Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands

Executive summary Strengthening Civil Society Theory of Change

Supporting civil society's political role

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Strengthening Civil Society Theory of Change

Civil society strengthening in perspective
The main aim of the civil society strengthening policy framework (CSS) is to contribute to sustainable inclusive development for all and fight against poverty and injustice by promoting civil society's political role. This presents a shift in focus from aid aimed directly at combating poverty through service delivery to aid aimed at tackling the root causes of poverty and (gender)inequality through lobby and advocacy. This focus on civil society's political role stems from a 'Social Transformative' approach to development which states that poverty, inequality and exclusion are caused by power asymmetries and that development is a complex, nonlinear and political process aimed at changing power relations.

Civil society and development
Civil society support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is based on the principle that a diverse and pluralist civil society is both goal in itself and a means to an end as it is crucial for sustainable and inclusive development, good governance and responsible citizenship. Civil society is defined here as the space between government, the market (businesses) and private life (family and friends) where citizens can organise themselves to pursue goals not directly related to personal or financial gain, which concern a wider group of people and are not necessarily taken care of by government. Civil societies consist of both tangible aspects such as Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), but also of less tangible aspects such as norms and values on citizenship, social capital, and the public sphere. In terms of norms and values, the MFA positions its civil society strengthening efforts in a human rights frame and links this to the attainment of the SDGs. In its concrete financial support the MFA mainly employs an organisational perspective on civil society. This doesn't mean that individuals don't play a specific role in increasing or decreasing space for civil society. Civil society is depicted as a concept which is populated by all sorts of formal and informal CSOs like professional NGOs, associations based on kinship, faith based groups, social movements, community-based organisations, labour unions, professional associations. Such a broad definition of CSOs is necessary because as a donor the MFA mostly relates to formal CSOs, it is therefore easy to lose sight of all the other organisational forms which make up civil societies, especially in non-Western societies. While it is difficult for the MFA to relate to these informal CSOs, it can stimulate others to relate to them.

