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**Development: uneasy and ineffective relations of cooperation?  
Paper prepared for the Dutch Dialogue on International  
Cooperation “Development is Change” Conference, June 24th  
and 25th, 2008.**

**Introduction**

The organizers of the interactive policy dialogue “Development is Change” have asked me to write a short background paper on cooperation and complementarity in the field of international cooperation (‘ontwikkelingssamenwerking’).

The **central theme** for this paper, as asked by the organizers, is: "Hoe staat het ... (gezien de erkenning van autonomie van Nederlandse Maatschappelijke organisaties door de overheid én de vermaatschappelijking van de OS) ... met de manier waarop de Nederlandse overheid en de maatschappelijke organisaties (zowel Nederlandse als internationale als lokale) elkaar aanvullen/versterken? En hoe vullen zij andere spelers aan, zoals het bedrijfsleven?".

**The paper will deal (but not in strict order) with the following questions:**

1. What are the most important elements regarding the 'theme' in question?
2. What are your own ideas about the current state of affairs regarding those elements?
3. Which consequences and dilemmas does this have for civil society organizations in both North and South?
4. Which follow-up questions definitely need to be addressed during the conference (June 24-25).

In this short paper I will set a personal view on the issues concerning the relations of cooperation and complementarity in the OS-area in the Netherlands. My view is based on two experiences: first on many years of work as a campaigner and strategist in the world of consumer affairs and sustainability at a consumer organization and secondly on my education as a political scientist.

My main point for this discussion is that Dutch ngo's and government are haunted by an imperative to cooperate that makes them blind for the real effects of cooperation.

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#### PROPOSITIONS

##### 1. The field of development aid and international cooperation is haunted by an imperative of cooperation

Working together or to cooperate seems to be a general imperative in the field of development aid and international cooperation. Ngo's have to work together, governments have to work together, ngo's have to work with business partners, etc. The drive to this cooperation and motives for it are seldom made explicit. Questions like why do we have to/want to cooperate, the advantages and risks are at the most only partially answered before cooperation starts.

There seems to be a general belief that cooperation is good per se (in itself). Synergy is expected but not based on evidence, it seems. And - at least at the policy level - it seems to lead to endless coalitions, alliances and circuits of talks, consultations and discussions. Resulting in more overhead instead of less. A big part of the imperative stems from the political backlash against development aid and cooperation seems to be the panacea against many evils, but not based on a realistic valuation of the possible synergies. Complementarity seems to be the new vogue word in town and runs the same risk of becoming a general but useless imperative. Why is complementarity necessary, what are the possibilities of complementarity, which problems does it solve and which not?

The suggestion of Koenders to create a kind of Public Broadcasting Organization for International Cooperation would fit quite well into this new vogue of complementarity. It has worked well in the area of broadcasting, especially with respect to the competition between public and commercial broadcasting. But in terms of the quality of programming and of influence of the viewer it has become more of the same (just like the commercial broadcasters: less quality of programs, less influence of the viewers).

So the comparison falls short for the area of international cooperation: though there is no commercial competitor in this area yet (but they might enter the market of fundraising soon) reorganizing the MFS-system like the public broadcasting system will inevitably lead to a greater distance to the real beneficiaries, the people in the South.

#### Directions forward:

- a. Stop thinking in terms of cooperation as a panacea. In most cases doing your own job as an ngo or as a government is fine.
- b. Only cooperate when there is a clear added value and/or synergy in terms of competencies or resources needed, and results and/or effects to be delivered for the partners (the poor) in the South.
- c. Let cooperation grow bottom up by enabling actors and stakeholders to find each other by information sharing and learning and let them negotiate about the use of each other's competencies and resources.
- d. The Public Broadcasting Model for International Cooperation will

effectively mean the end of the partnership relation between government and ngo's and will set the partners in the South on a greater distance.

## 2. Both governments and ngo's have lost their autonomy

The Dutch system of co-financing international development cooperation has become an inextricable knot of policy formulation, tendering and political lobbying. Government policy goal formulation is done by ngo's and vice-versa. The tendering process is inextricably interlinked with the policy formulation process. Ngo's work as vehicles for state policy and have been made responsible for goals they cannot help to deliver (good governance for instance). Government is sometimes the executioner for policy goals of ngo's.

