Room to Breathe

What works to support CSOs for inclusive development

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Preface

I assume that most of you know about the Assumptions Programme, with its unique setup of intensive collaboration between academics, practitioners and policymakers. However, as this assumption might be wrong, I will elaborating a little. The Assumptions Programme was born in 2017 when To Tjoelker (head of the civil society unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Marleen Dekker (INCLUDE) and I sat together in a bar in Amsterdam. We were discussing the novelty of the Dialogue & Dissent programme and exploring ways to document this. As I had recently completed an academically-grounded Theory of Change for the Dialogue & Dissent programme – explicating and discussing its underlying assumptions – this offered a good starting point. As many of the assumptions underlying the framework are contested or context-specific, we realized that a lot could still be learnt. To ensure high quality research, NWO-WOTRO (Judith de Kroon and later Martijn Wienia) as well as Karin Nijenhuis (INCLUDE) were brought on board, and together we designed the Assumptions research programme.

The goal of the Assumptions Programme was to feed into the learning trajectory of the ongoing Dialogue & Dissent, as well as provide input for the design of its successor, the recently published Power of Voices programme. To ensure policy relevance, it stimulated mutual exchange between policymakers, practitioners and researchers to discuss preliminary and established findings and to facilitate cross-learning. In addition, the research projects that made up the programme had to be relatively short, producing policy relevant evidence in less than two years. This resulted in important findings – on power asymmetries in the aid chain, on 'Southern' leadership, on the legitimacy of CSOs and on shrinking civic space – which were vividly discussed with all stakeholders, and which form the basis of this synthesis. The civil society unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs used the findings as one of the inputs for the design of the new policy framework, most notably by taking steps to strengthen Southern leadership, bring power asymmetries out in the open and give civic space an even more central place. For me it has been a truly inspiring programme, and I hope this synthesis will inspire you to keep questioning your assumptions and learn along the way!

Jelmer Kamstra,
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Introduction

In June 2017, NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and INCLUDE launched the New Roles of CSOs for Inclusive Development Programme (henceforth, referred to as the Assumptions Programme). This programme investigates the assumptions underpinning the civil society policy framework 'Dialogue & Dissent' (D&D) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Its key purpose was to generate new, evidence-based knowledge on the assumptions underlying the Theory of Change of the D&D framework and make this knowledge accessible, available and applicable to policymakers and civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Netherlands and low and lower middle-income countries (LLMICs). This publication synthesizes the findings of all eight research projects within the Assumptions Programme.

Over the course of the Assumptions Programme INCLUDE has organized and hosted various knowledge sharing activities, in which it brought together researchers and other stakeholders to make the knowledge generated available and accessible to possible users. Additionally, insights have been used by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to assess and improve the current D&D framework (2016–2020) and to inform the design of the next civil society policy framework from 2020 onwards. This publication synthesizes the findings of all research projects within the Assumptions Programme, which were discussed at the final knowledge sharing event 'Co-creating knowledge on advocacy with civil society', which took place on 8 October 2019. It serves to share the wealth and breadth of policy relevant insights from the research projects with development practitioners and policymakers (including, but not limited to, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

New Roles of CSOs for Inclusive Development

The Assumptions Programme consists of eight research projects. Six projects (three in Kenya and one in the Ukraine, India and Ethiopia) were selected in a first call for proposals by NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development, running from December 2017 until mid-October 2019. Two extra, shorter projects were added in late 2018 and ran from December 2018 until 31 October 2019. The geographical scope of the two new projects was wider to allow a cross-continental comparison, in both cases Africa with Asia (one compares Zambia and Bangladesh, the other Zimbabwe, Palestine and Bangladesh). The Assumptions Programme is organized around three themes: 1) CSOs and civic engagement, 2) CSOs and the aid chain, and 3) CSOs in an enabling environment. The eight programmes all fall under one of these three themes. Additionally, they were linked to development projects in LLMICs implemented by CSOs that were supported by the D&D framework (see Box 2 for a brief overview of all research projects).

All research projects started with a literature review followed by empirical research. Throughout the research period, the research groups shared their interim findings with policymakers and CSOs, both in the Netherlands and LLMICs. This continuous exchange of knowledge was facilitated by INCLUDE, the Knowledge Platform on Inclusive Development Policies, which disseminated researchers' work, formulated synthesis reports, and

Box 1. Defining civil society organizations

As explained in the ***Synthesis literature reviews. 'New roles of CSOs for inclusive development'*** (Hollander, 2018), civil society organizations (CSOs) are not an homogenous group. Rather, they comprise a whole range of different formal and informal organizations, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community based organizations (CBOs), labour unions, associations, faith-based groups and social movements. In practice, this means that the definition of CSO is not set in stone, may be interpreted differently by different actors, and is highly dependent on context. In the present synthesis, the acronym CSO will be used to refer to all civil society organizations operating in low and lower middle-income countries (LLMICs). In most cases, this will mean professional NGOs operating at the national and regional levels. On occasion 'NGO' will also be used, but always in combination with the term 'Northern', thus referring to non-governmental organizations operating from the global North. While CBOs are also CSOs, in this synthesis the distinction between the two is of such importance that CBOs will be referred to as a separate category. Thus, the acronym CBO will refer to community-based and usually informal grassroots organizations. Finally, INGO will be used as a separate term to refer to international NGOs as well as Northern NGOs operating at an international level, such as the ILO, Hivos and Oxfam.

organized knowledge sharing activities that brought together researchers and other stakeholders.

The eight research projects were selected to contribute to the evidence-base informing the D&D policy framework. Each project in its own way looked at ***if*** and ***how*** the assumptions underpinning the framework play out in the context in which the supported CSOs operate. By scrutinizing these assumptions, it was hoped to be possible to build a more credible policy framework and sustainable policy strategy.

The Dialogue & Dissent policy framework

The overall goal of the Dialogue & Dissent policy framework is to support CSOs in LLMICs in their role as advocates and lobbyists. The creation of the framework was motivated by recognition of the fact that CSOs are prominent actors in reducing inequality, promoting inclusive and sustainable development, and ensuring that government and private parties follow up on agreements and commitments made. The D&D framework is built on a Theory of Change, which in turn was informed by a number of assumptions about the roles and (potential) impact of CSOs. As these assumptions formed the point of departure for the research projects of the Assumptions Programme, they are presented in Box 2.

About this publication

Rather than dealing with each of the eight research projects separately, five cross-cutting issues are taken as the organizing principle of this synthesis. The aim of this approach is to show that the results of the Assumptions Programme extend beyond the confines of their respective geographical focus areas and topics. Analysing the cross-cutting issues and research in this manner sheds light on the complementarity of the findings. It shows that, together, the research projects are more than the sum of their parts.[1] That said, we recognize that this approach – and, in fact, the very act of synthesizing the eight research projects – comes with its limitations. Given our aim to produce an accessible and concise publication, it is impossible to do justice to the wealth of context-specific findings generated by the research projects. These insights are available online, on the webpage of the Assumptions Programme: https://includeplatform.net/theme/new-roles-for-csos-for-inclusive-development/.

The first chapter, 'Roles and relationships', sets the stage for the remainder of the synthesis. It deals predominantly with the context in which CSOs operate, and the extent to which this environment impacts on their (political) role. In the chapters that follow, more specific issues faced by CSOs are discussed in further detail. Chapter 2, 'Legitimacy and embeddedness', looks at the way CSOs deal with dilemmas to balance the needs of their constituencies and donor demands. Chapter 3, 'CSOs under state and non-state pressure', demonstrates the importance of an enabling political environment and discusses how CSOs respond to (state and non-state) pressure. Thereafter, Chapter 4, 'Dynamic support for CSOs', focuses on funding mechanisms and the importance of dynamic support. Chapter 5, 'Starting from the South', analyses power dynamics in the aid chain and the importance of Southern leadership. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main findings and presents eight recommendations for policymakers. Each chapter aims to investigate the specific assumptions underlying the D&D framework based on the key findings across the eight research projects.

1. The relationship between the D&D framework, its underpinning assumptions, the research questions and cross-cutting issues is explained in detail on pagse 8 and 9.

Box 2. Assumptions underpinning the D&D policy framework

1) CSOs and civic engagement

1.a. CSOs play a crucial role in changing power relations
1.b. CSOs perform 4 types of political roles to change power relations
1.c. Different roles require different organizational forms, capacities and forms of legitimacy
1.d. When pressured, informed and/or persuaded by CSOs, states and companies change their policies and practices, and societal groups change their norms, values and practices to be more sustainable, equitable and inclusive
1.e. Precondition: CSOs need to be locally rooted, strong, legitimate and autonomous to perform political roles

2) CSOs and the aid chain

2.a. External aid can strengthen CSOs in LLMICs in their political roles through capacity building and assistance in advocacy processes
2.b. CSOs are actors in their own right and not merely instrumental channels for aid delivery
2.c. Promoting civil society's political roles needs a long-term, context-specific approach
2.d. Precondition: The design of the aid chain does not interfere with the aspects mentioned in the previous point

3) CSOs in an enabling environment

3.a. External aid can strengthen CSOs in LLMICs in their political roles by offering protection in hostile environments and lobbying for improved political space
3.b. Assumption/precondition: CSOs need political space to perform political roles