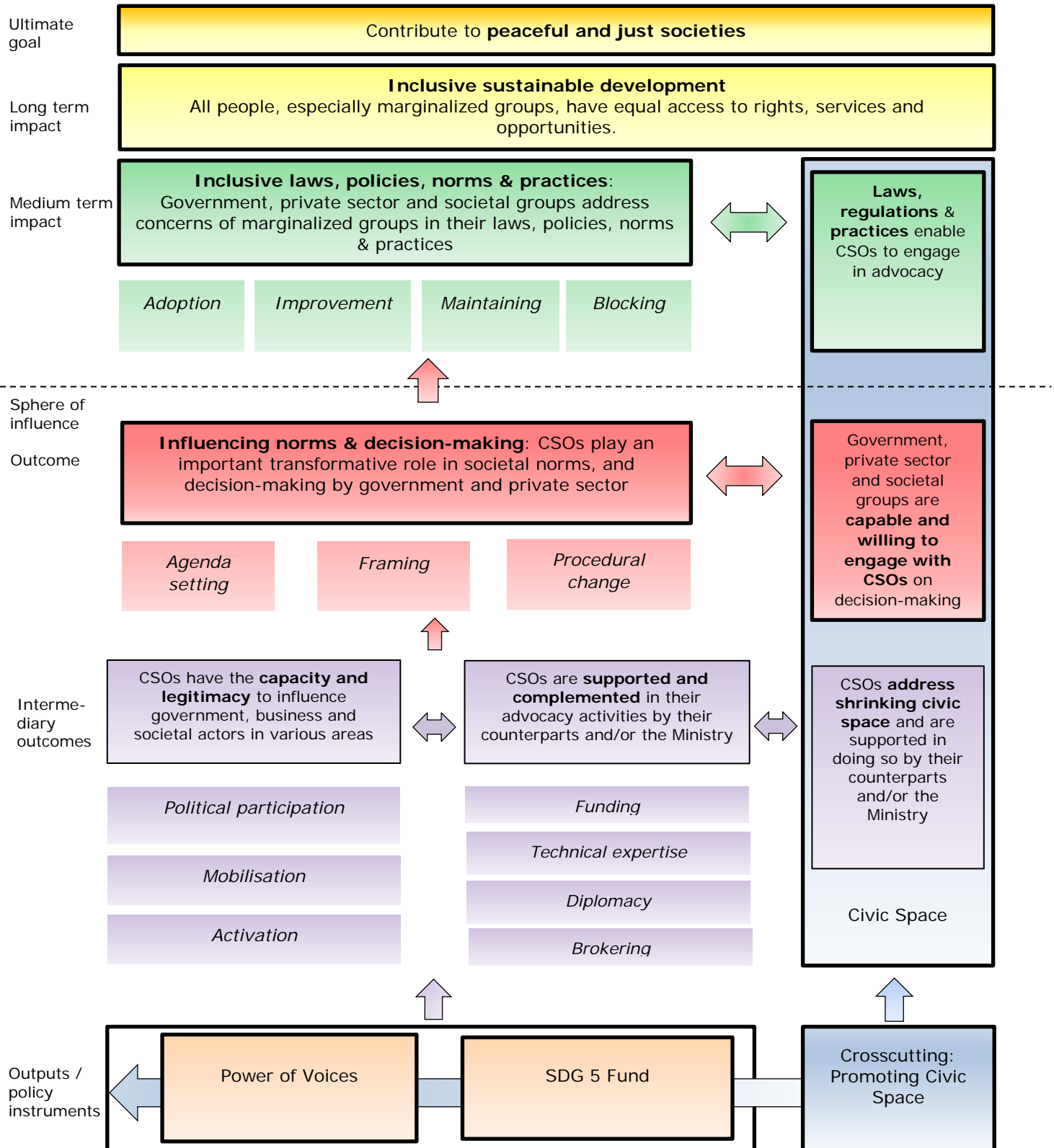*Civil society's political role as focus of CSS*
CSS focusses on promoting the political role of CSOs. Instead of combating poverty through service delivery, CSS aims for tackling the root causes of poverty and inequality through lobby and advocacy. This focus on the political role of CSOs is both urgent and timely as there is a global trend of shrinking civic space and limited international funding for this role. At the same time, CSOs around the world have steadily grown stronger over the past decade. Organisations which previously focused exclusively on providing services to the poor are increasingly making themselves heard in their own country and internationally to expose structural injustices. The issues they raise, such as inequality, environmental problems and extreme poverty, are increasingly interconnected both here and there. Therefore, it is important to support the political role of CSOs on all different governance levels, from local to global.

Rationale
The CSS framework consists of two sets of policy instruments grouped under 'Power of Voices' and 'SDG 5 Fund' (see figure and table below). The main pathway of change, which consist of several steps, applies to all these instruments. First of all, CSOs need the right capacities to be able to implement strong advocacy strategies, therefore, mutual capacity strengthening of CSOs in this area is one of the main underlying strategies of the CSS framework. With these strengthened capacities, CSOs can implement more effective advocacy strategies which will start to have an impact in the sense of setting agenda's, influencing public discourse or gaining a seat at the table. This should pave the way to positive changes in laws, policies and norms of state actors, societal actors or businesses, for those that live in poverty or are being marginalized in another way. Advocacy doesn't stop here, because actual implementation or application of these laws, policies, norms and practices is the ultimate goal. This will in the end ensure that they have a real impact on improving people's lives. Finally, civic space is an important precondition for all these steps towards structural change. The figure below depicts this rationale in a flow-chart, followed by a table with the underlying assumptions and policy instruments. Although it is a straightforward visualisation, it is important to stress the

complex and erratic nature of advocacy processes, meaning that they will usually go back on forth between these different steps depending on contextual changes.

