



NAVIGATING MESSINESS

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A Summit Report on Eight Emerging
Topics from the Strategic Partnership
Citizen Agency Consortium Evaluations



NAVIGATING MESSINESS

ACRONYMS

5C	Five capabilities framework
CA	Capacity assessment
CAG	Citizen Agency
CD	Capacity development
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DMEL	Design, Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning
DW4W	Thematic program Decent Work for Women
ERG	External Reference Group
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GIE	Thematic program Green and Inclusive Energy
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
L&A	Lobby and Advocacy
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MAI	Multi-actor Initiative
MFA	The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MSP	Multi-stakeholder Process
NA	Narrative Assessment
OC	Thematic program Open Up Contracting
OH	Outcome Harvesting
SD4All	Thematic program Sustainable Diets for All
SP CAC	Strategic Partnership Citizen Agency Consortium
ToC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference

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INTRODUCTION

The Strategic Partnership Citizen Agency Consortium (SP CAC) consists of Hivos, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and Article 19. Together, we implement a 5-year program (2016-2020) with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) under the Dialogue and Dissent framework. The program focuses on strengthening the lobby and advocacy capacities of civil society partner organizations, and influencing the policies and practices of governments and private actors around four thematic program areas:

- Sustainable Diets for All (SD4All)
- Green and Inclusive Energy (GIE)
- Open Up Contracting (OC)
- Decent Work for Women (DW4W)

The three organizations are represented in the SP CAC's Steering Committee (SC), the consortium's highest governance structure. For the implementation, Article 19 staff supports the Open Up Contracting program, and IIED staff support the Sustainable Diets for All and Green and Inclusive Energy programs. Baseline studies were conducted for all four thematic programs in 2016.

Within the consortium-wide Theory of Change (ToC), each thematic program is guided by its own ToC. Two thematic programs work with further contextualized ToCs at country level. To monitor implementation, the Citizen Agency Consortium has used outcome harvesting (OH) and narrative assessment (NA) for lobby and advocacy (L&A) results, and capacity self-assessments for advocacy



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capacities and capacity development (CD). The findings from the monitoring were used in partner (country) meetings, at the program level for periodic reflection and learning on progress and possible adaptation of their ToC, and for annual planning.

The end evaluation

In preparation for the end evaluation, a three-person External Reference Group (ERG) was established in 2017. The ERG members possess expertise in the areas of evaluation methodologies and quality criteria, advocacy monitoring & evaluation (M&E) and capacity development M&E. A Terms of Reference for the end evaluation was approved in July 2019 by the SP CAC SC and the MFA. The end evaluation aimed to assess the effectiveness, relevance, sustainability and efficiency of

the SP CAC, while striking a balance between learning and accountability purposes. Furthermore, two separate studies accompany this end evaluation: a study on the use of Theory of Change in advocacy, and a reflection paper on the evaluation methodology and choices made. All in all, a number of reports and learning events have been produced and organized:

- Four thematic evaluation reports with thirteen separate case study reports (the Green and Inclusive Energy program case studies are incorporated in the main report)
- One internal organization assessment report
- One policy brief on ‘The Hidden Life of Theories of Change’
- One reflection paper on the evaluation methodology (to follow before end of 2020)

- Almost fifteen learning and validation events with partners and staff plus a two-day synthesis event organized around eight learning topics.

In addition, a survey on outcome harvesting was conducted with staff who worked with the methodology, together with eight other strategic partnerships, supported under the Dialogue and Dissent framework.

HOW TO READ THIS SUMMIT REPORT

This report has been written by the two managers of the SP CAC end evaluation. It does not aim to be a meta summary of findings from the evaluation reports of the SP CAC’s end evaluation¹, but instead presents featured insights around eight topics emerging from

them. The eight topics are important to consider for current and future programs, and together they formed the agenda for the final synthesis event.

The evaluation findings do form the evidence base on which those insights are grounded: noteworthy lessons, insights or striking outliers, and key dilemmas and polarities singled out for each topic draw from this rich soil. When statements originate from the synthesis event, they are indicated as such. The eight topics form the main chapters of this report. They are: 1) Navigating messiness; 2) M&E and Learning; 3) L&A strategies; 4) Capacity Development and Assessment; 5) Partnership; 6) Citizen Agency; 7) Local ownership, and 8) Efficiency. Throughout the report, where reference is made to ‘we’, it refers to the SP CAC.

2. Although baseline studies were carried out in 2016, these contributed above all to a better understanding of the program context, but were not useful for the end evaluation. And it is doubtful whether they could have been, given the evolving character of the program. The CAC had not opted for a mid-term evaluation.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The responsibility for managing the CAC end evaluation was delegated to the two senior Design, Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning (DMEL) staff in the CAC project team. Early in the program, the first steps in the evaluation included contracting the external reference group². In late 2018-early 2019, preparations for the external end evaluation got underway. It was decided then that the evaluation should serve both an accountability purpose and a learning purpose. To maximize the learning potential and usefulness for the programs, the four global program managers were asked to propose possible learning topics for case studies.

The overall ToR provided for a four-phase evaluation process:

1. A substantiation of the portfolio of outcomes, harvested by the program since the beginning of 2017, to increase the credibility of the monitoring data, as an input for the evaluation teams;
2. Four parallel thematic evaluations, one of each thematic program;
3. A comparative study of the CAC organizational & partnership aspects that might have influenced the program, derived from the four thematic reports;
4. A synthesis exercise bringing together the findings from the different studies.

The evaluation questions in the ToR provided an operationalization of the evaluation criteria effectiveness,

relevance, sustainability and efficiency. The ToR further specified that the thematic evaluations should balance an overall analysis of each thematic program with a number of in-depth case studies. Starting from a description of changes – in agendas, policies and practices of targeted social actors and in the L&A capacities of participating organizations – the thematic evaluations should compare these changes with the program objectives. They should also assess inclusiveness and potential effects on climate change, as well as the relevance of these changes in the context of the program countries. Furthermore, the evaluations should assess the contribution of the programs to the observed changes, assess the sustainability of these changes, and finally make an attempt to analyze aspects of efficiency.

