring parties together. With these brokering and facilitating activities, they will provide access to platforms where NGO agendas can be advanced.

Maybe it is not at the level of the ambition, but I see when it comes to [policy agenda] we have certain targets; if [international body] organizes something about the topic, the Ministry tries to be present and mobilizes organizations to make a contribution. In that sense, you get a platform that you otherwise would not get.

When it comes to the development of a strategic vision or using the channels of the Ministry as a partnership, you have a much wider reach than as an individual NGO. The idea of working with Embassies and organizing something together is a very good way of working. Embassies opening doors for us: that is what it comes down to.

In [country] a discussion is going on how the Embassy can be a broker to get the people around the table. I expect a pro-active attitude....at least it can prepare well from two sides and consider how to get a constructive dialogue going.

Along the same lines, Department contact persons frequently mentioned opening up their networks and providing access for NGOs. Interviewees expressed this in supportive terms, discussing their collaboration as geared towards NGO needs and ambitions.

I tried to bring people from [other Ministry] into contact with [partner]. That sort of thing. Not planned, as it happens. Policy is also 'opening the door for a minute', this is the moment we can....

[Partner] has good contact with lots of Embassies and goes and meets them a lot. The triangle we try to complete now and then, that they let us know that they are going and I help them get a contact person and they get back to us.

We can make our international setting and network available to [partner] so that it can perform its role better.

Interviewees also suggested that this way of collaboration can be carried out with relatively little mutual adjustments and investments, and with few strategic implications.

I don't want to have an active role. If we as Ministry can tie networks together we will do that. Open doors. But in practice I do not expect this to happen a lot. ...we will try to set up this platform also for other organisations that we subsidize. Wherever we can we will connect with other networks, coordinate and learn.

Embassy staff see 'opening doors' for NGOs as their key task in the Strategic Partnership programme. With their networks, Embassies can introduce NGOs to other civil society actors in a country, private sector actors, as well as politicians. This work may support NGOs but in some cases also the Embassy itself.

A role of the Embassy is to open doors to relevant players in [country]. This is a brokerage job. But the NGOs have to do the work.

We were asked a lot to give opening speeches at meetings. It is good for the profile of the Embassy and maybe we should continue doing it. However, it is difficult when you have twelve partnerships and only two staff members.

Like information sharing, brokering is also perceived as a relatively basic form of collaboration, requiring little extra commitment.

We don't have [topic] in our strategic plan. Fine if [partner] comes here to do this sort of thing. It is not really a strategic partnership in the sense that there is any stake in it for us. We have other goals with [country]. But we do not get in their way. When I cannot go into substantive questions, I connect them to the partners working in on that topic in the country. This is where our role ends, I think.

NGO interviewees emphasized that the Ministry, with its reputation and connections as an important government institution, can guide the NGOs towards targets and arenas. A partnership with the Ministry can potentially empower the NGOs. The same goes for the Embassies, who due to their authority and convening power can have a strategic significance for NGOs. The Embassies can open doors and can get local organisations to be accepted as interlocutors, legitimizing civil society voices. The Embassies also can bring companies and NGOs together to facilitate interaction that otherwise may not take place.

An Embassy can facilitate dialogue. They can get us at the same table with the Dutch companies in a certain country. When the Embassy asks an international company at the table, it is different from an NGO or local partner doing that.

Department contact persons describe the brokerage and facilitation role primarily in terms of 'support for NGOs'. Collaboration appears to be rooted in the alignment of objectives and approaches, so this support can be considered to have an added value for the Ministry in the sense that partners work together for common purpose. At the same time, we see little articulation of added value in terms of Departmental activities and specific purposes amongst Department contact persons. Embassy staff perceived the added value as well by enhancing the access to NGO networks, thereby also strengthening their own networks, and simultaneously learning in terms of content. This may also concern the engagement with other NGOs, government organizations, or private sector actors.

I would be very interested to know in what way partners are involved with, for example, the private sector. This Embassy is in a transition phase, going from aid to trade, building different relationships.

This added value is partly related to a shift in tasks, with more emphasis on the role of the private sector. With the reduced capacity after the recent budget cuts this implies that the Embassies need to develop new directions, often with more limited financial and human resources.

It is good to try this instrument in a context of decreasing funds for development cooperation and capacity. As an Embassy in this way you can still become better informed and better develop your networks, than without a partnership.

3.5 Mutual influencing

NGO interviewees also expected to engage with the Ministry as a lobby target. Due to enhanced access to the Ministry, the NGOs can more easily promote their agendas and influence policy development by bringing their own perspectives and knowledge to the table.

As civil society, we want to keep the Ministry on the job. The Ministry is involved in investments but the social and ecological impact needs proper attention, we try to strengthen this in the Ministry, sometimes together with the people, sometimes against them.

Based on a dialogical relationship, interviewees expect openness of the Ministry towards this type of influencing.

We want to enhance local voices with [Dutch contractors]. The Embassy is interested and does not want the Netherlands to create some sort of monster over there, with hindsight. But the ball is in our court; we act from a good sense of what their influence is. These are small things but there are definitely concrete possibilities.

We don't have a lot of contacts with [Department] but we want to build those via the partnership. To be able to say to them, if you want to [policy] make sure that these and these things and interests can be taken into consideration. We expect and hope to have more influence in such a setting.

Agendas and perspectives may also diverge to such a degree that collaboration between the Ministry and the NGO Alliance is less likely. Interviewees do believe there is space for dissent and are convinced this space has grown and is more legitimate, now that it is part of a formal agreement. However, disagreement and dissent may also give rise to problems. At these occasions, interviewees expect to continue at least a dialogue, and keep each other informed so that the other party knows what is coming up. 'In partnerships, there should be no surprises', someone commented. Dialogue can also help to resolve particular issues, so is the expectation.

With [issue], while one group was negotiating inside, another group was protesting outside. It has been established in the contract that we are allowed clash within this partnership, so it is more or less agreed that it is possible to combine different strategies. We also agree that when feelings run too high we will get around the table to make sure the subsidy is not endangered. But we don't expect it to get that far.

Department contact persons often see NGOs as sparring partners, providing input to Ministry policies via their dialogic relationship; policy influencing is considered to be part of the partnership. Contact persons explained they had tried to improve the matching between policy priorities, selection of countries, number of countries (reduction, more strategic focus, or better match with geographic priorities) and conceptualizations of strategy in the programme documents. They wanted to maximise compatibility and adjustment of the programmes through negotiation:

We had a number of things we wanted to include but that did not relate well right away, so we discussed this with the director. You see, we had a certain assignment from our director and [partner] had arguments against that, and we discussed those. The director was also present and it was eventually resolved. It was mainly about the list of countries since we did not want to direct the content of the programme.

In pretty good harmony, we established a focus. A relatively small number of countries. Well, with a bit of give and take I should say, we now have a programme that largely meets the priorities of both the Embassy and the headquarters.

Department contact persons differed to the extent in which they choose to exert this influence. Some were reluctant to exert influence, either because they did not have the ambition to do so, or because they felt this was not appropriate for their role as a partner.

There is the possibility, and maybe more than before, to think along and to be flexible. There is also the possibility to have demands, for example about

the location where the programmes are to be implemented. But our Department made little use of this possibility to use these demands. We made our voice heard insufficiently. The most important reason for this is that [Department] itself is not clear on what it wants.

We have reflected on their pathways of change. Within and between. It should be formulated much more strategically. But theme-wise, this was what [partner] chose to focus on. We did not tell them they should make different choices. Also with other partners we did not do that.

These attempts to influence programmes enter sensitive territories. Some NGOs described it as an effort to limit their autonomy and as being invasive. In a reaction, Department contact persons stated that adjustment was only probed in a few minor areas, but it was not imposed as they also respected the desire for NGO autonomy. Influencing programme content appears to be targeted at creating synergies between agendas and activities. For example, by entering into negotiations a Department can attempt to influence the partner to work in the Departments' focus countries, or to emphasize a particular issue in a programme. There is no indication that Departments want to integrate the programmes into the Department policy.

Embassy staff in a few cases suggested that it would be desirable that NGOs adjusted to their objectives, as this is often not taking place due to the fact that NGOs approach the Embassy as autonomous actors carrying out their own programmes.

Regarding the added value of mutual influencing, NGO interviewees indicated that partnership can provide enhanced space to address the Ministry as a target, as it can create opportunities for agenda setting by drawing attention to certain issues, or approaches that are not as prominent on policymaking agendas as they should be. Partnership can also create space for providing input to the Ministry on issues and processes that both the Ministry and the NGOs are working on, enhancing inclusion of NGO viewpoints and knowledge into the policy processes of the Ministry.

We provide relevant information in order to keep people on their toes on our topics. Local information, from the ground, is really detailed. We often see that the Ministry does not have that type of information.

Broadly speaking, Department contact persons welcome the initiatives taken by NGOs to prioritize the voices of civil society. Inclusiveness and a better policy knowledge-base are key values central to NGO influencing. Some Department contact persons considered the opportunity to become involved with partners working on certain themes as an additional added value of partnership:

Suddenly there was the decision somewhere in the Ministry that we were going to do this. This huge amount of money was great for a topic I care about deeply. To me it was an enormous opportunity. Even though it is formally not our money if you are in a partnership you can use your influence: what gets emphasized? How it can be used in our policy?

Department contact persons discussed the added value of attempts to influence programmes mostly in terms of quality enhancement. By influencing, programmes may be improved in terms of conceptualization or strategy, or may become more aligned with the Ministry's policies.

3.6 Joint lobby & advocacy

Several NGO interviewees argued that the Ministry (including Embassies) can advocate for programmes, insert NGO input into lobby & advocacy activities, or promote certain agenda points in order to contribute to the programme objectives.

We see this as the Ministry's role: influencing at international, bilateral and national level, diplomatic negotiations and carrying out strategies and pressure. For us, in our field, we really consider this to be the role of the Ministry.

In the countries where we work, when we have an agenda on [issue] the Ministry can employ its own influencing mechanisms.

NGOs refer to particular Department contact persons as champions who promote their cause and who are virtually allies in targeting the Ministry.

We have nice and open contact with our contact person. The nice thing is that she is coming with us to [country], what we want to focus on is exactly the topic she is working on and she is interested in taking part in our programme over there.

Partners can coordinate and collaborate to complement each other's actions. NGOs can do things to advance shared agendas that the Ministry or the Embassies cannot do, as they are often limited because of political constraints, according to NGOs. And the other way around; in this sense, actions can complement each other.

In [countries] I see the Embassies playing roles that we cannot play, and that is the interesting part for me. In [country] the Embassy played a role in protecting [staff member of partner] who was being threatened, and made sure that person could leave the country. In [country] the Embassy was busy at a higher political level, having access to that in another way. Levels that we don't have access to; via the Embassy one can obtain this access or insert one's points.

Some Department contact persons and Embassy staff members have discussed joint lobby & advocacy activities. In particular cases, this collaboration was expected to include NGOs taking advantage of the Ministry's contacts and leverage in policymaking arenas. The Ministry's role then became one of supporting NGO lobby & advocacy initiatives.

They can give messages to us when one of us goes to an international forum; they can make use of us.

In some cases, this involves acting as a champion for the partner's cause, and taking relatively more responsibility for a programme's success. As a Department contact person and Embassy staff member said:

My role is, if they identify or experience something in a country, for example, relating to [institution]. I can take this information to [other Department] and they can work with that information because they are on the board.

We are actively involved with [partner]'s activities and we show it at higher political levels.

The added value of joint lobby & advocacy activities of NGOs often comes down to identifying the leverage of the Ministry and the Embassies in particular contexts, and harnessing this to strengthen messages, broaden their reach, and take them to locations where they can have an impact.

I see it as very specific little actions. Bring into action a civil servant or Embassy staff member at a certain moment. Making a link, supporting a certain position, of when a partner is threatened, speaking out or mobilizing political channels.

Department contact persons sometimes argued that joint lobby & advocacy implies strengthening the NGO programme of lobby & advocacy. They did not perceive a direct added value of joint lobby & advocacy initiatives for their Department. Others stressed the complementary roles between government actors and NGOs, such as building on complementary networks or lobbying roles. In these cases, the department contact persons did see synergies between the and the NGOs.

In my [Department] we have started to think about what kind of relation we want in this partnership. What we want to get out of it... maybe strategic relations in the longer run. We can suggest for example to [partner] to organize a meeting about [topic] or ask partners to mobilize companies to sign [covenant].

It is present in the UN diplomacy. There you can do things as a state that an NGO cannot do. For example, at [name of UN Council] you can put things on the agenda – my colleagues and I can do that – and then the NGOs provide input.

To a limited extent, Embassy staff members did see options for joint lobby & advocacy initiatives, even though they saw this more as actions in which both sides are strategically involved. We may note here that the Embassies sometimes differentiated between the partnerships, appearing to select only partners for joint lobby & advocacy activities that were closely aligned with their own agendas and approaches.

3.7 Protection of activists

The potential role of the Embassies role in protecting activists and organizations came up in several interviews. Embassies can help to protect persecuted activists and organisations by using their diplomatic immunity and via direct protective actions. They can also provide a safe meeting place for NGOs. Some interviewees were not sure, however, whether and to what degree Embassies will actually perform this role. This activity was not discussed in collaborative terms, but it can at a crucial moment become a key activity and an added value offered by the Embassies. As a Department contact person put it:

[Partner] works on rather sensitive issues, they, or local partners, can get in jail or something [...] I have always communicated to the Embassies that to me this is a very important aspect. It can't be that we give money to address a problem and it would be outrageous if we then don't protect them if they need that. From experience, I have learnt that you can achieve a lot more on that front than one may think.

Department contact persons also pointed at limited capacities and alignment as constraining factors, implying that they may not act in the way that Departments or NGOs expect them to do. Some NGO interviewees expressed doubts about the degree to which the Embassies will live up to this expectation, as they rarely discuss protection of activists as a way of collaboration. The added value of protecting activists was also seldom discussed during the interviews. When it was mentioned at all, it was related to protecting the lives of people involved in the Ministry's programmes, and their contribution to an enabling environment for civil society.

3.8 Different viewpoints

Different approaches to collaboration and added value were encountered amongst the interviewees. Interviewees identified different degrees and ways of collaboration, or looked differently at added value. In addition, expectations differed between actor categories.

First of all, important differences emerged between the NGOs and the Department contact persons concerning the degree in which collaboration was to be seen as *strategic*. NGO interviewees generally expected a strategic role of the Ministry's presence and influence in political and policymaking arenas. The Department contact persons that were supportive of the new programmes also expected using this power to advance the NGO programme objectives. At the same time, they often did not conceive the NGOs as potentially strategically and useful actors with a complementary added value in the context of promoting their objectives. More generally, the Department contact persons discussed collaboration less in terms of synergies generated by complementarity. Some also were of the opinion that their role in the partnership did not include shared responsibilities for strategic objectives. Along these lines, Department contact persons appeared to approach collaboration generally in terms of *support*.

Hence, partnership is about supportive activities like brokerage, facilitation of ‘open doors’, and information exchange for learning purposes.

Things like developing and arranging things practically, reporting, monitoring the framework. When it comes to content, something they (NGOs) want to achieve is access [funds] for their organizations. Those are monsters, often not transparent about who benefits, or who gets to be included in discussions. I can facilitate for [partner] how those things work, what mechanisms and how to get in. And they can share experiences and provide access, and we can trust this to people who negotiate for us so that this can be inserted, critical questions can be asked, and regulations can be adjusted.

This support also comes in the form of advising on programme quality:

I put a lot of time into the programme document. The contact persons in the alliance elaborated the Theory of Change, they set out to research collaboration ideas, and they tested these with us. We gave feedback, another round, back and forth. We focused particularly on what the ambition was for the coalition. It all remained a bit vague; we tried to get this sharper. Number of countries. Otherwise not a whole lot. Comment on the contents. I found that it was written up rather mechanically. You do not really go from a to b, and then to c; things happen unexpectedly, try to engage with that.

Several contact persons described their role in the partnership programme largely in management terms: their involvement in administrative aspects, responsibility for the implementation of the programme, employing a controlling function.

The programme should run well. Getting into the paper with substance-related stuff is not bad, but wasting money, doing very stupid things, not managing efficiently. That’s where I have to pay attention. Not running risks in the area of blameable management issues. Offending other countries, campaigning in a good way, informed and evidence-based, that sort of thing.

In those cases where Department contact persons pointed at the strategic relevance of NGOs in their work, they referred to their significance in concrete policymaking processes, in which NGOs can play complementary political roles.

A second important area of difference of viewpoints was related to the expected intensity of the collaboration. On this point, NGO interviewees often expressed higher expectations than Department contact persons:

[Partner] had extremely high expectations. That we should use all means and channels possible to make them play their role. So, we explored what could actually be done and what was overstretched, communicating this rapidly to make it more balanced and to prevent frustrations. I put a lot of time into that.

NGOs were generally more positive about the supportive and collaborative engagement of Ministry department staff, even though they did notice that their ambition levels for the partnership did not match those of the Ministry. These disappointments were visible in a limited involvement or commitment encountered during the first year of exploring the partnership. The consultation process they were involved in was constructive and supportive, but often not reciprocal and as committed they had hoped for. Indications were the disappointing lack of input or response to draft documents or showing insufficient strategic engagement and a sense of shared responsibility.

Even though contact persons may not always have lived up to the NGO expectations with regard to strategic involvement, NGO interviewees still looked for other contacts in the Ministry to explore alignment opportunities. They appreciated the Strategic Partnership programme for providing an enhanced access to staff members of departments of the Ministry.

A third area of difference concerned the involvement of the Embassies in the Strategic Partnership programme. NGOs and Department contact persons both foresee important roles for the Embassies. Department contact persons supported the NGOs in their effort to access and establish new relationships with the Embassies, and develop partnerships. Department contact persons described the efforts to raise awareness within the Embassies on what they consider opportunities or new roles, expressing the urgency to further develop these roles. For them, these roles lie in the opening up of networks, the convening of actors, advocacy and protection of activists. However, the Embassies often do not share an understanding that their role in the programme is necessarily prominent. An important issue here is that Embassies are confronted with multiple partnerships. An important consideration when it comes to collaboration and added value is the degree of alignment and coordination with Embassy policies and objectives. In many cases, alignment can be found, stimulating cooperation, but only with selected partners. Some Embassies indicated they clearly differentiated with their levels of engagement with partners. This also depended on the available capacity (staff time, expertise) within the Embassy. Another factor was the capacity to relate to the country’s political context, being able to add value to issues addressed by the partners in this context.

3.9 Discussion

We have noted that our interviewees expected a range of collaborations to take root as a result of the new partnerships. On the basis of more collaborative relations, they foresee enhanced information exchange, brokering and facilitation, mutual influencing, joint lobby & advocacy initiatives and protection of activists. The added value of collaboration is anticipated in terms of learning, and giving voice to civil society by providing access to political actors and policymaking arenas. Partners can also influence each other and strengthen their impact by acting together. And they can help to protect lives and contribute to an enabling environment for civil society. While the programme title ‘Dialogue and Dissent’ suggests a key role for differences in viewpoints and interests, partners expected that collaboration will be rooted in

the alignment of agendas and approaches. Some interviewees did mention that partnership also includes dissent in terms of forwarding critical viewpoints, keeping each other on the job, learning about alternative perspectives and filling knowledge gaps. NGO interviewees tended to see dissent as a valuable part of partnership, whereas Department contact persons and Embassy staff were more likely to perceive dissent in terms of *risk*.

Interviewees from different actor categories (NGOs, Ministry Department contact persons and Embassy staff) often had different expectations regarding collaboration and added value. There was a general agreement on ways of collaboration that require little strategic commitment: open and dialogical relationships, information sharing, brokering and facilitation to 'open doors'. However, as soon as more strategic commitment on lobby and advocacy is required, the ambitions of Department contact persons and Embassy staff seem considerably lower than NGO expectations. In particular, the perceptions of Embassies about mutual collaboration appeared to be different from those of NGOs and Ministry Department staff.