Civil Society Strengthening ToC Flowchart

Ultimate goal	Contribute to **peaceful and just societies**
Long term impact	**Inclusive sustainable development** — All people, especially marginalized groups, have equal access to rights, services and opportunities.
Medium term impact	**Inclusive laws, policies, norms & practices**: Government, private sector and societal groups address concerns of marginalized groups in their laws, policies, norms & practices — Adoption / Improvement / Maintaining / Blocking — **Laws, regulations & practices** enable CSOs to engage in advocacy
Sphere of influence / Outcome	**Influencing norms & decision-making**: CSOs play an important transformative role in societal norms, and decision-making by government and private sector — Agenda setting / Framing / Procedural change — Government, private sector and societal groups are **capable and willing to engage with CSOs** on decision-making
Interme-diary outcomes	CSOs have the **capacity and legitimacy** to influence government, business and societal actors in various areas — Political participation / Mobilisation / Activation — CSOs are **supported and complemented** in their advocacy activities by their counterparts and/or the Ministry — Funding / Technical expertise / Diplomacy / Brokering — CSOs **address shrinking civic space** and are supported in doing so by their counterparts and/or the Ministry — Civic Space
Outputs / policy instruments	Power of Voices — SDG 5 Fund — Crosscutting: Promoting Civic Space

Assumptions underlying Civil Society Strengthening

	Core assumptions	
On development	- Poverty, (gender)inequality and exclusion are caused by power asymmetries - Development is a nonlinear political process aimed at changing power relations - Changing power relations often needs and/or breeds friction and conflict - Local ownership of development processes is crucial for inclusiveness, effectiveness and sustainability of development efforts	

On civil society's role	- CSOs play a crucial role in changing power relations
	- CSOs perform 4 types of political roles to change power relations:
	    o Educational (internal & external)
	    o Communicative (linking state & society)
	    o Representational (voice & resistance)
	    o Cooperative (subsidiarity & coordination)
	- Different roles require different organisational forms (i.e. formal / informal), capacities and different forms of legitimacy
	- When pressured, informed and/or persuaded by CSOs, states, companies and societal actors change their laws, policies and/or norms, and their practices to be more sustainable, equitable and inclusive
	- Assumption/precondition: CSOs need civic space to perform political roles
	- Precondition: CSOs need to be locally rooted, strong, legitimate and autonomous to perform political roles	

On donor support	- External aid by the Ministry and (mainly Northern) CSOs can strengthen CSOs in low-income, lower-middle income and higher-middle income countries in their political roles through mutual capacity strengthening and assistance in advocacy processes, including offering protection in hostile environments and lobbying for improved civic space - CSOs are actors in their own right and not merely instrumental channels for aid delivery - Promoting civil society's political roles needs a long-term, context-specific approach, which incorporates mutual learning, trust and local ownership - Precondition: The design of the aid chain does not interfere with the aspects mentioned in the previous point	
Policy instruments	*Power of Voices*	*SDG 5 Fund*
	- Power of Voices partnerships - Voice - Accountability Fund	- Leading from the South - Power of Women - Women, Peace and Security - SRHR Partnership Fund

Innovative approach of CSS

When promoting civil society's political role, traditional top-down, logical framework approaches are less suitable due to the complex and erratic nature of political processes. A more flexible and context-specific approach is needed, ensuring local ownership, embeddedness and local legitimacy. Donors have often been criticised of doing the opposite, therefore the CSS framework introduced several innovations to overcome this criticism. First of all, the focus on promoting civil society's political role is an innovation in itself as not many donors support this role due to the greater risks. It involves promoting the advocacy capacity of CSOs and raising their voice both in their own countries and beyond. A second innovation is the choice to work with theories of change which can be adapted to different contexts and can be updated based on contextual changes and emerging insights. This also has consequences for planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning systems.

Besides these general innovations the policy instruments in Power of Voices and the SDG 5 Fund add specific approaches. To overcome the critique of unequal donor-recipient relations, the *Power of Voices partnerships,* the *SRHR partnership fund, Power of Women,* and the *Women, Peace and Security* programme go beyond a merely contractual relation between CSO consortia and the Ministry by working in partnership with shared goals and responsibilities.