3. In 2017, an earlier and more limited substantiation exercise was commissioned to the two OH experts who accompanied the OH monitoring process.

The OH substantiation exercise was commissioned to three independent evaluators with OH expertise. They had not been involved in the OH monitoring³. The four program managers were asked to select a purposive sample of harvested outcomes, based on their importance for the program and/or need for validation. The two substantiation exercises together (2017 and 2019) covered 186 outcomes (i.e. 44 % of the total outcomes harvested until mid-2019).

In early August, we launched an international call for proposals. Seventeen different teams presented proposals for one or more thematic evaluations. The evaluation managers performed a selection – based on the evaluation and thematic expertise of the teams and the quality of the proposals – which the CAC Project Team confirmed. Four evaluation teams were finally contracted in November-December.

The inception period allowed the contracted teams to familiarize themselves with the programs. In their draft inception reports, they (further) elaborated their proposed approaches towards answering the evaluation questions and their sample selections of country/case studies. These were discussed with project teams and assessed by evaluation managers and the ERG. They were finalized and approved in December-January 2020.

The fieldwork was conducted in the first semester of 2020. Field visits to the Philippines, Indonesia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Kenya, Uganda and Bolivia took place. Nevertheless, three of four evaluations were (partly) affected by Covid-19 and alternative arrangements were made for part of their data collection.

All evaluations triangulated sources of information, combining the study of documents with interviews, narrative assessments, FGDs and participant observation. Program monitoring data served as inputs for the evaluation teams, especially the harvested (substantiated) outcomes. The evaluation teams applied specific causal analysis on a

sample of these harvested outcomes (using contribution analysis or exploring rival explanations). For their analyses of capacity development, the evaluators depended more on their own data collection, as monitoring data proved less robust. For their efficiency analyses, the teams used the framework that the Efficiency Lab developed.

The thematic evaluations produced 17 country/case study reports and four overall thematic reports. The draft country/case study reports were presented to staff and partners for comments and validation. The DMEL and ERG also assessed the draft overall thematic reports. The final reports were produced taking the comments into consideration.

The original evaluation plan had included the hosting of thematic learning events with staff and partners and the evaluators in the various regions. Due to Covid-19, these plans had to be changed and a number of online learning events were organized instead.

The comparative study (phase three of the evaluation) was commissioned to a team of two, consisting of the team leader of one of the thematic evaluations and an organization expert not connected to the evaluation or the program. This was essentially a secondary study of the four thematic evaluation reports. A draft of their report was discussed with the CAC project team and members of the Steering Committee also reviewed and commented on it.

The objective of the final synthesis exercise was to gather findings from the bottom-up, from the four thematic programs relevant to the overall level of the Strategic Partnership Citizen Agency Consortium. For the final synthesis exercise and with advice from the ERG, the DMEL proposed a list of eight topics to the project team. This list formed the backbone of a two-day online learning event (on 7-8 September) and it also forms the outline of this report.

01

NAVIGATING MESSINESS – BRINGING ABOUT CHANGE UNDER COMPLEX CONDITIONS

To contribute to social change, development organizations, including the ones associated with the Strategic Partnership Citizen Agency Consortium, increasingly have to navigate a complex landscape. Complex because they: i) encounter multiple actors that can be foes, allies, or changelings that switch sides; ii) work in partnerships that can be structural, conjunctural, imposed or evolved, with young disruptors or established organizations; and iii) aim to achieve goals that can encompass multiple intervention levels, sectors and regions. Although, while complexity is increasingly recognized as influencing choices and options for approaches and tools, there is still little information about what works and how, why, when and for whom.

In this chapter, we as the SP CAC, share some highlights around the lessons learned, including the obstacles that we have encountered over the five-year period of the SP CAC in bringing about change in complex conditions.

Timespans One important insight is that the SP CAC represents a time-bound intervention in complex systems that themselves are ever-evolving. This insight has far-reaching implications as it comes with a number of difficult choices. When one has to produce results in a relatively short timeframe, it is not easy to invest time in deeper analysis beyond the project. One example is the notion that to achieve sustainability, advocacy capacity development (CD) should extend beyond the confines of the project and embed capacities into the wider structures and functions of civil society. Also, the thematic programs of the SP CAC focused on the CD of CSOs with little attention for testing assumptions about,

among others, their role in the wider society. Tensions resulting from a project time horizon is something that we need to look at more systematically when starting new initiatives.

Flexible and agile steering We have learned that the ability to steer flexibly and agilely is central to navigating messiness. To make that possible, we have used a number of instruments, such as the theory of change approach and outcome harvesting, albeit not yet in a coherent way across the four thematic programs. We have also tried rolling baselines – working with periodically updated context analyses, but time was failing us to systematically work on this across the four programs. Beyond instruments, we learned that what strengthened strategic agility is:

1. A move towards contextualized programming embedded at the country level, coupled with a degree of flexibility at the country levels to design and (annually) adapt, among others, contextualized pathways of change, and annual and partner budgets;
2. The use of agile steering mechanisms, especially: i) continuous, iterative and collective program adaptation and development by linking recurrent ToC revisions, outcome harvesting and capacity assessments to learning cycles; ii) the continuous scanning of the political and societal environments; and iii) the necessary organizational systems and procedures to support and embed those collective iterative learnings and revisions;
3. Learning to become a key driver for flexible and agile steering. To achieve that, special attention needs to be given to the design and use of learning processes

for engaged actors in order to bring them above the level of operational (single loop) learning, and support open attitudes to learning and reflection, and learning by doing.

