



Exploring the “how” of international NGO networks and partnerships

After two previous workshops on establishing and joining international NGO networks and partnerships¹² the workshop on 18 April focused on:

- What it takes to make internationalisation a success and on
- Challenges that need to be overcome in order to achieve the objectives of operating as an international network.

Part 1. What it takes to make internationalisation a success

Rita Dieleman and Helga van Kampen from Partnership Learning Loop (PPT is attached) made a survey on MFS programs and presented their findings on collaboration within this program.

Below some highlights (taken from the notes by Jerphaas Donner)

Different networks

In cooperation structures one can recognize different types of networks. On the one side of the spectrum you will find the Octopus or spider. A network with one dominant player connected to many smaller players who do not interconnect. On the other side of the spectrum you find the amoeba or distributed network with many interconnected players and not a central dominant one.

Many organisations try to transform from an octopus to an amoeba. But there are some obstacles to overcome in that process.

According to Rita and Helga each collaboration process is influenced by positive and negative factors. Some examples:

¹ We will refer to these processes with the term “internationalisation”.

² On 1 March 2016 directors and senior management staff of fifteen members of Partos met to share views and experiences about working towards-, and working in international NGOs networks. From this session it became very clear that there is a need for more exploration, exchange, and knowledge development in this field. Therefore, The Spindle initiated a series of workshop with the aim to further explore “the why, how and what”² of internationally networked NGOs

On 8 September 2016 a group of NGOs representatives explored the question why it makes sense for development NGOs to engage in international networks. Based on a review of studies Gerrit de Vries made distinction between four categories of possible drivers that make NGOs decide to internationalise, including: contextual drivers, strategic drivers, institutional managerial drivers and external criticism as a driver.

Personal relations

Good personal relations strengthen the network, while too strong egos can hamper collaboration. Diversity is important as are trust and transparency. Sometimes the Calimero complex of some members gets in the way.

Attitude

When partners are only in for the funding and do not keep a balance between organisational interest and collaboration the partnership is hampered. Earlier positive experiences and taking time to build trust are positive factors.

Ways of working

A pragmatic way of working with respect for each members' autonomy, which leaves room for learning and reflection and feedback are important for successful collaboration. As are some form of coordination, clear roles and responsibilities and joint decision making. Bureaucracy, unclarity, bad or no coordination and lack of balance in power is bad for the network.

Communication

Somehow face to face meetings still play an important role as is sufficient connection with players in the field and a system of communication from the grass roots that really enters the boardroom and influences decision making. When field officers act as account managers, physical distance between partners is long, meetings are extensive and decision making top down collaboration will not have a long life.

Added value

Complementarity helps and competition does not. It came out that while field partners were very satisfied with collaboration, steering committees were less happy. It is not very clear why this is. Maybe the field workers are more realistic and pragmatic than the paper world of the board rooms.

Some recommendations:

1. Be aware and open about potential power dynamics
2. Find a balance between attention for the process of collaboration and progress in terms of goal and mission
3. Make use of skilful facilitation, especially in clarifying the alliance process
4. Take the interests of each member seriously
5. Represent the interests of the collective towards donors
6. Have and show genuine interest in network partners, their culture, background, capacities and mission
7. Involve all members in change processes
8. Be pragmatic in your collaboration

Learning loop developed a tool to monitor collaboration and use the monitoring results for dialogue on progress and feedback on the process. This tool will be available after the demo stage.

Part 2. Challenges that need to be overcome in order to achieve the objectives of operating as an international network

Part 2 started with the identification of challenges with engaging in international networks and partnerships experienced by each of the participants. Two of the most common challenges were:

- Making the transformation from a octopus (or star) shaped network (in which partners maintained bilateral relations with the core without very much coloration between all other partners) towards an amoebe structure (where all partners collaborate

- How to collaborate in fundraising (funding dynamics)

The plenary was subdivided into two working groups that we given the following assignment:

1. Understanding (and if needed re-formulating) the problem/challenge
2. Generate alternative solutions This was a brainstorming session in which participants are challenged to come up with alternative solutions. At this stage alternative solutions were not supposed to be evaluated. Every acceptable solution was listed and described in a few key words.
3. Each was rated according to two dimensions: level of goal orientedness (right or wrong approach), level of specificity.

Working group Funding dynamics (notes Rita Dieleman)

The group sees the landscape of their work changing. For example former grantmakers are now becoming fundraisers themselves, sometimes in competition with (former) local partners. The changing donor relation influences the work with partners, its relevance and the added value of the role of Dutch NGOs.