As a consequence both governments and ngo's have lost autonomy in terms of policy formulation and execution of their policies. All parties have lost room to maneuver, possibly with strong negative effects on results, effectiveness, visibility, public support (especially for the ngo's). Also mechanisms for monitoring and control have been linked up with this (becoming 'politicized'). Through this mechanism of autonomy loss, ngo's have become the heat shield for critics against the role of development cooperation in general (remember: about 70 or 80% of the government budget consists of bilateral/multilateral government to government support, but most public discussions are about the remaining 20% of MFS-funds!).

### Directions forward:

- a. Reclaim autonomy for all parties and untie the knot.
- b. Ngo's should work from their own world view, mission, vision and strategy and have their own independent funding as a primary source and accept government money only as a means to reach goals on their own terms.
- c. Government should formulate its own goals and let organizations tender for the execution and/or negotiate common programs with ngo's.

## 3. Cooperation is not well informed by actors from the South

Though both government and ngo's have extensive contacts with southern counterparts, the influence of actors from the South on policy goals seems still fairly limited. The policy formulation process at the national level is largely a matter of national Dutch organizations and actors. Though there is an honest intention and will to change this the gap is still enormous.

What does ownership of the South mean? How can international cooperation be more demand oriented. And be more oriented at processes in the own society of the "receivers" (f.e. by having processes of policy formulation, service delivery and execution, monitoring and accountability more geared at their own civil society).

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#### Directions forward:

- a. Ownership from the South should be the radical starting point for future policy.
- b. Create influence from the South in the formulation and execution of development cooperation (tendering by actors from the South?). Beware that this doesn't lead to another series of consultative talks, etc.

#### The Development Aid field lives in splendid isolation

Looking from the outside the field of development cooperation seems to live and act in 'splendid isolation'. Own policies, methods and learnings don't seem to be connected with learnings and insights from other areas, like investment, business development, social security and sustainability. Cooperation with business is largely confined to fundraising and lobbying and does not extend to areas of technical expertise, management of change and implementing policies.

Also connections to areas that are of vital importance to combating poverty, such as economic development and sustainability, are only fragmentary developed. The consequence is that many chances for creating lasting results are missed. The field of international cooperation can learn a lot from the field of sustainable development, to which it is very sympathetic, but which has a lot more practical experience in cooperation between different actors (business, ngo's and governments).

#### Directions forward:

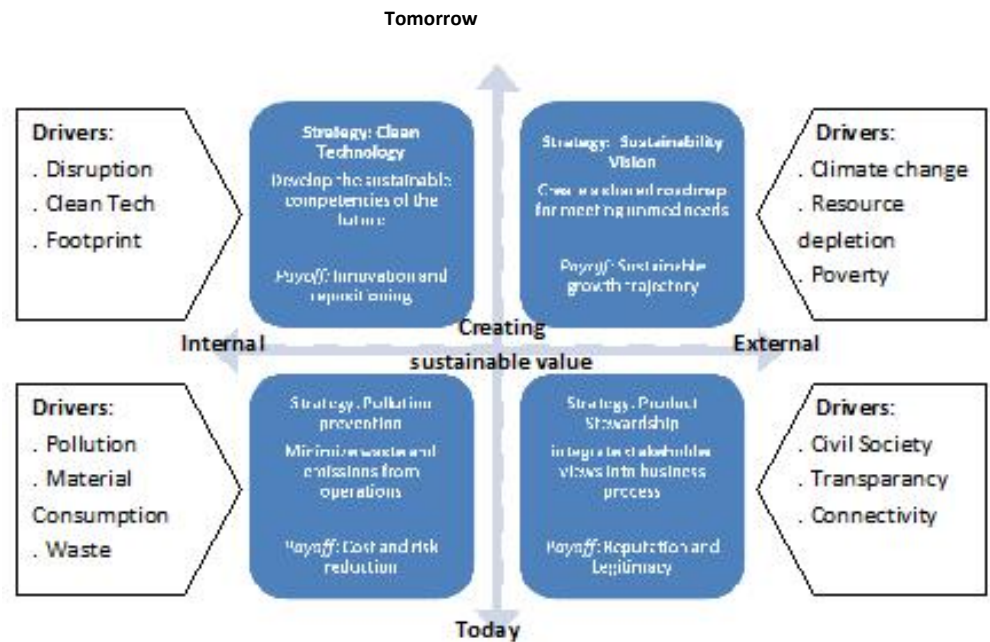
- a. Learn from practices of other areas (business, sustainability).
- b. Broaden the field of cooperation with business to other areas than lobbying and fundraising, for instance product/service development, investment, creating social security and insurance, housing, etc.
- c. Rethink strategic portfolio of activities against background of global economic changes and need for creating sustainable future.