Project management, M&E and learning are therefore to be conceived and implemented as a single system and process. In all of this, the ToC and ToC thinking is the central approach to achieving and ensuring adaptive management, holding initiatives together, and enabling their convergence and synergy. Furthermore, we looked into how the use of ToCs helped or hindered us to navigate the messiness of advocacy to achieve system change⁴. Some recommendations seem to have struck a note, inside and outside of Hivos, for example:

1. Rather than a roadmap, perceive, design, and work with a ToC as a menu of possible options and ambitions that reflect a diversity of plausible assumptions;
2. Use the ToC to build a shared framework across levels and actors, leaving within that framework a workable degree of open-endedness, space for more individual experimentation, and learning by doing;
3. Oversight should focus on processes through which the ToC is enacted rather than on the content of the documents produced.

There are still a number of divergent opinions about how to work with assumptions that underlie a Theory of Change. Some programs have used the assumptions as research questions to test during or even after implementation, and others have followed short(er) cycles of learning and adaption, incorporating revised assumptions in their next steps.

Emerging (eco)systems thinking From the evaluation findings, we can see hints of a transition from implementing projects towards navigating messiness in complex landscapes. A reference is made to transitioning to eco-system thinking in, for example, capacity development, co-creation with partners, and in general, to working in situations where much is beyond our control. This all points to a dawning understanding of how to achieve change in dynamic systems when control is beyond our reach and where we are just one of the many actors. One challenge will be to closely monitor this transition

across our different change initiatives to further our understanding and practice.

The obstacles encountered For certain, there are barriers that prevent us from using insights from past experiences or research when developing or starting new programs. A first barrier is formed by the clashes and gaps in timeframes between finalizing and starting up new initiatives, and the turnover of staff on project contracts. A second barrier results from the tensions between procedures oriented towards accountability and control, and flexibility and agility. A third obstacle is that we work in a context where many (donor) requirements are ‘frontloaded’ into the design of a program or added on during implementation when appetites change. This has sometimes led us to introduce concepts in our programs without giving them a clear follow-up and follow through, and which – due to a lack of clarity that is honed through practice – may, at times, result in varied and haphazard ways of implementation.

Questions to take along Of course, there remains a number of questions to ponder about now in current programs, or in the future when embarking on new adventures. These vary from: ‘What type of analysis and research can support effective and efficient navigation in a multi-country multi-level program?’ (a lingering question from the SD4ALL evaluation) to ‘How to achieve a multiplier effect in conditions of complexity to scale up the promising results of small, local interventions and achieve more impact?’ (surfacing from the GIE evaluation). One general, but important response is that answers can be best found within a particular context, and that answer or chosen option may constitute a balancing act to find a workable strategy around polarities.





02

MONITORING & LEARNING

In line with the overall Dialogue and Dissent design, the CAC ToC focused on two kinds of changes (outcomes): i) changes in L&A targets, and ii) changes in the L&A capacities of partner organizations. To monitor these changes, the CAC adopted two separate approaches. One, a self-assessment approach, based on the five capabilities framework (5C), was used to monitor changes in partners’ capacities. Two, outcome harvesting (OH) was used to monitor changes in L&A targets.

For CAC members and partners, it was the first time applying outcome harvesting to monitor L&A outcomes. The decision to do so was inspired by a number of external evaluations of Hivos’ programs that had used the OH method. The most recent of those had been the International Lobby & Advocacy (ILA) evaluation of eight different L&A programs in the period of 2011-2015, including Hivos’ 100% Sustainable program⁵.

The CAC evaluations confirm the usefulness of outcome harvesting for monitoring L&A results, in combination with a Theory of Change approach. On the other hand, they also underline that OH was new, and hence required quite some training. Even though it took some time and effort for CAC teams and partners to accommodate and apply it, the teams appreciated OH and its ability to collect evidence about what has changed in a complex program. It shifted the focus from outputs to outcomes and ‘forced’ program actors to look more sharply and analytically at what has been achieved and how this contributes to realizing the envisaged changes (as identified in the ToCs). It is a measure of partners’ appreciation of OH that quite a number of them indicated that they would use it in other programs as well.

The CAC programs invested a lot of time and energy in the quality and credibility of harvested outcomes, through extensive iterations between ‘harvesters’ (CAC program staff and partners) and M&E staff and substantiation exercises. A promising innovation was the introduction of ‘write-shops’. This made ‘harvesting’ less individual and more of a joint, stimulating exercise. It also helped to reduce the burden of iterations. The investment in our OH capacity gradually reduced our need for support from external consultants. For the evaluations, the harvested (and substantiated) outcomes provided an important data set. There was however a trade-off between the time invested in ensuring the quality and credibility of individual outcome statements on the one hand, and them being used for learning and ToC review on the other, with the latter suffering vis-à-vis the former. New programs using OH will have to find a better balance between these two aspects.

The evaluations are equally consistent in their assessments of the approaches that were used to monitor changes in capacity. Unlike OH, which was consistently applied during the whole program period, the programs did not find a common, satisfactory approach for assessing (changes in) capacity. Based on the idea that organizations (should) know best what their capacities and needs are, each program developed a template for regular self-assessment. It was based on the five capabilities (5C) model developed at the beginning of the program. After an initial application, the assessments were not used anymore, as they were

perceived to be too conceptual and not user-friendly. The 5C model may have analytical benefits but did not prove to stimulate reflection and dialogue on capacities and capacity needs. After this, all four programs adopted more ad hoc and flexible approaches to identify capacity needs and to keep track of capacity development. A suggestion to use OH for monitoring changes in capacity was not pursued, as OH focuses on changes in behavior (and not so much capacities) in other social actors (and not on self-assessment).

All programs implemented an annual cycle of learning and planning, at country/regional levels as well at global levels, making use of harvested outcomes and other available monitoring information. Two programs followed a contextualized (national/global) annual review of their ToC with learning as a driver for reflection and analysis (see first chapter on Navigating Messiness). The other two programs reviewed their overall ToC and its assumptions in global meetings, albeit not on an annual basis. All programs showed a capacity for learning, i.e. adapting their course of action based on reflections of the monitoring information collected during implementation. Three programs also made use of an explicit learning agenda and learning questions. The evaluations report on many different kinds of adaptations including geographical choices, partner selection, introducing an explicit ecosystem approach, abandoning certain ToC pathways, and changing the balance between dialogue and dissent.