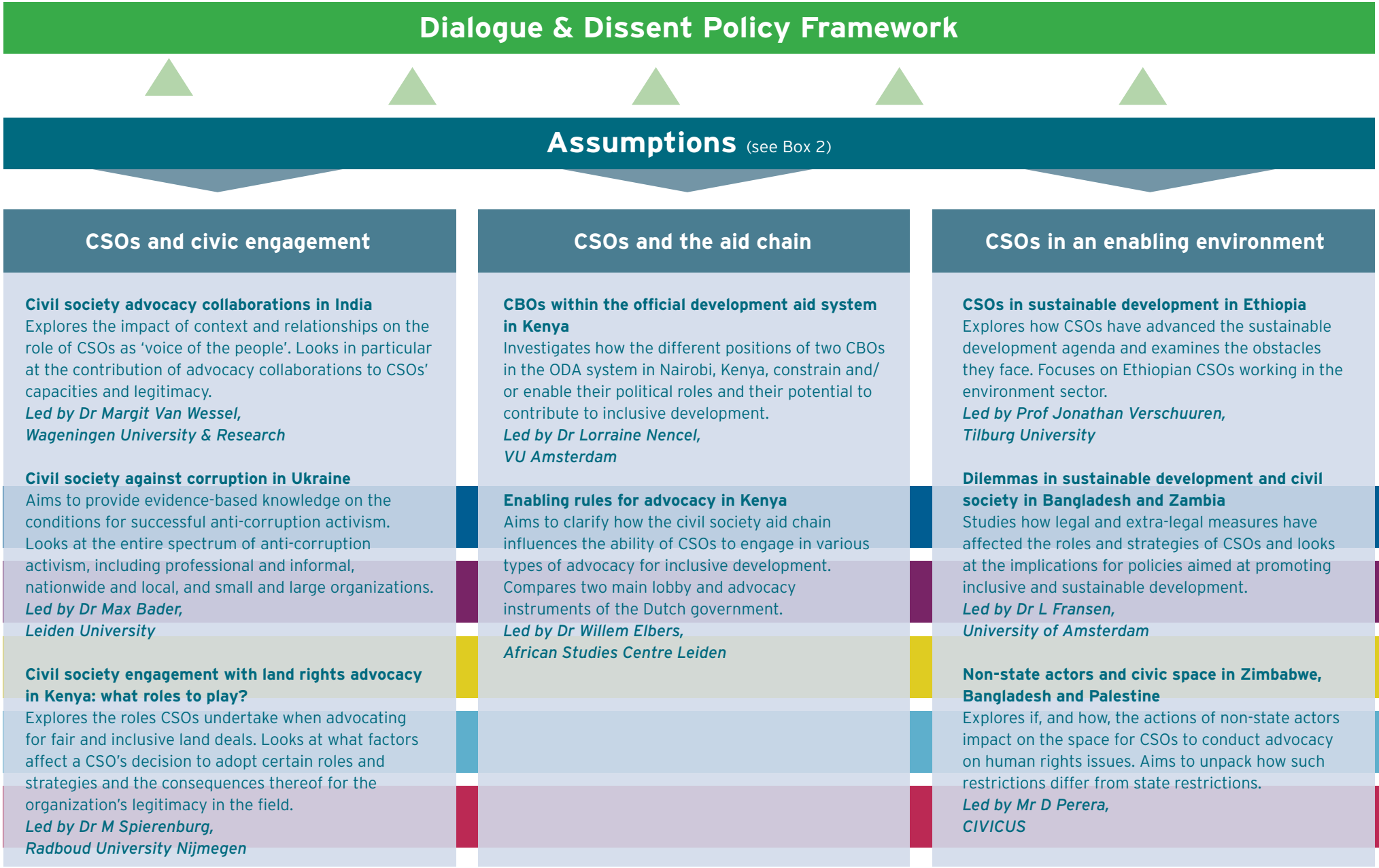

Figure 1. Synthesis framework

Box 3. From themes to cross-cutting issues (guiding note for Figure 1)

The Assumptions Programme was organized around 3 research themes, based on 11 assumptions underpinning the D&D framework (see Box 2). The eight research projects were then selected based on their contribution to scrutinizing the assumptions under these themes. However, as concluded in various exchange meetings organized in the course of the programme, the outcomes of the research projects often reached beyond one theme or its specific questions. In fact, all research projects have resulted in findings that relate to all three themes: CSOs and civic engagement, CSOs and the aid chain, and CSOs in an enabling environment.

To highlight the synergies between the research projects, and in order to present the findings in a concise publication, the researchers developed a framework for this synthesis. This framework consists of five 'cross-cutting issues' that were identified based on the reports of the eight projects. These issues serve as umbrella categories that encompass the findings recurring in the projects. They are all based on combinations of issues that originate in the questions and assumptions, however, merged and adjusted into overarching issues. For instance, cross-cutting issue #4 'Dynamic support in limited civic space' combines a focus on questions under Theme 2 (e.g. 'How should civic society aid be organized for supporting civil society's political role?') and Theme 3 (e.g. 'How should the Ministry and Northern NGOs relate to CSOs in restrictive contexts?').

To avoid confusion and better explain the framework for this synthesis, Figure 1 displays the relationship between the original themes, questions and assumptions, and the newly-identified crosscutting issues. These cross-cutting issues will form the structure of this synthesis report, with chapters 1–5 synthesizing the findings on each of them. The conclusion, 'What have we learnt', summarizes the main conclusions of these chapters, grouped under the three themes.

Chapter 1. Roles and relationships

According to the assumptions underpinning the D&D framework, CSOs perform four different political roles: education (internal and external), communication, representation and cooperation. The eight empirical investigations conducted as part of the Assumptions Programme indeed confirmed that these roles are performed by CSOs in LLMICs. Yet, the presence and intensity of these political roles varies between CSOs, depending on the organization and the context in which it is operating. Additionally, in practice these four main roles can be translated into a wide variety of actions or specific roles, such as watchdog, observer or knowledge broker (see Figure 2). Overall, the findings suggest that CSOs define their political roles based on four important contextual factors: 1) the political and socio-economic landscape, 2) the CSO's relationship with its constituency, 3) the CSO's interactions with other CSOs, and 4) the CSO's relationship with INGOs and donor countries.

Figure 2. Political roles of CSOs

Grassroots technical expert	Sensitizing/ awareness raising	Watchdog/ resistance	Lobbying & advocacy	Service provider
Knowledge broker/partner	Advisor	Protection	Observer	Facilitator

The ten recorded roles in Figure 2 are closely related to the four overarching political roles (education, communication, representation and cooperation), illuminating specific conditions under which certain political roles are performed. Take, for instance, the roles of 'grassroots technical expert', 'facilitator', 'knowledge broker', 'service provider' and 'sensitizer': they all fit into the category 'cooperation', but they consist of different tasks and have different focuses. The protection role of CSOs was identified across different research projects, yet it does not necessarily fit into the four main political roles in the D&D Theory of Change. The protection role occurs when CSOs, instead of performing the four political roles, need to provide projection to their members and representatives due to external pressure, as is the case in Bangladesh and Zambia, where Perera et al. (2019) observed that CSO representatives are at physical and mental risk due to state and non-state oppression. Hence, besides confirming the existence of the four political roles across different projects, the Assumptions Programme elaborated on the conditions under which these roles are performed.

The political and socio-economic landscape

The political and social-economic landscape affects the roles played by CSOs in two ways. Firstly, the ***rules of***

the game of existing political institutions determine the extent to which CSOs can perform their political roles. Political institutions can facilitate or hamper the political and organizational space of CSOs depending on factors such as the independence of the judicial system, financial and human resources, the available official dialogue channels and the public debate (media). Non-state actors and business entities also play a crucial role in shaping the political landscape in which CSOs develop their political roles[1] (Bader & Nesterenko, 2019; Van Wessel et al., 2019; Verschuuren et al., 2019; Spierenburg et al., 2019; Perera et al., 2019).

In a hostile political and socio-economic landscape, government and business representatives threaten CSOs representatives with intimidation, court cases, deregistration and violence. Alternatively, as the study on land rights in Kenya shows (Spierenburg et al., 2019), CSO-staff, community members or lawyers can also be co-opted by influential power holders, obstructing advocacy efforts from within. Influential power holders can also contribute to smear and delegitimization campaigns against CSOs and their representatives by framing them as corrupt or as actors who interfere with the development of the country. CSOs formulate their roles, including those recorded in Figure 2, by navigating within the changing dynamics of the political and socio-economic landscape.

When CSOs experience a distance or mistrust between them and responsible power holders, they tend to assume a watchdog position. However, when there is mutual respect and room for dialogue with responsible power holders, CSOs tend to take a collaborative approach (Spierenburg et al., 2019). In some cases, CSOs strategically combine confrontational and cooperative strategies. For instance, Spierenburg and her team documented a case where the advocacy efforts of youths were supported by small income-generating projects. This not only helped the youth with livelihood support, it also enabled them to educate fellow community members on land rights. Spierenburg et al. (2019) also observed an environmental NGO that combined forest conservation efforts with income-generating activities in order to reduce the incentive for community members to chop down forest for charcoal.

This combination of roles depends, among other things, on the goal, character of the advocacy target, and political and socio-economic context in which the CSO operates. Because in some contexts confrontational approaches

by CSOs might make government and business actors reluctant to subsequently accept them in a dialogue setting, CSOs tend to embrace a cooperative approach, but may resort to a confrontational approach when they are denied access to these settings, or when they feel that their concerns are not taken seriously. As the case of land rights advocacy in Kenya demonstrates, a multi-stakeholder dialogue can only be useful when parties take each other seriously, establish some degree of trust, and are willing to compromise. When these factors are absent, a multi-stakeholder platform (of CSOs, government, businesses) takes on an orchestrated character and is often used as a tool for distraction and avoiding CSOs' demands (Spierenburg et al., 2019). When all stakeholders (CSOs, government, businesses) recognize that their interests may both coincide as well as collide, confrontation and collaboration strategies can be combined by CSOs.

