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The Belgian NGO Landscape and the Challenges of the New Aid approach: Dealing with Fragmentation and Emerging Complexities

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ABSTRACT

Belgium's Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO)-sector embodies some of the country's most distinctive characteristics. Two of its main features are the affiliation of many organisations to one of the societal pillars and the divergence of the NGO-landscape on the different sides of the language border. A high degree of fragmentation is the result of these traits, which manifests itself internally in a scattering of small organisations and externally in a dispersion of NGOs' aid in the south. Past attempts of the bilateral aid agency to alleviate this ineffective situation have only been partially successful. Currently however the aid effectiveness debate is increasingly putting pressure on official and private aid actors to rethink the current practices of the non-governmental channel. Conflicting tendencies influence this debate, and in this chapter we aim to identify the elements that push the advance for a more effective Belgian NGO-sector, and those that possess the potential to obstruct it.

RÉSUMÉ

Le secteur des organisations non gouvernementales (ONG) revêt en Belgique certains des traits les plus distinctifs du pays, dont les deux suivants principalement : l'adhésion de nombreuses organisations à un des piliers sociétaux et la divergence du paysage des ONG des deux côtés de la frontière linguistique. Ces traits sont à l'origine d'un degré de fragmentation élevé, qui se manifeste en interne par un éparpillement de petites organisations et en externe par une dispersion de l'aide des ONG au Sud. Les tentatives entreprises dans le passé par l'organisme d'aide bilatérale en vue d'améliorer cette situation inefficace n'ont obtenu qu'un succès partiel. Toutefois, à l'heure actuelle, le débat sur l'efficacité de l'aide force de plus en plus les acteurs de l'aide publique et privée à repenser les pratiques actuelles du canal non gouvernemental. Des tendances contradictoires influencent le débat. Dans ce chapitre, nous visons à identifier les éléments qui concourent à faire progresser le secteur des ONG vers plus d'efficacité, ainsi que ceux qui sont à même de contrarier cette progression.

1. INTRODUCTION

Belgium, a consociational federal state, historically characterised by deep linguistic, regional and ideological cleavages, contains a Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) landscape which bears its traits. To a large extent segmented into ideological pillars (catholic, socialist, liberal) and divided into regional groups, yet increasingly linked to international networks, the NGO sector is fascinatingly fragmented. Attempts to fix the fragmentation problem through subsequent reforms in the Belgian co-funding system have met with limited success. The recent aid effectiveness debate, which puts more international pressure on donors (bilateral, multilateral but also indirect actors) to, among other things, harmonize, manage for results, professionalize, concentrate, specialize and become more effective in delivering aid, has once more pushed fragmentation to the top of the agenda. In Belgium, both on the side of the government and the NGO sector itself, there is a genuine concern to deal with these challenges and to improve the quality of the NGO sector. Yet on the other hand, counteracting tendencies in the Belgian aid landscape restrain the potential impact of the ongoing debate on the effectiveness of the non-governmental aid channel. One example is the success of a huge number of locally embedded, private, non-professional development initiatives and small organisations, part of the so-called “fourth pillar”^[1] – which do not necessarily follow the recommendations of the international aid effectiveness debate, yet compete with professional non-governmental development actors for private donations and are very successful in doing so. Added to that, a growing number of international NGOs are also finding their way to Belgium and competing with existing initiatives. The current attempt to deal with fragmentation thus meets new emerging complexities since all these organisations compete for public as well as private funding to implement their projects and programmes. The apparent trade-off between professionalization and popular support today seems – more than ever – the most fundamental challenge for the NGO-sector in Belgium.

In this chapter we first sketch the degree of fragmentation of the NGO landscape. Secondly, we briefly describe the historic and systemic dynamics underlying this fragmentation. A following section illustrates how both the government and NGOs have tried to diminish fragmentation and increase professionalization through successive reforms of the co-funding system. The next part highlights the gains but also the everincreasing pressure exerted by the principles underlying the Paris Declaration and developments in the international aid architecture which push towards a re-interpretation of the roles of indirect actors in aid. These new tendencies however are to a certain extent perceived to stand in contrast with the overwhelming success of the fourth pillar. We conclude by pointing out the most important challenges the NGO sector in Belgium is facing today.

Important to mention is that in this chapter we mainly concentrate on those NGOs which are legally recognized by the state and which figure as indirect actors in channelling official development aid. We also mainly focus on NGOs which are spending a large part of their budget in the south.