These differences may be rooted in the variation of anticipated added value. NGOs tend to estimate this as clear and evident: the prestige, the connections and the spaces opened up by the Ministry in important political arenas can make a real difference. For Ministry department and Embassy staff this is less evident and decisive for achieving of their own objectives, even though the value of contributing to a stronger civil society with the NGO programmes is broadly shared. This triggers the question what the nature of the strategic partnership really is. The documents and the interviews indicate that partnership in practice will mean that relatively autonomous NGO actors have the opportunity to mobilize Ministry department and Embassy staff to support their work. This support is based on the alignment of objectives and approaches, and the preparedness of the Ministry to support the NGO Alliances. Joint action, that is, being collectively responsible for shared goals, seems limited.

The NGO partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries and the objective of their capacity development was surprisingly absent in our discussions. The Strategic Partnership programme supposedly focuses on capacity development of partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries, even though the anticipated ways of collaboration largely concern Northern NGOs. The expectations in the interviews did not reveal a shared approach on this point, even though, the framework emphasizes jointly defined strategic goals, collective risk-taking, equal and reciprocal relations and mutual accountability. Capacity building is identified as the main programme focus. The experiences so far with the partnership between the Ministry and the NGOs has looked like it has been in the past, maybe more intense and with more dialogue. Several interviewees observed this state of continuity and questioned the novelty of the partnership in the new programme.

4. Opportunities

Interviewees identified a range of new opportunities offered by the Strategic Partnership programme: favourable circumstances or combinations of circumstances generated by the programme. In this chapter, we analyse these opportunities, stepping beyond the added value aspects identified in Chapter 3, towards the positive things that *may* happen, according to the interviewees.

4.1 Using synergies strategically

Potential synergies via the Strategic Partnership Programme were understood as instances in which the interaction between NGOs and the Ministry would lead to better results than if they would have acted separately, due to the complementary nature of their potential contributions to programmes. NGO interviewees particularly expected these synergies in three areas: complementary expertise, complementary networks, and complementary lobby & advocacy roles (or combinations of the three). One NGO interviewee observed, whilst discussing an issue on which both the Dutch government and the NGO were involved:

We are now considering what information we could deliver and what information is politically really interesting at which moment. From our side, we are sometimes so busy collecting that information we don't have enough energy or options to match that momentum with the political processes. [talking about a case] is one more possibility where we thought, we have access to information and ideas the Ministry does not have right away. But we are also interested in plugging that information into political processes in which we are not at the table. If we succeed in developing that focus, then the partnership really has something interesting to offer.

When there is alignment on agendas and approaches and the various actor categories all have different things to offer, they may complement each other's strengths, according to NGO interviewees as well as contact persons. This concerns (i) combining NGO information and other input with Ministry department and Embassy staff's ability to do politics, and (ii) combining activities at the national level with those at the international level, which may be realized when NGOs, Embassies and Ministry department staff coordinate and advance their shared objectives in different (national and international) arenas. A Department contact person noticed:

I really think that at the international level there are roles to play for us in lobby & advocacy. I am not sure exactly yet, but the modality we are moving towards needs to be brought together with the Sustainable Development Goals, but then at some moment in, let's say, New York, or with human rights trajectories. You very clearly get lobby & advocacy trajectories that start to touch upon what has to happen in those countries [where partners work]. There is very clearly a role for The Hague.

Another way of strategizing based on synergies concerns the complementary work of NGOs and the Embassies in those countries where lobby & advocacy efforts by NGOs can be strengthened through advocating for the same agenda but using different strategies simultaneously. NGOs, the Embassies and department contact persons all identified this as a possibility.

4.2 Making use of friction

NGO interviewees appreciated the space for dissent in the programme, as part of their role to speak out and as an essential programme element. Ministry department contact persons and Embassy staff discussed dissent generally in different terms; several contact persons did see opportunities for dissent in the Strategic Partnership programme. NGOs and contact persons also focused on potentially productive results of dissent. As an NGO interviewee put it:

Confrontation between tension and collaboration is not only a risk but also an opportunity. At least I think the power of our work is exactly that we work on both fronts, it's in the dynamic between the two that the exciting things happen. Collaboration without opposition is often a somewhat empty form of collaboration. The question is how to make relationships productive.

Even though contact persons did not celebrate dissent in the same way, some did mention that dissent may generate alternative perspectives that can help keep the Ministry on the job, making sure the right objectives are advanced, such as adjusting policies in the case of blind spots or erroneous approaches to particular issues. Hence, dissent is interpreted as offering instances of disruption that may help to renew and adjust, creating forms of inclusiveness that can be positive for certain outcomes. In that sense, dissent is welcomed if it is aimed at achieving these potentially positive outcomes.

4.3 Capacity development?

The strategic potential of realizing synergies through a multi-level approach relates to the main objective of the Strategic Partnership programme: capacity development. An NGO interviewee stated:

There is a certain paternalism to the idea that we have to go and strengthen lobby capacity over there, as if the partners over there do not have capacity and we do. Moreover, the causes of many problems are often located over here in the North as least as much as they are in the South.

Responding to this, a Ministry department staff member noted that it may be preferable to formulate the main policy objective in terms of *empowerment* rather than capacity development. Facilitating interaction between NGOs partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries and their lobby & advocacy targets – one of the main ways of collaborating foreseen in the Strategic Partnership programme –

empowers NGOs rather than that it is a mechanism of learning by teaching. Next to providing access, it also offers spaces and moments for learning that can be applied elsewhere. This statement can be read as a proposal for a working modality in which synergies target capacity development as the key objective of the Strategic Partnership programme. This is a matter not really addressed by most interviewees. It links to the added value that may be created through combining the capacities of all actors involved in the Strategic Partnership programme. This includes shared agendas, local information, access to political resources, and developing a basis for partnership to advance goals of NGO empowerment and thematic objectives.

4.4 How to develop opportunities further?

A collective effort is required to make the most of all the opportunities. These have to be made more specific by exploring how different partners can contribute in which way to what purposes. In other words, partners need to focus on developing collective strategies that can harness the potential opportunities of the Strategic Partnership. Otherwise, opportunities may be lost, as some interviewees suggested. For example, the Embassies may not be able to identify (or relate to) particular opportunities, or the Ministry department contact persons may not be able to find the space in their schedules to reflect and work on such opportunities. These collective efforts would at least include: exploring combinations of alignments, capacities, political processes (with the potential Dutch influence included), and the added value of government-NGO collaborations in a particular context for certain objectives. A contact person noted, while reflecting on the limited progress experienced in one of the partnerships:

There are opportunities. We need to make those explicit. Depending on [partner]'s programmes at the country level we need to have a discussion: where do we see our role, your role, do we see enough dynamism coming into that which you are able to develop at the national level? Which opportunities and limits do we see with the Embassies? Identify these and then enter into a dialogue with the Embassies, asking what they want from us as a Department when it comes to connecting it to a more strategic level. Then it will get some traction.

One interviewee explained how the explicit strategic focus of their NGO programme developed, with clear roles for different actor categories:

We brought together ongoing experiences and what were seen as opportunities for the various thematic domains. So, it is based on realistic possibilities and patterns of collaboration and partly also on professional intuitions: this is where there is space. There is space there, but it is also coloured by a willingness on our side. We know also now how difficult this collaboration is. We realize our own capacity limits and the limitations of the Ministry. Let us not tie ourselves to a giant Christmas tree of expectations. Let us look more realistically: these are the five themes we bring in. Let us zoom in on where we think there are realistic possibilities and where we, if we really work together, can really get something at the table about which we think,

hey, this is advantageous and also manageable for exactly that reason. Because, if we come up with something and within our organization it is rejected because it doesn't relate to our priorities or whatever, or within the Ministry we have to go against the flow, this is not particularly helpful.

Many NGO interviewees agreed that identifying opportunities and strategic focus for the partnerships would be enhanced by getting a better idea about the ambitions of the Ministry with the Strategic Partnership programme.

4.5 Reconsidering evaluation from a partnership perspective

Some NGO interviewees consider the Strategic Partnerships programme as an opportunity to reconsider evaluation approaches. The programme will provide the Ministry with space for a more reflexive approach due to the more open relationship with the NGO Alliances. One NGO interviewee was encouraged by the Ministry's initiative to reconsider relationships and ways of collaboration from a new angle:

I see a tremendous effort to get consistency of the approach, having it impact on reporting and the pushing back of reflexes at the Ministry. I have real respect for that, something has really changed. Whether we manage to keep that up in the sphere of accountability I don't know. Internally we try to contribute in a way, saying gee, there is much more space, potentially, to reflect on one's work.

A similar opportunity was identified by an NGO considering the mutual interest for demonstrating effectiveness. The partnership offers an opportunity for both parties to contribute to a more advantageous and appropriate approach of assessing the nature of the work that will be undertaken and the results that may be achieved:

Foreign Affairs always has had problems showing results, and we are with them. I can already hear the parliamentary questions coming up. If Foreign Affairs goes into this, realizing there is a need for another form of monitoring and looking at results, adjusting, the whole attribution story, they could play a role in supporting this. No hard figures but shifts in power; a certain way of dealing with measurement.

4.6 Discussion

Using synergies strategically, making use of friction, reconsidering capacity development, reconsidering evaluation from a partnership perspective: all these opportunities will trigger partners to make the most of the more open and equal relationships, interactions and open-ended forms of working together that the Strategic Partnerships Programme offers. These opportunities also may stimulate a collective and reflexive exploration, translating possibilities into action.

NGO interviewees were more outspoken on this issue, in line with their relatively more strategic outlook (see Chapters 3 and 5) and their positive view on the idea of partnership as a foundation for collaboration. Much of what NGO interviewees said on opportunities may also be read as an invitation to their governmental partners to think more strategic and to make the most of the potentials of the new programme in terms of strategic possibilities and reshaping collaborations. Several Department staff members of the Ministry mentioned similar opportunities during the interviews, whereas Embassy staff much less so.

5. Challenges

This chapter will integrate and compare viewpoints of NGOs, the Ministry Department contact persons and the Embassy staff members, analysing the spectrum of challenges identified by the interviewees. Often these challenges are similar in the three actor categories, but differences do exist which reflect their role and position within the Strategic Partnership programme. Four different types of challenges will be discussed below: risks, unknowns, points of attention and a limiting factor. The chapter concludes with a discussion summarising the key questions these challenges pose for the Strategic Partnership programme.

5.1 Risks

Partnership may compromise autonomy

All three actor groups believe strategic partnerships potentially may compromise their autonomy. For NGOs, this may happen when the Departments and the Embassies propose adjustments to their programmes, affecting what NGOs see as the prerogative of an autonomous civil society actor. For example, considering their partner selection:

I think if you have had years of experience selecting organizations you work with, and you have all kinds of procedures for that, you have tested those and all that, you think, 'this is ours'. We are all civil society actors, we are going to do this together. Government shouldn't select. ...if they say this is a good partner you can consider this. A dialogue could be the result. That's the idea, but the final decision should be taken by us. It is a dialogue, not an imposition and that is how it felt. Like, oh, you're coming to do that, then you should work with such and such.

Publicly being associated with the Dutch government can also compromise NGO autonomy. This applies to Alliance partners as well as to their partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries, who may not benefit from being associated with a foreign government.

It's a risk for partners. If you are a grassroots organization and you are financed for 80 % by a foreign country, you are less legitimate. In this programme, this problem is more explicit. The Ministry is a partner, not a funder in the background. If people start digging, it becomes easier to claim that the Dutch government is intervening in [country].

Some NGOs also fear co-optation, for example when they are squeezed into an agreement that does not correspond to their own values; 'we need to make sure we do not get used.' Combining dialogue and dissent needs to be done carefully with this potential risk in mind.

Ministry departments also can be affected by an association with certain NGO positions which may compromise government autonomy. The same is true for lobbying other sovereign nations. Partnership can be misunderstood or misrepresented when the involvement of the Dutch government is publicly perceived as a statement of approval, or when an NGO pretends to articulate a Dutch government position. This potential loss of autonomy can imply a reputation damage for the government.

When the Embassies associate themselves with certain NGO positions this can also create a reputation damage. It can contribute to highlighting conflicting interests with the country's government or with the private sector partners of the Embassy. This raises the question how these relations in the strategic partnership programme should be managed and communicated. For example, one of the conditions of the agreement is that external communications, such as reports, will not identify the Ministry as a partner. Later in the programme it can be considered on a case-to-case basis, but only if the Ministry allows its logo to appear on NGO reports. Vice versa, an NGO interviewee assured us that the names of partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries are kept confidential when mentioning the partnership with the Ministry, in this way avoiding political risks.

Continuity

NGOs perceived a risk in the uncertainty about the continuity of the Strategic Partnership programme. Their key concern is: what will happen after the Dutch parliamentary elections of March 2017 when a new government takes office? Key changes to the (implementation of the) new programme are feared. Will a new Minister promote the partnership to the same degree? What will remain of the mutual ambitions? Will partnerships perhaps be dismantled? Will log frames return and NGOs used as instruments for predefined government objectives? And the fears go beyond this: is the partnership programme perhaps one more step in a process of entirely dismantling support to civil society?

Continuity presents itself also as a risk emerging from staff leaving their posts. Both NGOs and Departments bring up this risk: collaboration is after all built on mutually developed relationships. As one NGO interviewee put it, talking about key personal contacts in the Ministry:

Everything is running well now, but the moment other people will be there later on, people you have to convince again, and maybe they cannot be convinced. That's a real issue.

Information handling

Imprudent handling of sensitive information between NGOs and Ministry staff was also perceived as a risk by NGO interviewees. The concern is the safety of NGOs and individuals as their information can be leaked, which can put them at risk. Publishing in the mutual information database IATI is a particular concern here:

Our organization has had real issues with transparency. [Activity] had been organized which was put on the website. We found out since we started to look on IATI ourselves. We found things and we thought, good grief,

how did this get on? The Ministry had uploaded all that information. The funders we know would never want to make public that they were putting money into this...This is one of my concerns for this partnership.

Handling of sensitive information is also an issue in lobby & advocacy. Can the political judgement and sensitivity of civil servants be trusted?

For lobby activities, it is sometimes necessary to stay under the radar, while you are at the same time accountable. It is like in politics: there is a great difference between being right, being endorsed, and getting acknowledgement. There is a constant battle on all these fronts and not everybody has the right competencies. That goes for us but also for civil servants. The number of civil servants with political sensitivity is not very large, while they increasingly are expected to possess this quality.

Doing the sensitive work of the programmes in partnership requires trust. The issue of information handling triggers the more fundamental question whether and how partners can be trusted, at least according to some interviewees.

5.2 Unknowns

There are a number of key issues on which partners have not yet achieved a shared understanding, as we have seen in previous chapters. This generally concerns partnership aspects about which there is a lack of clarity, or about which partners have different and conflicting ideas. These *unknown* issues will be further elaborated below.

How to be partners

Several interviewees from all three partnership categories expressed that they consider the current partnership as a continuation of previous collaborations, without seeing any particular difference with the new programme. This can also be explained as an apparent lack of a clear ambition or image about the strategic partnership, giving room to its own interpretations. Drawing on existing forms of collaboration then makes sense. In other cases, interviewees actually perceived little vision and direction about the partnership, expressing very diverse (and even opposing) views on the new partnership. Finding out how to be partners appears to be a process of 'finding out by doing'. As one NGO interviewee for example told us:

We are curious to have the first policy meeting. Do they expect that only we put things on the table or is there also reciprocity?

It is evident that in the early stage of the partnership many situations are still unclear. 'We will have to see how this works out in practice', was the assessment of interviewees. 'It will have to grow gradually', was the comment. Programmes are still in the inception phase; NGOs sometimes start working in new countries, or may be less experienced with lobby & advocacy. In addition, some do not have well-developed ideas on how to work with the Ministry, at least according to some of the interviewed Ministry and Embassy staff members. The latter also observed that a number of

partnerships were rather slow in their inception. Consequently, the concrete foundation on which to build the partnership between NGOs and contact persons is still lacking. With the Embassies we saw a similar pattern: only initial meetings had been convened and partner selection had not been completed yet.

The implementation of the partnership programme also was delayed by unclear or opposite starting points. Some NGO Alliances were already more advanced in their strategic vision of specific areas of the partnership, making it difficult to establish synergies, roles and strategies with Ministry contact persons or Embassy staff who were still in the process of developing this vision. Some NGOs complained that the Departments did not provide the expected input; they were taking a more passive attitude than was hoped for.

We have thought about it more than Foreign Affairs. We made an overview of support they could give, also possible collaboration in the various countries...They hadn't thought about that at all.

I remember you [speaking to colleague] coming back from a meeting running up to the drafting of the proposal. And you wrote that you asked the Ministry: 'what are you bringing into the partnership?' Because we had to include in the proposal who was going to do what. And they had said, 'You should write that down. What you expect from us'. So little came from that. I think that's peculiar. When you talk about partnership and you are looking together what everybody can contribute, but then we have to tell the Ministry what we expect from them. Without us knowing whether they can live up to that.

Some NGO interviewees considered some actors, in particular the Embassies, to have a traditional vision about partnership, approaching it in a paternalist way as part of a conventional development project. Ministry department staff responded that for several Embassies it can be a rather new experience to engage with critical NGO views as part of a dialogue.

From their side, the Embassies explained how they sometimes were confronted with programmes that were formulated only in very general terms and with limited information, making it hard to spot the added value for the Embassy. Sometimes they did not sense that NGOs approached them as partners, who would normally try to match viewpoints positions or respond to input. These NGOs simply dropped by for a chat or a request for a particular speech. An Embassy staff member commented:

The way of working is such that it is not like we look into their documents or anything like that. Or that we are asked to respond to something, with them consulting and adjusting with us. Look, if it truly would be an equal partnership they should also get back to us about what they did with our feedback.

Interviewees from all actor categories expressed their concerns about how the partnerships would match their organizations' goals, perspectives and capacities.

Finding out how to be partners therefore seems to be a matter of seeking common ground in the face of difference, starting out from the expectations, responding to new lessons learnt. As two NGO interviewees observed:

Embassies were at first very restrained. Something thought up in The Hague. Little legitimacy. In a number of countries, a lot of conversations were needed with the Embassies. An argument was that there is little manpower and 'what would it trigger?' People are more positive now and take up that role more. Initiating contacts with partners, organizing meetings. But also trying to direct. Also, the relationship with the Ministry is not always clear. The Ministry doesn't know which initiatives the Embassies are taking. There are differences between countries. The commitment of the Embassies is still a black box, and very diverse.

The expectations are not high. It is all still new. The Ministry only used to be a donor for us. It takes time to enter another relationship. From [organization] it is seen that only very small steps have been made by the Ministry, to really become a partner in a different way. A lot of energy goes into formulating the programme and managing funds efficiently. But I do see the Ministry to be ready to take steps in our direction, and to enter into a dialogue. It is not a closed framework. But to really go into a kind of partnership, having clear what they can contribute to our objectives, I still find that really hard to see at this stage.

Roles and responsibilities

Partners were often also unclear about what to expect from the other partner. What are the mutual responsibilities? What are the roles of the Ministry departments and Embassy actors? This is how a Department contact person looked at it:

First of all, [partner] should make clear what it wants. That already makes it hard. In the co-financing programme MFS it was quite simple: we could adjust the anticipated results [organization] wanted to achieve. These were formulated smartly. Now it is about capacity strengthening, policy and advocacy, and strengthening and supporting each other in that. That is not our core activity as [Department]. It is a challenge we face, and therefore I hesitate to say that it is a programme that belongs to [partner], we have emphasized mutual responsibility. We don't restrict ourselves to a funder role, monitoring and facilitating that one does not get in trouble. But it depends, and that discussion has already started in a number of countries, on the choice of the local partners, the operationalization of pathways, and it depends on that we can see how that relates to the objectives proposed by the Embassies, and then it generates more impact, it will come together.