03

LOBBY & ADVOCACY STRATEGIES

DIALOGUE OR DISSENT

In the lobby and advocacy strategies across all four thematic programs, consortium members and partners favored dialogue/insider approaches. Building trust and adopting a collaborative approach was seen as a more effective way than using confrontation to influence key decision makers, in government as well as in the private sector. When policy issues are broadly accepted and not (or less) controversial, suggesting win-win situations, it is easier to adopt a dialogue approach. Also, in contexts of limited civic space, a collaborative approach was perceived as less risky. Capacity development interventions with partners sought to enhance CSOs' capacities to engage in dialogue. This includes the framing of issues, opting for positive rather than negative terms. Dialogue/insider approaches also have their challenges. They may limit the issues that can be addressed, and make it difficult to expose underlying differences of interest and power. There is a danger of co-optation.

Some programs combined a dialogue approach with dissent/outsider tactics. Dissent often took the form of media campaigns or supporting investigative journalism, publishing critical evidence, as a way to put pressure on decision makers. The evaluations found that, in some contexts, dissent strategies actually contributed to subsequent dialogue, whereas in others dissent made future dialogue difficult.

Combining dialogue and dissent in one program therefore requires skillful management. Dialogue-oriented programs may benefit from 'dissent' approaches implemented by other actors outside of the program. The possibility to combine dialogue and dissent could have been further explored by seeking complementarity with other actors. Dissent strategies obviously carry risks, triggering repressive responses. Context is paramount and can change. A good and regularly updated context analysis is needed to find an appropriate combination of dialogue and dissent.

FRONTRUNNERS

All programs found that supporting so-called frontrunners or champions in government as well as in the private sector was important. Champions in government are individuals who are committed to the cause of the program. They are, or can become, allies. Strengthening their position and possibilities is therefore an important strategy, and can include capacity development. Government champions can be found at the political level as well as at the technocratic/administrative levels. Whereas the first kind may have more influence, the changes they can promote may be more superficial. They also tend to be replaced more easily in elections. Champions at the administrative/technocratic levels are needed to institutionalize changes. They don't tend to change positions as quickly as political champions.

The notion of champions/frontrunners also appeared in another way: as 'innovative examples' or 'best practices'. Projects that demonstrate the positive potential of policy/practice change are powerful elements in lobby and advocacy. However, one needs to be cautious and not overly optimistic about the possibilities of replication and upscaling. In the private sector, competitive relations may limit the demonstration effect of frontrunner businesses on other companies, especially when dealing with value-based changes. A strategy of betting on (the demonstration effect of) and supporting frontrunners in the private sector may limit itself to picking (or even subsidizing) low-hanging fruit.

MULTI-ACTOR INITIATIVES

Multi-actor initiatives (MAI)/multi-stakeholder processes (MSP) bring together various stakeholders in a policy domain. Supporting and/or engaging in multi-actor initiatives was an important way for the SP CAC programs to implement a dialogue approach. MAIs played different roles.

Some were able to engage actors in dialogue in 'safe spaces' to explore issues 'at stake'. The various 'Lab' initiatives (on sustainable food/renewable energy/living wage) created such safe spaces. Other MAIs functioned as 'champions' for joint advocacy, bringing together champions from different backgrounds. The evaluations underlined the importance of MAIs/MSPs but also their resource and time intensiveness and the CAC's limited capacities and skills to implement them. Attracting the most influential players from a policy area – especially from the private sector – was also found to be challenging. CAC's support to MAIs can only be temporary. The potential institutionalization of MAI initiatives into more permanent sectoral stakeholder platforms is something for sector players to undertake themselves.

LINKING LEVELS

All programs linked in-country work with lobby and advocacy at the international level. International level interventions were clearly strengthened by the voices and examples from the countries. The evaluations also found interesting examples of the inverse linking relationship, with international L&A strengthening the work in-country. Overall, however, the possibilities for this inverse linking do not appear to have been fully leveraged.

Much of the in-country L&A focused on the local government level and was successful. This is understandable given that many policy areas have been decentralized from the national to the subnational/local government. In some countries, shifts in focus towards working at the local level were triggered by political changes, thereby reducing the possibilities for national level L&A. In some situations, there was not an explicit policy area that existed at the national level.



04 CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND ASSESSMENT



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All four thematic programs have undertaken capacity development activities for partners and consortium members to achieve change through lobby and advocacy. The diversity of partners and initiatives supported resulted in a range of mandates, functionalities, operational modalities and organizational maturity. Therefore, there simply is no one-size-fits-all approach towards capacity development that suits all these different types of partners, partner groups and networks. Nevertheless, the key overarching questions to consider in capacity development (CD) and capacity assessment (CA) are:

1. What is needed to make the change happen (e.g. pathways in the ToC) and therefore what capacities should exist in that particular conglomerate of partners?
2. What and who are we working with (contextualized CA)?

Capacity, capacity development and assessment proved to be *elusive* concepts that cannot easily be captured in boxes, plans, toolkits, and indicators. At times, this elusiveness gave the space to follow personal preferences for certain approaches or tools. As SP CAC, we also realized that in the design and implementation of capacity assessment and development, too little attention was given to internal (that is: within the SP CAC, e.g. trust) and external factors (that is: outside the SP CAC, e.g. networking) that can influence CD. Taking these factors into consideration requires an innate awareness of the context, an acute sense of how change may happen, antennas for degrees of personal and organizational capacities, and an understanding of how these all interact in a dynamic cocktail. This is way beyond what can be expressed in plans or captured in score cards.

