



Urgent appeal to Minister Klever and the House of Representatives: A new policy framework for a stronger civil society

November
2024

A strong civil society is important for foreign trade and development cooperation:

1

CSOs are closely linked to local communities. They understand local needs like no other and offer tailor-made solutions. This allows them to tackle major global challenges effectively, especially in times of crisis. Investing in a strong civil society results in a well-functioning democracy. A strong civil society results in better social, economic, cultural and political conditions for all people. A dignified and successful existence for all.

2

A strong civil society addresses government leaders on decisions and asks critical questions. This ensures a society with more stability, less poverty and less inequality. This is in everyone's interest, including the interests of Dutch companies. Civil society organisations call for more transparency, anti-corruption measures, fair distribution of resources, political involvement and decision-making that includes citizens.

3

A strong civil society ensures constructive cooperation between government, private sector and society. It is a proven way to solve complex problems. Food security, fair distribution of natural resources, access to healthcare, equal opportunities and stable institutions require a variety of perspectives, capacity, resources and knowledge to find effective solutions.

5

Cooperation with civil society organisations benefits the reputation of the Dutch government. This confirms that the Netherlands is a champion of human rights and a reliable trading partner. Strong diplomacy strengthens the Netherlands' position on the world stage and facilitates multilateral negotiations.

RESULTS OF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Strategic partnerships have impact in different ways, as demonstrated in the 2023-2024 mid-term external evaluation. To illustrate this, we present in this document some results of individual programmes. We do not provide a comprehensive overview of all results of the programmes funded by the Strengthening Civil Society policy framework.

TRADE

- Youth-led organisations in East and West Africa received support to monitor whether governments and companies comply with agreements on working conditions and measures to protect the environment. In this way, they increased transparency and made people aware of trade practices. They called their governments to account so that they comply with the agreements made by the *African Continental Free Trade Area*.
- In the dialogue around palm oil between producing countries and the Netherlands, civil society organisations play an important role. They engaged Indonesia and Malaysia to raise awareness of the concerns surrounding the introduction of EU legislation on deforestation-free products. This positively impacts constructive, political engagement in local communities and strengthens international trade relations.
- More than 18,165 coffee farmers have been trained by civil society organisations in Uganda to increase transparency in the value chain using digital tools. Through cooperatives, farmers can now track information on payments more quickly, accurately and securely. This ensures compliance with current regulations that international business must adhere to, including Dutch companies.
- Within 1 year, 210,196 people in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa enjoyed better working conditions thanks to new collective bargaining agreements. Dutch brands working with these factories have a stake in this as better working conditions also lead to a better brand reputation and increased consumer confidence. It is also more in line with laws and regulations and less likely to cause supply chain disruptions caused by labour disputes.
- Civil society organisations have convinced the Netherlands and some other EU countries to withdraw from the *Energy Charter Treaty*. This treaty works to the advantage of fossil fuel investors and restricts governments from pursuing sustainable energy policies. Moreover, this treaty brought expansion to low- and middle-income countries to a halt. Informative workshops and financial support to organisations in countries such as Indonesia, Morocco, Tanzania and Togo enabled them to campaign more robustly against the *Energy Charter Treaty*.

FOOD SAFETY, WATER MANAGEMENT AND CLIMATE

- In Uganda and Ethiopia, farmers with disabilities are involved in local production and marketing. Self-established organisations work with local governments to implement inclusive food security policies.
- Women and young people in Senegal, Burkina Faso and Nigeria are taking climate resilience initiatives such as beekeeping, recycling waste, planting trees and small-scale irrigation projects. In this way, they are improving local food security and also creating new economic opportunities for vulnerable groups.
- In Mali, civil society organisations have ensured that the fundamental right to water and food is included in Mali's new constitution. This ensures sustainable government policies in promoting food security and better water supply infrastructure, with a focus on child welfare and public-private partnerships.
- Local water committees in seven different countries in Africa and Asia are supported to raise the lack of safe drinking water and sanitation in their communities with their regional and national governments. With success, as government agencies signed agreements promising to invest in water and sanitation facilities. For a longer term than just the duration of this programme.
- Thanks to partnerships with indigenous people and local communities in the tropical rainforests of 11 countries in Southeast Asia, South America and Africa, more than 34 million hectares of forest are now under sustainable management. This contributes to the conservation of biodiversity and a sustainable Dutch supply chain.

HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS

- In 26 countries, more than 1,500 women's rights organisations and more than 5,000 women's rights advocates have received support to advocate for better laws, policies and a shift in norms around gender-based violence and a fair economy. The impact of this support is widely visible, from better legal protection for women to better and affordable access to healthcare, access to water, land and financial services.
- In Kisumu in Kenya, health centres are now accessible to young people and people with physical and mental disabilities. In Zambia, healthcare staff are being trained in sign language so they can provide better care to those who need it.
- The first and only sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) network has been established in the Middle East and North Africa. Young activists and organisations gain access to and share key knowledge, skills and resources in order to address reproductive health, family planning and put issues such as gender-based violence on the map so that people can make the right decision about their bodies, health and future.
- To achieve gender equality within a religious framework, and to show that human rights and religion do not bite each other, six religious organisations in Egypt, Kenya, Palestine and South Sudan have launched publications on women's rights in Christianity and the Islam. They also created a safe environment for having conversations on topics such as sexual and gender-based violence and reproductive health and rights.
- In Myanmar, where a civil war is raging, a local network in seven regions supported more than 5,288 LGBTQI+-individuals. People from the LGBTQI+ community are often persecuted and face violence. Civil society organisations play a crucial role in meeting their specific needs.