There is a gap between what the NGOs expect and what the Embassies and the Departments say they can or want to do. A clear pattern is that NGOs expect the contact persons and the Embassy staff to push the NGOs to lower and 'manage' expectations: stressing the limited capacity and addressing the differences in approaches or agendas that will pre-empt close collaboration. There is also a

gap between what the Departments expect the Embassies to do in stimulating collaboration and commitment, and what the Embassies say they can or want to do. In particular, the Embassies want to lower the expectations as they experience the Strategic Partnership programme as something imposed by the Ministry as well as the responsibility of the Ministry. In the interviews, the Embassies indicated to be ready to collaborate, but with certain reservations in terms of readiness or capacity. This concerns the intensity of the collaboration as well as the issues. The Embassies have reservations about things asked from them by the NGOs such as the involvement in other activities, monitoring processes, protecting activists, or doing things that may be sensitive in relation to the (local) government or the private sector.

As there is no shared ambition for the partnerships among the Ministry department and Embassy staff and NGOs, this elaboration is largely realized in the individual partnerships. But even there, differences on key elements of the partnership may exist, leading to a lack of agreement about expected results. Some (agreed) programme documents even contain statements on contributions to be made by the Ministry departments and the Embassies, about which the NGOs involved are not sure. These doubts were confirmed in several interviews with Department contact persons and especially Embassies staff.

What is 'strategic' in the partnership?

Based on the interviews, the expectation is that the partnerships may flourish as long as a number of conditions are met: alignment on topics, agenda, perspective, geographic focus; capacity in terms of expertise and time; personal and organizational ambitions to partner; perspectives and options for contributions to be made. In some cases, these conditions may be met only to a limited extent. As a contact person described these options for one of the partnerships:

I think things can happen in certain countries. There are enormous differences. These partnerships are not all located in the priority partner countries of the Dutch development programme. There you have thematic experts at the Embassies who may have an affinity with this programme... there may be some resonance with the substance and perhaps even enthusiasm. But we also work in countries where there is no Dutch Embassy, or in countries in which there is a hard-core Foreign Policy orientation. Then there are no people concerned with such topics, so not too much can be expected. We can try to facilitate, if that is helpful for them, to organize an event around [topic] or problem. To give it more prestige by asking if the Ambassador can join in, or do it in the Ambassador's residence. Then if they can address the Ambassador saying that you are a partner, there may be more chance that the Ambassador will agree.

Despite the general willingness of all interviewees to contribute to the partnerships, if particular actors (especially the Embassies) do not see their added value, a valuable opportunity can be lost.

So, what is actually strategic about the 'strategic partnership'? NGOs indicated that this is not clear, and often also not addressed as an issue. One may argue that this

is a matter of further clarification. But it may also be argued that it involves more fundamental issues, such as the ambitions and the commitments to the agreements signed. NGOs wonder, for example, whether the responsibilities for the programmes are really seen as *shared*, in light of the shared goals. Similarly, NGOs would like to know what they can expect in terms of *commitment* to the different partnership dimensions.

With this form of partnership, with the plan that we have developed and submitted, and the certainly good talks with the Ministry, I still do not feel that the Ministry really takes collective responsibility for the programme. Absolutely not. What will the Ministry say when in Parliament questions are raised about this? And whilst our plan is modest, others go much further with lobbying. As partners, you are not responsible for each other's programme. But I expect to be politically covered for what we do. The plans have been approved and we are kept to implementing these. I really doubt whether that cover will always be there, also because of existing political pressures.

NGO complaints about the lack of clear and shared ambitions appear to be grounded in the consultations with their Ministry department and Embassy partners. They experienced that their expectations on practical collaboration were lowered towards what Ministry department and Embassy staff considered to be realistic, often much below the NGO ambitions. Therefore, NGOs raised questions like: what does the Ministry want to achieve with the Strategic Partnership programme? And what is the Ministry's own Theory of Change?

We don't know where they want to end up. What their strategy is on that, and how we fit into that.

A Theory of Change of the Ministry doesn't have to be a technical affair. But I think of the words of Martin Luther King, who didn't say 'I have a plan', but: 'I have a dream'. And then acting purposefully, into a particular direction. What are they working towards? [...] What is their dream in this area? It will have to be a coalition-bound dream. That is all fine, but I miss that.

These questions and comments underline some of the NGO frustration. There is an apparent lack of ambition and a spirit of acting together as programme partners from the side of the Ministry. NGOs also want the partnerships to be more in line with their own, more strategic and high-stake orientations of the Strategic Partnership programme. Therefore, NGOs appear to look for support to their own objectives, rather than for mutual adjustments with Departments and Embassies. The Department contact persons and the Embassy staff considered the teasing out of ambitions and strategies as a matter to deal with in partner consultations, rather than as a wider question involving the Ministry or the entire policy programme.

Dissent

Many NGO interviewees expressed appreciation for the space of dissent that is formally provided, and confidence that this space for dissent will indeed be available. However,

they also wondered to what extent the Ministry departments and the Embassies will actually perform a role as partners in cases of dissent. Will they support their actions when these can be viewed as dissenting with Netherlands' policy?

When there are issues around dissent, the agreement is that it will be tolerated. The point is, are they going to influence us on that dissent, for example by keeping the issue out of the news, or by stopping us to do something? Those signals are not clear now. Then it is just: we simply disagree. That space is given.

Department interviewees also emphasized these spaces for dissent. However, there is also a sense that various actors inside the Ministry will interpret these spaces differently.

Once you start talking about partnership, you discover everybody defines it differently. It is a diffuse term you can sense on the side of the Ministry. Maybe not a lot has changed in our working relationships with the government, but with the new partnership flag on it, with some civil servants, for them it means that 'you need to tone it down a bit'.

This may emerge especially when conflicting interests of the Ministry are at stake, as with multi-stakeholder processes involving the Dutch private sector, where NGOs may be in dialogue and exert pressure at the same time:

You can tell it is a bit of a struggle. Especially for the civil servants. There is this tendency that you can't sit at the table and protest at the gates of [companies] at the same time. That isn't fair. They find that unpredictable, or worse: unreliable.

Some interviewees indeed sensed that not everybody in the Ministry is open to the dissent aspect of the Strategic Partnership programme. Others wondered whether the space for dissent will continue to be available under situations of political pressure. Some Department contact persons confirmed these doubts during the interviews; one of them said:

When it comes to [issue]. That is so sensitive now that we have to be really careful around that. And we need to make good agreements, certainly with full respect for [partner]'s space for their work. So, we won't tell them what they can and cannot do, but it is about searching for a balance. So, it shouldn't go too far. Then afterwards all we are doing is putting out fires.

Space for dissent is not clearly defined and will have to be negotiated in the process of developing and carrying out the programme. NGOs hope to protect civic space through the partnership with the government. But the Ministry department and Embassy staff are also conscious of the risks involved and are concerned for a backlash. For them the 'space for dissent' issue centres on the question: how to manage it? Potential disagreement with partners' objectives may be another complicating factor in these cases.

Contact persons and Embassy staff propose two types of solutions. On the one hand, staff propose to act respectfully and to appropriately distance themselves when necessary. As a contact person explained:

There are goals that we cannot embrace. Within [partnership] the government is not on the same page with [partner] on [issue]. Is fine as long as you are open about this. As a civil society organization, you should be free to act and not be on a leash or to feel you have to give in. Higher goals can be shared, but you have different roles.

On the other hand, Department contact persons and Embassy staff see the solution in directly approaching the NGOs concerned so that these situations come more predictable and manageable. In this way, strategies can be negotiated and responses from the Ministry or the Embassies to possible backlashes can be carefully prepared. (See also ‘information sharing’ in Chapter 4).

A key question underlying this friction is: how to embed dialogue and dissent more structurally into the partnership? Partnerships are trust-based relationships. However, in the Strategic Partnership programme, partners can collaborate as well as disagree, and even oppose each other. How to navigate all these contradictions? What information has to be shared, for example, and what not? On all these matters, the interviewees did not really express clear perspectives.

Evaluation

Part of the lack of clarity around partnership concerns the evaluation of the Strategic Partnerships programme. Whilst NGOs are working on their evaluations, it is as yet an open question how the partnership dimension will be evaluated. Who will the Ministry evaluate? And on what? Is it also not something you should do together, as partners? These were questions asked by NGO interviewees.

In the subsidy part, we can evaluate well what we have contributed, but evaluating how the collaboration with the Ministry has gone will be a harder matter, of course. It's a challenge evaluating the Strategic Partnerships if it's not done from two sides at the same time and if you don't know what points to look into.

Contact persons and Embassy staff do not bring up evaluation as a concern, other than through some of the contact persons’ bringing up of evaluation up as a challenge in terms of measurement and showing of programme results. This addresses the matter, more from a management and political viewpoint, than from a partnership perspective. With them, NGOs do share this particular concern. However, this is from another angle, though the two may well be able to meet. How to do justice to the complexity of lobby & advocacy, and continue on the chosen direction, thinking differently about accountability? For some NGOs, supportive of the shift in approach they see, addressing this could help advance it. A concern here among at least some interviewees is the demonstration of effectiveness, which is often a challenge when it comes to lobby & advocacy. While contact persons and Embassy staff do not mention it as such, for some of the NGO interviewees partnership has a role to play here, since

‘the Ministry will have the problem how to come with a story about the success of the policy framework’.

5.3 Points of attention

Implementation

Embassy staff and contact persons are concerned about the programme implementation. ‘Will partnership really take off?’ is a question Embassy staff members asked. They seem to have doubts in cases where little has happened so far, or when NGOs have demonstrated limited engagement with the local context or with the Embassy’s work, or simply not responded to requests for input. Some Embassies also doubt whether certain NGOs are really interested in working with the Embassies. Department contact persons, on the other hand, have concerns about the responsibilities they have been given by their Departments. As a department staff member explained:

Some programmes have to spend an awful lot of money. They have submitted detailed budgets. But things can run differently. That is less of an issue with infrastructural projects, since these can be planned better. This affects our budget for [amount]. That is a lot of money. Can it really be spent? Lobby & advocacy, how to translate this financially? We have to acquire experience with that.

A few contact persons and Embassy staff members also expressed concern about the quality of the NGO programmes. They had doubts about NGO engagement with the local context, the ability to realize capacity development and to develop a strategic focus, or to keep up the quality of their collaboration within the Alliance. An Embassy staff told us:

After the inception phases, which is almost done now, will it be clear afterwards what the desired results will be and are these concrete enough? Are they also convincing enough? For the people, I mean, and not just for the NGO insiders?

Concerns like these are sometimes expressed from a partnership perspective: how can we be partners if the NGOs do not seek to work with us as partners, or if they do not have their act together? Concerns also are expressed from a managerial perspective in terms of responsibility and accountability for the programme implementation.

Coordination, partnership development and mutual understanding

Efforts by the Civil Society Department of the Ministry (DSO/MO) to help develop the partnerships have been appreciated as very supportive. They took up key tasks in the new programme with a strong commitment to the notion of partnership, which was appreciated by NGOs in particular. Simultaneously, some Department contact persons and Embassy staff members perceived the new partnerships as being imposed upon them. They evaluated the coordination and communication efforts by the Ministry as insufficient, and they identified haziness about who will partner with which Embassy.

In addition, the multitude of actors and partnerships make the programme hard to manage. This is true for DSO/MO that oversees the programme, but also for NGOs who need to navigate a wide diversity of Embassies with diverse conceptions of roles and agendas. Moreover, the Embassies need to get a handle on a wide range of partners and issues, many of whom they are not familiar with. The Embassies as well as the NGOs are sometimes struggling how to build the partnerships with a minimum of contact, involvement and responsiveness. Some believe that a more steering role of the Ministry (particularly by DSO/MO) would be recommendable to manage challenges like the multitude of partners engaging with Embassies (see appendices 3-4), or the apparent lack of programme coherence. Having said that, interviewees often expressed that partnerships will need to be jointly constructed, by developing mutual understanding between the partners over a longer period of time.

Tension between funder and partner roles

Many NGO staff members pointed out that they experience a tension between the Ministry's role as partner and its role as a funder. They challenge the combination of the partner and the managerial roles, which are often taken up by a single person. For example, how open and honest one can be with each other when these roles are combined? This tension is sometimes also experienced by NGOs in the way roles are put in practice:

There is a tension between the role of the subsidy provider and the partner. On the one hand, controlling conditions for subsidy, and that it is all accounted for, and on the other hand they have to think along in a positive way. Such roles do not necessarily go together. In the collaboration until now, I sometimes see that. Leaning back, at the time of the few pager [document charting collaboration plans]. And then you submit something and it is assessed like a sort of application for subsidy while it was meant to be a negotiation document for equal partners that are going to look together what makes sense to do and what not.

Some NGOs find themselves approached as an implementing partner rather than as an equal partner. When Departments proposed programme adjustments, NGOs experienced this at times as an imposition of power and ideas the NGO does not agree with. The challenge is how to shape the relationship between the NGOs and the Ministry in such a way that the verifying role does not clash with the partnership role. This challenge will likely become more prominent in those cases where the strategic commitment and collaboration between the NGOs and Departments is more intense. So far, as Chapter 3 demonstrates, many contact persons interviewed showed less temptation to be strategically involved, rather than to combine different ways of support and management.

Friction between the programmes and other policy objectives

Interviewees from all three actor categories addressed the friction between different agendas as challenging for the Strategic Partnership programme. An NGO interviewee put himself in the shoes of a civil servant:

You expect from civil servants that they say, okay, taking the broader policy objective into account we must acknowledge that this tension, and this controversial role played by civil society organizations is necessary to get ahead together. But that is quite something. What do you expect from people that are also held accountable on a range of other issues? We have this [policy process] that has to finish properly and we have relationships with business, not too much pressure must be put on that sector. We have an Embassy that of course needs to play a mediating role, but also in the area of trade and research interests, also for the Netherlands. Relationships with the host country must also remain manageable. So, there you are, in the middle of the tough daily reality.

Indeed, this friction between various policy agendas emerge at different levels. Between the programmes supported under the Strategic Partnership programme and other policies of the Dutch government. This friction also emerges as a result of different agendas *within* the Strategic Partnership programme: capacity development and lobby & advocacy, each under the guidance of DSO/MO and one of the thematic Departments. Special attention is paid to working out the different objectives and understandings from the various Departments, such as policies supporting the private sector, involvement of NGOs in climate change or trade policies, whose combinations obviously can generate friction. In the case of the Embassies, this friction may concern similar agendas, but may also concern relationships with the host government that NGOs programmes may undermine. Many other areas of potential also were mentioned: friction emerging from conflicting policy objectives may affect relationships between the Minister and the coalition partner, or different Departments within the Ministry, or between the Ministry, the Embassies and the private sector, etc.

Interviewees did accept this potential friction as part of the reality which has to be dealt with when it arises. Contact persons and Embassy staff members tend to protect the various relationships, trying to strike a balance. They try to integrate these different policy objectives, for example, welcoming the issue of sustainability in relation to foreign investments, and exploring options to promote dialogue. In other cases, actors may rather foresee a strategic management that protects relationships while taking some distance from the NGO programme if necessary. In some interviews, respondents took this friction as a given, and not something to be easily addressed due to the entrenched nature of differences in power, interests and viewpoints.

NGOs rather accepted this space for friction and tried to deal with it by rallying for political support for their work from the government, or for their voice to be heard in the policy process. This resonates Ministry viewpoints that welcome dialogue if issues tend to become confrontational for the sake of better, more inclusive or more coherent policies. However, it was not specified how that integration is to be realized and under which conditions this integration will be acceptable for the various actors involved. An issue for NGOs is how to prevent co-optation: sometimes it is better to remain on the outside than to be in a position in which you go along with an outcome that goes against your convictions.

5.4 A limiting factor: capacity

A limiting factor widely discussed by our interviewees is *capacity*. In the first place, this relates to capacity in terms of staff time. Both Embassies and contact persons stress their limitations to engage with such a large number of partners. Also the expected level of engagement is often too ambitious in the Embassies' eyes. An Embassy staff member explained:

We have many partnerships and we are a very small Embassy. We are also not an Embassy with a development cooperation profile, and with not budgets. Development cooperation has a low priority, but with this type of initiatives a lot is expected. That does not match with our capacity.

Funding cuts and a shift away from development cooperation play an important role here. For more background information on capacity issues for the Embassies involved, see Appendices 1-5. In some cases, extra Embassy staff was recruited for handling the new partnerships, which NGO interviewees valued as making a considerable difference.

Department contact persons emphasized their limited availability in terms of time. The partnerships were added to their already heavy workload, but they did not really complain. It basically implied that they had to limit their involvement. But it also can be frustrating:

It is a shame, most colleagues at Foreign Affairs have so little time for this. I would like to spend much more time on partnerships, looking into the content and more deeply into what the possibilities are and really explore the advantages of this collaboration.

Limited capacity is seen as an important problem that may constrain the results as they have been written up in the agreements. The partnerships also consume contact persons' time due to extra management and coordination work.

Capacity also is a matter of available expertise. Some NGO interviewees were disappointed about the extent to which contact persons gave input. One contact person explained that he is lagging behind with knowledge, so in meetings with NGOs he is largely updated where the programme stands. Another contact person indicated that the NGOs should have the expertise and that her role was limited to that of a broker. Indeed, the capacity to address certain issues often can be much larger with the NGO than with the Ministry:

'We are two staff members involved with TTIP. The NGOs have 15. For responding to well-argued letters there is just the two of us.'

At the Embassies, the expertise capacity largely depended on the availability of specialists in the areas the NGOs work on, which was not always the case. Others remarked that NGOs sometimes also lack the capacity to strategize effectively, or the capacity to relate to the country context. The question is: how to develop the partnerships if the capacity at the Ministry departments and the Embassies is too limited for the NGO ambitions to cooperate?

'If you want to push forward on an issue you need to spend days, push through meetings. Not just give somebody an email address.'

'Embassies immediately complained that they don't get extra time. They say they want to engage but they don't have hours, or only a few. If that is true, what can a partnership amount to? This we still have to explore.'

NGOs are basically concerned that because of the capacity limits at the Ministry departments and the Embassies, partnerships will become less significant than the ambitions stated in the programme documents.

5.5 Discussion

A number of challenges have been identified in this chapter. The first is *risks*: being closely engaged in relationships of mutual dependence generates risks. The challenge is to safeguard autonomy and to prevent negative consequences for the partnership. This matters to all three actor categories, but for each in different ways. NGO interviewees mentioned three of the identified issues (autonomy, continuity, and information handling), while contact persons and Embassy staff only mentioned autonomy.

Unknowns concern the question of how to be partners: a matter of developing shared understandings of partnership in the light of different ambition levels and capacities. This matter was particularly prominent with the NGO interviewees. It reflects an important difference in expectations between the partners. The challenges are to address the NGO call for a sharper and shared ambition. But then: what should that ambition be? And what are the implications of these ambitions for the expected commitments?

Points of attention regarding implementation, coordination and partnership development reflected concerns about how smoothly and effectively partnerships will come about and will work out. This points for a need to focus on effective management, communication, and trust-building within the Strategic Partnership programme. The tension between the role of a funder and the role of a partner points at friction between partnership programmes and other governmental policy objectives.

The limiting factor of *capacity* is underscored by all actor categories. NGOs have expressed most clearly their concerns, since they will be mostly affected by the gap between the stated ambitions and the capacity to realize these. The challenge is a fundamental one: what can a partnership achieve if it is restricted by capacity issues? This is related to another challenge: how to be partners? One can also say that this relationship lies at a deeper level: with a bit more ambition by the Ministry, will the capacity barrier not go down? A final challenge lies in addressing this question, following a suggestion by an interviewed contact person: 'capacity depends on the objectives you set and the roles you play'.

A final observation is that the challenges by and large do not reflect concerns about the feasibility of capacity strengthening. In this sense, challenges discussed by the interviewees do not relate to the shared ambitions, which are the central objectives of the Strategic Partnership programme. So how do the various actors engage with these ambitions, and which viewpoints do they have regarding the potential contributions of the partnership to these objectives?

6. Partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries

As part of this study an Internet survey was sent to partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries of the Alliances involved in the programme, with the option to respond in English, French or Spanish. The survey consisted of 16 questions focusing on the involvement of these partners, their activities in the field of lobby & advocacy and their opinion about the partnership with the Dutch government and Royal Netherlands Embassies (RNEs) as an integral part of the programme (see Appendix 6 for the full survey).