However, in response to that dawning realization, over time, all four thematic programs moved from formal capacity assessments (e.g. via templates and questionnaires) and development (e.g. formal trainings and courses with formal plans) to a *more fluid and interactive process*. This complicated a formal assessment of the effectiveness and relevance of capacity development against stated outcomes, and went against the pressure to use indicators to measure capacities. However, the open-ended discussions of required capacities – for example in relation to revisions of a Theory of Change – greatly contributed to strengthening personal relationships, essential pillars for ownership and partnership. This in turn resulted in a heightened sense of collective direction, which made it easier to answer questions related to who owns and who decides about whose capacity building.

Forms of dialogues were not only used in ToC reflection and planning meetings, but were also introduced to carry out capacity assessments in relation to revisions in a Theory of Change. In SP CAC, we noted differing degrees of eagerness between staff members to engage with partners in this way. This is possibly because we had not always anticipated the need for reassurance and preparation when staff felt insecure to engage in more open-ended interactions without prescribed templates.

Importantly, the shift from templates and indicators towards more fluid, interactive and open-ended conversational forms of capacity assessment and development reflects a way of working guided by the compass of what capacities are required to achieve change. This is a contextualized and dynamic way of working on and with capacities, and intimately intertwined with an ongoing process of learning (see chapter on Navigating Messiness). At the same time, the work in alliances, networks, and partnerships is requiring us to shift from organizational capacity self-assessments to the identification and appreciation of complementary capacities within the group. A contextualized, interactive and dynamic way of working together focused on complementary or synergistic capacities has been the practice in a number of countries and programs, but can be applied more systematically to strengthen our skills to navigate messiness.

There remain a number of questions and polarities that we wrestle with:

1. How to bring 'nested' thinking into CD design and implementation, for example, the CD of CSOs as the basis for their CD of citizens (groups), or how the CD of CSOs contributes to citizen agency?
2. How to balance the timeframe needed for the CD initiatives to lead to desired end results within the project timeframe? e.g. the CD of CSOs, assuming they will conduct CD of citizens (groups)?
3. How to bring CD into a partnership on 'frontloaded' topics and requirements that the partners have not chosen, such as gender, inclusiveness, TOC and OH methodology, climate change?
4. How to balance the achievement of results on CD and advocacy? Tipping the balance of efforts towards advocacy CD implies working with younger, less established partners, while tipping the balance towards achieving advocacy results may require working with established partners who don't require (or may object) to especially frontloaded CD topics?

05 PARTNERSHIPS AND EMERGING TRENDS FROM THE EVALUATIONS

In this chapter, we refer to the following types and levels of partnerships:

1. The Strategic Partnership program with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, limited to the relationship between the Ministry and the CAC, and especially Hivos;
2. The consortium, i.e. about the relationships between Hivos, IIED and Article 19 (including the steering committee and project teams);
3. Between the CAC consortium partners and organizations from the global South, often referred to as 'country partners'.

The first level was a specific evaluation topic, with findings generally converging on "the ambition of establishing a strategic partnership between the MFA and CAC only partially materialized." More specific findings can be found in the thematic evaluations. As SP CAC, we do note one unanswered question: *'How does a strategic partnership with the MFA, including embassies, change power balances and dynamics, and influence ownership issues at the level where it matters?'* While in 2017 a study looked specifically at the second level, in the evaluation findings it did not consistently emerge as a key influencing factor on either advocacy or CD results. This chapter therefore focuses on the third level.

What emerges from the thematic evaluations is that partnership is envisioned, understood, designed and supported to evolve in many different and at times divergent ways. Ambitions and visions may relate to:

1. *Inclusiveness*, by attempting to align ToCs with partner's programs, by sharing (aspects) of management and budgeting, by identifying marginalized groups.
2. *Innovativeness*, by working with 'unusual partners', such as Chambers of Commerce, or federations of employers, journalists or media houses;
3. *System change*, by having 'the whole system in the room' for which thematic programs worked with different kinds of partners, different so-called 'nexus' sectors, and the private sector.

Overall, it has been a struggle to operationalize partnership as a concept: partnership comes loaded with abstract values, expectations and requirements for 'real' partnership. Some examples of those values, expectations and requirements are: trust, collaboration, co-creation, learning (which requires trust), peer coaching and capacity building, co-ownership, leadership, and complementarity. All these have deep implications for the best ways of working. However, in practice, they clash with, for example, the need to be result-oriented, to deliver on promised results, or to 'tick the box on gender'. The thematic programs wrestled with questions, like *'How to work with partners in multi-country, multi-level initiatives?'* and *'How to work with a donor that wants to be a partner when that influences, for example, power dynamics, or accessibility/nearness for end-beneficiaries?'* Besides these questions, all four evaluations point to the many tensions and polarities that come with partnership:

1. A polarity exists, for example, between the intention to create ownership and co-creation among partners and an 'outsider's intervention approach' pushed for by shorter timelines (and also between ownership and a funder's role – see chapter on Local Ownership);
2. Shifting geographic and thematic priorities imposed by donors results in often having to move to new regions, and being forced to abandon long-term partners, thereby damaging trust and credibility built over years;
3. On a related point, partnership is a concept to be agreed to by partners and forged over time while working together. True partnership therefore requires time. When each project is about to start with new partners, it feels like one has to build the boat while having already set sail. This not only affects effectiveness and efficiency issues, but often results in repairing leakages while trying to reach the other shore. One resulting dilemma is whether to adjust ambitions to partners' capacities (sailing together from start to end), or to push for results by changing partners mid-way (throwing some overboard and hoisting others in);
4. Trying to be effective in advocacy means prioritizing work with established partners that have a track record, a reputation and social assets. This brings

along a potential inclination towards working with established organizations, that are sometimes also elite and urban, with their own agenda, against choosing younger and possibly more eager organizations;

5. Partnership takes place in a situation where contracts, reporting and funding are designed for upward accountability (towards the funder); the context thus thwarts partnership and ownership.