#### One example for further thinking: the Sustainable Value Framework

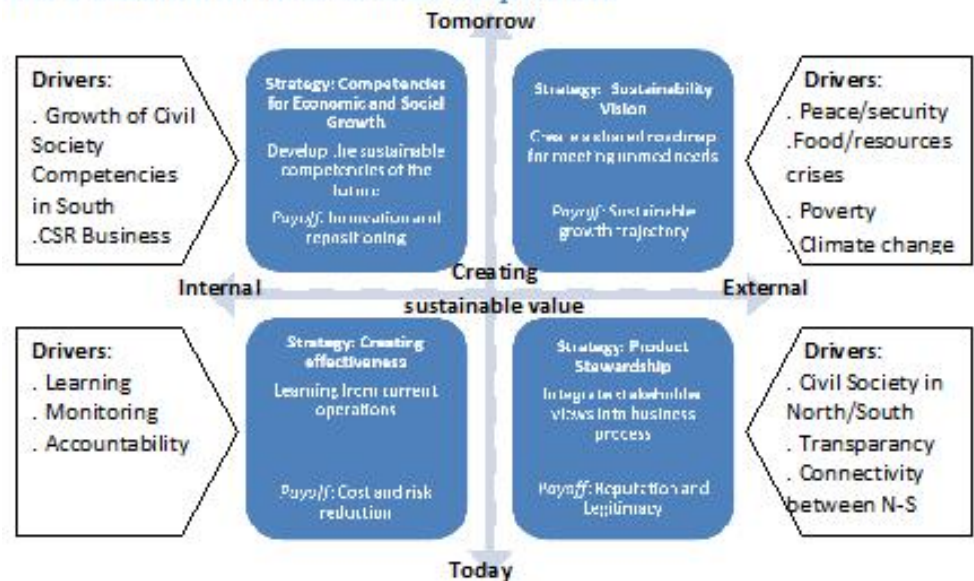
This framework has been developed by Stuart Hart in *Capitalism at the crossroads*. Aligning business, earth and humanity to sketch the possibilities for business strategies in creating a sustainable future. It shows the portfolio of strategies that a business organization can choose if it decides to become sustainable. In the second model I have tried to translate this into strategies for ngo's (and possibly also government). That could form the basis for thinking through in what areas different roles of ngo's could lead to effective cooperation (or complementarity if you want). This is just a first idea but in the world of creating sustainable value it has proven a very effective strategic instrument.

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### The translation for International Cooperation



### Point for discussion

1. It is of no use to introduce “complementarity” as the new panacea for all current problems in international development cooperation. Especially not as long as neither the problems that complementarity has to solve nor the competencies and roles of different actors (government and ngo’s) that should act complementary are very well defined. For short: if complementarity is the solution, what is the problem?
2. The introduction of a public broadcasting model as a replacement for the MFS-system will inevitably lead to putting the beneficiaries of the system

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at greater distance. And it will lead to a more statist model of international development cooperation.