[1] The fourth pillar is a very diversified group of initiatives in which both large and institutionalized players (like foundations) and small private initiatives are collected. In this paper however we mainly refer to those initiatives which are non-professional development actors whenever we use the fourth pillar concept. More details are given lateron.

This study, carried out in 2008-2009, draws on the quite limited number of existing studies on the Belgian non-governmental aid channel, policy documents and reports of the federal and regional development agencies, information from the NGOs themselves^[2] and interviews with representatives from the Flemish and Francophone federations^[3] and umbrellas^[4] and the DGD (Directorate-General for Development Cooperation). Interviews were carried out between January 2009 and April 2009. Information on Belgian NGOs is quite scarce and since it was crucial to ascertain the sector's view on certain evolutions, we launched a web survey in October 2008, which probed NGOs' opinions on several themes of this article and gathered data on their composition and activities.^[5] A very early version of this paper was presented to a group of NGOs, and the comments and reactions they gave to the preliminary research results also served as very valuable input.

[2] We gathered a lot of interesting information from a website (www.ngo-openboek.be) launched by the Flemish federation, which aims to increase NGO transparency and accountability through supplying aggregate and individual information on national and Flemish NGO activities, visions, finances and employment. A similar database is being compiled on the Francophone side. Some documentation in the paper consists of unpublished documents and position papers that were created during the recent consultations between the NGOs and the government on the effectiveness of the indirect cooperation channel.

[3] Coprogram (Flemish) and Acodev (Francophone).

[4] 11.11.11. (Flemish) and CNCD (Francophone).

[5] All federally funded Belgian NGOs were requested to participate in the survey and 42 organisations (36%) submitted their answers.

2. SNAPSHOT OF THE LANDSCAPE

2.1. Extensive federal subsidisation...

There are currently 115 officially recognized NGOs in Belgium, which act as indirect actors in channelling part of the ODA.^[6] The portion of Belgian federal ODA allocated to these organisations has been at an average of 7,7% between 2003 and 2007, and oscillating between 6,4 and 8,4%^[7]. In 1976, the Belgian state began to co-finance NGOs' activities in the south (Stangherlin 2001: 24). Since 2005 two NGO registration "levels" exist: basic registration, which makes organisations eligible for funding of projects with a duration of maximum two years and a yearly grant of the subsidy, and programme registration, which makes it possible for a NGO to receive financing for a three year programme (which should include a component in the north and in the south).^[8] Currently there are 58 "programme" NGOs and 57 so-called "project" NGOs. The government finances the NGOs on the basis of the gifts they have collected, supplying four euros extra for each euro earned on the private market.

Beyond federal funding, Belgian NGOs can receive subsidies from at least four different sources: the European Union, the Belgian regional governments and the provinces and communes. 60% of Belgian NGOs combine the subsidisation of the national and the subnational level. However, the subsidy amount organisations receive from the regions on average only constitutes 4% of the financing they receive from the DGD.^[9] In 2007 federal funding for Belgian NGOs amounted to €112,5 million^[10] (DGD website: 2007), Flemish regional funding reached €5,2 million (DIV 2008: 8) and Francophone support to NGOs totalled €2,5 million (CGRI-DRI 2008: 95-96). In the rest of the paper we focus on the federal subsidisation of Belgian NGOs, given that in volume, it far exceeds the regional funding and at NGO level also strongly outweighs the subsidies from other actors. It is therefore the most influential factor when considering how the co-funding structure of Belgian NGOs relates to their activities.

Table 1, which gives information about the composition of the 2007 budgets of 37 Flemish and national NGOs^[11] gives an indication of their high dependency on official funding, and also a first idea of their fragmentation. In that year, on average 54% of NGO revenues came from government funding (national, international, regional or local) while 45% were generated by the NGOs through private gifts and transfers.^[12]

[6] A list of these organisations can found in annex.

[7] Information obtained from the DGD website (<http://diplomatie.belgium.be/nl/Beleid/Ontwikkelingssamenwerking/>).

[8] Two main decrees now regulate the federal subsidisation of NGOs: one concerning the registration of NGOs and one concerning the subsidisation of the projects and programmes of the registered NGOs. Both regulations can be consulted in Dutch and in French on the website of Coprogram (www.coprogram.be).

[9] Calculations on the basis of the data from www.ngo-openboek.be.

[10] Information obtained from the DGD website (<http://diplomatie.belgium.be/nl/Beleid/Ontwikkelingssamenwerking/>).

[11] For an explanation of the regional categories (Flemish, Francophone and national) of Belgian NGOs, see later.

[12] Calculations on the basis of the data on www.ngo-openboek.be.

