Report: Inconvenient Realities - Discussing the recent IOB evaluation
Date: Thursday 5 October, 13:00 – 15:00

Key take-aways

- Re-assess objectives in FCAS to more realistic proportions: a donor has limited influence in the complex social contract and everything depends on ownership.
- Prioritize downward accountability and conflict sensitivity, which means investing in local knowledge.
- Look for examples of decentralized budgets and continuous involvement of communities for adaptation and evaluation. This way, programmes are more embedded in actual realities, but it also stimulates downward accountability and ownership.
- Keep lines of communication open with inconvenient actors and profoundly think through your intervention's exit strategies. While upholding ethical principles, it's also important to acknowledge the limitations of avoiding engagement with certain authorities.
- A stronger narrative is needed to explain the relevance and necessity of SRoL in FCAS. Transparency about dilemmas and challenges, while showing incremental results. Show risk of not engaging and make FCAS voices heard.
- Adaptation demands interaction during the design and implementation, less allocated funding and flexibility in switching goals more profoundly if feedback points in that direction.

Summary meeting

On 5 October, the KPSRL network discussed the evaluation 'Inconvenient Realities: An Evaluation of Dutch Contributions to Stability, Security, and Rule of Law in Fragile and Conflict-affected contexts', by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs' independent Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB). The goals of the session were to:

- Understand the key arguments and recommendations from the IOB report;
- Provide space for international partners to relate to these findings;
- Identify paths to realistically reframe development cooperation in FCAS, with specific attention to stabilization and security, and rule of law.

The IOB evaluation

For this report, IOB analysed all Dutch efforts in FCAS as a whole (development, defence, diplomacy, humanitarian), focussing on the cases of Mali, South Sudan and Afghanistan from 2015 to 2022. Key findings were:

- The rationale to focus on FCAS lies in a combination of addressing the most urgent needs while also preventing and/or countering security threats.

- Throughout those years, the MFA was consistent in its guiding principles and objectives, by focussing on 'legitimate stability' and 'supporting the social contract' to address root causes of conflict, migration and poverty.
- The MFA's efforts supported positive results at a local level and in technical sectors results (e.g. health care, education). However, these results did not trickle up to breaking cycles of violence - at best it prevented deterioration of the situation.
  - Similarly, capacity building with governments and security actors were unsuccessful at higher levels. There was no space and elite willingness for larger scale institutional reform.
- There is a large gap between the MFA's ambitious policies and its sphere of influence. What does not help, is a lack of willingness to commit long-term in such difficult processes, or to find ways to engage with controversial but influential actors (instead, many unsustainable parallel structures emerged).
- Political and institutional barriers prevented proper implementation of an integrated approach of '3D' or the triple nexus, but also working more needs based, as Dutch priorities prevailed. Working needs based is difficult with a constantly rotating staff, lack of capacity for MEL and little reliable information.
- There is insufficient attention to conflict sensitivity. This is discussed during the design of programs, but it is rarely monitored. On a larger scale, it is important to regularly take a critical look at how international actors impact the local political economy.

Key recommendations were:

- Reassess objectives in FCAS to more realistic proportions. The Netherlands is always a relatively small donor and supporting social contracts is a complex process that fully depends on the needs and will of those it concerns.
  - Enlarging that sphere of influence somewhat requires longer time frames, flexibility and more openness about dilemmas.
- Prioritize context specificity and ownership, a.o. by delegating decision making and budgets to for example embassies. Downward accountability also plays a key role in involving those affected constructively.
- Apply a pragmatic approach: be careful with red lines, maintain diplomatic ties with politically controversial actors and use knowledge from development programming as input for such diplomatic conversations.
- Improve the adaptive capacity of the organization.
- Improve policy coherence and, in a similar vein, take conflict sensitivity more seriously.

Responses from case countries

David Deng - International Growth Center (South Sudan)

- Most of the IOB recommendations apply to development support in general and are unfortunately not new; there have been no thorough, systemic changes since '90s.
- A key challenge is the highly centralized financial flow of development cooperation, which links to its inherently political nature. Similarly, MEL is aimed at accounting for those funds, with a huge consultancy sector that evokes fatigue with those affected.

- However, there are great examples such as the Partnership for Recovery and Resilience (PfRR), with more decentralized budgets, thorough community mapping and continuous involvement of communities for adaptation and evaluation. This not only makes the programs more embedded in the actual realities, but it also stimulates downward accountability and ownership.