The second element of the political landscape that affects the role that CSOs assume is the political ***will*** of (local) authorities. This 'will' – that is the willingness of authorities to cooperate with and provide support or space for CSOs – determines how effectively CSOs can perform their political roles. CSOs tend to take a cooperative and communicative approach when their goals are aligned with the targeted authorities, but a more confrontational approach when the opposite is the case. A clear example of CSOs strategically manoeuvring between different political roles is documented in Ethiopia (Verschuuren et al., 2019). Here, some CSOs found a way of conducting advocacy activities (representation) through service delivery (collaboration). In order to limit the political influence of foreign CSOs, the Ethiopian government introduced a regulation that forbade these organizations to conduct advocacy activities. CSOs were only allowed to engage in service delivery. In response, foreign-funded CSOs in the country working on human rights issues found creative ways to blur the line between service delivery and advocacy work (advocacy-through-service-delivery)[2]. In other words, CSOs had to strategically adjust their activities and perform their political roles, navigating the available margins and continuously changing the rules of the game.

Relationship with constituency

In the development of their political roles, CSOs aim to represent the interests of their constituency[3]. Across the projects within the Assumptions Programme, a clear distinction can be found between how community based organizations (CBOs) and CSOs (larger, national NGOs) relate to and interact with their constituents. While the first are locally embedded and consider themselves actors that directly channel the experience of their constituents in their lobbying activities, CSOs tend to play an intermediary role between their constituents and policymakers. This intermediary role of CSOs takes a range of different forms, depending on the type of role that the CSO constructs for itself in relation to its constituency, other CSOs, and the state (Van Wessel et al., 2019). The range of social inequalities (arising from caste, age, gender, religion) that CSOs choose to prioritize also differs (Van Wessel et al., 2019).

CSOs represent the interests of a broad range of groups in the community. They construct their political roles based on the belief that they have qualities that make the representation of these groups possible. This suggests that CSOs in LLMICs do not see themselves as delegates who articulate the exact views of their constituents, but rather as trustees who play an intermediary role between their constituency and the states. In the study on the political roles of CSOs in India, Van Wessel et al. noted that many of the CSOs involved in this study showed "little facilitation or inclusion of leadership emerging from the marginalized groups themselves" (Van Wessel et al., 2019, p. 5). This observation is visible across different

cases, where the phenomenon of 'elite capture' or 'elite dominance' takes place (a phenomenon where high-ranked members of the community capture resources or speak on behalf of marginalized groups without involving them in the process).

The contrary is the case for CBOs. As the following chapter elaborates, they tend to consist of, and be represented by, people who are part of the constituency. As such, CBOs share their experiences and have an intimate connection with the community. "The foundation of shared lived experiences and the embeddedness of activist CBOs within the communities fosters direct forms of accountability" (Nencel et al., 2019, p. 7). Overall, the level of connection that CSOs have with their constituents determines how they will strategically relate to the responsible power holders and, hence, which political roles they will take on. In general, as the following chapter will elaborate, big CSOs that are involved in the official development assistance (ODA) system tend to be more often alienated from their constituency, while CBOs that are not fully integrated in the aid chain tend to take on a delegate role, meaning that they directly channel the needs of their constituency, uncensored. In quite a number of cases this is facilitated by the fact that CBO staff are part of these communities.

Interactions with other CSOs

Beside its interactions with the state and its constituency, the way in which CSOs relate to and collaborate with other CSOs plays an influential role in the definition of their political roles. CSOs collaborate and complement each other in the domestic political agenda. Complementarities between CSOs are based on factors such as capacity, geographic landscape, perspectives (diverse angles), networks and advocacy at different levels (Van Wessel et al., 2019). This notion of complementarity can be illustrated by what Spierenburg et al. (2019) call the 'division of labour' between CSOs. In the project on land rights advocacy in Kenya, a division of labour was observed between advocacy organizations doing strategic work influencing political practices and law making on the national and international levels, and those doing fact finding, awareness raising and advocacy work at the county or village levels (Spierenburg et al., 2019). At the grassroots level, CBOs autonomously advocate for a broad range of issues of interest to their constituents (the target group that they represent). They attain their credibility through their embeddedness in the local context and their large network. This local embeddedness, and the fact they generate their own internal sources of resources, is what enables CBOs to operate as autonomous agents.

In contrast, CSOs on the national level can lack the same level of autonomy and local legitimacy (Nencel, et al., 2019; Bader & Nesterenko, 2019). Not only because they are not locally embedded, but also because they must adjust themselves to influential actors (donors, the state, other CSOs, their constituency). With this limited space for manoeuvring, but with potential for impact, national CSOs tend to adopt a communicative and cooperative role in order to influence political and legislative practices, but many resort to more confrontational approaches when they feel that their concerns are not addressed. These national-based CSOs also support the capacity of local CSOs as autonomous actors and collaborate with the government for the implementation of policy at the local level. This is the case in India, for instance, where a national network of sex workers plays the role of "integrating different views and diverse issues of sex workers from different parts of the country" and "connecting the community to different professional/technical support groups such as CSOs providing legal support, and creating a platform for sex workers to highlight their issues" (Van Wessel et al., 2019, p. 8). These national-based CSOs are politically effective not only because of their network, but also because they have good access to national and international partners and funding, which enables them to generate financial and human resources. National CSOs also play a pivotal role in linking and translating local needs to national and transnational levels.

This interaction between national and local level CSOs is just an illustration of how CSOs relate to and complement each other. Another example of collaboration and complementarity is outlined by Spierenburg et al. (2019). In this project, the research team observed another division of labour within coalitions or informal collaborations. In these coalitions, one CSO would focus on dialogue with government officials, while the other would apply a more confrontational approach (such as initiating court cases and media engagement) to attain the same goal. In short, in defining their political roles, CSOs take the existence of other CSOs and initiatives into account, giving them the opportunity to focus on roles that suit their legislative, financial and human resources capacity.

Relationship with INGOs and Northern donors

Understanding the process through which CSOs develop their political roles also includes the involvement of international NGOs (INGOs) and (Northern) donor countries. Both Northern donors and INGOs shape the political roles of Southern CSOs in two ways. Firstly, INGOs and Northern donors provide financial and other forms of support that help Southern CSOs to effectively conduct their political roles. Secondly, INGOs and donor countries shape CSOs' roles by making their (financial) support conditional. This means that Southern CSOs adjust their activities to the conditions and strategic goals set by donor countries.

In order to effectively perform their political roles, CSOs need to sustain their organization with financial and human resources. Across different cases within the Assumptions Programme, research confirmed the assumption that INGOs play an indispensable role in supporting Southern CSOs to overcome capacity issues and financial shortages. The research conducted under the Assumptions Programme suggests that CSOs with core funding and access to international donors are most effective in performing their political roles (Elbers et al., 2019; Bader & Nesterenko, 2019; Nencel et al., 2019). In the case of Ukraine, for instance, Bader & Nesterenko (2019) note that in order to be effective, anti-corruption organizations must overcome what they call the 'capacity' problem – that is, the ability to have a sustainable organization (with core human and financial resources). Nencel et al. (2019) also recognize the importance of international

funding for CBOs to effectively perform their political goals[4]. This conclusion is also supported by Elbers et al. (2019), who note that besides financial support, INGOs and international donors also provide other forms of support to Southern CSOs, including brokering, capacity building, training and security.

The consequence of this Northern support and funding mechanism, as different researchers observe, is that Southern CSOs develop a dependency on the financial mechanisms and rules of accountability set by Northern donors (and channelled through INGOs). This means that when, for example, donors turn off the money tap, CSOs are hampered in their ability to effectively conduct their political roles. But this cutting off of financial resources is not necessarily the main threat to the ability of CSOs to perform their political roles. Across different cases, researchers identified that the lack of flexible funding and the short-term nature of funding undermine the organizational capacity of CSOs (Nencel et al., 2019; Elbers et al., 2019). In some cases, programmes needed to be delayed due to the fact that donors slowed down the transfer of necessary funding. In other words, when there is uncertainty in the funding mechanism, CSOs are less effective in performing their political roles.

This is related to something that Elbers et al. (2019) and other researchers observed: CSOs have to adjust to the strategic goals and interests of donors. This has an adverse impact on the capacity of CSOs to successfully perform their political roles (Elbers et al., 2019; Nencel et al., 2019, Verschuuren et al., 2019). To understand this, one needs to make a distinction between the design and operational phases of an advocacy programme. While CSOs (and CBOs) are responsible for the operational phases, it is the Northern donors and INGOs that set the financial and accountability rules of the aid chain. Various projects show that CSOs are not invited to these design tables (Van Wessel et al., 2019; Nencel et al., 2019; Elbers et al., 2019). In reality, this means that CSOs get financial support when it is probable that their conducted activities are aligned with donors' interests, agenda and conditions. Or as Elbers et al. (2019) formulates: In choosing partners (with particular capacities and qualities), certain political roles are included while others are excluded ('ruled out'). In order to sustain their organization with financial and human capacity, CSOs, therefore, strategically take the donors' considerations into account. INGOs play a crucial role in that process as they often act as brokers between CSOs and Northern donors.

Political roles as negotiated products

The research thus suggests that CSOs behave as strategic actors in defining their raison d'être. They develop their political roles by simultaneously taking different considerations into account. While CSOs aim to stick to their advocacy goals, contextual factors influence how they formulate their political roles. The political landscape, their relationship and collaboration with other CSOs, their interaction with their constituencies, and the role of international donors and INGOs are all contextual factors that influence how CSOs behave and which political roles they adopt in order to achieve their advocacy goals. In some cases, CSOs take on multiple political roles, depending on the available political and organizational spaces. In other cases, CSOs develop a division of labour in order to effectively specialize in approaches and methods, according to the strengths and opportunities of individual organizations.