This all results in clashes between intentions and values on the one hand, and operational choices being made in (short) time-bounded projects on the other hand. The latter includes shifting geographical and thematic priorities, staff turnover and lay-offs, and restricted resources. The evaluation findings point to positive experiences that may offer (partial) ways out of the tensions and polarities described. Examples are:

1. More peer-to-peer and dialogue-based ways of working, among others, to engage in capacity assessment. This often came from staff who courageously engaged in and brokered honest, credible and reliable relationships, inspired by a personal commitment;
2. Flexible and adaptive operations using, for example ToCs, adaptive management, decentralized decision-making, flexible budgeting, and small grants for unexpected actions;
3. A systems approach to partnership, for example, working with nexus partners, or partner networks to enhance complementarity at different levels (especially country), taking care to look for synergies, alignment, added value, a division of labor including of responsibilities, and coordination.

What then seems to emerge, is partnership as an important element in systems thinking and change, where the boundaries between different partners appear more permeable as interdependencies, complementarities, more 'fluid' peer interactions and synergies become more prominent. By implication, this brings along less hierarchical ways of understanding and working, for example in capacity development, but also in sharing responsibilities and ultimately, power.





06 CITIZEN AGENCY

‘Citizen Agency’ (CA) is the name of our consortium. In 2015, we loosely defined a CA approach to lobby and advocacy as “*giving citizens and their organizations a podium and strengthening their ‘indispensable lobby and advocacy role’ as stated in the Dialogue and Dissent framework. In short, it is about stimulating and ensuring citizens have a voice and a choice....civil society and citizens play a crucial role in a movement towards more government transparency and accountability.*” However, the program document did not further elaborate on the approach, nor did it provide criteria for assessing its progress. Implementation differed between programs, within programs, and between countries. More concerted efforts by the thematic programs to define a citizen agency approach took place from the second year onwards, triggered by initiatives in SD4All.

Based on the premise that ‘citizens’ have ‘agency’, i.e. that people do act in and respond to their ‘lived reality’, it became clear that our ambition of a citizen agency approach to L&A refers to the relationship between the interventions of ‘civil society organizations’ (our partners/ the consortium itself) and these ‘citizens’ in the process of lobby and advocacy, and to the way their ‘lived reality’ takes center-stage in that process.

‘How do the organizations implementing L&A relate to the lived realities and interests of these citizens?’ A document by the GIE team, quoted in the evaluation, distinguished different possible ways: “In a ‘people-driven advocacy’ approach people have direct control over the advocacy agenda, lead the entire planning process and actively participate in collective L&A activities. In *advocating alongside people*, individuals are willing and active participants in setting the advocacy agenda and are engaged in the advocacy planning process. When advocating on behalf of people, civil society assesses how individuals want to be involved, set the advocacy agenda with some input from individuals, elicit people’s views and seek to include these in the advocacy planning process and civil society takes the lead in lobby and advocacy activities. Lastly, when civil society *advocates based on citizen’s needs*, the advocacy planning process is conducted by civil society only and is leading all advocacy efforts. In this last approach, citizen’s needs are assessed prior to the program. This can be done by research in the form of consultation meetings, or else.”

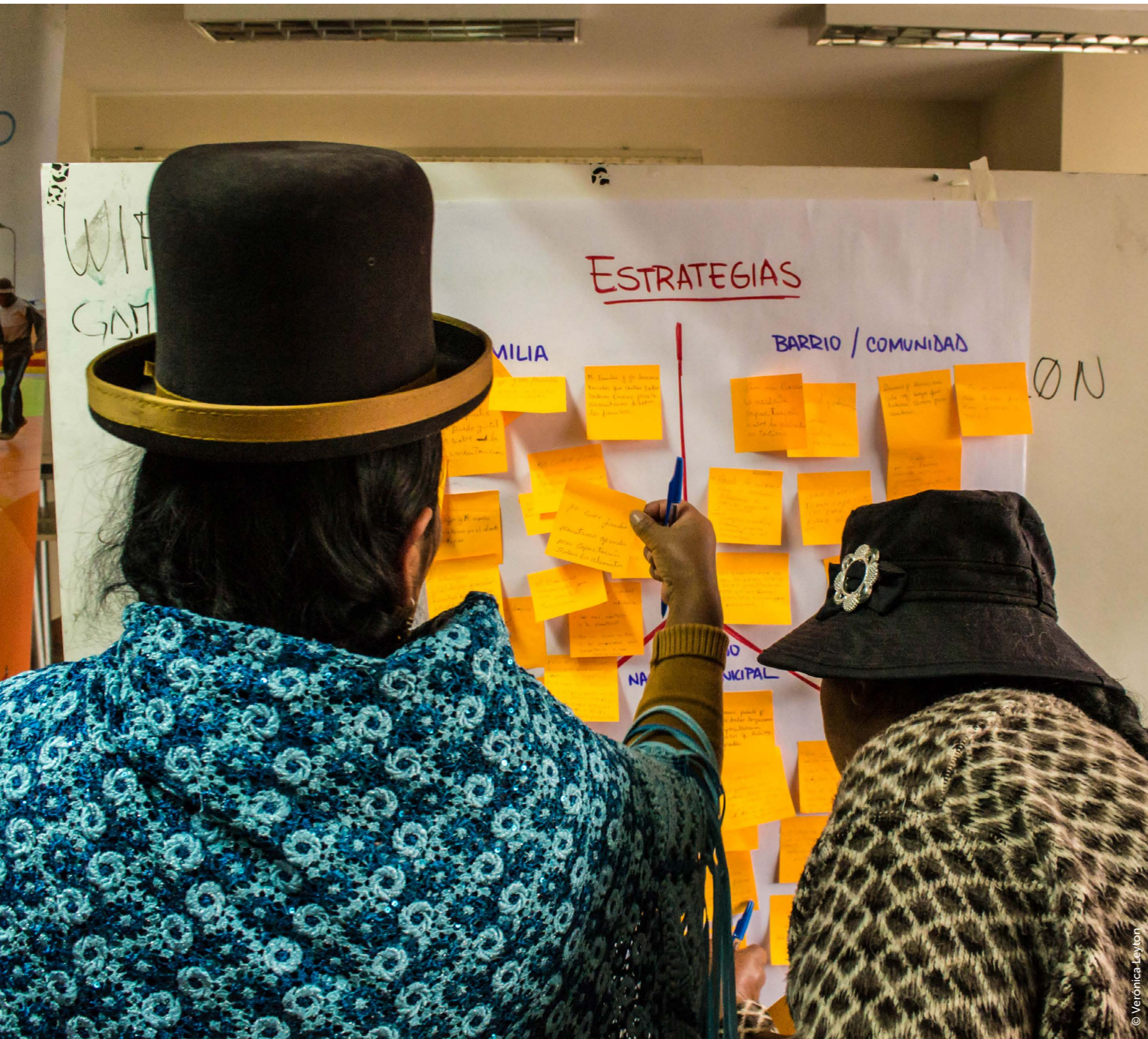
A citizen agency approach is easier to implement for programs targeting a specific category of citizens. The CAC thematic programs varied in this respect. Some targeted a very specific category of citizens, others focused on citizens more generally, becoming more specific only at the country or project level. In spite of initial generic definitions, all programs sought to benefit – directly or indirectly – specific marginalized categories of the citizenry.

