

# **The role of NGO's in fragile states**

## **Outline for a PSO learning Programme May 2010**

This learning programme focuses on the role of NGO's in fragile states. Western NGO's have played an important role in mitigating the consequences of war, in coming to conflict resolution/conflict transformation and improving social capital (trust) in so-called fragile states. Increasingly, adverse effects of the work of NGO's have also become apparent. In answer to this dilemma, the do-no-harm principle was introduced: whatever you do, be aware that (NGO-)interventions can also have negative effects.

### **Rationale**

#### **Liberal agenda and the role of NGO's**

The conceptual and therefore also the practical basis of the work of NGO's has changed drastically over the last decade. During the era of the (neo-)liberal agenda with policy instruments such as structural adjustment, Poverty Reduction Strategies and Sector Wide Approaches, the tasks assigned to NGO's in fragile states were relatively clear: they were in the market for increasing social capital, especially in those countries where governments did not want to or could not govern. Furthermore, the task of NGO's was to reconstruct the social fabric, to promote pluriformity in society, to contribute to a vibrant civil society, to promote democratic principles and tolerance, to critically monitor government actions, and to effectively deliver services to the population.

#### **Hybrid political orders**

The recent debate about fragile states started by focusing on the functioning of the state. Originally, the problem was perceived as the state being weak and therefore needing fixing. Next, it was realized that the build-up of a government does not take place in a vacuum and requires legitimacy from citizens and existing institutions. In policy terms, the *social contract* between citizens and the government was deemed crucial for the success of state building. Most recently, the issue of legitimacy of institutions and local leadership led to greater emphasis on the analysis of the local social fabric. This mix of communities, movements and local institutions is labelled the hybrid political order. Interventions of NGO's should be principally based on the livelihood strategies of the people and their formal and informal institutions.

This is the background against which we will carry out our learning programme, hoping to contribute to the next stage of analysis of our work.

#### **Role of NGO's in war zones**

The work of NGOs in Fragile States constitutes mostly of dealing with human rights promotion, supporting compromise, dialogue, and economic and social integration. They fulfil a role as described below in the "Liberal agenda and the role of the NGO". These Western NGO's support local civil society organisations that promote values and implement projects that are instrumental in sustaining a peace deal and in promoting democracy as even in the most deeply divided societies there remain

multi-ethnic and civic constituencies. Sometimes however, the effectiveness of the local civil society organisations is not as desired, due to the fact that they lack a popular constituency and legitimacy in society. On top of this, the financial support of Western NGO's discredits them in the eyes of the local communities. Their accountability tends to be oriented towards the donor NGO instead of towards local constituencies.

In fragile environments the analysis of the context of the so-called hybrid political order (see below) often reveals that indigenous civil society institutions, including religious and community groups, veteran organisations and NGO's are as divided as the societies in which they are embedded.

Moreover, the legal and political vacuum left by a fragile state often makes society at large subject to civil society organisations that are in fact uncivil, such as Mafia-like entrepreneur groups and paramilitary gangs engaged in illegal and violent activities. They operate in a context of national, ethnic or religious divide, in the absence of a functioning state. They maintain close relations with the political establishment and/or neo-patrimonial state. In the absence of a functioning state, yet with close ties to the existing informal structures. Often, it is in their interest to sustain inter-ethnic divisions and illegal rule. They have an interest in fomenting and perpetuating ethnic and national segregation and exclusion. Western NGO's do not usually deal with these groups.

The focus in this learning programme is on neither of the above groups, it is about the 'dubious' group of civil society organisations in between. As a western NGO you wonder whether to work with them or not. They have a lot of popular support, they use the right jargon. They operate within the boundaries of the law, they are usually not engaged in violent or illegal behaviour, on the other hand they could play a divisive role in society. Membership of these groups is based on particular attributes, such as race, religion, or the need to have fulfilled specific patriotic duties (e.g. having been soldier in the army). Admittedly, it is known that similarity and cultural homogeneity provide an initial basis for trust, which is the foundation of successful cooperation. However, these groups organise around sectarian and particular identities. Mostly they reject, at least publicly, violence. However, they endorse a world view that considers groups' relations as a zero-sum game and resist compromise and cooperation. In conclusion, these civil society groups have a constituency: their opinion and actions are influential in the development of the society at large. However, their world view (or parts of it) is not one that should be supported. But in the short term they can have an important contribution to short-term (negative) peace and stability in the country.