CSOs develop their political roles by balancing between what Miraftab (2004) coined the 'invited spaces' and the 'invented spaces' (Van Wessel et al., 2019). Invited spaces are facilitated by the state while invented spaces are claimed or self-organized spaces. By navigating between these spaces, specific political roles develop. Van Wessel et al. (2019) defines this evolving nature of CSOs' roles not as sequential, but as a relational, nonlinear process. The roles of CSOs evolve not only by translating what one source of the pentagon (state, constituency, other CSOs, donors, INGOs) wishes, but by balancing different voices and goals. As Van Wessel et al. (2019) explains: "The idea of CSOs seeking to be the voice of society needs to be reconsidered. Under the given conditions, we found representation to be a negotiated position".

1. This part of the analysis specifically looks at the national and local political and socio-economic dynamics. International developments also influence CSOs role formation, as discussed in much more detail below in the section on the CSO's relationships with INGOs and Northern donors.
2. Given the sensitive character of the cases, the researchers do not present concrete examples of this finding.
3. Constituency is a broad concept that covers the groups that CSOs aim to represent. It can range from the inhabitants of a geographical area, to members of minority, ethnic or religious groups, or even refer to a group of workers in a company.
4. This could be due to selection bias within the D&D framework, but this conclusion is reflected in all of the research projects across the Assumptions Programme.

Recommendations from the research groups

Encourage coalitions and cooperation between CSOs: This will strengthen the position of CSOs as they will be able to pool resources, share knowledge, provide mutual support and mitigate personal risks.

Invest in building alliances and partnerships between CSOs at different levels: For example, between local CBOs or informal groups and national, formalized NGOs. The different organizations bring complementarity capacities to the table.

Donors should be flexible and open: Donors should be flexible in their requirements regarding partnerships and open to engagement with less conventional and informal civil society actors.

Monitor mutual accountability within partnerships: An instrument is required to monitor mutual accountability within partnerships, especially between formal and informal, national and local, Northern and Southern CSOs.

Chapter 2. Legitimacy & embeddedness

The assumptions underlying the D&D framework imply that in order to successfully and autonomously perform their political roles, CSOs need to be locally rooted and enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of their constituents. The Theory of Change also supposes that external aid can strengthen CSOs in LLMICs in their political roles through capacity building and assistance in advocacy processes. At the same time, however, it is assumed that international support can damage the autonomy and legitimacy of CSOs. The research conducted supports these assumptions by demonstrating across different cases how CSOs are faced with a trade-off between capacity building and legitimacy. This means that CSOs in LLMICs find it difficult to simultaneously operate within the ODA system and remain connected to their constituents. However, the findings also suggest that legitimacy is role, goal, actor, context and time specific. CSOs have different sources of legitimacy and autonomy and these are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Under certain conditions, CSOs can develop 'narrative autonomy', meaning that they can collaborate with other actors, but also manoeuvre to maintain control over the narrative.

The credibility and capacity dilemma

The research shows that CSOs often find themselves in a 'catch-22': a paradox where CSOs face the need for (financial) support on the one hand, and for local embeddedness and legitimacy on the other. It appears that in many cases CSOs experience local embeddedness and organizational sustainability as two mutually exclusive things. Bader & Nesterenko (2019) illustrate this in their case study about anti-corruption CSOs in Ukraine, where they found that in order to be effective in the performance of their political roles, CSOs must overcome what they call the legitimacy and capacity dilemma. This means that in order to perform their representative role, CSOs need credible grassroots support. Yet, those organizations that do have sufficient grassroots support (i.e. CBOs) often do not have access to sufficient funding. Consequently, these small organizations are faced with grave limitations in terms of capacity and financial and human resources, and are often struggling to survive. In order to overcome this capacity dilemma, CSOs can attract sustained and substantial funding, mostly in the form of international assistance. This enables them to have a core staff, operate professionally and engage in multi-year planning. This makes CSOs effective in the performance of their political roles. Yet, as Bader & Nesterenko (2019) observe, this professionalization or capacity formation often undermines grassroots support. Professionalized organizations tend to lack a credible support base (Nencel et al., 2019; Bader & Nesterenko, 2019). These organizations, as Bader and Nesterenko note in the case of anti-corruption advocacy in Ukraine, "are far from the ideal type of community-based organizations that represent the interests of their members and contribute to building social capital" (2019, p. 4). Because of the lack of a credible support base, many CSOs cannot mobilize supporters to help them advance their cause (Nader & Nesterenko, 2019; Spierenburg et al., 2019).

This observation is made across different studies: foreign funding can undermine the legitimacy of CSOs, and thus their ability to perform their political roles[1]. In an attempt to overcome the capacity problem, CSOs tend to lose attachment with their constituency. For instance, there can be a 'flipside' to a CBO's capacity to consolidate and sustain its organization. Of the two CBOs studied in Nairobi, the one that was fully integrated in the ODA system was less likely to take into account the daily experiences of its members, which affected its accountability and legitimacy in the wider community. In contrast, the CBO that was less integrated in the ODA system was "far more attuned to calls from the community and invested considerable time to listen to and address community requests" (Nencel et al., 2019, p. 5). Despite a lack of core funding, the CBO that was not fully integrated in the aid-chain managed to generate a considerable amount of money, time and resources to help its constituency to overcome a wide range of emergencies (such as fire, police violence and hospital bills). "Their contribution to alleviate such hardship builds on existing solidarity ties that bound residents and family members in low-income contexts together, and through this the CBO nurtures their credibility, relevance and legitimacy within the community they aim to represent" (Nencel et al., 2019, pp. 8–9). A CBO's credibility, relevance and legitimacy can thus be jeopardized by attempts to overcome resource constraints. Consequently, as underscored by Van Wessel et al. (2019) and Spierenburg et al. (2019), CSOs that are professionalized and integrated in the ODA system tend to speak on 'behalf of' marginalized groups without considering their lived experience. This can also be understood as elite representation, a phenomenon whereby local and small organizations are overshadowed by bigger CSOs that are better integrated in the political and ODA system.

Diversified autonomy and legitimacy

CSOs construct their legitimacy and roles in terms of long-standing relationships with marginalized groups, assuming that they understand their needs and can speak on their behalf (Van Wessel et al., 2019). As the aforementioned cases suggest, legitimacy and capacity can be mutually exclusive. However, this does not necessarily need to be the case, as Spierenburg notes. Based on different case studies in Kenya, she noticed that CSOs' legitimacy is actor, context and time specific. This means that different groups (donors, government, local communities) have a different conceptualization and measurement of legitimacy. The legitimacy of CSOs is built on various factors, including context-specific knowledge, transparency and the ability to demonstrate tangible results. While the legitimacy of local, grassroots organizations is intimately connected to their embeddedness in the community and involvement with their constituents, broader and national-based CSOs are more likely to construct their legitimacy based on their moderate and cooperative tone towards advocacy targets, such as governments and the private sector, their ability to represent broad community interests as well their research-based advocacy. For donors, a CSO's legitimacy is based on other factors such as their online presence, professional management and financial reporting capacity (Spierenburg et al., 2019).

To illustrate this multiplicity of sources of legitimacy, Spierenburg et al. (2019) mentions, among other things, a national group of environmental activists who had taken up a local community campaign and received praise from donor representatives for their detailed knowledge, access to policymakers, and online activities. "Among community members, however, they were perceived as Nairobi-based activists who hardly engaged with locals and failed to report back on their activities conducted on behalf of the community (which in themselves were appreciated on the local level)" (Spierenburg et al., 2019, p. 10). Thus, in practice, a CSO can be effective in getting international funding and engaging with the government, but at the same time lack a credible support base. The opposite can also be the case, Spierenburg notes, a CSO can be locally embedded and directly channel the voice of its constituency, but have no linkage with policymakers or international support. Legitimacy is, in other words, in the eye of the beholder. This suggests that CSOs can overcome their capacity dilemma without necessarily losing their local embeddedness, as long as they manage to generate different sources of legitimacy.

Narrative autonomy and interpersonal linkages

Relying on multiple sources of legitimacy can pose challenges to CSOs, "but these need not necessarily be traded off against each other" (Spierenburg et al., 2019, p. 11). This is related to the fact that CSOs have various conceptualizations of success and failure, depending on how they define their representational roles. Representation, as Van Wessel notes, does not necessarily mean articulating the views of your constituents. Rather, it often means performing the role of an intermediary between constituencies and states. When CSOs expand their staff and portfolio, their interaction with specific constituencies can change (Van Wessel et al., 2019). While some CSOs find it important to represent a broad range of interests, engage with power holders and sustain their organizational capacity, others focus more on keeping their base support alive and making sure that their constituents feel represented in their activities.

In order to overcome the capacity problem while at the same time keeping some form of legitimacy, CSOs need a space to develop what Van Wessel et al. (2019) call 'narrative autonomy'. This is a form of autonomy that is understood as relational, relative and contextual, where participants create their own narrative meaning. It involves the ability to navigate through informal engagement and adjust to the time and context. Informal networks and linkages with individual power holders are identified as pivotal factors in creating a space for CSOs to negotiate their autonomy (Van Wessel et al., 2019; Elbers et al., 2019; Nencel et al., 2019). This also has implications for the funding mechanisms within the aid chain: when funding partners (Northern donors and NGOs) acknowledge the importance of long-term organizational development, CSOs have the space to overcome the capacity dilemma, while at the same time developing narrative autonomy.

To sum up, it is a major challenge for CSOs to simultaneously overcome both the capacity and the credibility dilemma. Yet, beside the complexity, both states are not necessarily mutually exclusive. When CSOs receive space to develop normative autonomy, navigating between their representative roles and external demands from donors, they can overcome the capability dilemma without jeopardizing their representative role.

1. This is a general trend, but the observed nuances are discussed in the next chapter.

Recommendations from the research groups

The dissemination of advocacy efforts and outcomes to local constituencies should be actively integrated into programmes: Reaching communities beyond community leaders cannot be taken for granted and such efforts are vital to prevent the creation of elite cliques or the exacerbation of inequalities and leadership tensions.