SECURITY, THE LAW AND POLITICAL STABILITY

- In South Sudan, a partnership supported women seeking to assume leadership positions in their communities. This resulted in more involvement of women in decision-making in their communities. It also led to the appointment of women as judges in local courts, and more legislation against gender-based violence. Reports are now being filed more frequently by victims of gender-based violence.
- Establishing the *Access to Justice Network* and mediating 317 conflicts in Afghanistan increased confidence in the informal functioning of the justice system. Community conversations and mediation enabled vulnerable groups to engage directly with authorities, so that policies were made at the provincial level and conflicts were effectively resolved.
- In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the *Lobby & Advocacy* initiative is having a positive impact on human rights. The *United Nations Universal Periodic Review* (UPR) assesses the human rights situation every four years. This initiative amplified the voices of more than 120 civil society organisations, influencing the decision-making of both the United Nations and the Congolese government.
- In Nigeria, religious leaders and women of different faiths worked together for better interfaith understanding and dialogue. The aim was to reduce discrimination, social exclusion and violent extremism. This contributed to security and stability in the region.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF A SHRINKING CIVIL SOCIETY

A strong civil society is vital for democracy and human rights. It creates space for dialogue, public policies are monitored and freedom of expression is respected. Both individual citizens and groups in society can safely stand up for their rights, encourage female leadership, fight inequality, influence public policy and increase social cohesion. This ensures greater well-being and prosperity in societies and reduces the risk of armed conflict. In addition, more space for civil society means that a country or region becomes more economically stable, because responsible entrepreneurship and sustainable development are encouraged. The supply of products is secured, which is in the interest of, among others, the Dutch agricultural sector. By linking local challenges to global policies, CSOs contribute to stable, inclusive and prosperous societies. This benefits not only the local population, but certainly also the international business community.

In many countries around the world, the space for civil society is shrinking. That is why it is so important to maintain our support precisely now. If we do not, authoritarian leaders gain more power. This creates unstable societies, with social unrest in which democracy is undermined. Corruption increases and economic power monopolises, only increasing the risks and costs for Dutch companies operating in these conditions. When civil society shrinks, movements standing up for political and civil rights are more likely to be suppressed. This increases the risk of authoritarianism, and cooperation with other authoritarian regimes such as Russia. We see this, for example, in areas around the Sahel, where there is less and less Western influence. Space for civil society is a prerequisite for continuing to resist anti-democratic influences and contributes to the realisation of human rights, international security, a fair rule of law and global stability.

Urgent call to Minister Klever and the House of Representatives: A new policy framework for a stronger civil society

We make an urgent appeal to Minister Klever and the House of Representatives to draft a new policy framework that strengthens civil society. We urge them to start working on this as soon as possible, because...

TRADE

Civil society organisations make people around the world aware of the impact of trade. They show the barriers people experience, and campaign to change trade policies, for better working conditions and environmental protection. This results in a predictable situation for business with legal certainty in trade and export relations. By adhering to sustainability principles, companies (such as clothing brands) can make their entire supply chain more sustainable, improve their reputation and serve consumers who value corporate social responsibility and care for the environment.

FOOD SAFETY, WATER MANAGEMENT AND CLIMATE

Civil society organisations play an important role in improving food security locally, nationally and internationally. They encourage public participation in decision-making, more sustainable use of natural resources and local livelihoods. When organisations work together to improve policies and distribute budgets according to needs, it leads to more sustainable economic development. And that is one of the key priorities of the Dutch government. Whether it is food, clean drinking water or combating deforestation - once legislation is in place, opportunities arise for the private sector.

HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Civil society organisations play an important role in improving healthcare. They strive to ensure access to healthcare for all who need it, leading, for example, to safer childbirth and prevention of disease. Organisations led by young people, women and other vulnerable groups understand the challenges of these communities better than anyone and ensure that their voices are heard more clearly. By supporting them, access to healthcare improves and human rights are ensured even for the most vulnerable groups. This enables girls, women, LGBTQI+ persons and any other individual to participate fully in society and live healthy and safe lives in freedom.

SECURITY, AN EASTERN LAW AND STABILITY

Civil society organisations, communities, religious leaders, women and youth - they all contribute to peace and stability by engaging in dialogue within their societies. Civil society organisations build trust and resolve conflict. Without social cohesion, communities fall prey to extremist ideas and the likelihood of conflict grows. People flee due to hopelessness and lack of prospects. A stable and safe environment is in everyone's interest and increases the likelihood of (international) trade thanks to an attractive investment climate.