All 25 Alliances have been asked to participate in this part of the research by providing contact details of their partners. Not all Alliances were willing or able to do so (also see Box 1 for the main arguments for not participating or for partly participating). Whereas five Alliances for different reasons declined their cooperation, four others initially agreed but, in the end, did not provide the required contact details. In effect, a total of 16 Alliances did provide contact details – although not in all cases of all their partners involved in the programme (some made a specific selection, e.g., of their core partners). Besides, with one of these 16 Alliances it was agreed that they would send out the survey to their partners. In all other cases, local partners were contacted directly by the researchers. In total 213 partners participated in the survey – a response rate of nearly 40%. Further information about the methodology is included in Appendix 6.

Box 6.1 Main reasons for not (fully) participating in this part of the research

One of the main reasons that Alliances did not provide contact details for (all) partners involved in the programme is that the selection of partners was not yet finalised (and occasionally even still had to start). Actually, only with five Alliances we can be reasonably sure that all their partners in the programme have been forwarded.

A number of Alliances raised questions about the research with some feeling that there was no need to be involved and one refusing to cooperate as they themselves were not selected as part of the earlier phase of this research (i.e., interviews with a selected number of Alliance members).

Time was also needed for consulting with Alliance members as well as with partners. One Alliance explicitly stated that it is difficult ‘to define who “all our partners” are’ because of the nature and variety of partner relations and collaborations. This already shows the diversity in partners within one Alliance and between Alliances; a diversity that is only strengthened by the fact that in quite some cases also local offices of Alliance members are involved in the implementation and are regarded as ‘local partners’ or ‘local partners’ include any mix of civil society

organisations, businesses and government organisations.

Besides: some Alliances clearly indicated that the request for providing contact details of their partners came in the middle of the inception phase and they were hesitant to ask even more of their partners and they simply wanted to prevent a 'survey overload'. For others, the fact that their partners are 'small, vulnerable and young activists', are working in an environment that could be regarded as 'dangerous' for local partners, and/or 'are working on sensitive and high-risk issues' was an important issue. Providing contact details was then seen as jeopardising the position of the partners. As one of the Alliances clearly stated: 'the risk is too high for the partners we are working with'.

One final argument brought forward for not (fully) participating in this part of the research is that the survey would interfere with the communication between Alliance members and partners. The survey would, for instance, point out that one of the elements concerns the partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Dutch Embassies, while not in all cases partners were already informed about this (possible) partnership.

Considering the fact that not all Alliances participated and some of those that did provided only contact details for a selection of their partners, it remains unknown how many partners are involved in the entire Strategic Partnership programme. As such, it is not possible to determine the representativeness of this part of the study. Nonetheless, the large response rate makes us confident that the answers are indicative of the importance attached to the study by local partners. The findings have to be seen as important in understanding the expectations with regard to the Strategic Partnership of the most important group targeted by the programme: the partners that are both the major implementing agencies and the major 'recipients' of capacity building in the field of lobby & advocacy.

6.1 Overall findings

The survey was drafted following the understanding that the Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme differs from earlier NGO programmes of the Dutch government on three counts: (i) an exclusive focus on lobby & advocacy; (ii) a focus on capacity building of partners in the field of lobby & advocacy; and (iii) a focus on partnership between Alliance members, local partners, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Dutch Embassies in the implementation of the programme. We follow these three 'foci' in presenting the findings from the survey. We start, however, with some background data on the partners.

Background

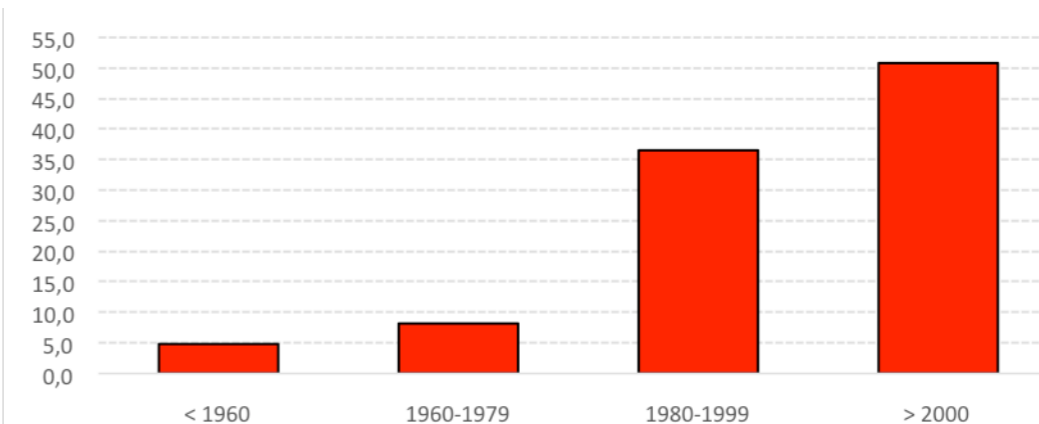
As expected, almost all respondents (96% / N=213) regard themselves as belonging to the civil society or NGO sector. Still, and in line with the diversity in types of partners that was clear from the discussion with Alliances about the survey, there are also a few governmental (1.5%) and business (3%) partners included. In terms of age, these

organisations range between 142 years and 1 year. However, as Table 6.1 shows, half (50,2%) of the partners is relatively young (i.e., established after 2000), with another 37% having been established between 1980 and 1999.

Concerning their involvement in the 'Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme', it is first of all interesting to note that a small part of the respondents (5% / N=213) had never heard about the programme they are part of, while the majority (75%) heard about it in 2015 or in 2016. The remaining 20% had already heard about the programme in 2014 – so about the same time that the process of applying for the programme got underway.

In total 129 respondents (60.6%) state to have been involved in the preparation of the proposal(s), whereas 32.8% have not been involved and the remaining 6.6% does not know whether they have been.

Table 6.1 In what year was your organisation established? (N=209) (in %)



Source: Survey Partners 2016

Finally: 31% (N=213) of respondents is already a partner of a Dutch NGO involved in the Strategic Partnership programme for five years or more. While 3.3% does not know when they became a partner, a total of 26.7% has been a partner for one to four years. That leaves 39% for which the programme is the first time they will be a partner. As such, the programme has already led to a substantial rejuvenation of the partner portfolio of NGOs in the Alliances.

Focus on lobby & advocacy

Nearly 90% of respondents regarded the new focus on (strengthening the capacity for) lobby & advocacy as a positive development, whereas 7% was neutral and 2% does not know. That leaves only 1.4% (three local partners) which regarded it as a negative development.

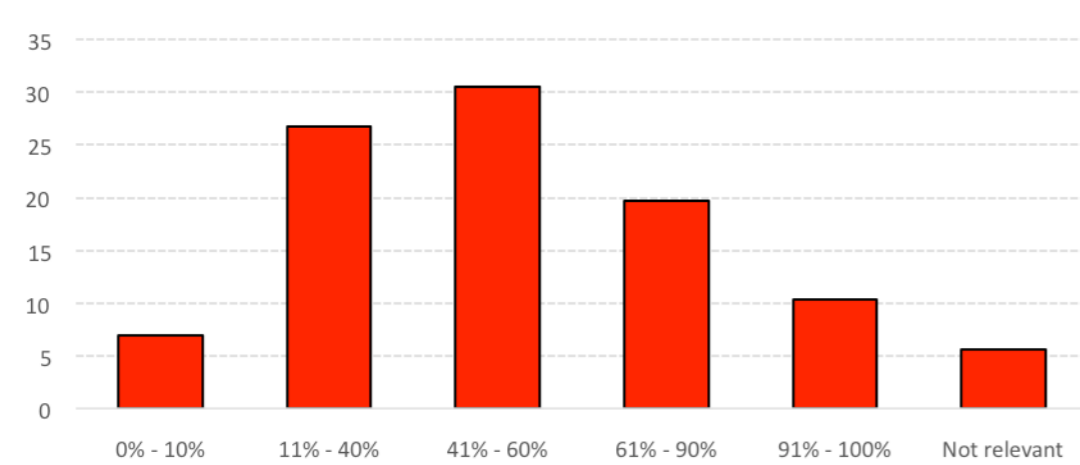
The latter is perhaps understandable given the fact that only a few (ten partners, 4.6%) indicated not to be involved at all in advocacy or not to know at which level their organisation operates with L&A activities. Of those that are involved in L&A (N=204), 27% is active only on one level (i.e., the local or sub national level, the national level

or the international level), 35% combines two of these levels, and the remaining 38% works on all three levels. Those that focus on one level principally are active at either the local (43% / N=56) or the national level (48%). Equally, those active on two levels principally combined the local and national level (85% / N=71). Only 14% combined the national and international level and the remaining one respondent states to be active on the local as well as the international level.

All in all, the data clearly show that activities at the international level are the least important for local partners in the Strategic Partnership programme – but also that ‘least important’ is certainly relative as still nearly 44% of all respondents is (also) active at this level. The national level, at which nearly 82% of all respondents is active, is only slightly more important than the local or subnational level (76%).

Following the above, it is also understandable that in terms of time, lobby & advocacy is considered as an important activity for a large part of the partners. For over 10% of respondents, one could even say that it is about the only thing they do (i.e., dedicating 90%-100% of the organisations’ time on L&A). Still, for the largest group, lobby & advocacy activities are not the only – or the most important – activity: 64% spends less than 60% of its time on L&A (also see Table 6.2).

Table 6.2 My organisation currently dedicates the following percentage of its total time to lobby & advocacy activities (N=213) (in %)



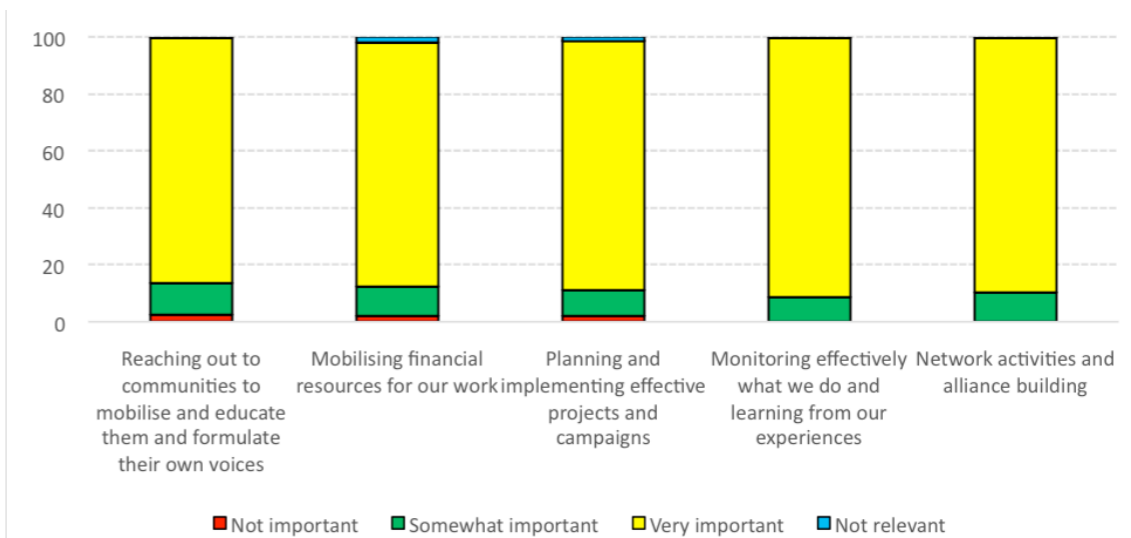
Source: Survey partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries 2016

Focus on capacity building

The focus on capacity building of local partners in the field of lobby & advocacy presupposes that there is a need for such capacity building (e.g., that these partners have to be equipped – e.g., via training). In this light, it is interesting that a large majority of respondents (77.7% / N=222) (totally) agrees with the statement ‘my organisation possesses a good capacity for lobby and advocacy activities’ and that an even larger percentage (81%) (totally) agrees that their organisation ‘plays an important role in the capacity development for lobby and advocacy of organisations they work with’. This does not imply, however, that a focus on capacity building in the Strategic Partnership programme is wrong: a large majority (87.6%) simultaneously regards capacity building in this field as a key priority for their organisation.

The question then is: what do partners regard as important capacities to be strengthened for their organisations? In short, the answer is: all capacities. Whether it concerns reaching out to communities, mobilising financial resources, planning and implementing effective projects and campaigns, effective monitoring, or network and alliance building: in all cases a large majority feels this to be ‘very important’ capacities to develop further (also see Table 6.3). The number of partners that feels that these are ‘not important’ capacities to develop is negligible, as are those that regard them as ‘not relevant’.

Table 6.3 How important is strengthening the following capacities for lobby and advocacy for your organisation? (N=211) (in %)



Source: Survey Partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries 2016

Focus on partnership with the Dutch government and the Royal Netherlands Embassies

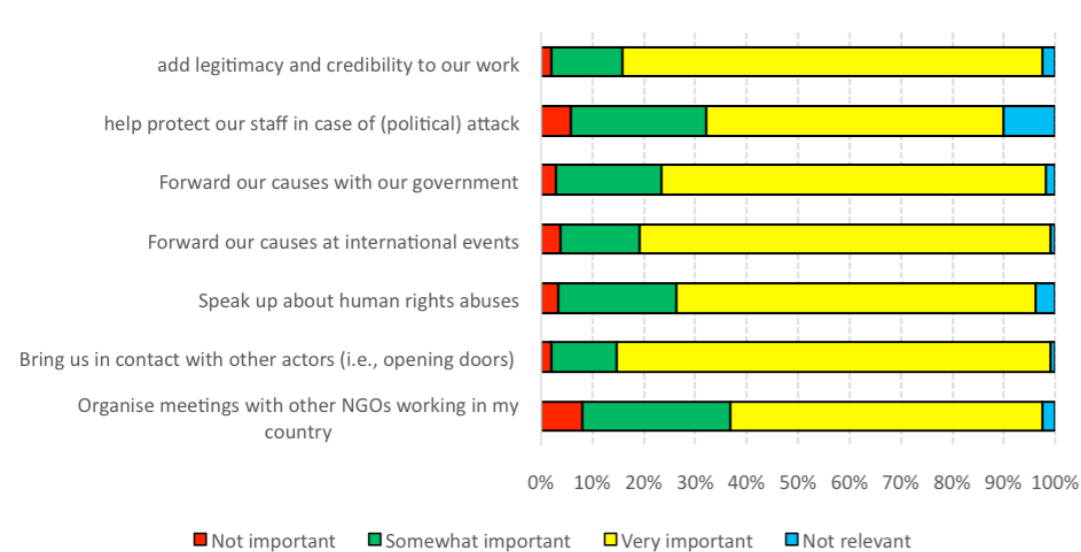
The final part of the survey explicitly focuses on partnership – and then particularly on the opinion of partners regarding the (possible) partnership with the Dutch government (i.e., the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and/or the Dutch Embassies in the respective countries). In what ways do they see the Dutch government helping them to achieve their objectives for L&A? And to what extent do they agree with statements (drawn from the interviews with Alliance members, departments at the Ministry in The Hague and Embassies) regarding the involvement of the Dutch government in the programme? Before going into these questions it is important to note that only a small minority of less than 14% was not aware that the partnership within the Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme may also include the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Dutch Embassies.

As with the earlier question about the capacities respondents want to strengthen, also the question about the different ways in which the involvement of the Dutch government can help to achieve objectives largely receives a unanimous response. Essentially all different ways proposed to the respondents are regarded by a large majority as ‘very important’. If we would add those that regard these different ways as

'somewhat important' there are hardly any respondents left which feel differently. It is, however, more likely that 'somewhat important' has to be viewed as a substantial deviation from 'very important'. In this way, not all ways are considered equally important by the partners.

Table 6.4 clearly shows this. Partners thus regard 'helping to protect staff of partners in case of (political) attacks' and 'organise meetings with other NGOs in my country' as less important than forwarding their causes at international events and adding legitimacy and credibility to their work. Most important is clearly the issue of opening doors to other actors; a point also stressed by NGO Alliances. All in all, partners have broad expectations of the involvement of the Dutch government, a point that is also quite clear when looking at the opinions about this involvement.

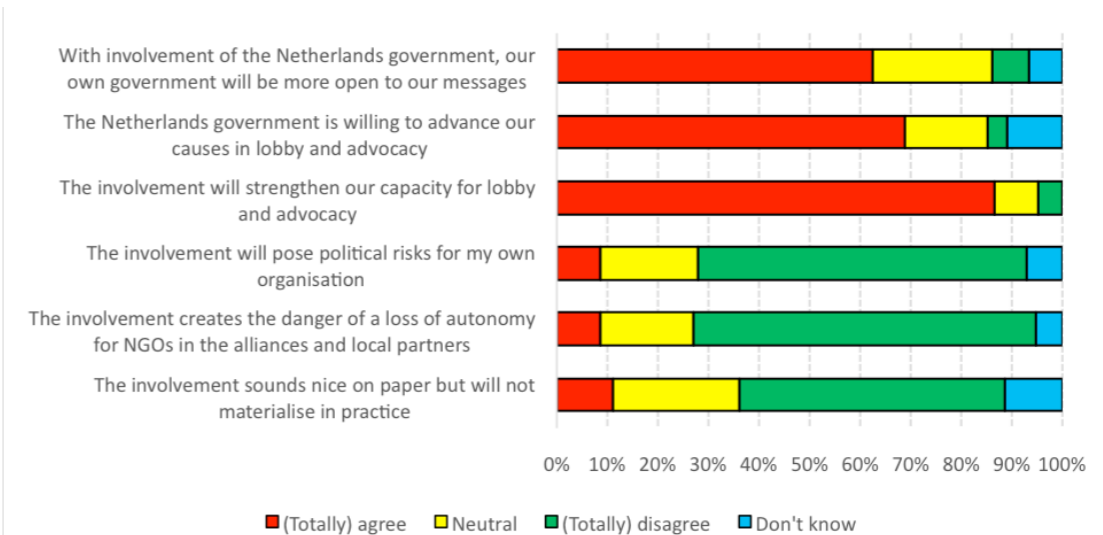
Table 6.4 How important do you regard the following ways in which the involvement of the Netherlands government or the Embassy could help your organisation to achieve its objectives for lobby and advocacy? (N=209) (in %)



Source: Survey Southern Partners 2016

Table 6.5 shows that partners are quite unanimous in their opinions. This unanimity is, however, much clearer with regard to the more positive formulated statements than in the case of the more negative formulated ones. Starting with the first group, the table shows the majority to (totally) agree that the involvement of the Dutch government will strengthen their own capacity in the field of lobby & advocacy (86.6% / N=208), that the Dutch government is willing to advance their causes in L&A (68.8%), and that their own government will be more open to their messages with involvement of the Dutch government (62.5%). Even if we would assume the 'neutrals' to indicate some scepticism with regard to these statements, these outcomes show a rather strong belief in the positive contribution that the involvement of the Dutch government can make to the programme.

Table 6.5 Please indicate your opinion about the involvement of the Netherlands government and/or its Embassies in this programme (N=208) (in %)



Source: Survey Southern Partners 2016

A similar picture emerged when looking at the more negatively formulated statements, although the number of partners (totally) disagreeing is somewhat lower here. So, we find that the majority does not feel that the involvement of the Dutch government creates the danger of a loss of autonomy (67.8%) or that this involvement will pose political risks for their organisation (64.8%). Interesting here is that smaller majority (compared to the other statements) of 52.4% disagrees that 'the involvement sound nice on paper but will not materialise in practice'. It is also this latter statement where the scores in the 'neutral', '(totally) agree', and 'don't know' category are the highest. Tentatively, this might be interpreted as a cautious viewpoint: the belief in the positive contribution of the Dutch government is high but a substantial part of the partners also adheres to the idea that the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

6.2 Discussion

If there is one thing clear from the above presentation it is that overall partners involved in the Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme highly agree about the three elements distinguishing this programme from earlier NGO funding schemes. The focus on lobby and advocacy is thus applauded by a large majority, and, while nearly 4 out of 5 respondents believe they are well equipped for L&A, an even larger part still feels there is always a need for strengthening their capacity in this field. They also feel that all different capacities taken up in the survey are important. Likewise, large majorities see the involvement of the Dutch government as a helping hand in such different areas as forwarding their causes at international events and helping to protect their staff. Finally, and overall, partners express trust in the added value of Dutch government involvement but at the same time are a bit less sure whether it will also materialise in practice. In this sense, the picture emerging from the survey among partners mirrors the findings from interviews with NGO Alliances. All this is not to say that the different NGO Alliances have selected a uniform group

of partners. Obviously, there are (minor) deviations from this overall uniformity which have been discussed above. Not in all fields, for instance, the involvement of the Dutch government is regarded as equally important. Besides, although the agreement among partners largely stays intact when analysing how specific groups score and there is no significant variance between more recent or older partners, there are a few issues where older organisation (in terms of age) significantly differ from younger organisations.