More efforts are needed to understand how CSOs can exercise dynamic accountability to core constituencies when faced with reputational threats against their work: Support is needed to ensure that organizations can protect themselves against, or counter the effects of, smear campaigns.

Giving more autonomy and flexibility to CBOs helps them to perform their political role more effectively: It allows CBOs to stay intimately connected to their local constituents, while at the same time having access to the resources necessary to pursue their advocacy goals.

Chapter 3. CSOs under state and non-state pressure

In order to perform their political roles, CSOs need a political environment, also known as civic space, that enables them to operate as legitimate and autonomous actors. CSOs can represent the interests of their constituencies only if formal and informal channels in the political community recognize and support their existence. Yet, various research under the Assumptions Programme demonstrate that civic space in LLMICs is shrinking, which negatively affects CSOs' ability to perform their political roles (Van Wessel et al., 2019; Elbers et al., 2019; Verschuuren et al., 2019; Fransen et al., 2019; Perera et al., 2019). In addition, the research shed more light on the unexplored role of non-state actors (NSAs) in enabling or limiting CSOs in the available civic space. This means that CSOs face different forms of oppression, by both state and NSAs. That said, the research also shows that while state and non-state oppression is carried out by different actors in practice, it often originates from the same source, with NSAs functioning as extensions of the state. Besides demonstrating the negative consequence of state and non-state pressure on CSOs' effectiveness, different research projects also outline how CSOs respond to these pressures. They demonstrate that when faced with oppression, CSOs apply three different strategies: adjust, resit or disband their political and advocacy activities (Perera et al., 2019; Verschuuren et al., 2019).

State oppression

The research found that state actors in LLMICs apply different forms of oppression to limit the ability of CSOs to perform their political roles. CSOs are confronted with oppressive practices such as smear campaigns, control of the media, financial and legal limitations, threats and surveillance, to name just a few. Although the intensity of government oppression varies across the studied countries, the overall picture suggests that it is a reality for practically all CSOs involved in advocacy activities. Even in a country like India, where Van Wessel et al. (2019) note that the civic space is not necessarily 'shrinking' but rather 'changing', forms of government oppression are observed. For instance, pro-government and pro-Hindu majority-aligned CSOs get preferred positions over independent ones. In contrast, critical activists of extractive industries are put under pressure because of their activities. Additionally, in India, as in Kenya (Spierenburg et al., 2019) critical CSOs face a (state-incited) discourse that depicts them as corrupt, anti-development and even terrorist in order to delegitimize them and justify their discrimination and displacement.

Beside these hybrid or covert forms of oppression in Kenya and India, various researchers have documented more advanced forms of state oppression. In Zambia and Bangladesh government actors actively prevent CSOs from conducting their political activities. This political oppression is manifested in legal measures (laws and policies) as well as extra-legal actions like threats, intimidation and physical violence. In both Bangladesh and Zambia state actors (military, police, civil security agents, state media) were found to contribute to the repression of CSOs (Fransen et al., 2019). The Government of Bangladesh has implemented regulations to monitor foreign-funded CSO projects (in effect preventing such funding). The government of Zambia has created, but not effectively implemented, an NGO Act that makes it difficult for CSOs to operate independently. In Zambia as well as Bangladesh increasing regime control of the media also restricts CSOs' opportunities to express themselves and their concerns.

While civic space for CSOs in Ethiopia was highly restrictive, in early 2019 the Ethiopian government reformed its civil law, creating a new political landscape that better protects CSOs' right to association and freedom of expression. Yet, the new law still maintains some degree of state oversight through registration, reporting and funding allocation requirements. "Our overall conclusion, therefore, is that although the regulatory environment for CSOs is improving, the sector is still in need of international support and ongoing, consistent and reliable funding" (Verschuuren et al., 2019, p. 4).

Non-state oppression

Non-state actors are groups that are not part of the state. These vary from businesses, state-controlled or co-opted media, pro-government militia, government-oriented NGOs (GONGOs) and religious groups, to name a few. The research shows that these NSAs that operate in close proximity to the state – whether it is a business actor conducting a smear campaign against a CSO and its representatives, a religious group attacking a CSO's members, or co-opted government media limiting CSOs' freedom of expression – play a critical role in restricting the capability of CSOs to conduct their political activities (Elbers et al., 2019; Van Wessel et al., 2019; Fransen et al., 2019; Perera et al., 2019).

Given their intertwined (Fransen et al., 2019) or 'symbiotic' (Perera et al., 2019) relationship, the distinction between state and non-state oppression is somewhat arbitrary. In interviews conducted in Zimbabwe, Palestine and Bangladesh, Perera et al. (2019) found that states delegate

more severe forms of CSO restrictions to NSAs in order to evade international scrutiny and being accused of human rights violations. When faced with NSA restrictions, CSOs are unable to seek state assistance because of the symbiotic relationship between NSAs and the state. "As a result of state inaction, state-aligned groups are also freer to impose harsher restrictions on NGOs than states. State support and public opinion is a crucial driver in creating an environment of impunity" (Perera et al., 2019, p. 6). In other words, one cannot understand NSA restrictions without looking at the role of the state. In some cases, like in Bangladesh and Palestine, pro-government militias openly work hand-in-hand with state actors to aggressively restrict CSOs from conducting their political roles.

Effects of state and non-state oppression on CSOs

Another important reason why the distinction between state and non-state oppression of CSOs does not hold is because their negative impact on the ability of CSOs to conduct their political roles is so similar. Oppression by both state and non-state actors' limits CSOs' organizational capacity and creates an environment of fear, with the result that CSOs apply a defensive strategy instead of an active advocacy strategy. Perera et al. (2019), for instance, stress that state and non-state restrictions create a climate of fear and mistrust for CSOs, which negatively affects the ability of CSOs to perform their political roles. The threats and intimidation that CSOs face from both state and non-state actors damage the physical and mental health of CSO employees, members and stakeholders (Perera et al., 2019). State and non-state actor oppression also lead to what Perera et al. (2019) call 'invisible work'. These unfunded defensive strategies include, among other things, safety arrangements for staff, building security, and responding to smears (Perera et al., 2019; Nencel et al., 2019; Elbers et al., 2019). As Perera et al. (2019) note, physical violence by NSAs is effective in reducing the advocacy activities of NGOs in the short term because they tend to focus less on their organizational capacity and more on self-care. Further, the reputational smear campaigns against targeted CSOs (mostly by GONGOs) have a devastating impact on their ability to successfully raise resources and perform advocacy in the long term. When a CSO's legitimacy is under pressure, its efficacy and advocacy compromised in the long term.

Overall, both state and non-state restrictions cost CSOs their organizational resources (people, funding, and networks). Yet, the way in which CSOs respond differs, depending on the level of their vulnerability). CSOs in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Palestine, Zambia and Zimbabwe show three types

of responses when confronted with state and non-state oppression: adjust, resist or disband (Verschuuren et al., 2019; Perera et al., 2019; Fransen et al., 2019). In the first scenario, CSOs adjust their activities to the hostile and oppressive political environment in which they operate. In some cases, CSOs transform from an advocacy organization to a service delivery organization, taking a cooperative approach with the state and self-censoring. In Zambia and Bangladesh, for instance, Fransen et al. (2019) found without leaving advocacy in relation to the state altogether, CSOs have become more cautious in targeting the government when lobbying and campaigning. Faced with oppression, CSOs in both countries chose to: 1) focus on local government, 2) use their personal networks with government officials to influence policy from within, 3) conduct advocacy on topics that are less political, and 4) use 'cloaked policy language' that appears apolitical or 'neutral' (Fransen et al., 2019). In other words, the timing, tone and setting are important factors in the ability of CSOs to adjust to the shrinking civic space. However, this adjusting is mostly a short-term strategy, aligned with the ultimate goal: resistance. Perera et al. (2019) describe how, against all odds, some CSOs manage to continue their confrontational and proactive strategies. When CSOs do not adjust to or resist state and non-state oppression, they can also respond by disbanding their activities.

The results of the research projects in Bangladesh, Palestine and Zimbabwe indicate that CSOs' resistance depends on, among other things, their priorities and available resources. Activities that are imposed by donors are likely to be dropped when CSOs operate under state and non-state pressure. Similarly, CSOs are less likely to drop their core issues – that is, issues that represent the interests of the constituency – when faced with state and non-state pressure (Perera et al., 2019). In other words, the level of vulnerability among oppressed CSOs is factor dependent. In Ethiopia, for instance, CSOs that worked on multiple issues were able to sustain themselves and adjust after the oppressive Charities and Societies Proclamation was implemented in 2009 (Verschuuren et al., 2019). However, this was difficult for CSOs that focused on a single issue. The lack of self-regulatory mechanisms between CSOs also makes CSOs vulnerable to oppression. In addition to this, Perera et al. found that CBOs were better placed to respond to repression by NSAs: "As such, smaller groups working in a particular locale were found to be better at managing reputational risks than their counterparts working at the national level, who have less direct contact with members or constituents" (2019, p. 7).

Recommendations from the research groups

Acknowledge advocacy-through-service delivery: The line between service delivery and advocacy work is not always clear and at times CSOs operating in closed civic space use service delivery as a veil for advocacy efforts.

Build stable relations between Southern CSOs and Northern donors and INGOs: CSOs under pressure benefit from stable relationships with Northern donors and INGOs: To build such relationships a focus on long-term capacity building is required.

Direct diplomatic responses at repressive governments: CSOs benefit from diplomatic responses directed at repressive governments as well as active interventions from donor governments in cases of repression.