One CAC program and its partner organizations ‘implemented’ some very explicit initiatives of ‘people-driven advocacy’, leading to the successful formation of and collaboration with specific groups of citizens like small farmers, street vendors, women, etc. These initiatives also involved capacity development for partner organizations, familiarizing them with this approach to citizen agency and helping them to facilitate such processes. People driven-research is assumed to play an important role in ‘people-driven advocacy’. The evaluation on the other hand, also pointed out some limitations of these examples of people-driven advocacy. They were necessary but not always sufficient to build the essential capacities within the citizenry to stand for and promote their interests. The five-year SP program context was too short for them to mature to sustainability. Their incipient character also showed in incomplete multi-stakeholder processes that did not take into account the ‘lived realities’ of all stakeholders involved.

Beyond the local level, lobby and advocacy processes at the national and international levels tend to be more ‘on behalf of people’, even when these people attend and speak at (inter)national events. Vulnerability issues may also limit the possibilities for direct people-driven advocacy, and require interventions ‘on behalf’ of them by other civil society actors.

All in all, it is probably correct to state that - to a large degree - lobby and advocacy in the SP CAC was ‘on behalf of people’, whereby several program choices (nexus-approaches, ecosystem approaches and generally a focus on local-level processes) helped to secure the connection to their ‘lived realities’.

07 LOCAL OWNERSHIP



While a citizen agency approach refers to the relationship between citizens and CSOs, in local ownership the focus is on the power relationship between the Citizen Agency Consortium and its southern partner organizations, wherein Hivos acted as the funder of partner organizations. The discussion about this relationship is not a new one. During most of Hivos' life – as a Dutch co-financing agency – local ownership was much more obvious; partner CSOs 'owned' their programs and Hivos provided (financial) support. The new civil society strengthening policy framework of the Dutch MoFA has put local ownership on the agenda again.

The question that interests us here is to what degree did the relationship between Hivos and its partners contribute positively to the partners' ownership. Although it was not an explicit element in the ToR, all four thematic evaluations present a similar picture, which is mixed. On the one hand, the program was found to be very flexible. Partners were allowed to adjust plans and tactics quite easily. Partners appreciated Hivos for the open consultations; willingness to learn and adapt; flexibility in planning and budgeting; guidance in context analysis; facilitation of policy processes; connecting and aligning with third parties; sharing technical knowledge; support in M&E and related tasks, and management support, among others. On the other hand, some partners felt that the program was dictating and did not always consider the context-related issues. Funding conditions were a main bone of contention. The short-term (one year) partner contracts make agile maneuvering difficult as the partners felt they could not build the necessary flexibility into their operations. Partners also complained about delays in the disbursement of funds due to long reporting and accountability modalities.

The CAC evaluations confirm findings from earlier Hivos-com missioned studies, in particular by Keystone, which indicated a downward tendency in partner satisfaction. It is not clear whether this tendency is related to Hivos' more recent ambition of combining funding with (co)-implementation. An observation in one CAC evaluation suggested that the partner network in one country where Hivos was not implementing seemed to be stronger, more cohesive and proactive, than in another country where Hivos was implementing.

Whether or not Hivos wears different hats vis-à-vis its partners (funding, brokering, co-implementation), the reflections during the synthesis event on 7 & 8 September emphasized the relational aspect and the importance of the quality of communication between Hivos and its partner organizations. Hivos has taken up the challenges posed by these findings. In response, Hivos has decided on a number of measures that will contribute to the strengthening of local ownership. This includes: the earlier involvement of partners in project design; longer-term contracts; institutional funding; more of a focus on a complementary role towards partners such as through facilitation and enabling; partner-led capacity development; more partner participation in grant-making and program management structures, and clear exit strategies. A necessary prerequisite is that the programming context and the funding and accountability structures the donors impose will allow Hivos to introduce such measures that help increase local ownership.

08

EFFICIENCY



In principle, the term efficiency is used to indicate the extent to which the intervention delivers – or is likely to deliver – results in an *economic and timely* way. For reasons of methodological complexity, the time factor was not considered in our evaluations. Here, efficiency refers only to the ‘economic’ dimension; understood as the extent to which the program has converted its resources and inputs (such as funds, expertise, time, etc.) into results in order to achieve the maximum possible outputs, outcomes, and impacts with the minimum number of inputs. Efficiency therefore ties the results of a program (at the output or outcome level) to the value of resources used to achieve those results. Effectiveness refers to the extent to which the intervention achieved – or is expected to achieve – its objectives and its results (including any differential results). Cost-effectiveness is the extent to which the program has achieved – or is expected to achieve – its results at a lower cost compared to alternatives⁶.