With the *Voice* programme the Ministry recognises that regular aid programmes have often failed to reach the most marginalised and discriminated groups. It has therefore set up a fund (*Voice*) to reach these hard to reach groups.

With the *Accountability Fund* the Ministry recognises that many Southern CSOs have grown stronger and therefore can be supported directly through our embassies.

In the *Leading from the South* programme, four Southern regional women's funds are supported directly, so they can strengthen the international women's rights movement in the global South.

Finally, the Ministry is actively involved in monitoring and protecting civic space through its embassies, support to CIVICUS and ICNL, and through participation in international initiatives.

Political roles of CSOs
To understand how CSOs contribute to changing power relations for promoting inclusive development and (gender)equality, it is important to look at the various political roles they can play. CSOs can perform four interrelated political roles, namely an educational role, a communicative role, a representational role and a cooperative role. These roles are often seen as an indispensable feature of democracy and as a driver of good governance, which explains why a vibrant and critical civil society is considered a goal in itself. In their educational role, CSOs are usually portrayed as schools of democracy where citizens come together and learn about democratic norms, values and practices. Furthermore, CSOs can provide various social actors with information and educate them about their rights and duties. In their communicative role CSOs provide communication channels between state and society. In practice CSOs often foster strong links with the state, society, knowledge institutes and/or businesses. In their representational role CSOs enable citizens to monitor government and businesses and defend their rights and interests, acting as a countervailing power. This can enhance participation of marginalised groups and can also promote transparency and accountability of various types of actors. Finally, CSOs can perform a cooperative role by working together with states, companies or societal groups. In this role they can act as alternative modes of governance by providing basic services, or they can act as brokers in policy debates, linking various types of actors and generating expert knowledge through their networks.

Civic Space
An important precondition for performing political roles is that CSOs have the space to do so. Civic space is defined as the space that CSOs have to perform their political roles and implement their advocacy strategies. This can relate to individual citizens, to the formation and functioning of CSOs, but also to less tangible aspects such as the functioning of the public sphere and the formation and distribution of norms, values, social capital and trust in a society. The topic of civic space is urgent as there is a worldwide trend of shrinking civic space. Many countries are curtailing CSO activity and civic participation. CIVICUS points to several important aspects of this trend, such as exclusive economic systems, fake and flawed elections, weakening multilateralism and the growing power of anti-rights groups.[1] As these are very different but still connected issues, understanding what civic space is and how it affects CSOs is key for countering this trend.

Various interpretations of what civic space entails can be found. First, sociological studies look at the impact of national contextual factors on civil society related aspects such as the (financial) size of the non-profit sector, CSO membership and volunteering. They point out various contextual variables which are important for civil society development, including religiosity, economic development and the rule of law. A positive finding is that low economic development and a low rule of law do not necessarily coincide with a weak civil society, but seem to change its nature from formal to informal. Second, political opportunity structure theory provides a model for understanding the threats and opportunities in the political system for social action. It shows that different CSOs have different opportunities and challenges in restrictive environments. Because states and societies are such complex and multi-layered phenomena, they usually have multiple entry-points, even in restrictive contexts. Third, practitioner oriented literature captures civic space in indexes for country comparisons, signalling global trends and organising agenda's for action. These indexes show the extent of the problem of shrinking civic space and put it on the (international) agenda. The CIVICUS civic space monitor is a prominent example of this.