Call on actors that have leverage with repressors to reduce pressure on CSOs and civic space: Both donors and Northern CSOs could, for example, call on businesses to respect their due diligence obligations and use their leverage to influence suppliers.

Chapter 4. Dynamic support for CSOs

As already mentioned in previous chapters, the Theory of Change underlying the D&D framework implies that international donors and INGOs play a crucial role in supporting CSOs in LLMICs to perform their political roles. At the same time, the Theory of Change also assumes that CSOs are actors in their own right and not merely vehicles for aid delivery. Hence, the support that CSOs in LLMICs receive needs to be long term, flexible and context specific, not interfering with their autonomy. The research conducted shows that: 1) Northern donors and INGOs play a crucial role in supporting CSOs in performing their political roles, 2) at the same time, however, the short-term, top-down and managerial nature of the aid chain poses challenges to CSOs' effectiveness, 3) small and local CSOs do not have a direct linkage with Northern donors and miss necessary and flexible funding to perform their political roles, and 4) CSOs in LLMICs also conduct 'invisible' and 'unpaid' work, meaning that the existing funding mechanisms exclude some of their activities. This is also the case for CSOs operating in hostile political environments where service delivery and advocacy are intertwined. In other words, the research conducted suggests that in order to effectively support CSOs to perform their political roles in limited civic space, Northern donors and INGOs need to develop a dynamic support mechanism that takes the context in which CSOs operate and their administrative capacity into account.

Core funding and accountability

Different cases demonstrate that CSOs in LLMICs tend to be effective in performing their political roles when they have core and sustainable funding that enables them to build a professional organization (Nencel et al., 2019; Bader & Nesterenko, 2019; Elbers et al., 2019). This core funding is provided by INGOs, which play a brokering role between CSOs and Northern donors. The result of this relationship is that CSOs have the responsibility to account for their conducted activities to INGOs, while the latter follow guidelines that are determined by the Northern donors. This creates a hierarchy in the aid chain (Nencel, et al. 2019; Van Wessel et al., 2019; Elbers et al., 2019; Verschuuren et al., 2019). Northern donors are at the top of the hierarchy, followed by INGOs and national CSOs. CBOs and other (small) grassroots organizations take the very last place on the ladder.

The primary objective of this accountability mechanism is to ensure that donors' resources (Northern taxpayers' money) are efficiently and effectively used (Elbers et al., 2019; Verschuuren et al., 2019). This is in line with the D&D framework, which prescribes that effective lobbying and advocacy not only demands specific expertise and experience, but also the "use of planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME) instruments aimed specifically at lobbying and advocacy interventions" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014, p. 6). The D&D framework also prescribes that CSOs must have "an adequate administrative organisation", be "capable of proper financial management" and "work in a transparent and accountable manner" vis-à-vis society and finance providers (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014). Besides the fact that the D&D framework aims to work towards a social transformative approach of advocacy, and prescribes that its strategic partners do not need to submit "detailed programme proposals", different researchers observed that the accountability rules of Northern donors (including the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs) are managerial in nature (e.g. focus on measurable results and measures to minimize financial risk) (Nencel et al., 2019; Elbers et al., 2019, Spierenburg et al., 2019). According to Elbers et al. (2019), this managerial thinking can be explained by the fact that the social transformative approach is not mainstream and fully integrated in all departments of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In one Kenyan case, for instance, Elbers et al. observed that a Northern INGO had to meet "a set of additional (financial) accountability rules originating from the accountancy department of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs" (2019, p. 6). According to the researchers, this underscores the fact that "the social transformation logic which informs the Ministry's accountability rules is not necessarily shared or upheld by all departments within the Ministry" (*ibid*.).

The downside of managerial thinking

Besides the fact that Northern funding through INGOs plays an indispensable role in supporting CSOs in LLMICs to perform their political roles, the existing rules of decision-making, funding and accountability have unintended or even obstructive consequences for the general functioning of CSOs in LLMICs (Elbers et al., 2019; Nencel et al., 2019; Spierenburg et al., 2019). This is especially the case for CBOs that don't have a direct connection with INGOs and donors. Their vulnerability can be explained by two mutually reinforcing factors. Firstly, accountability rules become increasingly strict the further you go down the aid chain (Nencel et al., 2019; Elbers et al., 2019). It is what Nencel et al. (2019) characterize as the double standard of accounting: CBOs without a direct connection to donors and INGOs are exposed to more financial and accountability requirements, while they also do the operational work. Second, CBOs have limited negotiating power with donors and INGOs due to their limited organizational

capacity and limited sources of funding (Nencel et al., 2019; Elbers et al., 2019). More specific examples of how CBOs (and CSOs) cope with this dilemma are presented in the next chapter.

Different researchers observe that Northern donors, including the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, tend to provide short-term and project-based funding and lack the flexibility to respond to ad-hoc dynamics on the ground (Elbers et al., 2019; Spierenburg et al., 2019; Nencel et al., 2019; Verschuuren et al., 2019). This is especially the case for CBOs, which according to Spierenburg et al. (2019) are 'conditioned' on existing donor frameworks, obstructing their flexibility and capacity to respond to dynamics on the ground. CBOs have to adjust to the strategic goals of donors and report on their activities based on donors' expectations. Yet, they don't always have the time and the resources to meet the donor's managerial demands. In their attempt to apply for funds, small CSOs and CBOs encounter stringent conditions, which they often cannot meet because of their small size (Spierenburg et al., 2019; Nencel, et al., 2019). It is a visible pattern across almost all cases: big, professionalized NGOs that understand donors' demands and language have better access to funding, sometimes at the expense of CBOs.

Invisible work

Regarding funding, Southern CSOs emphasize that "the relative short-term nature of the funding (reflecting managerial principles) undermines their organisational stability" (Elbers et al., 2019. p. 5). This obstructive and exclusive nature of the managerial funding mechanism is best visible during what Nencel et al. describe as the 'chaos of urgencies': "the everyday oscillation between needs and demands, and organisational problems that CBOs face – invisible for donors and NGOs but a reality for CBOs" (2019, p. 9). Faced with time and resource shortages, local and small CSOs have to balance between demands from the community and engage in advocacy, access funds, manage programmes and expand their network and activities (Nencel et al., 2019). In the case of a CBO advocating for social justice for sex workers in Nairobi, its employees appeared to invest their own money, time and resources to help fellow community members to face emergencies (such as assisting sex workers who experience [police] violence and contributing to hospital and funeral bills). This mechanism – whereby CSO employees and representatives contribute their own resources and time for urgent activities, unpaid, in order to overcome the 'chaos of urgencies' – is visible across different cases (Elbers et al., 2019; Nencel et al.,

2019; Perera et al., 2019). It relates to what Perera et al. (2019) call 'invisible work', including activities such as safety arrangements for staff, building security and responding to smears. This invisible work is unaccounted for and exists outside of funding strategies. It is hard for CBOs and small CSOs to access (flexible) funding for such activities, which obstructs their responsiveness to emergencies (Spierenburg et al., 2019).

It is based on these observations that almost all of the studies conducted recommend that Northern donors create flexibility in the design of their funding mechanisms. Different authors also note that the D&D framework's sharp juxtaposition of 'advocacy' and 'service delivery' should be re-examined. In reality, service delivery and advocacy go hand-in-hand. As mentioned earlier, Spierenburg et al. (2019), for instance, observed one example where the advocacy efforts of youths were supported by small income generating projects. This not only helped them with livelihood support, it also enabled them to educate their fellow community members on land rights. "The CSO indicated this combination was important in order to ensure sustainability of advocacy efforts even after funding would stop" (Spierenburg et al., 2019, p. 6). And as the previous chapter demonstrates, in hostile political spaces, CSOs are sometimes obliged to depoliticize and conduct their advocacy and rights-based activities under the flag of service delivery (Fransen et al., 2019; Verschuuren et al., 2019; Van Wessel et al., 2019). Yet, the existing funding mechanism does not recognize this complexity and focuses on the sharp distinction between service delivery and advocacy. "Considering the complexity of civic space and the fluidity of roles, we recommend recognizing the multi-layered and multi-level scope of state–civil society interactions, through which multiple entry points may be found to conduct advocacy", Van Wessel et al., (2019, p. 14) writes. "We also urge questioning the adequacy of epistemic and donor policy frameworks that maintain a simple distinction between service delivery and advocacy because, through service delivery, CSOs can engage in social transformation via mobilization, capacity development, and networking, as well as the careful insertion of agendas into policy processes" (*ibid.*).

Recommendations from the research groups

Flexibility is required in the allocation of funding, including in the type of activities funded: Such flexibility allows for the diversity of roles within CSO coalitions, as well as for changes to take place over time.

Facilitate flexibility through flexible programming, support for informal organizing and action, and flexible reporting requirements.

Establish small and flexible grant schemes that match the volatile and changeable realities of CBOs: Such funds can be allocated within a short time period and do not require detailed proposal writing and reporting.

Establish multi-year grants instead of short-term funding: Multi-year grants would enable sustainable coalitions and capacity building and generate lasting, structural change.

Funding strategies should be guided by the principles of programme sustainability and be aligned with the interests and priorities of the target beneficiaries.

Chapter 5. Starting from the South

A precondition for the assumptions underlying the D&D framework's Theory of Change is that CSOs should have autonomy and ownership in order to perform their political roles effectively. This notion of autonomy is challenged by the fact that CSOs continuously balance between their goals, the needs of their constituencies and third parties, and other factors (the political environment, their relationship with other CSOs and donors). As outlined in chapters 2 and 4, CSOs' autonomy and effectiveness is partly influenced by the rules of accountability that donors develop in the aid chain. Evidence from the synthesis study (Hollander, 2018) and research projects (Nencel et al., 2019; Van Wessel et al., 2019; Elbers et al., 2019) show that the aid chain and its interrelated rules and relationships are characterized by top-down decision making, which negatively affects CSOs in LLMICs, especially CBOs. This power imbalance is characterized by resource dependency on the part of CSOs (depending on donor resources to conduct their activities) and selection bias by donors (collaborating only with large CSOs that fit the donors' managerial framework and agenda). Yet, beside the existence of these power imbalances, the research conducted under the Assumptions Programme also suggests that there is room for CSOs to manoeuvre within the aid chain without necessarily losing their *raison d'être*. Informal relationships between the donors and CSO actors, and the presence of mutual understanding and respect are preconditions for this.