What then are these issues on which older and younger organisations diverge? It is interesting to note that older organisations spend less of their time on L&A and that they regard ‘speaking up about human right abuses’, ‘forwarding their causes with their government’ and ‘helping to protect their staff in case of (political) attacks’ less often as important ways in which the Dutch government can help than younger organisation. Interesting as well is that they are more sceptical about the involvement of the Dutch government: they are thus more inclined to agree that this involvement sounds nice on paper but will not materialise in practice.

Despite these differences, the picture of uniformity remains strong. And the fact that it is overall a strong and positive set of expectations that partners sketch at the start of the Strategic Partnership programme, this might be seen as a boost to the programme. It remains to be seen, of course, how everyone involved will live up to these positive overall expectations in the coming years.

Box 6.2 Partners’ voices

Many of the respondents used the final open question to voice their opinion about the Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme. Although it is not possible to present all of these opinions here, we include several of them below to show not only the diversity of opinions but also that where one clearly expresses his/her appreciation of the programme, while another stresses specific challenges and a third comes up with specific suggestions to make the programme a success in the coming years.

Appreciation

‘I feel that the current efforts from the Netherland Ministry of Foreign Affair to ensure effective participation of NGOs is of great value. I do encourage because I believe working together in collaboration is always beneficial.’

‘The partnership is a good idea as it will enable us to reach governments, civil society actors and other stakeholders that we might not have been able to.’

‘It is very strategic and participatory. It has very high chances of success.’

‘The five-year duration of the project is a good time to have impact with key range groups. This is in comparison to projects that are much shorter.’

‘The Dutch Ministry is one of the few in the World supporting the space for civil society - this is unique very much welcomed and will become even more important the coming 4 years.’

*‘I think through this SP program voiceless will get voice & we will be able to bring some positive changes in the society both-quantitative & qualitative’
‘It is very innovative approach in challenging environment and shrinking space for civil society is global phenomenon, this approach will help all of us in building synergy.’*

‘The project itself really reminds us and raises our awareness about the importance of lobby and advocacy in scaling up our conservation impacts! We are thankful for the opportunity to be part of this forward-thinking project.’

Challenges

‘The project seems interesting on papers, but the actual implementation in Tanzania has not yet started. We were involved in Baseline Survey and now in a process to negotiate activity implementation schedule and budgets.’

‘Just so you know, Liberia does not have a Dutch Embassy right now.’

‘Year one (1) is ending when my organization have not received funding. I am sure that the process will be quickened early next year.’

‘In our country, there is no Dutch Embassy. There is one in the region but it has no office in our country. Therefore, we have to be careful to make sure that this opportunity to work together is not lost as a result. We see the Embassy not just as an ally in the region, but also as an ally to work with in our own country.’

‘The programme is crucial but lobbying and advocacy requires sufficient finances.’

‘Civil society organizations consider that the Business and Human Rights agenda (OCDE principles, Ruggie principles) are being promoted to undermine classic Hard Law and Human Rights standards. CSO should not be pushed to use such mechanisms and certainly should maintain their autonomy to decide whether or not they would like to be involved with them. I mention this because I have heard comments among civil society organizations about the promotion of OCDE guidelines and concerns about the role that Dutch Embassies are having on it.’

‘NGOs in Uganda need their capacity to be built to promote meaningful advocacy. Currently civil society is not strong enough to organize coordinated and strong advocacy. As a result, many social problems are unattended to.’

'My comment is that the programme is very relevant, but its implementation may be jeopardised by the current political security situation.'

'Lobby and Advocacy in certain countries presents risks. Netherland partners need to be facilitators in the process of capacity-building and implementation of these activities. Dutch NGOs may have institutional objectives for each country and these should not be the priority for local NGOs. That should not be the focus of L&A activities.'

'The Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme is still fairly young and as an organization we are still trying to understand how exactly it will work. If the Netherlands government/local Embassy is able to keep clarifying to partners, this will help a lot, also if they are clear of how realistically they can help the strategic partners given that they have other priorities too.'

'We hope that the program will not take away the local identity of Vietnamese LGBTQ CSOs.'

'Let's see what happens in six months to a year.'

Suggestions

'The Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme in Nigeria is a good idea, but regular meetings with partner organizations should be held for experience sharing and to ensure that we are all still pursuing the same goal.'

'The advocacy should assume the bottom-up approach.'

'There seem to be a challenge with the commencement date. Perhaps some clarifications on the exact start date can help.'

'I just hope that the program will pay special attention to children - who we consider marginalized cohort of the population when it comes to strategic partnership.'

'The partnership should include on the job coaching by expert visiting the partners regularly to support in their individual capacity gaps filling.'

'The programme is very important but it runs behind in implementations. It is therefore important to adjust the planning with regards to activities that were originally scheduled.'

'It is a good venue for effective action to have a strategic partnership with the Dutch government instead of its former role as a simple donor. This gives more weight to action. However, this partnership would benefit local communities more if there was also an aspect of providing services and goods. It would be good to think about this when reviewing the programme. We welcome this new approach to the Netherlands.'

'This program needs to be reviewed and re-evaluated every year as it will address some relevant momentum, further it will be better if the Strategic Partnership will not only focus on lobby and advocacy but also give some opportunity for evidence strengthening efforts to be used further in the Integrated Risk Management dialogue in the future.'

'If the Strategic Partnership has the possibility, it would be important to strengthen the lobby and advocacy capacity of student organizations and (political) youth organizations in the country.'

'The Strategic Partnership should have been more visible, action oriented at the national level to achieve the result. Lobbying and Advocacy is a priority in our country but to add move value to the project there should be direct right-based support to the beneficiaries.'

'Apart from political aspect, there is need for more advocacy at the economic and social aspects that are every crucial for the political stability and well-being of the people of my country.'

'The principle of dialogue and dissent against which the strategic partnership for lobby and advocacy program is built is perhaps the most unique and value adding approach, particularly in the context of shrinking political space. We shall get the most of it only if we allow for continuous learning and adapting the program to the lessons drawn from implementation.'

'Organise annual meetings between organisations involved in the programme to develop joint lobby.'

7. Suggestions for a learning agenda

Interviewees were asked to propose elements for a learning agenda for the Strategic Partnerships programme. In this chapter, we will present the different elements that the interviewees proposed, and how these may be integrated. We also propose elements for a learning agenda that emerged from the analysis in Chapters 3 to 6. We also suggest a range of questions that were not brought up by interviewees but which appear potentially important in light of the Strategic Partnerships programme.

7.1 NGOs

Of the various actor categories, NGOs offered the most suggestions for a learning agenda. Below we present them categorized by thematic focus.

Effectiveness

The topic most frequently mentioned by NGO interviewees as relevant for a learning agenda is the effectiveness of partnership. Integrating the various issues interviewees addressed, the following questions for a learning agenda emerge:

- *What is really new here?*
- *Is partnership going to lead to positive results? Is it an effective way of working?*

On the one hand, these questions reflect an interrogation whether the programme actually will lead to new ways of working. On the other hand, it reflects a concern about which results partnerships may actually generate, and whether these will be positive or not. It reflects a wish to get a grip on what the programme actually entails and what can be expected in terms of effectiveness. As an interviewee says: 'will this context-specific and more rapidly influencing, as we saw in Honduras', really happen now?' And another: 'will this lead to more effective influencing of Parliament? Or will it generate a stream of questions from Parliament which will rather impact the effectiveness of the sector, and perhaps even negatively?'

Monitoring and evaluation

A second and closely related topic NGO interviewees addressed is monitoring and evaluation. This is addressed in four ways. First of all, in the form of a fundamental question about the programme as such:

- *When do we say 'the partnership is a success'?*

This reflects the sense of yet having an insufficient grasp of what the programme is about, relating also to the question NGO interviewees addressed in Chapter 6 when they call for the Ministry to define their ambitions more clearly. Interviewees take the

learning agenda as a way to develop this grasp, reflexively. As an interviewee says: 'speaking with each other really regularly about what one expects from each other, and looking back to results, that should be the core of the learning agenda'. Secondly, questions concern the role of the Theory of Change, and its adjustment over time:

- *How, and will what effects, will employing Theories of Change work?*

A few Interviewees wonder about this, again expressing a sense of going into unknown territory. Will adjusting ToCs influence our entire policy and strategy? Is it feasible to focus on expected and intended results, as we do with Theory of Change, when in the past, we have learnt most from unintended and unexpected results?

A third question concerns the evaluation of the partnership, especially looking to the Ministry in the sense of the evaluation of the Ministry itself, and the role of the Ministry in carrying out its own evaluation. Questions then are:

- *How to evaluate the partnership?*
- *Who will evaluate the partnership?*

Interviewees wonder whether evaluating partnership is perhaps to be done together? Whether it is possible for the Ministry to take up a collaborative role, considering its institutional responsibility for the policy? One interviewee mentioned IATI and the tension it presents for some interviewees between partnership and control; this can be seen as an indication of this problem.

Another question is not necessarily directly related to partnership, as it also concerns the intangible nature of outcomes of lobby & advocacy and capacity development.

- *How do we demonstrate programme results?*

This question may also be related to the apparent lack of appropriate guidance regarding the evaluation of interventions on these fronts that are available, or known, for interviewees. How to do justice to what we do? This is also a question asking for evaluation methods matching the programmes.

Handling friction

Interviewees expect confrontations between actors' perspectives and interests, different policies and policy agendas and different objectives of the Strategic Partnership programme. Some interviewees learning how to deal with these will need to be part of a learning agenda. How to resolve conflict?

The programme facilitates increased confrontation between alternatives, offer a way to have checks and balances for policies. How to make conflicts productive? How to balance differences and enhance coherence, also in the communication with external actors like the media? A question that can be suggested for the learning agenda is therefore:

- *How to handle differences, internally and in communication with external actors?*

¹ This is a reference to lobby & advocacy following the assassination of indigenous activist Berta Cáceres in March 2016.

Partnership

In line with the discussion on partnership as an ‘unknown’ in Chapter 6, several interviewees raised the question how to be partners for a learning agenda. What roles can partners have, and how does performance of certain roles contribute to effectiveness? What can collaboration look like? Can the Ministry’s roles of funder and partner go together?

- *How to be partners?*

Lobby & advocacy and capacity development

Some questions raised by interviewees concerned the thematic focus of the Strategic Partnership Programme: lobby & advocacy and capacity development. These questions were diverse in nature, but often drew attention to contextual matters important for the programme:

- *How can we collaborate with the private sector, and with what result?*
- *What can be the Dutch state’s role seeking to influence policy and politics in another country?*
- *What can we learn when comparing different countries, i.e. open countries, closed countries and structured countries where it is in fact possible to do our work?*
- *How to combine a lobby & advocacy agenda with civil society capacity development? How does this work out in the different countries and what can we learn from the different political systems?*
- *How about the political space for NGOs? Should this perhaps become a spearhead for the programme?*

Reflections

Interviewees had further reflections to offer regarding a learning agenda. One preferred the development of learning agendas within the collaborations, starting out from a potential need for learning experiences in that context rather than the ‘rolling out of learning agendas from the outside’. Another interviewee pointed at the potential of peer learning between partners working on related issues or in certain contexts, also in the light of the usefulness of developing joint agendas or strategies between partners – this could make it easier for the Ministry to collaborate or support.

7.2 Department contact persons

By and large, contact persons proposed questions for a learning agenda from considerations of effectiveness, taking a managerial stance and an orientation towards programme results. These learning agenda points may not only concern partnership per se; the flexibility built into the programme may contribute to uncertainties and concerns rather than the collaboration in partnership.

Effectiveness: outcomes

Questions focusing on programme outcomes of diverse kinds:

- *Can partnership help to make sure grassroots voices impact policy?*
- *Can partnerships contribute to learning about integrated area development involving the private sector?*
- *What impact will partnership programmes have at the country level?*
- *How to achieve thematic objectives through lobby & advocacy?*
- *Are NGO lobby & advocacy initiatives effective? Do they choose the most effective channels and targets?*
- *How will the outcome of this programme relate to Foreign Policy agendas?*

Effectiveness: process

Questions focusing on processes, again centering on effectiveness. Here too, we see a wide diversity of questions raised:

- *How to build civil society capacity?*
- *Is working with Theories of Change (rather than log frames) really effective?*
- *Is working in partnerships effective?*
- *How to improve working in partnerships along the way?*
- *Will the NGOs be positioned in the mainstream or in the margins, when it comes to lobby & advocacy? And how does that relate to the forums of the Ministry? How does this work?*
- *How to achieve coherence at the country level?*

7.3 Embassies

Embassies did not propose questions for a learning agenda that directly related to the Strategic Partnerships programme, but they did offer issues and options from their specific positions and perspectives. One Embassy staff member expressed concern with managing the partnerships they were to be involved in, urging other actors to learn. ‘There has to be more overview. It should be clear who to contact. DSO should have an overview, looking from a higher level. Partners should engage with the Embassies more strategically. Establish contact earlier, make time to connect with other things we do, and stay in touch. There’s a role there for DSO or the country specialist.’ Another Embassy staff member pointed at the possibility of training local NGOs in working with open data. And one Embassy staff member says that it is not possible to come up with points for a learning agenda at this early stage without having had sufficient experiences with the programme. This interviewee pointed out that it would be good to reflect on the partnership after a year, considering progress, challenges, and support needs.

7.4 A common learning agenda?

Integrating the above

The above makes clear that the different actor categories have very different views when it comes to the possible content of a learning agenda for the Strategic Partnership programme, each expressing different ways of relating to the programme as such. As we saw in the other chapters, the NGO interviewees come up with points by which to make more of the potential of the partnerships in terms of collaboration and results. How can we work together and how can a partnership contribute to results? The questions by and large concern the larger question of how to shape to partnership. From the NGOs' perspective, this is a question concerning all actor categories involved. The contact persons, on the other hand, while asking questions about effectiveness and process as the NGO interviewees did, rather take a managerial perspective. Questions mostly appear to be rooted in concerns about the end results of the programme rather than in a concern about how to shape the collaboration from a position of shared responsibility. For the Embassies, learning appears to be still less something to conceive as a collective effort to shape the partnership, but as a question of how the effort to be undertaken by Embassies can be made more manageable.

This does not mean that bridges between concerns cannot be pointed out or developed. Both NGO interviewees and contact persons are clearly concerned about the effectiveness of partnership. Each side has a clear motivation to learn how to employ the possibilities of partnership to optimal effect.

NGOs and contact persons also show uncertainty about key elements of partnership that they find need to be addressed. This provides space for collective exploration of possibilities, and shared reflection and learning along the way.

The questions on lobby & advocacy and capacity development that both NGO interviewees and contact persons propose, suggest possibilities for a shared learning agenda as well. Both sides are entering new territories on which they want to develop a better grasp along the way.

Finally, the effectiveness questions the contact persons propose resonated well with monitoring and evaluation questions NGO interviewees proposed. It is important to learn what works and demonstrate results, but we do not know yet how to do that. This suggests a set of agendas that can and must be combined.

Questions emerging from analysis in chapters 3-6

When we consider the discussions in preceding chapters, another set of potential questions for a common learning agenda emerge, since they concern issues that were raised widely and that implicate all actors involved:

- *How to protect autonomy in partnerships?*
- *How to build and maintain trust in partnerships while also dealing with differences and conflicts within the collaboration?*
- *Is there need for a shared (and clearer defined) ambition at the level of individual partnerships and/or the programme as a whole? If yes, what should it be?*

Silences

Finally, we noted some important 'silences' in the interviews, also in the discussion of the learning agenda. While capacity development is central to the programme, interviewees hardly addressed this objective as a source for learning. The same goes for the ambition to integrate capacity development and lobby & advocacy. How this is to be done, and whether and how this may or may not be done through partnerships, is not exactly evident. That this matter is hardly addressed raises questions about the way the various actors engage with these objectives and their interrelations. It also raises questions whether and in what ways actors see these objectives as ones that partnerships could help to advance.

Another important silence concerns the role of partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries in the programmes. While discussing the learning agenda, as in the rest of the interviews, interviewees mostly did not bring up the partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries as key actors to consider. This is remarkable, considering these partners' supposed centrality in the programme. It is the capacity of these actors whose capacity is to be developed, and one would think the potential partnership of the Netherlands government might be a potentially relevant factor in their view concerning the development of their capacities. This silence can perhaps be explained by thinking at the early stage of the programme, when partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries were still undefined. But also by the fact that interaction on the Strategic Partnership programme so far mostly took place between the Ministry and the Dutch NGOs. It may also have depended on the approach to capacity development chosen in the programmes. This approach may or may not be integrated with lobby & advocacy activities involving the Ministry. More broadly, it may or may not use a systemic perspective that integrates activities at the different levels (Blagescu and Young 2006).

- *To address these silences, we propose to consider the following questions for a learning agenda:*
- *What is the role of capacity development and lobby & advocacy in the different programmes?*
- *How can capacity development and lobby & advocacy be integrated effectively in the different contexts?*
- *What can be the role of the partnership between the NGOs, the Ministry and the Embassies in advancing capacity development?*
- *What should be the role of partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries in the development and implementation of the Strategic Partnership programme?*
- *How to guarantee the focus on capacity development of partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries' as the main objective of the Strategic Partnership programme?*

8. Conclusion

The policy framework of the Strategic Partnership programme envisages partnerships based on jointly defined strategic goals and equal and reciprocal relations, with space for flexibility. Risks are to be taken together, and partners can hold each other to account. Capacity building is the main focus of the programme. Strategic partnerships aim to achieve results that partners cannot achieve on their own. In these partnerships, differences are not only accepted but welcomed for the energy that is created by friction, which can contribute to achieving change.

If we consider the analysis in the preceding chapters on added value, opportunities, ways of collaboration, challenges and learning, how do the expectations regarding partnership relate to this vision? What are the expectations, and to what extent and in what ways is partnership, in this first year of the programme, materializing in line with the stated ambitions? In this concluding chapter, we start with summarizing the insights from Chapters 3 to 7. We then offer some reflections on key themes emerging from the analysis which may be important for the further development of the Strategic Partnerships programme, and that may be used to inform future monitoring and evaluation of the programme. We also discuss possible ways in which these themes can be addressed to facilitate reflection and dialogue.

8.1 Summary of findings

For most interviewees, important conditions for partnership have been met. Interviewees often see considerable alignment between the agendas they work on and the approaches that they work with, and those of their partners. The basic idea of the partnership is accepted as legitimate: while approached differently, it is taken positively, with openness to exploring possibilities, including the reshaping of relations and roles. In this, there is a strong recognition of the role of civil society organizations as the voice of society. The space that the programme creates for close contact and building of relations between NGOs, the Ministry and the Embassies, combined with the prospect of sustained cooperation over the coming years, provides a basis from which partnership can develop. At the same time, there appears to be space for dissent within the programme, as experiences so far suggest.

Collaboration

To varying degrees, interviewees envisage collaboration in a range of areas: information exchange, brokering and facilitation, mutual influencing and joint lobby & advocacy. At this moment, NGO interviewees, on the whole, have a more strategically oriented view, and seek more collaboration than Department contact persons. NGO interviewees identify multiple ways in which the presence, influence and convening power of the Ministry in policy making arenas can be used to advance programme objectives. Department contact persons relatively often take a supportive stance to partnership, expressing readiness to, indeed, offer to have their presence, influence and convening power put to use. Relevance for Departments' thematic objectives or work is often less evident to the Department contact persons. They mostly welcome the partnership, yet often identify benefits in areas where partnership is not strategic,

such as the sharing of information, consultation, brokering and facilitation. The NGO's leading role, expertise and autonomy is accepted as guiding, and Departments have at most aimed to adjustment programmes in relation to the (number of) countries that were targeted. Embassy staff members typically seek to manage and differentiate collaboration with a keen eye for what is possible in situations where apparent demand for collaboration exceeds capacity. All in all, multiple opportunities for collaboration are taken up. Shared responsibility and mutual accountability for the pursuit of shared strategic goals is not yet developed to the extent envisaged in the policy framework, especially on the side of the Ministry.