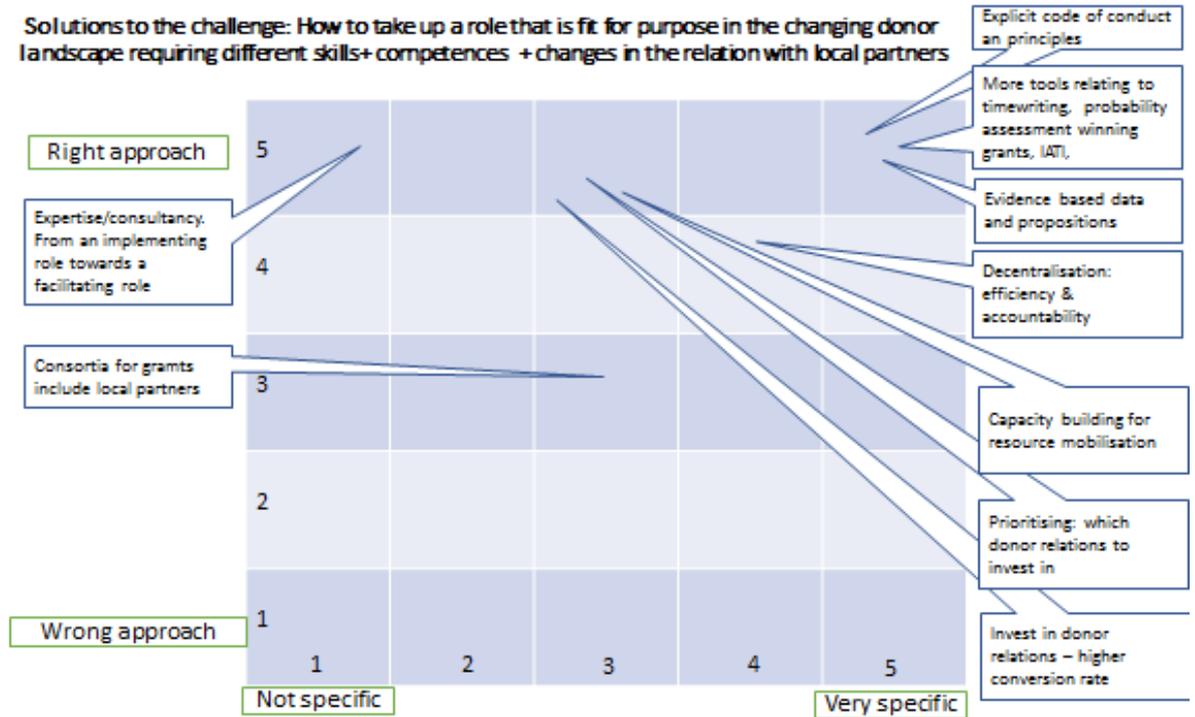
What is required more from Dutch CSOs in this changing landscape are skills such as fundraising/resource mobilization, diversification of income streams, different business models, clear risk analyses regarding collaboration, different partners (for example more collaboration in public private partnerships) and adapted tools such as time writing, IATI and assessing feasibility and probability of successfully participating in calls.

In response to the changing landscape Dutch NGOs shift from implementation to facilitation, more in the role of a consultant with specific expertise (☐ possible solution 4) That requires different ways of working. For example it should be clear what the risks are, when engaging in certain partnerships. Because some potential partners (especially in the private sector) might have working practices that oppose the values of your organisation. Therefore it is crucial to have an explicit Code of Conduct/Principles, and that you make them explicit with potential partners (☐ possible solution 1). It might be a reason not to partner up at all. Some group members argue that it can hamper the relation as well if you put your red lines on the table too early in the process.

Checklists and evidence based data/propositions within your organization taking into account principles and conduct of potential partners can also be helpful when considering and discussing a potential partnership (☐ possible solution 2 and 3) To remain embedded and in linked with the local context, NGOs start decentralizing (☐ possible solution 6) and form local consortia (☐ possible solution 5) but the risk is that they will compete with local partners over scarce resources.

The group agrees that investing in (donor) relations is important (☐ possible solution 8). This investment will pay itself back as you might hear what calls are coming up, and the conversion rate becomes higher. That means you have to allocate time and resources for investing in the relation and in fundraising as such (☐ possible solution 9). Considering the limited capacity that all NGOs have you have to prioritize in which (donor) relations to invest and which not (and what are the criteria for that) (☐ possible solution 10).