3. To reclaim their autonomy Dutch ngo's in the field of development cooperation should work from their own world view, mission, vision and strategy and have their own independent funding as a primary source and accept government money only as a secondary means to reach goals on their own terms.
4. Ownership from the South should be the radical starting point for future policy.
5. Cooperation should be done only to reach clearly and specifically defined goals, as agreed with Southern counterparts. To be able to cooperate effectively Dutch ngo's will have to review their strategic portfolio of activities and define their possible roles (as financier – or investor? -, lobbyist, service deliverer, etc.) as to enter into cooperation from a clear picture of their own competencies and mission. They should stop to cooperate on everything else (i.e. endless consultations, alliances etcetera for broadly and not specifically stated objectives).

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## **Working in isolation is no option**

### **Comments on ‘Development: uneasy and ineffective relations of cooperation?’**

I have been asked by the organisers of the Policy Dialogue to comment on the paper on Complementarity. I am grateful for the opportunity because I believe that complementarity is at the core of the debate on autonomy, values and effectiveness of stakeholders in development. For me, working in isolation is no option. One billion people living in extreme poverty are entitled to our concerted efforts and any other interests are secondary to achieving the most effective means of poverty alleviation.

#### **Definitions?**

In debates on complementarity, one of the major shortcomings is clarity on basic concepts. Concepts like complementarity, synergy, coherence, coordination, and harmonisation are often mixed up of. Unfortunately, Koole’s state of the art paper did not make a critical analysis of the different concepts and definitions that surround complementarity. In his paper, Koole equates complementarity with cooperation and by doing so he adds an extra level of confusion to the debate by introducing the concept of cooperation without explicitly linking it to complementarity. It would have served the policy dialogue a lot more if Koole’s paper had laid out an analytical framework on complementarity which could then have served as the basis for the discussion at the conference.

#### **Generalisations**

For now, it is not easy to comment on Koole’s paper. I had to resist my first impulse of reacting to his statements on cooperation because they are so fundamentally different from what I have observed in the Dutch development sector in the past few months in my current position as Oxfam Novib’s executive director. I have seen so many examples of effective cooperation that it surprises me that none of them are considered. Even the media, often focused on negative news, regularly pick up positive examples like the story in De Volkskrant on the Access to Medicine index, initiated by Oxfam Novib, together with other NGOs, and involving the pharmaceutical industry and institutional investors in order to increase access to medicine for the poor. This neglect of existing positive practices of cooperation and complementarity in the development sector has led to generalisations and misconceptions. Secondly, it seems as if Koole misunderstood this policy dialogue for a debate where positions need to be polarised. However, a dialogue is much more than a debate. It is a joint attempt to reach a higher level of understanding by acknowledging progress made and by identifying challenges faced by all stakeholders involved. The antagonistic style of Koole’s paper harbours a risk of encouraging us to take in defensive positions and rebut Koole’s inaccurate assumptions on cooperation.

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#### **Complexity leads to complementarity**

The discussion should focus on whether or not different actors complement each other in developmental change processes. As such, we should not look at complementarity as an end in itself but as an analytical tool for identifying the contributions of different stakeholders to positive change with regard to power relations, economic structures and social/cultural attitudes and practices. First and foremost, developmental change is a complex process where a multitude of actors are involved, often facing interconnected problems. Between these actors there are relationships of dependence and interdependence. In addressing the obstacles to positive change and counterbalancing negative change, it is therefore impossible for one actor to determine the outcomes. When we accept the complexity of change processes we also need to accept the complexity of intervention in these processes, together with modesty regarding the role of external stakeholders. Change should to be primarily an internal process.

Reality dictates that developmental change is never the result of civil society action alone. In general, business (economics) and the public sector (politics) have a determining impact on where change leads us. What civil society organisations can do is to influence these stakeholders as a way to promote lasting pro-poor changes. Consequently, it is inescapable to interact with other stakeholders and this interaction sometimes requires cooperation and sometimes confrontation. But in the end, working in isolation is no option.

Complementarity in change processes entails different roles for state, commercial and civil society stakeholders. When these stakeholders recognize a common interest, cooperation is feasible. As such, the different roles may complement each other for the purpose of the common interest. However, cooperation is seldom spontaneous and requires the commitment and investment of all stakeholders. Only then we can strive for a higher level of complementarity which I would call synergy: the sum of the roles of the stakeholders creating an added value. If a common interest is not acknowledged, the different roles of the stakeholders complement each other in a completely different way: to counterbalance the power of the other stakeholders.