Leading from the North

The research conducted not only confirms that donors and INGOs play a crucial role in supporting CSOs in LLMICs to conduct their political roles, but also that rules dealing with decision making, funding and accountability are often unilaterally determined by these other actors, without the inclusion of Southern CSOs (Van Wessel et al., 2019; Nencel et al., 2019; Elbers et al., 2019). Northern donors and INGOs take the lead in defining the strategy of advocacy programmes, which roles participants in the aid chain should play, and the selection of implementing partners. Southern CSOs are not included in the design phase or the strategic level of the aid chain, yet, as the previous chapter demonstrates, they are expected to align their activities with donor-determined rules. This Northern dominance is not always visible: "Overall, in day-to-day affairs, power in the aid chain is largely exercised indirectly by setting rules in the beginning of the relationship, as opposed to actors openly imposing their will on others" (Elbers et al. 2019, p. 6).

An illustration of these skewed power relations is the fact that CSOs in LLMICs need their Northern counterparts (INGOs) to generate international credibility. INGOs play an essential brokering role, connecting CSOs in LLMICs with international platforms and donors, which illustrates the observed distance between donors and Southern CSOs, with especially CBOs being the greatest distance from the donors. In general, CBOs access (international) funding through intermediary NGOs and INGOs: "CBOs are generally perceived by donors and NGOs alike as small and informal organisations that lack financial and managerial capacities and abilities to scale up" (Nencel et al., 2019, p. 6)[1]. This is an assumption that does not correspond with reality. In many cases, CBOs are formal organizations with a robust structure and the organizational capability to manage large-scale programmes. CBOs are informally engaged in the community, which gives them the legitimacy to perform their political roles. But, beside these qualities, they mostly lack the necessary financial and human resources to prove their eligibility. According to Nencel et al., from the perspective of CBOs, "the ODA system, with or without intention, continues 'colonial' regimes which position them and their members as 'subalterns'" (2019, p. 5).

Channelling the power imbalance

Some researchers take a normative stance by describing this top-down character of the aid chain as problematic in itself: "Notwithstanding the social transformative approach by donors and (some) NGOs, the flow of decision-making, money and accountability is distributed top-down by the advocacy aid chain and as such perpetuates coloniality, which also gradually captures CBOs" (Nencel et al., 2019, p. 10). The normative position that one takes towards the unequal power relations is interrelated with how accountability is conceptualized. As discussed in the previous chapter, top-down or upward accountability means that the lower you are positioned in the aid chain, the more exposed you are to rules of accountability. This means that CSOs, and especially CBOs, have to demonstrate to INGOs that their activities have tangible outcomes and are aligned with the donor's agendas and criteria. Upward accountability is, however, not the only form of accountability that exists, because donors and INGOs also have to account for their activities to the demands of their electorates and members (Hollander, 2018). This means that the support that Northern donors provide to CSOs is not value free and cannot be understood without having regard for their constituents, interests and agendas (Verschuuren et al., 2019; Spierenburg et al., 2019; Nencel et al., 2019).

Two types of arguments are developed by researchers against the observed power imbalance in the aid chain. The first is an efficacy argument, claiming that the power imbalance obstructs CSOs from performing their political roles, as the previous chapter outlined. Because of their

relatively small size and informal character, CBOs are flexible and agile, which can facilitate contextualized interventions by NGOs. Yet, because of the top-down character of the aid chain, their potential is not being fully utilized. In addition to this, Nencel et al. (2019) found that the more a CBO is integrated into the ODA system, the more likely its leadership will be required to balance donors' demands with the demands of its constituency, which can lead to tensions with the latter. This hinders the CBO from performing its political roles.

The second argument against the power imbalance in the aid chain is the social justice argument – i.e. that it is unfair to decide how CSOs should conduct their work without including them in the decision-making process (the design table). Nencel et al., for instance, observe that CBOs are not treated as equal partners by larger NGOs, which tend to act on their behalf: "On the whole, both CBOs studied have virtually no existing professional relationships with financially more powerful organisations (i.e. donors or NGOs) in which they are treated as actor in their own right" (2019, p. 9). Instead, CBOs were subjected to what they termed "colonial power imbalances and dehumanizing practices", their lived experiences being used "to window-dress reports and conference meetings" (Nencel et al., 2019).

Starting from the South

Besides confirming the existence of these skewed power relations, the evidence also suggests that the aid chain has manoeuvring space, that the rules that determine decision-making, funding and accountability are not carved in stone, and their application varies between Southern CSOs. In the case of advocacy in Kenya, Elbers et al. (2019), for instance, identified two factors that enable flexibility. First, staff members of a Northern NGO and the Dutch Embassy were able to change and bend the rules and create new ones. Second, some Southern CSOs are able to negotiate better than others. This depends on their organizational capacity and experience, their credibility and whether they have alternative funding sources. In the case of India, Van Wessel et al. (2019) also found that a 'sense of informality' in the programme enables participants to keep their autonomy intact: "Most partners describe this autonomy as experiencing dignity and respect in the partnership". Van Wessel et al. noted that "There is a sense of mutual respect and a 'friendship'-based partnership, with space for critical reflection on key decisions, recognition of partners' strengths, and a sense of shared responsibility" (2019, p. 10) .

The presence of dignity and respect, based on trust-based informal networks, is also described by both Nencel et al. (2019) and Van Wessel et al. (2019) as a condition to create a manoeuvring space for CSOs in the aid chain. Other important factors are ally-ship and solidarity, as they enable actors high in the aid chain (INGOs, donors) to support those at the lower end (CBOs). In case of a sex worker support programme in Kenya, ally-ship plays an important role, as it enables the CBOs involved to play leading roles on the national level to lobby for changes in health care and/or police-citizen engagement. "Through support by powerful allies such as UNAIDS, the sex worker-led CBO has been able to increase its influence in strategic partnerships between the state and NGOs to try and have their interests and lived experiences inform policies and interventions" (Nencel et al., 2019, p. 10). This notion of ally-ship and solidarity corresponds with what Elbers et al. observed in Kenya, where two local CSOs developed a relationship with the Dutch Embassy and a Northern CSOs in which they co-created the advocacy agenda in the design phase of the project: "This co-creation process contributes to strengthening the capacity of local CSOs; for which both [the CSO] and the Embassy make funding available" (2019, p. 5).

In short, mutual and trust-based personal relations between donor and recipient create manoeuvring space, enabling actors to act beyond the managerial thinking. As Elbers et al. (2019) showed in the case of Kenya, individual staff members within the Dutch Embassy and Northern NGOs had room to interpret rules, and even to add new ones, deviating from the predetermined norms. "They do so according to their understanding of the local context, their personal relationship with, and trust in, the respective CSO, their personality and their own expertise" (*ibid*., p. 6). The importance of understanding the local context and the inclusion of local actors in the design and operational phase of the aid chain is in line with what Van Wessel et al. (2019) call 'Southern leadership' or 'Starting from the South'. Under this condition, Southern CSOs (and especially CBOs) play a prominent role in the design and operational phases of advocacy programmes, as they are the ones who understand and operate in the local context.

1. It should be noted, as already mentioned, that international funding (through intermediary NGOs and INGOs) enables CBOS to effectively perform their political roles (see Chapter 2).

Recommendations from the research groups

Acknowledge and link up with existing (local) civil society and advocacy efforts that are already in place: Instead of Northern donors and CSOs taking the lead, support advocacy processes already underway.

Southern CSOs should take the lead in deciding what kind of support and capacity building they need and how: To this end, they should be involved in the decision-making process from the very start, with Southern CSOs in charge of agenda setting and implementation.

CSOs should involve communities in decision making on advocacy strategies: At the same time, CSOs should recognize that many community members lack the time, skills and resources to take the lead. Therefore, where possible, resources should be allocated to grassroots-led advocacy.

What have we learnt

So far, this report has synthesized the findings of eight research projects initiated to scrutinize the assumptions underlying the Dialogue & Dissent framework of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The question that remains is how these findings relate to the framework, and what policymakers and practitioners can learn from these insights.

In relation to the 11 assumptions under the 3 themes (outlined in Box 2 in the introduction), we find that most of the assumptions are largely confirmed by the research projects – in their literature reviews as well as their empirical studies. For instance, regarding 'CSOs and civic engagement', four assumptions are confirmed by the research under the Assumptions Programme: 1.a) the crucial role of CSOs in changing power relations; 1.b) the different political roles they play; 1.c) the different organizational forms, capacities and legitimacy required to do so; and 1.d) the changing of policies, practices, norms and values when pressured, informed and/or persuaded. One assumption that is somewhat challenged is the precondition of CSOs as being locally rooted, strong, legitimate and autonomous (1.e). While being locally rooted and deriving legitimacy from their constituency may be an important asset, research shows that CSOs that are closely related to donors and INGOs can have an equally high impact as grassroots organizations. In case of the assumptions about 'CSOs and the aid chain' and 'CSOs in an enabling environment', we find all of them confirmed by the Assumptions research. The validity of these assumptions is also underlined by the various research projects, pointing to the positive impacts that the partnerships supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have had.

The conclusions of the research projects, outlined in the various chapters of this report, bring forth 10 key messages regarding the three themes of the programme: 'CSOs and civic engagement', 'CSOS and the aid chain' and 'CSOs in an enabling environment'.

