

Civil engagement in donor countries

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Summary report

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ABSTRACT

As the role of INGOs in humanitarian action changes, how should they rethink their relationship with society? This was one of the key questions discussed during a KUNO session on civil engagement in donor countries. INGOs are increasingly aware that, as local organisations take on more responsibility for delivering aid on the ground, they need to rethink their own role in the humanitarian system. Their work is becoming less centred on direct aid delivery and more on managing funds, providing technical advice, sharing risks, advocating for change and connecting different actors. To be successful in this new role, INGOs need to rethink not just what they do, but also how they engage with the people that support their work in the donor countries.



What happened to public engagement?
Professor of Cultural Anthropology and Development Studies at Radboud University Sara Kinsbergen showed how, in the past, there was strong emphasis on engaging citizens and building public understanding and support for international development. There was even an international target that 2% of official development assistance should be spent on raising public awareness. Fair Trade shops, solidarity movements around Latin America and South Africa and other social initiatives flourished. In 1996, 89% of Dutch people said they supported maintaining or increasing the development cooperation budget.

In the late 2000s, the political environment became increasingly critical of development cooperation and started questioning public awareness work: why spend money on campaigns in the Netherlands when that money could instead be spent directly on projects elsewhere? Around 2010, the Dutch government dropped public awareness-raising from its development cooperation policy and funding declined sharply. A similar trend could be seen across Europe. As the funding dried up, so did the incentive to invest in citizen engagement. People were still asked to donate and continued to be kept informed about development organisations' activities, but they were no longer actively involved. In terms of accountability, NGOs had started, as professor Kinsbergen put it, looking "upwards" to international donors rather than "outwards" to society.

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Why the relationship matters
Kinsbergen challenged the assumption that the general public is simply turning away from INGOs. Perhaps, she suggested, INGOs should look in the mirror. As they became more focused on international donors and professionalisation, and citizen engagement became less central to their work, they may have gradually lost touch with the societies whose support ultimately helps to sustain their work. This matters for the changing role of INGOs. If they are becoming focused more on advocacy, connecting actors, influencing policy and defending humanitarian principles, their relationship with society becomes important. Kinsbergen's research shows that people are active and willing to organise around issues they care about, from climate action to local initiatives for global solidarity. But people struggle to connect when issues are remote, complex and overly institutionalised. For Kinsbergen, this creates an opportunity to rethink citizen engagement from the ground up.

The starting point is to ask what this relationship means for your own organisation: why does it matter, what do you want from it, and what role do you want people to play? Once that is clear, you can think about who you want to engage and how.

Looking beyond the usual constituencies

Sera Koolmees, speaking on behalf of Partos, the Dutch umbrella organisation for international cooperation, showed how this thinking can be put into practice. For many people, Koolmees noted, international cooperation can feel very far away. Rather than 'preaching to the choir' by relying on the usual NGO networks, Partos has successfully been looking for links with topics that people already care about, such as climate change, women's rights, democracy and human rights. Recognising that the old narrative of 'we help people far away' no longer has the right ring to it, Partos has broadened the range of people and organisations it engages with by reaching out to civil society organisations and movements that do not see themselves as part of the international development cooperation sector. For example, Partos jointly launched the campaign 'The Netherlands is not an island' in collaboration with the Royal Dutch Football Association (KNVB), the Dutch Federation of Trade Unions (FNV), the Council of Churches, Cordaid, Oxfam Novib, Solidaridad. By bringing together these unusual partners, the coalition aims to build broad support for stronger international cooperation.

Three different approaches

Three organisations then shared how they are approaching citizen engagement in their own work.

Dorcas

Dorcas runs around 43 thrift shops in the Netherlands, supported by about 4,000 volunteers. People donate things they no longer need, volunteers run the shops and others buy the goods. The money raised supports humanitarian and development programmes. The shops create a direct link between people in the Netherlands and the organisation's work elsewhere. They are not simply a way to raise funds; they are also places where people meet the organisation and become involved in its work. But Dorcas faces the challenge that many of its volunteers are older. Younger people often want something different: more flexibility, a clear sense of purpose and the option to contribute for a few hours rather than volunteer on a regular basis. This raises a question for INGOs: are they keeping pace with how people want to get involved?

Stichting Vluchteling

Stichting Vluchteling is investing in more direct contact. Its fundraising team recently brought face-to-face fundraising back in-house, instead of outsourcing it to commercial agencies. Within a year, the Dutch refugee foundation had recruited thousands of new donors. Face-to-face contact is slower and more labour-intensive than digital communication. But when algorithms filter messages through platforms with very different priorities, INGOs can struggle to have their messages about humanitarian issues reach people. Fundraisers also listen to what people think about refugees, humanitarian aid and the organisation itself, including views that can be difficult, but nevertheless valuable, to hear. Direct exchanges with people in the street give organisations a much more immediate and two-way connection with society than a website or social media campaign.

MSF Netherlands

MSF Netherlands focused much of its public communication on fundraising for a long time. But with humanitarian needs growing and political decisions increasingly affecting humanitarian action, MSF is now taking its relationship with the public one step further, towards advocacy and public mobilisation. The Red Line campaign is one example. In the context of Gaza, MSF and partners used the simple image of a red line to draw attention to the basic humanitarian principle that some lines, such as attacks on civilians and medical workers, should not be crossed. MSF had been hearing growing concern from supporters and the wider public. Rather than simply communicating its own position, it decided to turn that concern into public mobilisation to call on political leaders to take a stand.

What does this mean for INGOs?
The three examples are very different. Dorcas builds engagement through shops and volunteers. Stichting Vluchteling is investing in direct contact with individual supporters. MSF is moving beyond fundraising and communication towards public mobilisation and advocacy. None of these organisations treats the public simply as donors or an audience. In the Netherlands, growing polarisation and increased populist rhetoric can make it harder for people from different groups to understand one another, both within the country and outside of its borders. Throughout the discussion, participants stressed that NGOs need to take Dutch citizens more seriously. They need to develop messages that speak to people's concerns and interests, rather than simply explaining why they should donate.

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Building stronger relationships with the public helps INGOs become more firmly rooted in society and build 'local-to-local bridges', connecting people in donor countries and communities affected by humanitarian crises and human rights violations. This is particularly relevant for a country like the Netherlands, where the donor base remains relatively strong but is concentrated among older, wealthier groups and gradually shrinking as the population ages. There is an imperative to invest in engaging young people, not just as potential donors, but as ambassadors for international solidarity. This calls for more than adapting communications or finding new ways to raise funds.

INGOs need to think more fundamentally about what their relationship with society means for their own organisation, why it matters and what role they want people to play. In a rapidly changing world, where international relations are shifting and new connections and divisions are emerging between people, these questions are becoming increasingly important. The next step is to turn this thinking into practice and find meaningful ways to involve people in the work they do.

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