#### **A principled approach**

Any discussion on complementary roles, cooperation and synergy should be preceded by a thorough analysis of the issues at hand. In our analysis we have to carefully investigate the options for recognizing and defining a common interest between governments, private sector, international agencies and civil society. Only after analysing the power relations and what drives change processes in specific contexts we can strategise about how to engage ourselves vis-à-vis other stakeholders. Questions of if, when and with whom to cooperate and whether or not we can talk about complementarity will emerge. However, there are some preconditions to this strategizing and they relate to a large extent to the identity and values of stakeholders: why do

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we care and what do we wish to see changed? Let us take the example of our engagement with fragile states. As a civil society organisation we argue that solidarity with marginalised communities and groups, without access to certain basic rights like basic security and essential services and with governments that cannot or will not take their responsibility, motivates us to be engaged. We do not expect commercial companies to care in a similar manner because they are driven by other motives: profit making in order to guarantee the continuity of the company. Investing in fragile states in a socially responsible manner is often not seen as profitable and therefore perceived as unbefitting a profit making company. Similarly, governments have specific considerations that may overrule solidarity considerations. Geo-political security considerations may be a dominant motivation for our government to get involved with certain fragile states. Other social and ethical interests then get lower priority from our government. Taking a principled approach leads us to an analysis that the development problems we are facing are not only the result of failures at the state level but we should also talk about failing markets and failing social structures. None of these failures should be seen in isolation, nor can they be resolved by just one stakeholder.

#### **Different contexts, different roles**

In the end, whether we strive for synergy or not, it all depends on the issues at hand and the context we work in. Strategising then means to read the context carefully, decide when and with whom to collaborate, and for what purpose. Differences in contexts (countries/regions, issues, stakeholders, timelines) require differentiation in civil society strategies on how to position ourselves vis-à-vis commercial and governmental stakeholders (to collaborate or to confront). This means fulfilling different roles at different moments in time. The question then is what roles are there to fulfil? In general terms, five different ideal-type roles can be found in the academic literature on civil society:

1. The provision of basic social services
2. Breeding ground for inclusive democracy
3. Watchdog
4. Presenting policy alternatives and innovation
5. Intermediary for social participation

A distinction should be made here between those NGOs that employ an integrated approach to development, using the three intervention strategies of direct poverty alleviation, civil society building and policy advocacy, and those NGOs with a thematic focus. The latter may limit themselves to certain specific roles because of their thematic focus. For NGOs with an integrated approach it is impossible not to consider all different roles. Depending on the context, certain roles will be prioritized over others, leading to a unique constellation of civil society roles per context to be supported.

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In practice, these roles are overlap and each role is to be fulfilled by also considering the roles of other actors (states, business and international institutions) as well. Looking at the three country profiles of Minister Koenders, it becomes quickly clear that in MDG countries the role of civil society often lies in holding governments accountable to their promises and policy plans and therefore acts as a watchdog. The budget tracking initiatives on educational governance spending in Mali and Tanzania are examples. The role of governmental donors is to engage with governments of these countries through budget support and supporting the implementation capacity of public agencies. In fragile states, governments are either unwilling or incapable of providing basic security and essential services to their citizens. Civil society involvement in these countries is often directed to fill basic services gaps temporarily and stimulating a democratic culture through debate, public participation and reconciliation. Progress in fragile states is often better defined as preventing further decline than major improvements in reaching the MDGs. Lasting solutions require long-term commitment from political, commercial and civil society stakeholders. Finally, transition countries offer prospects to build new international alliances. The emergence of Oxfam India and Oxfam Mexico as 'Southern' members of the Oxfam confederation is a good example of how civil society is globalizing and new linkages emerge.