The central question that we will examine in our learning programme, is how Dutch NGOs and their local partners deal with these kind of civil society organisations? Do they just support relations? Do they ignore them? Or do they support specific projects? How do they support them? How do they monitor how these organisations develop? How do partner organisations morally judge the activities of these civil society organisations? How do they distinguish between activities that have civic aims, or assess uncivil aims? What specific attitude and tools are needed to assess these organisations? How do they include them in the context analysis?

## **The Thematic Learning Programme Working Method**

In this programme, we envisage participating organisations who encounter these half-way civil organisations in their work and struggle with relations with these groups doing action research on their own practices. We will collectively agree on relevant questions, which will enable us to share our experiences and learn from them. Action research will take place on the ground, and we will meet to share our conclusions and discuss outcomes. The participants commit themselves to exchanging experiences and learning with and from each other. There is a free flow of information.

### **Purpose**

By collecting and sharing meaningful information regarding the potentials and pitfalls of working on capacity development in fragile states, PSO aims to contribute to improved practices in strengthening civil society. The results of the learning programme will not only contribute to improved practices for participating organisations and their partners, but also will generate new insights, experiences and lessons learnt that are valuable and useful for the development sector as a whole working in fragile areas.

### **Central learning questions**

The subject of the research is that segment of the local civil society (in a fragile state) whereby membership requires certain attributes (religion, ethnicity, veteran organisations) and has the tendency of a world view based on a zero-sum game, works in the margins of the law, but on the other hand has mass support, and could e.g. support peace deals and other shared objectives, contributing to a negotiated (short-term) peace.

The learning programme seeks to discuss answers to the following questions:

- How do international organisations and their partner organisations assess and work with this segment of civil society?
- How can they work best with this segment of civil society? According to themselves and according to local partners?
- What is the view of the segment identified above about the Western Ngo's and their local counterparts?
- In case of interventions, what is the best division of labour between international organisations and local partner organisations?
- How can you analyse this segment of the socio-political context?

In the course of the proposal development process, these questions will be further developed and refined according to the wishes and insights of those taking part.

## Expected outputs/outcomes

- Improved learning capacities – participants know how to tackle specific questions and how research can be helpful to them, and how the results of the research can be helpful in practice.
- There is an improved culture of learning. Learning capacities and aspects of research are valued more highly.
- Participating organisations know how to do action research. Practical do's and don'ts for action research are explored
- Participating organisations know more about each others' working practice. The central learning questions ensure that a wide variety of working practice can be compared with one another. A common language improves comparability
- Interaction through peer review and action research
- Development practice is improved
- The results of the research will be published

## Organisation and planning

The thematic learning programme on fragile states will be facilitated PSO. An expert on fragile states will take part in the learning programme to monitor the quality of the action research. In addition to that, an expert on methodology will support the participating organisations in the local action research. The participating organisations will be asked to peer review the project proposals and research findings during 2 workshops.

Agriterra, ICCOenKerkinactie, Oxfam Novib, ZOA, Press Now!, Cordaid and CARE have shown interest in participation. Also SNV, HIVOS, Clingendael, The Broker and HCSS want to be involved in the learning programme. Per participating organisation detailed action plans will be developed.

### Preliminary Planning

| What                                | When                     |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Expert meeting                      | Week 15 (April)          |
| Finalising outline                  | Week 19 (May)            |
| Approval outline                    | Week 20 (May)            |
| Publication outline (E-zine)        | Week 21 (June)           |
| Meeting participating organisations | Week 24 (June)           |
| Finalising proposal                 | Week 26 (July)           |
| Approval proposal                   | Week 28 (July)           |
| Finalising contracts                | Week 34 (August)         |
| Start of learning programme         | Week 35 (September)      |
| Kick off workshop NL                | Week 36 (September)      |
| Peer review research proposals      | Week 40 (October)        |
| Start of action research            | Week 41 (October)        |
| Workshop in Great Lakes             | Week 4 (January 2011)    |
| Finalising action research          | Week 22 (June)           |
| Final workshop NL                   | Week 24 (June)           |
| Publication                         | Week 35 (September 2011) |