Added value

NGO interviewees identify many possible forms of added value of partnership. Partnership with the Ministry in The Hague and at the Embassies can provide access to important actors and arenas, 'opening doors'. Similarly, the Ministries' convening power can bring NGOs together with actors they themselves could not get to engage with directly. The Ministry in The Hague, and to some degree the Embassies, can become important lobby & advocacy targets, being more accessible as a partner, and open to dissent. The Ministry can also be an ally whose collaboration can help strengthen messages, broaden the reach of messages, and take messages to new and important places. Through a partnership with the Ministry, NGOs can learn important lessons on different fronts, like government perspectives and the workings of the state in different countries. Finally, the Embassies can play an important role by protecting activists and organizations. The perceived leverage of the ministry plays an important role in NGOs' high expectations regarding added value of partnership. Department contact persons also value collaboration, since partners create added value. Partnership can contribute to strengthening the capacity of civil society, which is important in its own right. Partnership provides some opportunities to adjust NGOs' programmes in line with Department objectives and activities. Through partnership with NGOs, the Departments can learn important lessons, most importantly through providing access to important information 'from the ground'. For the Embassies, partnership can have added value in offering access to information and enrichment of the Embassies' own networks.

Opportunities

In particular, the more open and equal relationships, interactions and open-ended forms of working together that the Strategic Partnership Programme offers are seen to provide opportunities. Firstly, partnerships make it possible to develop collaborations using synergies strategically. Secondly, it can involve making friction productive. Thirdly, through the programme, partners can combine capacities of all actors involved contributing to empowerment of partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries. And fourthly, partnerships also provide spaces to reconsider evaluation from a partnership perspective. NGOs are more outspoken on these opportunities; this also may be read as an invitation to their governmental partners to think more strategically and to make the most of the potential of new collaborations.

Challenges

Interviewees identified four challenges: risks, unknowns, points of attention, and capacity limits. They see a risk in the potential loss of autonomy coming with a

partnership. Challenges are how to safeguard autonomy and how to mitigate or prevent feared consequences of a partnership. Additional risks concern uncertainties around the degree to which partnerships as envisaged can continue to count on political support after the 2017 general elections in the Netherlands, and the handling of sensitive information between partners. The latter refers especially to the use of the IATI system that was introduced independent of (but simultaneously to) the strategic partnership programme. Unknowns concern the question how to be partners - a question of developing shared understandings of partnership in the light of differences in the levels of ambition, in stakes and in capacities. This is a highly prominent issue for NGO interviewees.

Points of attention regarding implementation and coordination reflect some concerns about how effectively partnerships will come about and work. This challenge points to the need for attention to effective management, communication and trust-building within the Strategic Partnership programme. It also points to concerns whether the open space of the partnership tallies with political accountability demands: some people in the Ministry are concerned with the question of how to account for the results of the programme.

The limiting factor of capacity is pertinent for the Department contact persons and the Embassies, but is perceived as problematic mostly by NGOs. It has given rise to some frustration amongst the NGOs. Adjustment and development of mutual understandings and agreement on commitments appears necessary.

The major objective of the programme is to develop capacity for lobby and advocacy in the partner countries. The specific importance of this objective was not often referred to in the interviews with the NGOs and the Ministry representatives. However, the survey amongst partners of lower and middle-income countries of the strategic partnerships revealed a high support for the programme. Remarkably, we noted an important effect of the programme in the sense that many strategic partnerships have engaged with new sets of partners that have a strong record on lobby and advocacy, mainly at the national and sub-national level. A majority of the respondents knew about the strategic partnerships and were involved in their development.

Local partners

Local partners (in low- and lower-middle income countries) generally welcome the programme. Although they consider their capacities high on lobby and advocacy, they see room for capacity development in all domains. There are many new local partners engaged in the programme, with a strong record on lobby and advocacy, largely at the national and sub-national level. The majority of the local partners were familiar with the Strategic Partnerships and had been involved in its programme design. Local partners largely see the involvement of the Dutch government as useful in forwarding their causes at international events or in helping to protect their staff. They trust the added value of the Dutch government involvement but are also less sure whether it will materialise in practice. The overwhelmingly positive response was qualified by a number of remarks showing concern by some partners about the uncoupling of lobby from service delivery, the financial continuity and the feasibility of the programme in view of national politics.

Learning agenda

When it comes to suggestions for a learning agenda, interviewees propose a wide spectrum of questions. Many questions concern effectiveness of the programme, and demonstration of effectiveness. Is partnership effective? What will contribute to effectiveness? How to monitor and evaluate? Also, more basic questions emerged on how to carry out lobby & advocacy and capacity development programmes, as well as questions regarding the possible results to which these will lead. These questions reflect basic uncertainties about the programme and its effectiveness. The interviews more broadly also suggest questions around protection of autonomy, building and maintenance of trust, and the ambitions of the programme. The researchers identified silence on issues that do appear important to learn about, considering the ambitions of the programme: integration of capacity development and lobby & advocacy; the role of partnership in capacity development; the role of partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries; and how the focus on their capacity development can be secured.

8.2 Themes for further development and monitoring of the programme

The policy framework shows high ambitions for the nature of the partnership to be achieved. Many things are being achieved already when it comes to partnership development. At the same time, materializing ambitions turns out to be challenging. Differences between organizational stakes, envisaged contributions and capacities are real, as are differences between agendas. Furthermore, expectations of partnership are also influenced by personal role conceptions and existing practices of collaboration. Further development of partnership requires active mutual engagement to help develop trust and common ground, based in mutual commitments and understandings of each other's possibilities and limits. This is something that needs to grow through communication and mutual adjustment regarding goals, capacities and responsibilities. As partnerships develop, possibilities and challenges become more clear and concrete, and such developments offer moments for reflection, learning and adjustment.

Based on our analysis and taking into account the ambitions of the Strategic Partnerships programme, five themes are proposed for further developing and monitoring partnerships. These themes offer questions and issues that have cross-cutting relevance for the programme: (1) how to be partners, (2) how to deal with friction, (3) capacity, (4) effectiveness and (5) evaluation.

How to be partners?

The different partnerships start out from programmes primarily devised and controlled by the NGOs involved. Department contact persons and Embassy staff take as the starting point that the programmes will be NGO-led. While guarding their autonomy, NGO interviewees sometimes expressed that they would expect more from the Departments and the Embassies. Given the limitations they experience in terms of involvement, commitment and capacity by the Departments and the Embassies, NGO interviewees call for more and more clearly articulated ambitions from the side of the Ministry.

A key question is whether a more strategic approach from the Ministry is possible and desirable. NGOs clearly see the strategic added value of the Ministry for their work, but this is less evident for the Department contact persons. They see the value of supporting civil society, of inclusiveness and learning. But to advance strategic involvement and commitment, Ministry staff members may also promote more explicitly the options for synergies between the NGO work and their own work, and how collaboration with NGOs may help the Ministry to achieve its diplomatic goals. For example: how can the work of the NGO partners complement the Ministry's work on policy engaging with states, international organizations and multi-stakeholder processes? Which policy processes? Which NGOs? What could they contribute, and what difference would that make? To help achieve what type of objectives? Where can such collaboration match objectives of NGOs in the programme? In short, how can the specific power of civil society be *harnessed* within the programme, in the context of the Ministry's activities or ambitions to influence specific political and policy processes?

We may consider though that NGOs try to get support for their own objectives rather than aim for mutual adjustment with the Ministry. They may also consider that the development of strategically oriented and committed partnerships may depend partly on the degree to which they themselves are open to engaging and adjusting with the Ministry's objectives.

One way of reaching clarity about the collaboration and to invite partners to think more strategically about the opportunities would be to develop Theories of Change concerning the strategic partnerships between the NGOs and the Ministry, which will be elaborated further below. It can also contribute to mutual understanding and confidence in commitment. Also in cases where the Ministry decides that the involvement can mainly be supportive (e.g. by brokering and facilitation), developing Theories of Change for the partnerships can be helpful.

That a strategic approach to partnership is not evident in many interviews with Department staff may have a number of reasons. First of all, the NGOs approach partnership from the starting point of autonomy and control over programs, and many Ministry staff agree with this. One may question to what extent this leaves room for collective strategizing. Secondly, partnerships primarily develop between the actors directly involved, rather than through imposed requirements. This may make it more natural for Departments to continue existing ways of working with NGOs (more supportive, more management-oriented) rather than take more collective responsibility for programmes through more strategic involvement. Thirdly, a reason may lay in the novelty of approaching NGOs as partners in lobby & advocacy. And finally, such strategic involvement may not easily develop through the interaction between NGOs and individual Department contact persons, who may not be engaging with partners from an involvement with political or policy processes that are directly relevant for their NGO partners. Broader engagements between Departments and NGOs, e.g. through policy meetings, may form excellent opportunities for exploring options for more strategic engagement from the Ministry's side.

Another issue concerns the way capacity development relates to partnership. While the Strategic Partnership programme is to focus on the development of the lobby &

advocacy capacity of partners in low- and middle-income countries, discussions on the expectations of partnership focused mostly on the Northern NGOs and on lobby & advocacy. Interviewees' discussions of their expectations of partnership hardly considered implications for the capacity development of partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries. This may well be related to the early stage of the programme. However, this is something that deserves attention. A related point is that the effectiveness of the Strategic Partnership programme regarding the key objective of capacity development is at risk of being compromised if programmes are, to a large degree, predefined by Northern NGOs who subsequently develop partnerships with the Ministry based on this predefined programme. This generates questions about the space for partners in low- and lower-income countries within the programme. It also points at the need for making adequate connections between the initiatives of NGOs and the Ministry, as well with the needs and voices of their constituencies.

How to deal with friction

While the programme's title 'Dialogue and Dissent' suggests a central place for differences in viewpoints and interests, we rather observed expectations for collaboration rooted in the alignment of agendas and approaches. In some cases, interviewees mention that partnership is to include dissent in the sense of offering critical and correcting viewpoints, keeping each other on the job, learning about alternative perspectives and filling gaps in one's understanding. However, mostly NGOs were offering this viewpoint; among the Department contact persons and the Embassy staff this was less evident. This raises issues as to what the role of dissent can be in the programme.

Two concrete questions emerged from the interviews: (1) how to manage friction, and (2) how to make friction productive? When it comes to management of friction: partners do not always agree, and such disagreement can find an expression in the interaction behind closed doors as well as in public. How to deal with such disagreements? How to combine dialogue and dissent with a partnership - maintaining trust and a foundation for collaboration while also engaging differences? How to avoid an association with a partner's position when this position is controversial or contrary to one's own? How to respect each other's autonomy and limits? These are questions that emerge particularly when strong disagreement or controversy can make association between civil society and the Dutch government risky for one or both sides. Key ways of managing such friction that are discussed during the interviews are: keep each other informed in a timely fashion so that partners can prepare to respond, facilitate a dialogue to overcome or control friction, and seek distance in particular cases, while maintaining partner relations and communications.

When it comes to making friction productive: partnership rooted only in alignment may reinforce views already present in the Ministry, advancing established agendas. This may be advantageous for these agendas, through the synergies that can be achieved through aligned and complementary acting. This may strengthen the voice of civil society around prominent concerns and interests. However, the present, implicit focus on partnership on the basis of alignment may undermine the programme's potential of using differences in viewpoint and interest to strengthening the voice of civil society, by giving more space to alternative and less-heard voices. These can help

put to the test existing and dominant understandings and approaches, confront and integrate knowledge and attain a more inclusive process.

In addition, developing approaches for dealing with dissent in a productive way may help mitigate concerns amongst the Ministry staff for whom dissent may sometimes appear risky rather than positive. It can also help to secure the space for dissent granted in the policy framework, which many actors involved consider to be of major importance. Moreover, it may thereby help address questions of autonomy (for NGOs as well as the Ministry), since a partnership rooted in alignment only may involve risks of (apparent) co-optation and institutionalization of civil society (Lang, 2012).

Capacity

Limited capacity (staff time, expertise) with the Department contact persons and the Embassies may restrict the development of partnerships. This has already led to frustrations with at least some NGOs. While capacity limits are a fact of life, partnership may be well served by some further reflection on the question how the available capacity can be worked with most effectively. The Embassies, faced with multiple partnerships, differentiate their engagement with partnerships looking to the degree of alignment, the programme quality, and the added value considering the Embassy's own objectives. Such differentiation may also take place based on other grounds, e.g. the potential added value for the Strategic Partnerships programme itself. Also, civil society groups might explore options for coordination to engage Embassy capacity efficiently. Also within the Ministry, differentiation between partnerships can be noted. In some cases, Department contact persons show more involvement and commitment than in other cases, similarly grounded in levels of alignment and assessment of programme quality and added value. Here too, further differentiation might help make the most of existing capacity. First, facilitating and encouraging diversified engagement between NGOs and Ministry staff may help identify staff and policy work where stronger alignment and added value between Ministry and NGO can be found, in cases where such alignment and added value now appear limited. Second, developing a strategic focus in the collaboration within the partnerships may help to enhance effectiveness, working with the available capacity. A third possibility is strategic focusing through coordination across different partnerships that are working on related issues and policy processes, or engaging with the same institutions or policymakers.

Effectiveness

An important concern shared among the interviewees is the effectiveness of the Strategic Partnership programme. Questions that comes up are: when is the programme to be considered effective? Based on which criteria? Here, we may want to acknowledge the built-in tension that effectiveness and results are to be defined by the Alliances, whereas the Dutch Parliament will eventually decide about the success of the programme, which may result into pressure from within the Department to show tangible results. The questions above can only be answered when ambitions for the programme are clearly articulated, and put to effect in mutual understandings and in operationalization of roles and responsibilities. This is possible whilst maintaining the necessary space for diversity. Options could well be explored with close attention to effectiveness. Within a partnership, what forms of collaboration have a good chance of being effective looking to what a programme is trying to achieve? This also

requires considering potential synergies and opportunities of a partnership and the political or policy processes it could engage with. While this is what NGOs often seek, such engagement appears to be more limited from the side of the Ministry. A proper solution may lie in developing Theories of Change for the collaboration taking place between the Ministry and the NGOs within the partnerships. Such Theories of Change would help partners to define mid-term and longer-term common strategic goals. This would also stimulate a clearer sense of mutual responsibilities and accountabilities within the partnerships, and provide a basis for dialogue, reflection and adjustment over time.

For contact persons, however, effectiveness also is an issue in another important way. Contact persons sometimes appear to be uncertain and concerned about the programme's effectiveness as such. Can this work? How can we make it work? The managerial stance some contact persons have towards partnerships, seeing it as their main task to make sure programmes are adequately run and lead to results, may well be stimulated by such concerns. This stance may work against partners taking a collective responsibility for their results. Different factors may play a role here. Results of lobby & advocacy and lobby & advocacy capacity development programmes are often likely to be rather intangible. Programme implementation is not easily controlled. And finally, lobby & advocacy is often novel terrain for contact persons, but also for some of the NGOs involved, generating uncertainty. Further development of shared understandings of lobby & advocacy and lobby & advocacy capacity development, and the potential relevance of achievements in these areas, may contribute to a stronger sense of efficacy and partnership for Department contact persons and NGOs. Working from a Theory of Change approach for the partnership dimensions of programmes, incorporating regular moments for monitoring, dialogue and adjustment, may also contribute to trust in partners, involvement and confidence in each other and in the collective work. Finally, a clear sense of how evaluation can bring out effectiveness of lobby & advocacy can contribute to more confidence in effectiveness, and maybe also help to develop partnerships on the side of the Ministry actors.

Evaluation

When it comes to evaluation of the Strategic partnerships programme, two important concerns emerged from the interviews: (1) what to evaluate, and (2) how to evaluate? A question that emerged, in particular from the side of the NGO interviewees is: what is to be evaluated? This relates to the question 'how to be partners'. Are the different programmes to be seen as the responsibility of the NGOs, or as a collective responsibility? A key issue here is what the role of the partnership element actually is to be in the evaluation of programmes. Presently, at least some interviewees are uncertain about this, and this may impact on trust and collaboration. A clear choice for one or the other may stimulate very different engagements between NGOs and the Ministry. The fact that funder and partner roles are combined in the Strategic Partnership programme and in the roles of policy officers is an important complication. A question emerging from both Ministry and NGOs was: how to evaluate? The rather intangible nature of outcomes in lobby & advocacy and lobby & advocacy capacity development makes measurement of outcomes challenging, and some interviewees expressed they had no clear sense of how to deal with this. For some NGO interviewees, the Strategic Partnerships programme is an opportunity to reconsider

how to evaluate, moving away from the numerical and bureaucratic reporting exercise of the past that often failed to convey the meaning of achievements. More broadly speaking, NGOs as well as the Department contact persons would be interested to learn about (new) ways of establishing effectiveness. This applies in particular to NGOs and Ministry staff who are relatively new to lobby & advocacy. Evaluation of lobby & advocacy requires special competences, for example, identifying outcomes that do justice to the long-haul nature of some efforts and the intermediate nature of many lobby & advocacy outcomes (Barrett et al. 2016). For Departments and NGOs it may be worthwhile to explore together what can be achieved together through lobby & advocacy and lobby & advocacy capacity development via their partnership, and how these achievements may constitute steps towards achieving objectives. This may contribute to more programme legitimacy and commitment from the Ministry, and thereby enhance the confidence in the partnerships.

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Appendix 1. 25 Dialogue and Dissent partnerships: number of countries

Appendix table 1. 25 Dialogue and Dissent partnerships: number of countries

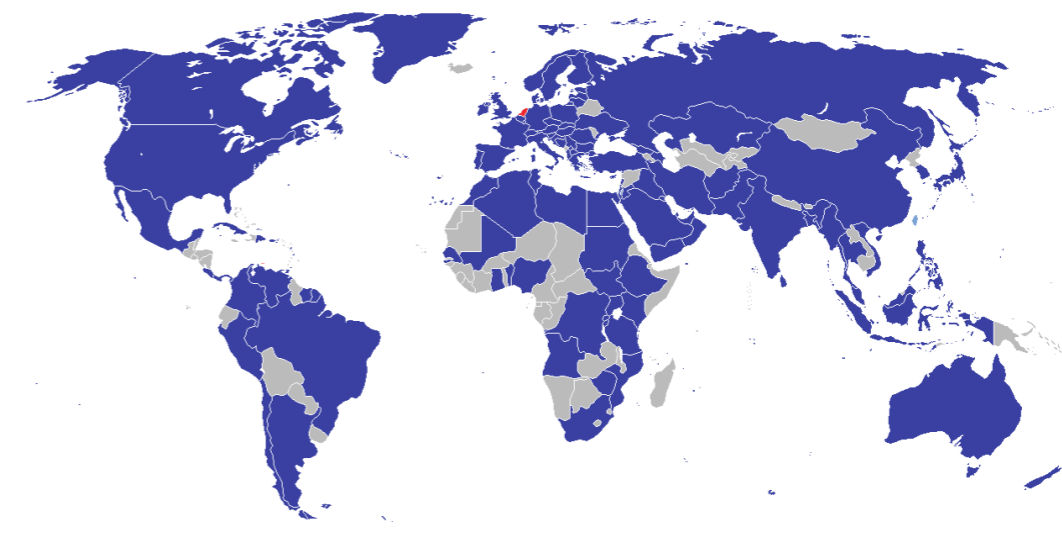
Programme name	Lead organisation	# Alliance partners	# Countries*
1 Fair green and global alliance	Both ENDS	5	38
2 Prevent up front	GPPAC	1	33
3 Count me in!	Mama Cash	4	30
4 Global alliance for green and gender action	FCAM	2	28
5 Towards a worldwide influencing network	Oxfam Novib	1	24
6 No news is bad news	Free Press	1	22
7 Citizens agency consortium	Hivos	2	16
8 Shared resources, joint solutions	IUCN	1	14
9 Partnership for rights, inclusivity, diversity and equality	COC	-	14
10 Freedom from fear	Pax	1	13
11 Convening and Convincing	ICCO	5	11
12 Building capacity for sector change	UTZ	-	10
13 Conducive environments for effective policy	NIMD	1	10
14 Girls advocacy alliance	Plan Nederland	2	10
15 Partners for resilience	Rode Kruis	4	10
16 Right here, right now	Rutgers	6	10
17 Beat the AIDS epidemic	Aids Fonds	1	9
18 Fair Wear alliance	Fair Wear	2	8
19 Green livelihoods alliance	Milieudefensie	2	8
20 Advocacy for change	Solidaridad	-	6
21 Capacitating change: empowering people in fragile contexts	Cordaid	-	6
22 Every voice counts	Care	-	6
23 Watershed – empowering citizens	IRC	3	6
24 SNV and IFPRI alliance	SNV	1	6
25 Health systems advocacy 4 Africa	Amref	3	3

* Based on programme documents of the Dialogue and Dissent Alliances. Possible changes made in the inception phase have not been included.