### Be context specific

When analysing a context or issue the different interests of stakeholders need to be acknowledged because they determine to a large extent the roles that the different stakeholders may assume. Understanding the internal dynamics of societies and the key actors within it is a prerequisite for identifying and supporting those processes and actors that drive positive change. However, with the increasing pace of globalisation we can no longer limit ourselves to a national or local context analysis without considering the impact of global trends and developments. Therefore a thorough understanding of the impact of globalisation on internal dynamics should be part and parcel of joint context analyses.

I emphasize the combined effort in the analysis because any form of complementarity starts with consent of all stakeholders on the analysis made. Minister Koenders made a first start into the direction of context analysis by distinguishing between three profile countries: fragile states, MDG-states and transition states. This offers a good starting point for analysing the different type of challenges in different contexts, calling for different roles and leading to different strategies.

But a context analysis cannot be limited to the classification of states into three broad characteristics only. Looking at the classification of Minister Koenders, a civil society organisation like Oxfam Novib will contribute to the analysis in particular way. Since our level of intervention is not limited to the state level, we will highlight the pockets of extreme poverty in certain transition states like Brazil and India, resembling the situation in many MDG-states in Africa. Similarly, within the same transition states we can observe

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high levels of fragility at local and regional levels, caused by violence/insecurity and with government inability to control the situation (communal and religious violence in India and gang wars in Brazil's mega-cities).

Another example: growing religious and cultural tensions, within and between countries, are a worldwide trend and it has become nearly impossible for governmental donors to engage themselves with progressive groups (human rights organisations, democratic movements, women's organisations) in many repressive regimes (Burma, Zimbabwe) or ultra-conservative (religious/culturally) societies (Iran, Afghanistan) without risking a backlash to these groups. Civil society to civil society support is in those cases often more viable. Joint analysis of a context will help to clarify the different roles different (external) actors could play. In this respect, the emergence of large 'Southern' NGOs should also be taken into account. The added value of the Bangladeshi organisation BRAC in Islamic countries like Afghanistan or Sudan forces us to reconsider our conventional strategies. It will also force us to challenge the perceptions of North and South, developed and developing. An exiting challenge for the future is how synergies will emerge within global civil society, with the increasingly important role that large NGOs from countries like Bangladesh, India en Brazil are playing outside of their own country.

Another variable which cannot be limited to one of Minister Koenders' categories is government domination. In India and Vietnam the extent of governmental control over civil society is completely different for each country. It requires a difference in strategies in fulfilling the roles of civil society. In the case of Vietnam, local civil society may need to collaborate to a certain extent with an authoritarian government as a risk management strategy, while in India more independence of civil society is possible in fulfilling its different roles. At the international level, civil society organisations engage with donor governments and international institutions to play the role of watchdog and presenting alternatives for repressive NGO legislation in addressing a much wider trend of civil society repression.

### Intervention strategies and complementarity

The constellation of the civil society roles that we wish to support are framed by our intervention strategies of direct poverty alleviation, civil society building and policy advocacy. If we take the example of economic development, we can see in general terms how to meet different stakeholders when focussing on each intervention strategy. Starting with direct poverty alleviation, where we strive for pro-poor economic progress, interaction with the private sector is essential. Business is the engine of economic growth and in our strategy of direct poverty alleviation, we need to explore with the private sector opportunities for pro-poor growth. The next step is then to talk about the distribution of the benefits of economic growth which entails influencing policies of governments by advocating for a redistribution of economic resources (taxes, natural resources, land, etc.) for the purpose of social protection and fair economic participation. Finally, economic growth will only have a sustainable impact on poverty if

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marginalised groups (i.e. women, indigenous communities, youth, dalits) can benefit from it. This requires a strong voice for these excluded groups to claim their economic rights with the private sector, governments, and international institutions. In order to promote sustainable economic growth, civil society organisations should be enabled to highlight adverse side-effects and demand action on the part of the judiciary, government and business to compensate and rectify unjust situations.

## **Conclusion**

In order to promote synergies in developmental change, the relevant stakeholders should start with joint analyses of the issues at hand, define the context specific challenges and opportunities and then identify the potential roles of the different stakeholders. On this basis, each stakeholder can choose its strategy and relate to other stakeholders according to the level of agreement on common interests.