Solutions to the challenge: How to take up a role that is fit for purpose in the changing donor landscape requiring different skills+competences + changes in the relation with local partners



Working group on the transformation from an octopus towards an amoeba structure (Notes by Jerphaas Donner)

Centralized management

If there is one main office with management, financial department, HR and international consultants this will function as the head of the network and hamper the development towards an amoeba structure. This can be overcome by transferring parts of the head office to other members of the network.

Start small

If you want to develop cooperation start with small mutual projects and monitor the level and impact of your cooperation in an open way. Transparency is crucial in development of trust.

Funding

Funding is necessary to support activities within a network but it is hard to maintain equal relationships if one partner in the network acts as an internal funder. All the mechanisms of planning, monitoring and control can block the transformation from octopus to amoeba or distributed network.

Time

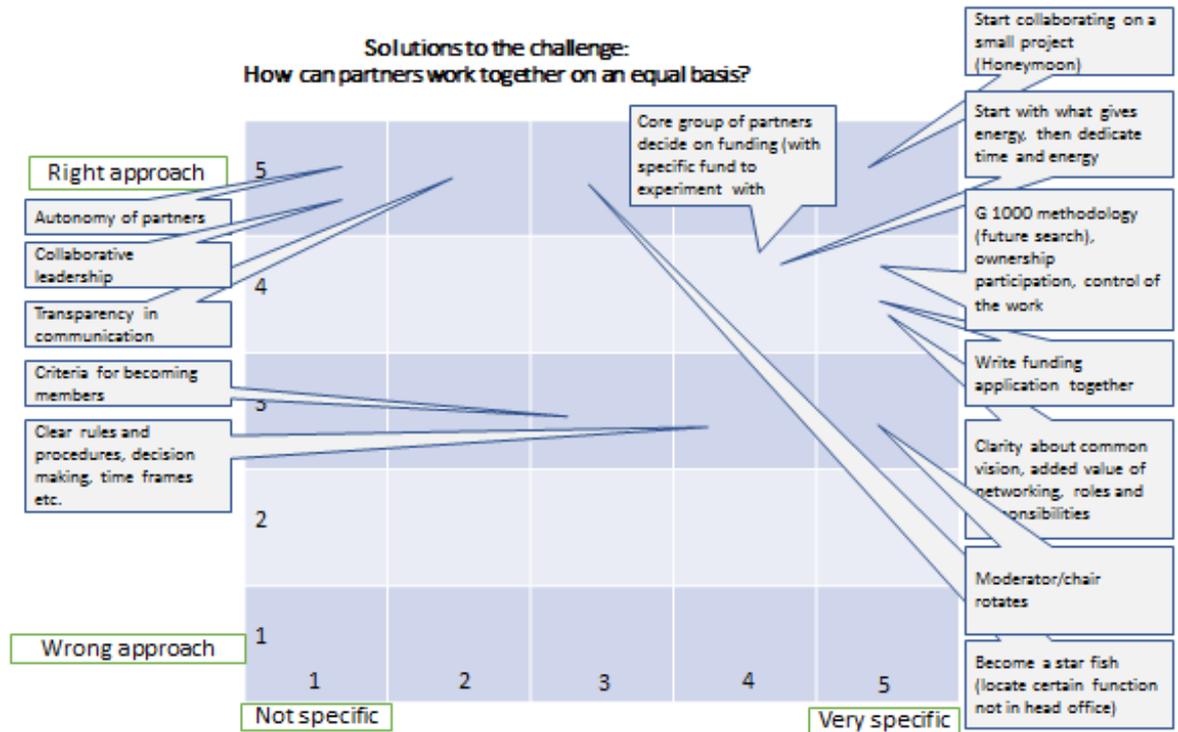
Time is a limited resource and choices have to be made in selecting partners and participating in networks. If you want to build up trust and strengthen network connections it means investment in time and money. Again, start small and not only for the funding.

Selection

If a network becomes influential or delivers advantages to its members more organisations will want to join. This requires regulations and protocols for joining and participating in the network. A large network may mean more power and influence but also requires more internal management and discussions on the road to take. Here the dilemma emerges of a more natural alliance based on trust and mutual interest or a structure based on rules and protocols.

Autonomy

Distributed networks are based on autonomy of the members, trust and mutual benefit, which gives meaning to connections within the network. These four elements construct a distributed network. In these networks you have different layers of attachment. Some members spent much time and effort, others just observe and have a weak connection. You can attend these issues and give feedback to members if they do not contribute enough. On the other hand it is something natural you have to live with, working in network structures.



Participants

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Gender and Water Alliance
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