Box 4. Ten key messages

CSOs and civic engagement

1. Not so much the individual factors, but the **combination and sum of these factors** need to be considered when asking why CSOs opt for certain roles or strategies. For instance, in several cases, there is an apparent trade-off between strength of the relationship with the local constituency and that with INGOs and donors. Improving the position of CSOs, therefore, requires not only looking at improving the position of a CSO vis-à-vis the local community, donors or other actors individually, but acknowledging the interplay between the various relationships.

2. While it may appear that factors influencing roles and relationships exist independently from CSOs and their activities, in actual fact they often do not. Many roles and relationships are the result of **strategic manoeuvring**. CSOs negotiate their way through spaces that are either provided or created. This often happens through longer-term informal engagement and adjustment to local contexts.

3. **Mutual accountability and information sharing** are essential for improving partnerships. This includes installing instruments for accountability between partners at various levels and the dissemination of advocacy efforts and outcomes to local constituencies.

CSOs and the aid chain

4. Although many organizations can definitely benefit from more financial resources, the main improvements are not necessarily found in the amount of funding, but the **conditionalities, sustainability and dynamism** of funding. Options suggested are to provide funding: a) on a core basis, rather than only to meet programme objectives; b) beyond the duration of the programme; c) on a flexible basis, where funding (and other support) can be up-scaled and downscaled according to time-specific needs; and d) for advocacy-through-service delivery in the context of limited civic space.

5. Changing from managerial to transformative paradigms may be **easier on paper than in practice.** As research has not focused on the discrepancy between the transformative approach in the D&D framework and the rules underlying its funding, it is essential to create a better understanding of the various rules and procedures, and why they persist.

6. The consequences of managerial funding are best visible along the aid chain, where CSOs face high burdens in accessing or keeping funds. Hence, a sole focus on the funding requirements by donors, such as the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, may not be sufficient to reduce unequal access to funds for CSOs. Developing a **coherent, low-burden accountability mechanism** throughout the aid chain is important.

CSOs in an enabling environment

7. As CSOs **respond differently to pressure**, it is important to understand why different types of CSOs choose each of the strategies to cope with their environment. It is the combination of relationships with other actors (see message #1), together with their own strategies and capacities, that determines whether CSOs adjust, resist or disband.

8. Within the context of limited civic space, **dynamic support** is considered even more important. CSOs operating in repressive environments need to be able to deal with urgencies and have 'invisible work', such as safety arrangements, as a larger part of their activities. As manoeuvring between advocacy and service-delivery tasks is an important part of CSOs' adjustment to decreasing civic space, eliminating the distinction between the two is a suggestion that deserves donors' attention.

9. While our eyes often look to donors for support, the research suggests that **cooperation between CSOs** can help to adjust to state and non-state pressure. When small CSOs are connected to transnational, influential NGOs, it appears to be harder to oppress them. Moreover, the 'division of labour' can be a powerful tool to enable CSOs to stay under the radar when they are fearful of performing advocacy.

10. Donors should consider their practices **outside the support of CSOs** to ensure space for CSOs under pressure. This includes using diplomatic efforts to target repressive governments, considering their power in international political institutions such as the European Union, and calling on businesses to respect their social responsibility.

From paper to practice

Generally speaking, the findings of the Assumptions Programme do not challenge the accuracy of the assumptions per se. Rather, they pose some important questions with regards to the implications and applications of the assumptions and draw attention to some aspects that demand further scrutiny and/or nuancing:

• Firstly, several assumptions are rather indisputable in the way they have been formulated. In fact, the real question seems not to be whether a particular assumption holds, but how it can be put into practice. This particularly applies to the preconditions (1.e, 2.d and 3.b). Research largely confirms the importance of these preconditions. However, the main issue lies not in this acknowledgement, but how these preconditions can be created or preserved.

• Most assumptions about roles and relationships are formulated unidimensionally and do not consider trade-offs between roles and relationships. For instance, while research indeed confirms the importance of external aid for capacity building and assistance (2.a) and for protection and lobbying (3.a), it is crucial to recognize, at the same time, that reliance on external aid can jeopardize the relationship of a CSO with its constituency and other actors. Thus, the assumptions must all be understood within the context of the CSOs' broader set of relationships.

• The question is whether the assumptions are acknowledged and acted upon throughout the aid chain. For instance, while the D&D framework acknowledges CSOs within their own right (2.b), researchers argue that the aid chain prevents direct, core support for CSOs.

To address these three issues and better support CSOs in fulfilling their political roles, it thus seems that the current set of assumptions underlying the D&D framework need sharpening and nuancing. To assist in this endeavour, Table 1 outlines additional questions that donors and policymakers can ask (themselves) in relation to the assumptions, based on the insights presented in the previous chapters. Such questions will help donors and policymakers gain a more nuanced understanding of the realities of the CSOs they seek to support and serve to ensure that their programmes and activities are better aligned with the complexity of these realities. In other words, the questions can be understood as an 'extra check' or 'nuancing tool' to avoid any over-simplification or tunnel vision that the current set of assumptions may produce.

Table 1. Additional questions for donors and policymakers about the assumptions underlying the D&D

Assumption	Additional questions
1.a. CSOs play a crucial role in changing power relations	- To what extent is the support of CSOs for changing power relations aligned with achieving programme objectives? - How does project-based funding contribute to the representational and cooperative role of CSOs in the long term? - How can CSOs be encouraged to cooperate more with businesses, embassies and other strategic actors to increase their political leverage?
1.b. CSOs perform four types of political roles to change power relations	- Does the aid chain enable CSOs to perform the various political roles according to the objectives of both donors and CSOs, and how can more dynamic support contribute to shaping these roles? - How aware are donors of the existence and practices of CSOs that can be considered 'fake' or make them 'state proxies'?
1.c. Different roles require different organizational forms, capacities and forms of legitimacy	- Is the acknowledgement of the need for different organizational forms, capacity and legitimacy sufficiently acted upon in terms of power relations and funding procedures in the aid chain? - Are donors aware of the adverse impact that their support may have on the legitimacy of locally-rooted CSOs and, consequently, their impact? - How can (inter)nationally oriented, high-capacity CSOs assist in transferring skills and knowledge to low-capacity grassroots CSOs and movements?
1.d. When pressured, informed and/or persuaded by CSOs, states and companies change their policies and practices, and societal groups change their norms, values and practices to be more sustainable, equitable and inclusive	- Are CSOs encouraged (and enabled) to disseminate information beyond programme recipients, to broaden the scope of activities and increase legitimacy? - Are CSO partnerships sufficiently aware of the practices of businesses, GONGOs and other actors countering advocacy efforts of CSOs aimed at inclusive development?
1.e. Precondition: CSOs need to be locally rooted, strong, legitimate and autonomous	- Do donors acknowledge the interplay and trade-offs that may exist in the relationships between CSOs and other actors? - Are programmes and their monitoring frameworks adequately taking into account the context-specificity of the roles and relations of the CSOs involved?

2.a. External aid can strengthen CSOs in LLMICs in their political roles through capacity building and assistance in advocacy processes	- Are donor budgets sufficient for capacity building on all important fronts (i.e. research, infrastructure, legal capacity, technology, etc.)? - To what extent are donors able to provide (dynamic) support for strategic opportunities to advocate for inclusive development?
2.b. CSOs are actors in their own right and not merely instrumental channels for aid delivery	- To what extent do donors endorse the principle of 'starting from the South' (i.e. involving CSOs from the earliest stages of programme design onwards in equal power relationships) in programme design and implementation? - What are the reasons for donors to abstain from providing core funding towards CSOs, instead of (or in addition to) project-based funding?
2.c. Promoting civil society's political roles needs a long-term, context-specific approach	- How can complementarity between CSOs and activities be strengthened through coordination in the aid chain? - What are the incentives driving short-term, one-size-fits-all thinking within CSOs and donors, and how can flexible but stable support and adaptive learning be promoted in organizational cultures?
2.d. The design of the aid chain does not interfere with the aspects mentioned in the previous point	- Are donors sufficiently involving CSOs in the design stages of the programme, and thereby promoting equal relationships along the aid chain? - How can the aid chain become more receptive to (local) CSOs that lack the knowledge and capacity to access funding? - Can donors seek collaboration with each other to address the managerial nature of the aid chain within the broader aid system?
3.a. External aid can strengthen CSOs in LLMICs in their political roles by offering protection in hostile environments and lobbying for improved political space	- To what extent are donors able to provide (dynamic) support against misinformation, violence, smearing and other practices of repression? - How can donors overcome the (apparently flawed) distinction between service delivery and advocacy, and support organizations doing advocacy work through service delivery? - Are donors sufficiently aware of the devastating impact of reputational threats and how they can help CSOs to exercise dynamic accountability?
3.b. Assumption/precondition: CSOs need political space to perform political roles	- How can embassies, and other political authorities, be invited to contribute to create political space and/or alleviate pressure on civil society? - How can businesses be invited to consider their activities in the context of their corporate responsibility in relation to civic space and human rights? - Are CSOs' partners sufficiently aware of the repressive strategies of both state and non-state actors? What activities do they undertake to expose and fight collusion between the two?

Acronyms

CBO	community based organization
CSO	civil society organization
D&D	Dialogue and Dissent
GONGO	government-oriented NGO
LLMIC	low and lower middle-income country
NGO	non-governmental organization
NSA	non-state actor
NWO-WOTRO	Dutch Research Council (NWO) – WOTRO Science for Global Development
ODA	official development assistance

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All information on the 'New Roles of CSOs for Inclusive Development' research programme can be found on the INCLUDE website: https://includeplatform.net/theme/new-roles-for-csos-for-inclusive-development/


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