CSO Advocacy
The political roles of CSOs provide the building blocks for the more concrete advocacy strategies of CSOs. Through advocacy, CSOs can influence decision makers, strengthen the voice of marginalised groups, and ultimately challenge the unequal power relations which perpetuate poverty and exclusion. Advocacy is defined as the process of influencing actors to promote political, social and economic change on behalf of a collective interest. Advocacy processes can be divided in three overlapping and

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[1] Source: CIVICUS state of civil society report 2019

non-linear phases. First, the activation phase concerns the recruitment and political activation of individual citizens. Second, the mobilization phase refers to the process of aggregation and sense-making. In this phase, CSOs act as vehicles for translating individual concerns into collective action by mobilising resources and support, and by framing the message for communication in the public sphere. Finally, in the participation phase the mobilised resources and framed messages are translated into action in the form of a broad range of advocacy strategies.

Three general advocacy targets can be identified, namely state actors, market actors and societal actors. Within CSS, these actors can be targeted with advocacy messages on a range of issues related to inclusive and sustainable development, for instance on women's rights, improved tax systems or the sustainable use of natural resources. Five cumulative types of advocacy claims are distinguished, namely agenda setting, discursive change, procedural change, policy change and behaviour change. Agenda setting is about awareness raising and getting your issues on the political agenda. Discursive change refers to the process of framing, and means that advocacy targets start adopting your terminology, rhetoric and framing of an issue. Procedural change refers to influence on institutional procedures, for instance by changing the way in which decisions are being made, by opening up new spaces for dialogue or by gaining a seat at the table. While law, policy or norm change can mean a great victory, this does not always translate into actual changes. The highest attainable form of impact is therefore behavioural change of state, market and/or societal actors.

CSO advocacy capacity
CSOs need the right capacities for implementing successful advocacy strategies which help raise the voice of marginalised and discriminated groups and contribute to improving their lives. Strengthening the advocacy capacity of CSOs is therefore CSS's main policy instrument. It is defined as a process which involves the transfer or mutual exchange of certain skills, ideas, capabilities or resources to attain development goals or social justice. Capacity strengthening trajectories should adhere to the following principles, namely: to address power relations, promote national ownership, adapt to local conditions, build on existing capacities, go beyond training individual skills and take a long-term, flexible and comprehensive approach. Together, these three elements (mutual exchange, social justice, principles) summarize capacity strengthening as envisaged in this ToC.

It is important to keep in mind that capacity strengthening trajectories should not promote a unidimensional organisational model, because different democratic roles and advocacy strategies require different organisational forms, different capacities and different forms of legitimacy. Not all organisations need to become a professional NGOs, for certain political roles and advocacy strategies it is even better to have informal organisations like CBOs or loosely organised networks like social movements. This is the case because different types of CSOs occupy niches, making them better suited for certain roles and strategies over others. In terms of capacity strengthening this means tailoring capacity strengthening trajectories to specific organisational setups and specific political roles rather than promoting a standard set of capabilities. Furthermore, to overcome the limitations of specialisation, these trajectories should include a reflection on how various types of CSOs complement each other and how cooperation between them can be stimulated.

Learning and adaptation
As CSS uses a ToC approach, learning and adaptation form an important part of the programme. CSS aims to build on and extend the learning approach which was initiated under the previous Dialogue and Dissent policy framework. This approach included annual linking and learning sessions with CSO partners, field visits, shared meetings, lunch seminars, Mid Term Reviews, IOB research on partnership, and a research programme with NWO-WOTRO and INCLUDE on the assumptions underlying the Dialogue & Dissent ToC. All these trajectories delivered valuable input for both the implementation of the ongoing Dialogue & Dissent framework, as well as for the design of the new CSS framework. Especially the NWO/INCLUDE research programme added an extra layer of understanding on the complexities involved in supporting civil society's political role.[2] The most important lessons coming from all these learning processes, and which have been integrated in the CSS policy framework, are: to strengthen 'Southern' leadership throughout the programme; to have a stronger focus on civic space; to integrate gender equality right at the start of the programme; to better manage expectations in the partnership relation between the Ministry and CSOs and to include monitoring, evaluation and learning more structurally.

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[2] For information on this research programme and the research reports see:
https://includeplatform.net/theme/new-roles-for-csos-for-inclusive-development/