Masood Karokhail – The Liaison Office (Afghanistan)

- Key problems with Afghan support were no engagement with the Taliban early on (to know their interests, diverging wings etc.) and no exit strategy towards the end. After the Taliban takeover, the international community focused on evacuations and humanitarian aid, leaving civil society to its own. This is a human catastrophe and a waste of investment. So keep lines of communication open with inconvenient actors and profoundly think through your intervention's exit strategies.
- Throughout, the INGO dominance (and with it the focus on transparency, accountability and capacity to feed system) hampered real localisation. Moreover, civil society constantly worked through Western diplomats with the government and provinces skipped the national governments by directly reaching out to international donors.
  - Conflict sensitivity therefore also means looking critically at whether the 'sector' as a whole is not undermining the social contract. In Afghanistan, it clearly reached a 'breaking point' that undermines ownership.
  - Such an improved social contract also requires a solid nexus approach: delivering services like health care and education should be linked to support on poverty and governance. This creates civic space and provides accountability for such services.

Kadiatou Yacouba Keita – International Alert (Mali)

- Mali's multifaceted challenges demand adaptability and flexibility, qualities embodied by Dutch funding. These attributes are crucial for navigating the dynamic context and effectively responding to evolving peace efforts.
- Balancing engagement with authorities in conflict-affected areas is vital. While the Netherlands upholds ethical principles, it's equally important to acknowledge the potential limitations of avoiding engagement with certain authorities in the short term, especially given Mali's recent regime change. A nuanced approach, blending ethics, strategic diplomacy, and pragmatism can yield effective outcomes, especially as inaction in certain contexts can lead to severe consequences, including heightened conflicts.
- Institutional change need not rely solely on the state; traditional authorities, religious leaders, and civil society wield significant influence. Community and civil society-led peacebuilding initiatives can drive transformation. Recognizing this, conflict sensitivity should extend beyond understanding conflict dynamics to considering the potential harm of inaction or poorly conceived interventions. Proactively addressing these factors ensures our actions contribute positively to peace, stability, and development in complex environments like Mali.

Discussion

- It is a challenge to explain to donors' (at least Dutch) tax payers why remaining engaged in FCAS is relevant and necessary, if results are not tangible and anti-democratic trends prevail. A stronger narrative is needed:
    - o Avoid polarising arguments of choosing between extremes (sanctioning or partnering with authoritarian). Explain shades of grey to Parliament and the public and be transparent about dilemmas.
    - o Find better (and less defensive) ways to share the risks of nót engaging with FCAS as well.
    - o Make FCAS voices heard in donor countries and – only where relevant - link such voices to Dutch interests of e.g. security or migration – without falling into the same pitfall of overpromising what you as a donor can do about it.
    - o Outline the wealth of different modalities and partnerships; if governments are unreliable, it can for example still be important to support local communities.
    - o Show the slow and incremental value of development cooperation, as a counterweight to the tendency to demand quick fixes.
- While we have to acknowledge that slow and incremental effect of development cooperation, we must also recognize that we have a tendency to follow the path of the least resistance (e.g. postpone elections out of fear for unrest), preferring stability.
    - o Perhaps, instead of only focussing on smaller, incremental changes there is also a bigger need for bold thinking and less risk averseness: we have lost the political room for manoeuvre to jointly take conscious, calculated risks in collaboration with in-country partners that innovate SRoL.
- There seems to be too little change in coordination on SRoL in multilateral coordination (EU/WB) – this is an area in which we can learn from the humanitarian aid community.
    - o Coordination needs to happen at policy level, but coordination happens at every level and is part of ownership: looking for connections.
- Conflict sensitivity can a.o. addressed by slower turnover of (policy) staff and better use of external, local knowledge.
- Adaptive management is impossible with the current system of writing proposals and quick deadlines. This can be improved by having more interaction with partners while designing programs (including time to engage communities).
    - o Even where adaptation occurs, it is often still limited to scaling up or moving the same intervention somewhere else. Instead, we should be able to follow if feedback points to a different direction.
    - o A concrete tool can be a significant 'contingency funding' budget line, not allocated to a particular activity yet.
    - o Adaptive management is not only flexible funding, it also demands good partnerships: use embassies better.