Efficiency is a rather enigmatic ambition in advocacy and capacity development, which is why, in SP CAC, we did not see it as an explicit aim. Nevertheless, we considered it important to look into efficiency issues during the end evaluation, and admittedly, we learned many a lesson.

One important insight is that judging results of efficiency analysis exercises can only happen within a specific context, of a country program or international policy work. Investing resources in lobby and advocacy is influenced by many factors, making it especially challenging to assess efficiency and effectiveness. These influencing factors differ from country to country, and a one-to-one aggregation, or comparison of numeric or qualitative scores of efficiency analyses may therefore not be meaningful.

Other insights relate to timing. One intervention may, for example, only be implemented after other actions have paved the way or created an appetite. This is the case when one first needs to develop evidence-based argumentation to reach out to potential influencers before being able to recruit them as a food champion. Hence, it makes little sense to analyze the standalone efficiency of an intervention. Similarly, some efficient interventions may only generate effects after a longer period, while others may yield results sooner but at a higher cost. This kind of balancing is not easy to capture in an efficiency analysis. In many instances, it was also still too early to assess whether a particular strategy worked well.

With regard to the assessment of effectiveness and efficiency of standalone interventions, we learned that while that can be relevant, such analysis does not capture the added value obtained through a *combination or integration of different methods and interventions*, such as combining communication strategies with organizing side-events at a global conference.

Nevertheless, we did notice that, in general, interventions are considered most efficient when they create a *multiplier effect*, such as the strategy of working through champions. Across the board, there was agreement that it was not easy to appreciate the impacts of individual interventions, given that the success of one intervention impacts the success of another at a next stage. Interventions should therefore be seen as interrelated; in carefully designed lobby strategies, the interventions are all interrelated. This means that the efficiency assessments of individual interventions are practically irrelevant. Another complication in the analysis of efficiency is the fact that staffing, capacity development and staff changes

and related ‘transaction costs’ are essential issues in operational efficiency, but difficult to integrate into an analysis.

We struggled and still struggle with a number of dilemmas and polarities, such as:

1. We believe that we could have achieved more impact if the program had taken place in fewer countries with a smaller number of partners. Yet, when developing a new proposal, other factors play a role, such as the requirements for consortium partners or regions;
2. Within countries, we worked with decentralized strategies. For example, partners worked in different districts or counties. This can either contribute to spreading risks (for example, when activities in one county are halted because of political upheaval) or expand opportunities. Although, there may be (positive or negative) relations between efficiency and decentralization, we are not clear how to take efficiency into consideration in decentralization or in designing more locally owned programs, or how decentralization impacts issues of sustainability and scale of impact, and therefore efficiency;
3. We have learned that efficiency improves when over time partners develop functional communication lines and more efficient working methods. Yet, we work within time-bound projects which creates a stress around efficiency ambitions;
4. When looking at our ambition of achieving system change, we suspect that investing more in collaborative learning and strengthening joint ownership contributes to increasing our overall efficiency;
5. How to achieve more impact efficiently within the aid chain, when we have to balance donors’ priority countries with the organization or alliance’s interests and office infrastructure.

CONCLUSIONS

After a process of many months, during which dozens of important findings and lessons were unearthed and a great number of sharing and learning events organized, it feels challenging to write a chapter of conclusions. Challenging, not only to further condense the multitude of rich insights gained, but to do so in a concise way without losing the crucial embedding in lived experience and rich situational information seems sheer impossible. Therefore, by way of conclusion, we will summarize the key insights from the preceding chapters that are relevant to navigating messiness and to laying out the contours of an emerging new way of understanding change and its accompanying practices.

SHIFT TOWARDS FLUIDITY

We have pointed out a shift from formal, structured, hierarchical and explicit ways of working to *more fluid, interactive, horizontal and open-ended conversational practices*. We see this, for example, in capacity assessment and development, and in joint analysis and reflection on the ToC. An ongoing process of learning, moving between the operational and more strategic levels, accompanies these ways of working and contributes to coherence and synergy between capacity assessment and development and working with Theory of Change.

AGILE CONTEXTUALIZATION

How to achieve change can only be answered in a contextualized, dynamic way. We now know that the work of advocates takes place in ever-changing conditions. And for advocates to be successful, their strategizing depends on their skills to work with and in those contextualized dynamics. Consequently, we note the increased attention to *agile contextualization*. This can be in the way we use our tools such as the ToC, outcome harvesting, or narrative assessment that allows surfacing advocates' skills to navigate and strategize within a dynamic context.

It can also be in the ways we understand and undertake capacity assessment and development.

ECOSYSTEM PARTNERSHIPS

At the same time, changes are taking place in our partnerships. Again, we observe more contextualized, horizontal, interactive and dynamic ways of working together, focusing on complementary or synergistic capacities. For example, in our work in the alliances, networks, and partnerships, we note a shift from organizational capacity self-assessments to identifying and appreciating complementary capacities as sometimes ambitiously called an 'ecosystem partnership'. Another expression of the changes mentioned are the more flexible ways of

budgeting and planning, where contributions are more equally weighed. We, the Citizen Agency Consortium started off with a vision seeing our "role and contribution as an interlocutor – a trusted change agent – who has the proven ability to generate new relationships between civil society organizations and governance and business actors, across multiple layers of governance." Overall, it is striking that, throughout, *relationships and the relational nature of the work have proven to be the foundation* for if and how change can actually be achieved.

It is both our goal and our challenge to build on these insights and to deepen our capacities for forging meaningful and productive relationships into the future.

ANNEXES

All reports produced for the SP CAC end evaluation can be found here:
<https://www.hivos.org/end-term-evaluation-of-the-citizen-agency-consortium/>

The policy brief 'The Hidden life of Theories of Change' can be found here:
<https://www.hivos.org/document/the-hidden-life-of-theories-of-change/>