Appendix 2. Netherlands diplomatic missions

The Netherlands have about 140 diplomatic missions abroad – including consulates (see the countries in blue in the figure below).

Appendix figure 1. Netherlands diplomatic missions



Some of these Embassies are also responsible for neighbouring countries. The Dutch Embassy in Senegal, for instance, also caters to Mauritania and Gambia, whereas the Embassy in Ghana covers – next to Ghana – also Ivory Coast, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Togo. In effect, some Embassies have even a bigger number of Dialogue and Dissent partnerships to handle than a first glance at the list shows. Ghana then includes partnerships with 15 Alliances in Ghana itself, five in Sierra Leone, three in Togo, four in Liberia, and three in Ivory Coast. As many Alliances work in several of these countries.

Appendix 3. Overview Royal Netherlands Embassies and number of partnerships

Appendix table 2. Overview Royal Netherlands Embassies and number of partnerships (total and unique)

RNE	Represents which Dialogue and Dissent countries?	Abbr.	# P. total	# unique Alliances	
1	Indonesia	Indonesia + Timor Leste	JAK	21	19
2	Kenya	Kenya + Somalia	NAI	22	19
3	Uganda	Uganda	KAM	19	19
4	Ghana	Ghana + Ivory Coast + Liberia + Sierra Leone + Togo	ACC	30	17
5	Mali	Mali + Niger + Burkina Faso	BAM	18	13
6	India	India + Nepal	NDE	15	12
7	Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe + Malawi + Zambia	HAR	19	12
8	Bangladesh	Bangladesh	DHA	10	10
9	Bolivia	Bolivia	LAP	10	10
10	Myanmar	Myanmar	YAN	10	10
11	Nigeria	Nigeria	ABJ	10	10
12	Philippines	Philippines	MAN	10	10
13	Costa Rica	El Salvador + Honduras + Guatemala	SJO	16	9
14	Pakistan	Pakistan	ISL	9	9
15	Ethiopia	Ethiopia	ADD	8	8
16	Tanzania	Tanzania + Madagascar	DAR	9	8
17	Thailand	Cambodia + Laos	BAN	11	8
18	DRC	DRC	KSS	7	7
19	Mozambique	Mozambique	MAP	7	7
20	Senegal	Senegal + Mauritania + Guinea-Bissau + Guinea + Gambia	DAK	11	7
21	Vietnam	Vietnam	HAN	7	7
22	Benin	Benin	COT	6	6
23	Burundi	Burundi	BUJ	6	6
24	Sudan	Sudan + Chad + Central African Republic	KHA	7	6
25	Egypt	Egypt	KAI	5	5

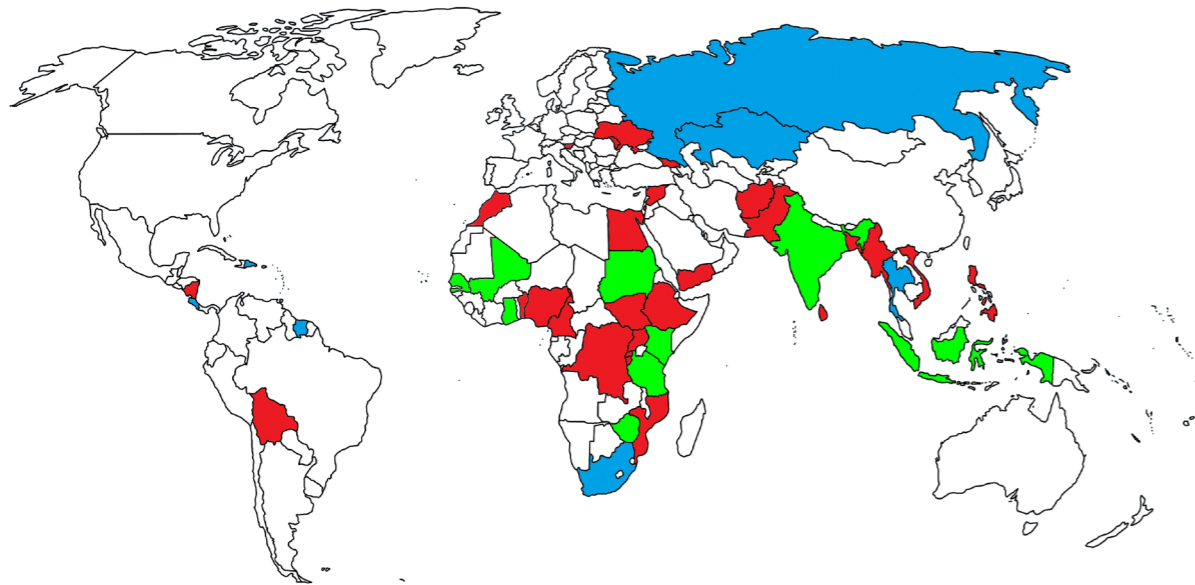
RNE	Represents which Dialogue and Dissent countries?	Abbr.	# P. total	# unique Alliances	
26	South Sudan	South Sudan	JBA	5	5
27	Nicaragua	Nicaragua	MNG	4	4
28	Palestinian ter.	Palestinian territories	RAM	4	4
29	Rwanda	Rwanda	KIG	4	4
30	Afghanistan	Afghanistan	KAB	3	3
31	Dominican Rep.	Haiti	STD	3	3
32	Sri Lanka	Sri Lanka	COL	3	3
33	Ukraine	Ukraine	KIE	3	3
34	Cameroon	Cameroon	YAO	2	2
35	Georgia	Georgia	TBL	2	2
36	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan + Tajikistan*	AST	3	2
37	Morocco	Morocco	RAB	2	2
38	Russia	Uzbekistan	MOS	2	2
39	Suriname	Guyana	PRM	2	2
40	Yemen	Yemen*	SAA	2	2
41	Kosovo	Kosovo	PRI	1	1
42	Moldova	Moldova	BKR	1	1
43	Syria	Syria	DMC	1	1
44	South Africa	Lesotho	PRE	1	1

* Temporarily closed?

Appendix 4. Embassy responsibilities for partnership, by country

Embassies are responsible for partnerships in countries where activities under the Dialogue and Dissent programme are to take place (which we may call 'D&D countries'). This leads to a variety of situations, as shown below.

Appendix figure 2. Embassy responsibilities for partnership, by D&D country

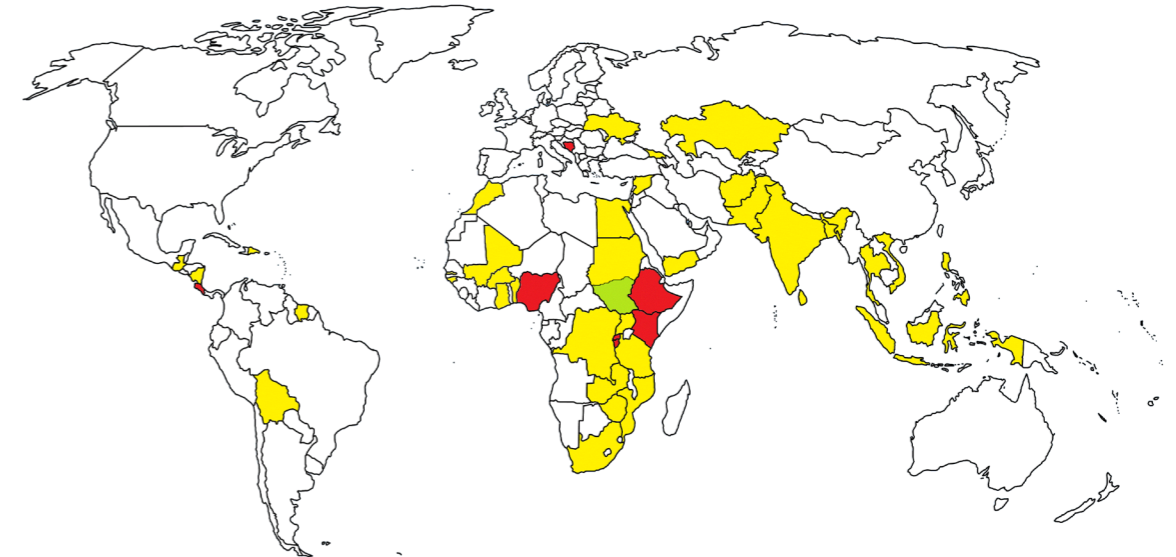


(1) in red: responsible only for concerned country; (2) in green – responsible for the indicated country + other(s); and (3) in blue: responsible for D&D country but not a D&D country itself

Appendix 5. Royal Netherlands Embassies' expenditure

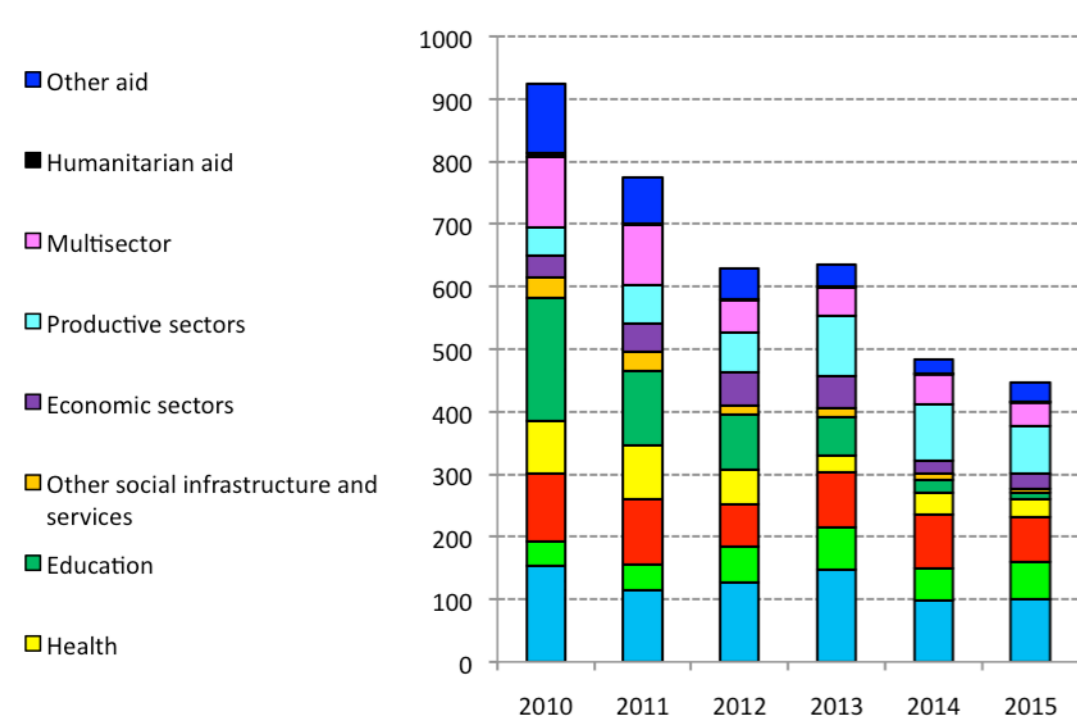
The budgets of Dutch Embassies over the period 2010-2015 has declined substantially. This undoubtedly impacts as well on the capacity of embassies to 'invest' in Dialogue and Dissent partnerships. Overall, Embassies central to the Dialogue and Dissent programme have shown a decrease in expenditure of almost 52% (from €924 million in 2010 to €447 million in 2015). Such a decrease does not hold for all embassies, however. Besides, the Dutch Embassy in South Sudan (marked green in Figure 3 below) is a special case here as there was no embassy (and no South Sudan for that matter) in 2010. Figure 3 below provides an overview of those Embassies showing a decrease in ODA expenditure (ranging from a low of -20% to a high of -100%) (yellow; 35 Embassies) or an increase (red; seven Embassies) ranging from +34% to +553% when comparing 2010 to 2015.

Appendix figure 3. Increasing (red) or decreasing (yellow) ODA expenditures per Royal Netherlands Embassy during 2010-2015



Source: based on data from the internal administration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

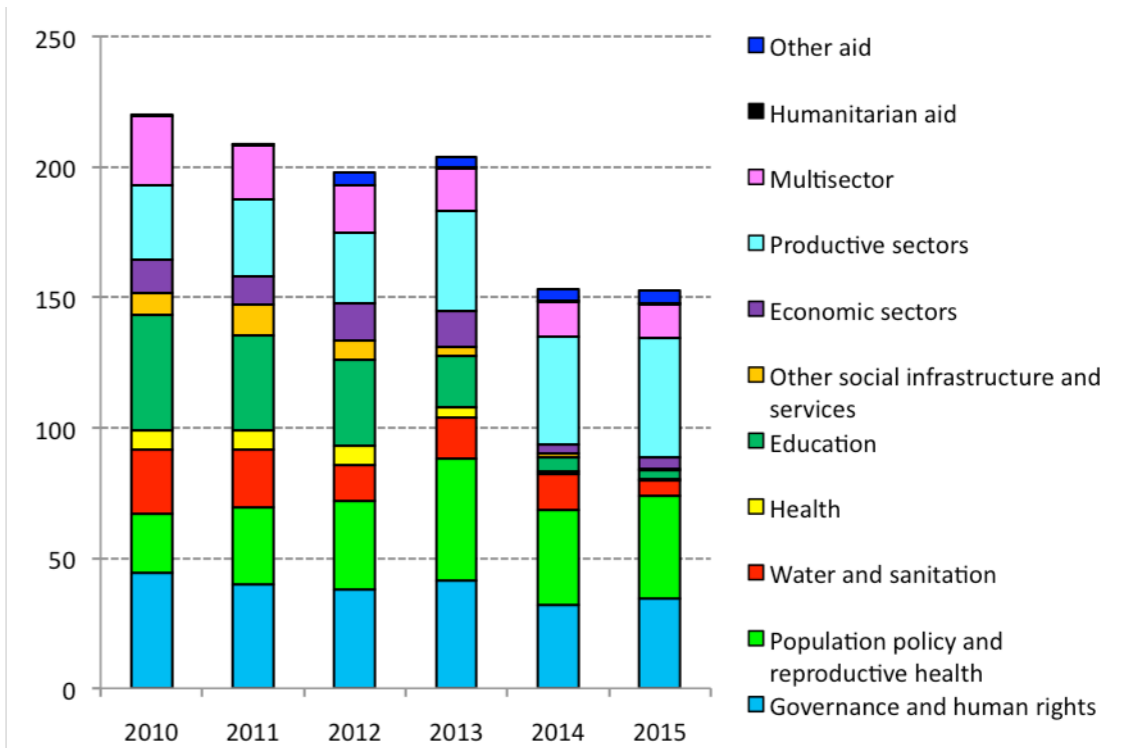
Appendix table 3. Expenditure Royal Netherlands Embassies per sector, 2010-2015 (in million €) – all channels*



* Only covering 45 Royal Netherlands Embassies responsible for Dialogue and Dissent partnerships. Excluding Myanmar and Uzbekistan.

Source: based on data from the internal administration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

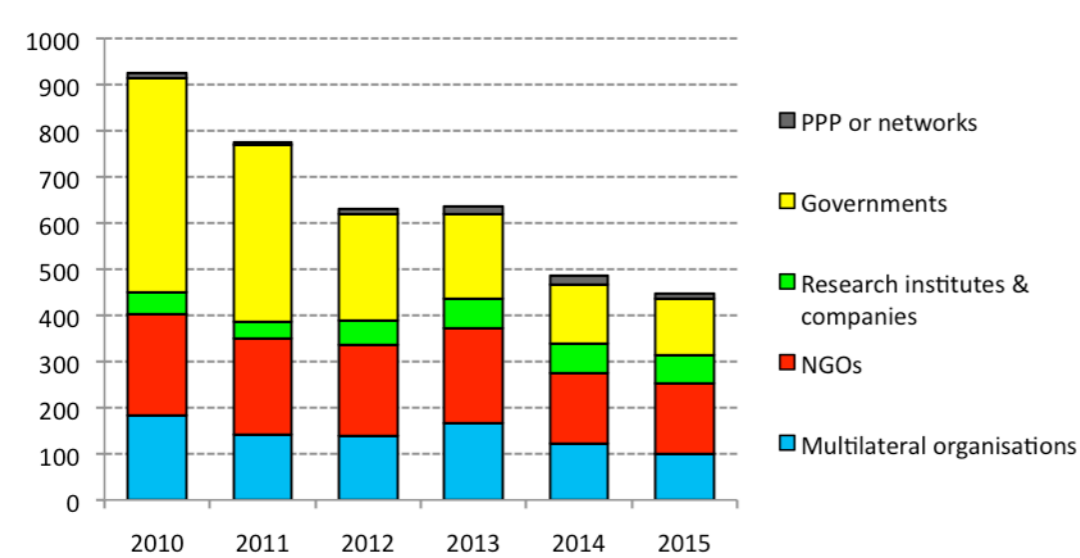
Appendix table 4. Expenditure Royal Netherlands Embassies per sector, 2010-2015 (in million €) – only NGO channel*



* Only covering 45 Royal Netherlands Embassies responsible for Dialogue and Dissent partnerships. Excluding Myanmar and Uzbekistan.

Source: based on data from the internal administration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Appendix table 5. Expenditure Royal Netherlands Embassies per channel, 2010-2015 (in million €)*



* Only covering 45 Royal Netherlands Embassies responsible for Dialogue and Dissent partnerships. Excluding Myanmar and Uzbekistan.

Source: based on data from the internal administration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Appendix 6. Survey partners in low- and lower-middle income countries

Methodology

Although planned from the start, it was officially only agreed to include partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries in this research in July 2016. Mid-August, all 25 Alliances were contacted with the request to provide contact details of their partners in the Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme. Mid-November this process of collecting contact details was finalised. Box 6.1 (page 47) already indicated that there were a lot of questions as well as resistance and hesitation from the side of many Alliances to provide the contact details of their partners. Arguments were exchanged, partners and local representatives of Alliance members were consulted and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was asked by a few Alliances to indicate the need to cooperate in this part of the research. As mentioned: in the end 16 Alliances provided details for (part of) their partners.

Over a period of four weeks (and in four batches), the survey was sent to a total of 538 partners of these 16 Alliances. Collection of data was finalised on the 28th of November – at what time 213 partners had returned the survey (of which 97% filled it all questions and the remaining 3% reached at least question 10).

The survey itself consists of 15 question (plus a final possibility to add other comments regarding the Strategic Partnership programme). These 15 question are divided over four sections. In the first section, some background data is collected (e.g., sector, age, involvement in the proposal writing, history with the NGO(s) in the Alliance) that is principally used to distinguish between different groups in the analysis of the other three parts. It allows, for instance, for analysing whether the extent to which partners see an added value in the involvement of the Dutch government differs between younger and older partners or between those that have been involved for a longer period with one of the Alliance NGOs and those that are new partners. At the same time, some of the questions in this section also have a 'value on their own'. This holds, for instance, for the question whether partners have been involved in the proposal(s) written by the NGO Alliance for the Strategic Partnership programme.

The following three parts of the survey are structured based on the idea that the Strategic Partnership programme differs from earlier NGO schemes of the Dutch government in three ways: (1) an exclusive focus on lobby & advocacy; (2) a focus on capacity building of organisations in low- and lower-middle-income countries in the field of lobby & advocacy; and (3) a focus on partnership. In line with the ToR for this research, the last section zooms in on the partnership with the Dutch government (i.e., the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague and/or Dutch Embassies in the respective countries). It is also in this latter section that the questions posed (principally in the form of statements) derive directly from the earlier analysis of interviews with Alliance members, departments at the Ministry and Dutch Embassies. The survey was constructed by the research team and was informed by the findings from the interviews with NGO Alliances, departments at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Dutch Embassies during the first stage of the research as well as by group interviews with partners of one Alliance. Besides, Luuk van Kempen (CIDIN, Radboud University)

and the Ministry provided feedback on an earlier version as did three partners who participated in a test run of the survey. Their remarks were used to finalise the questionnaire.

In the descriptive analysis, we principally rely on scores per question (i.e., frequencies) to show the ideas and opinions of partners (as well as the differences among partners). It was also analysed to what extent differences systematically are related to types of partners. Types are then determined by establishing groups based on (1) the age of the partner and (2) the number of years they have been a partner of an NGO involved in the programme. The 'partner'-groups are based on question 7 and led to three groups: (1) having been a partner for 5 years or more; (2) having been a partner between 1 up to 4 years; and (3) new partners (i.e., those for which the Strategic Partnership programme is the first time they are involved with a specific Dutch NGO). The three sections together provide for a first understanding of the opinions of partners about the (potential) pros and cons of the programme – and certainly about the partnership aspect of this programme, which is after all the central focus of this research. Including the voice of partners in low- and lower-middle-income countries, will therefore allow for a broader analysis at the very start of the programme.

Survey

This is how the survey was introduced to the participants:

Your organisation is one of the partners in the Strategic Partnership for Lobby and Advocacy programme of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. This programme started early 2016 and will run for 5 years. As a partner in the programme, we like to ask you to fill in a survey about your opinion and expectations of the programme. The survey will take around 20 minutes of your time.

We are researchers of three Dutch universities (Wageningen, Erasmus and Radboud). Our study has been commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. The survey is part of a study aimed at providing an overview of expectations with regard to this new programme. We have had interviews with NGO Alliances as well as departments in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague and a number of Netherlands Embassies. In order to get a better understanding of expectations, we feel it is essential to include your viewpoints in this study. This survey comes at the end of the first year of the programme, and hence your viewpoints will be valuable to improve the programme and to do future evaluations of the programme. The report of the study will be made available to you after completion in February 2017.

Instructions

Thank you for participating in this survey. You were selected for this survey because you have been identified as a partner of one of the NGO Alliances under the Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This programme started early 2016 and will run for 5 years.

The study will be strictly independent in its analysis and your responses will be confidential and anonymous.

- This questionnaire is being sent to all partners of NGO Alliances under the Strategic

- Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme for which we received contact details.
- Reporting on this questionnaire will only be done on the basis of all respondents combined. It will not be revealed who said what.

Guidance notes

- Your responses should relate to your own organisation only.
- Please mark your choice by selecting the answer that is closest to how you see the situation for your organisation. If you do not understand a question, or if it is not relevant to your organisation, please choose 'don't know' or 'not relevant'.
- There are 16 questions and it should take approximately 20-25 minutes to complete the questionnaire.
- Please read the introductions and the questions carefully.

1. To which sector does your organisation belong?
 - a. Government
 - b. Business
 - c. Civil society / NGO
2. Are you a direct representative of one of the NGOs in the Alliance (e.g., country or local representative)
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
3. What is your position in the organisation (e.g. director, administrator, liaison officer)?
4. In what year was your organisation established? (in case you don't know or feel this is not relevant please indicate as such)
5. When was the first time you heard about the Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme?
 - a. Advocacy programme?
 - b. Two years ago (2014)
 - c. Last year (2015)
 - d. This year (2016)
 - e. I never heard of this programme
6. Were you involved in the proposal(s) written by the NGO Alliance for the Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme you are part of (for instance by providing input or feedback)?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Don't know
7. My organisation has been a partner of a Netherlands NGO involved in the Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme since:
 - a. 1-2 years
 - b. 3-4 years

- c. 5 years or more
- d. This is the first time we will be a partner
- e. Don't know

The new Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme has an exclusive focus on lobby and advocacy as intervention strategy. This means that it excludes direct contributions to service delivery.

Lobby and advocacy activities, in the view of the programme, aim to set the agenda and/or change policies and practices in your domain of interest. It can comprise a wide range of activities, including analysis; relationship building and maintaining; capacity building; information-centred activities; working with targeted stakeholders; public and media campaigns; participation in (multi-stakeholder) governance processes; and using legal and grievance mechanisms.

8. Do you consider the new focus on (strengthening the capacity for) lobby & advocacy as a positive or negative development?
- a. Positive development
 - b. Negative development
 - c. Neutral (neither positive, nor negative)
 - d. Don't know

9. My organisation operates with lobby & advocacy activities on the following level(s) (*multiple answers possible*):
- a. Sub national (local) level
 - b. National level
 - c. International (global) level
 - d. We are at present not involved at all in advocacy
 - e. Don't know

10. My organisation currently dedicates the following percentage of its total time to lobby & advocacy activities:

0 - 10 %	10 – 40 %	40 – 60 %	60 – 90%	90 – 100%	Not relevant
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The Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme aims to focus on capacity building of partners - such as your organisation - in the field of lobby and advocacy.

11. Please indicate (by ticking the appropriate box) the extent to which you agree with the following statements

Statement	Totally agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Totally disagree	Don't know
My organisation possesses a good capacity for lobby and advocacy activities						
Building the capacity of my organisation in the field of lobby and advocacy is a key priority						
My organisation plays an important role in the capacity development for lobby and advocacy of organisations we work with.						

12. How important is strengthening the following capacities for lobby and advocacy for your organisation?

	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important	not relevant
Reaching out to communities to mobilise and educate them and formulate their own voices				
Mobilising financial resources for our work				
Planning and implementing effective projects and campaigns				
Monitoring effectively what we do and learning from our experiences				
Network activities and alliance building				

The Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme foresees a partnership that may involve many different actors. This may imply that also the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and/or the Netherlands Embassy in your country could be involved in the programme. We would like to ask you a few questions about this possibility.

13. Were you aware that the partnership within the Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme may also include the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Netherlands Embassy in your country?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Not relevant

14. How important do you regard the following ways in which the involvement of the Netherlands government or Embassy could help your organisation to achieve its objectives for lobby and advocacy?

	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important	Not relevant
Organise meetings with other NGOs working in my country				
Bring us in contact with other actors (i.e., opening doors)				
Speak up about human rights abuses				
Forward our causes at international events				
Forward our causes with our government				
help protect our staff in case of (political) attack				
add legitimacy and credibility to our work				

15. Please indicate your opinion about the involvement of the Netherlands government and/or its Embassies in this programme.

Statement	Totally agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Totally disagree	Don't know
The involvement sounds nice on paper but will not materialise in practice						
The involvement creates the danger of a loss of autonomy for NGOs in the Alliances and local partners						
The involvement will strengthen our capacity for lobby and advocacy						
The involvement will pose political risks for my own organisation						
The Netherlands government is willing to advance our causes in lobby and advocacy						
With involvement of the Netherlands government, our own government will be more open to our messages						

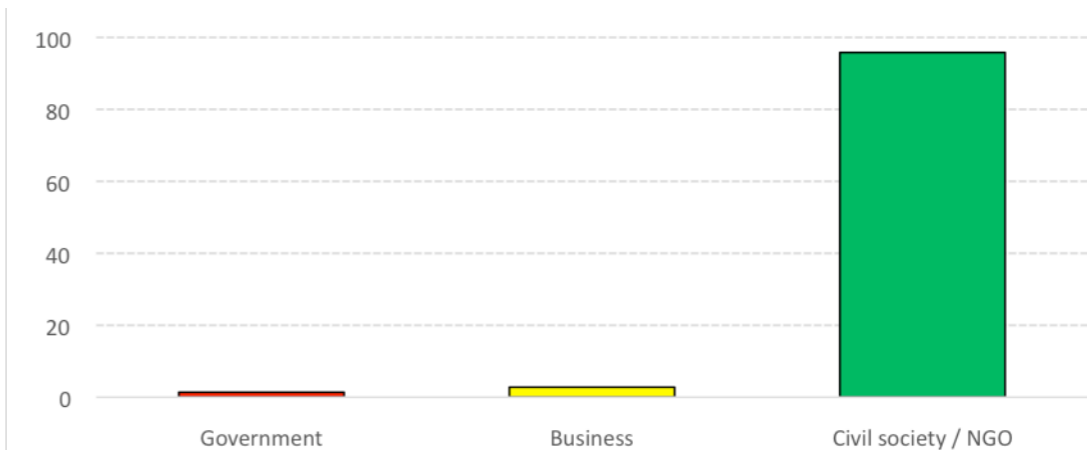
16. Do you have any other comments regarding the Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme?

Thank you very much for your collaboration.

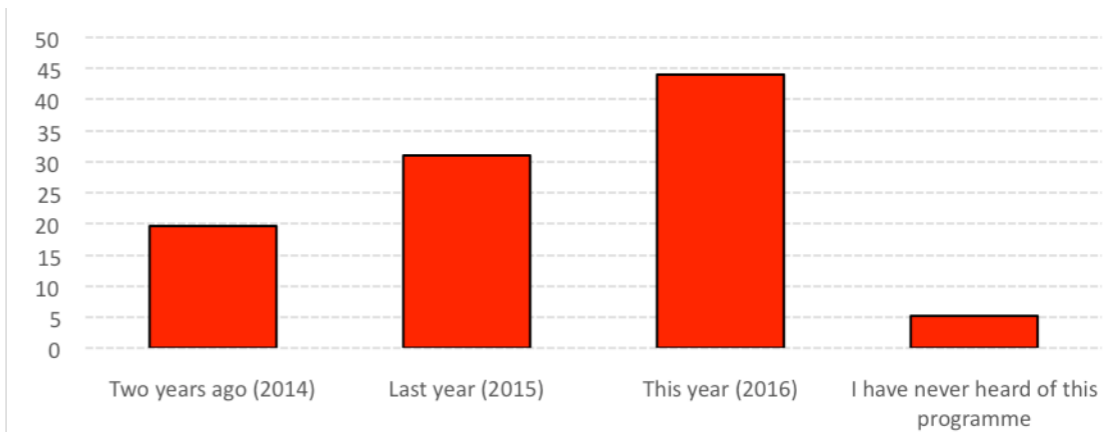
Frequencies

Below we present the scores per question with the exception of those questions that have already been illustrated in the main text (Chapter 6) and question 2 (see 'Methodology' above for an explanation) and question 3.

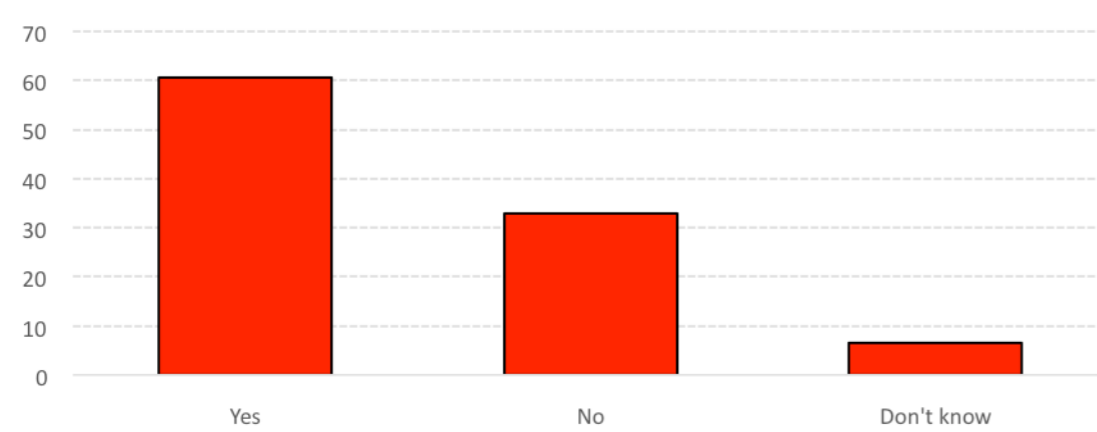
To which sector does your organisation belong? (N=213) (in %)



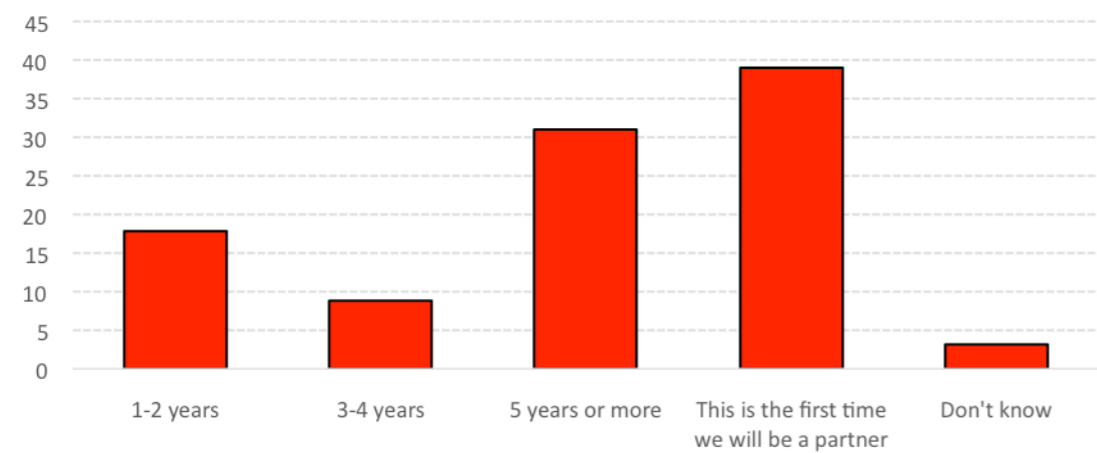
When was the first time you heard about the Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme? (N=213) (in %)



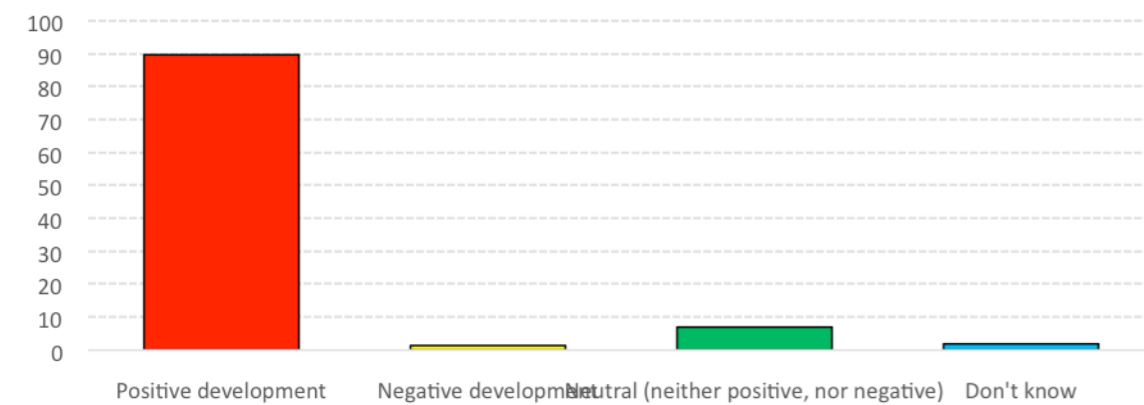
Were you involved in the proposal(s) written by the NGO Alliance for the Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme you are part of (for instance by providing input or feedback)? (N=213) (in %)



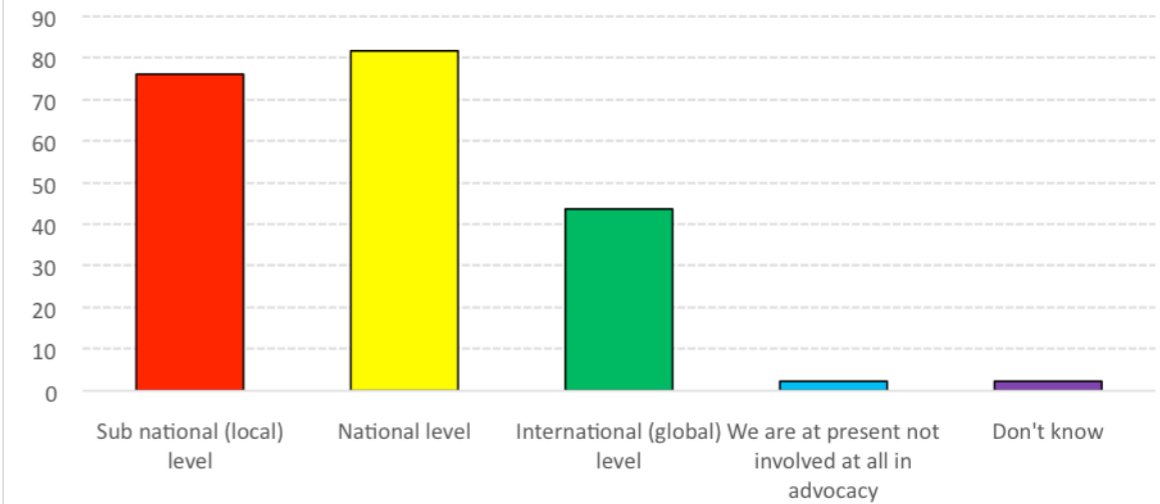
My organisation has been a partner of a Netherlands NGO involved in the Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme since (N=213) (in %)



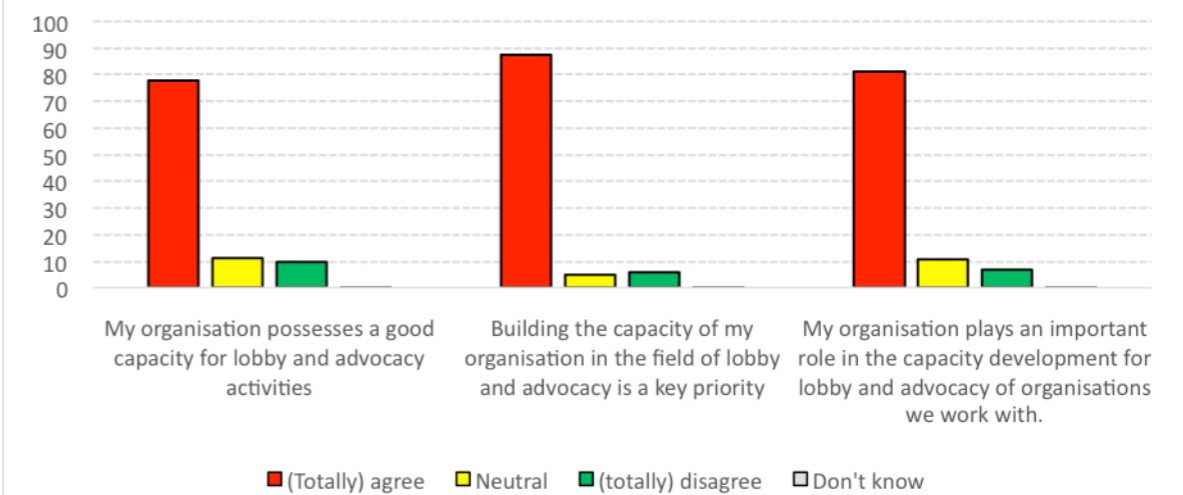
Do you consider the new focus on (strengthening the capacity for) lobby & advocacy as a positive or negative development? (N=213) (in %)



My organisation operates with lobby & advocacy activities on the following level(s) (N=213) (in %)



Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements (N=211) (in %)



Were you aware that the partnership within the Strategic Partnership for Lobby & Advocacy programme may also include the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Netherlands Embassy in your country? (N=211) (in %)