Table 1. 2007 budgets of 37 Flemish and national NGOs

NGO	Subsidies (€ million)	Own revenues (€ million)	Total (€million)	
Artsen Zonder Grenzen	22,05	110,53	132,58	Budget above €10 million (10 NGOs)
Oxfam-Solidariteit	8,25	12,76	21,00	
Caritas International	10,19	6,19	16,38	
Broederlijk Delen	6,31	10,07	16,38	
Handicap Int.	10,13	6,03	16,16	
Damiaanactie	3,76	11,13	14,89	
UNICEF	0,60	12,54	13,15	
11.11.11	5,73	7,04	12,78	
Vredeseilanden	8,12	4,62	12,74	
Plan België	0,08	12,45	12,52	
DMOS	5,50	3,68	9,18	Budget between €5 and 10 mil- lion (8 NGOs)
MEMISA	6,71	1,88	8,59	
Trias	7,08	1,26	8,34	
Wereldsolidariteit	4,55	3,24	7,79	
Volens	5,47	1,78	7,25	
PROTOS	5,57	1,04	6,61	
Rode Kruis	3,41	2,17	5,58	
Fos	4,81	0,72	5,53	
Caraes	1,07	3,05	4,12	Budget between €1 and 5 million (9 NGOs)
Bevrijde Wereld	3,09	0,59	3,69	
VIC	2,68	0,40	3,07	
ACTEC "Een Beroep voor Iedereen"	2,30	0,76	3,05	
Artsen Zonder Vakantie	0,00	2,67	2,67	
Oxfam-Wereldwinkels	0,58	1,84	2,42	
Tearfund	1,09	0,91	2,00	
Studio Globo	1,29	0,37	1,66	
Steunfonds Derde Wereld	0,85	0,26	1,11	
Cunina	0,02	0,94	0,96	Budget under €1 million (10 NGOs)
Atol	0,31	0,24	0,55	
Alfa - vanaf 2008 Djapo	0,46	0,06	0,52	
Ipis	0,38	0,12	0,50	
Geneeskunde voor de Derde Wereld	0,18	0,23	0,41	
Djapo	0,25	0,08	0,33	
PHOS	0,28	0,02	0,30	
Wereldmediateek	0,15	0,09	0,24	
Umubano	0,06	0,06	0,11	
SOS Kinderdorpen	0,00	0,00	0,01	
Average	54%	45%	9,60	

Source: www.ngo-openboek.be

2.2. ...of many small organisations

It is an often heard complaint from the Belgian official aid actors^[13], frequently concurred by larger NGOs^[14], that the existence of large numbers of NGOs, many of which do not optimally invest in specialisation and cooperation, creates unnecessary transaction costs and therefore constitutes a stumbling block to more effective non-governmental aid. It is difficult to fully substantiate this claim with a complete overview of the size of Belgian NGOs because there is no central organisation or database with information on all the organisations. The data that do exist however^[15] show a quite fragmented NGO landscape. The above table 1 highlights the sharp discrepancy between NGOs' respective budgets: Artsen Zonder Grenzen/Médecins Sans Frontières (AZG/MSF) is in its own category: its budget totals around 37% of the combined budget of the NGOs in this table, and is over six times bigger than the NGO with the second biggest budget. Not counting AZG/MSF, the top seven Flemish/national NGOs generate 50% of the total Flemish NGO budget, and the top twelve 73%. The remaining 27% of the budget, which amounts to €60 million, is divided among 24 organisations, with over a quarter of the organisations working with a budget that does not exceed €1 million. Hence, many Flemish and national NGOs are very small players.

The general impression in Belgium is that Francophone NGOs are on average even smaller than Flemish ones. The information on NGOs' budgets, as supplied in table 1 for Flemish and national NGOs, does unfortunately not exist on the Francophone side. A study on the federations and umbrellas (Lambert and de Smedt 2006: 42.) however indicated that in 2005 the NGOs which are a member of the Flemish federation on average received larger federal subsidy amounts (63% of NGOs received more than €500 000) than those who were members of the Francophone federation (only 42% of NGOs received more than €500 000).^[16] The table below also shows that there are overall more Francophone NGOs than Flemish ones, and that they are more often subsidised for projects (instead of programmes) than Flemish or national ones.

Table 2. 2007 budgets of 37 Flemish and national NGOs

Region	Subsidisation		Total
	Programme	Project	
Flemish	19	9	28
Francophone	19	32	51
National	19	17	36
Total	57	58	115

Sources: www.DGD.be and www.acodev.be

[13] For example, see Charles Michel, Lancement de concertation avec les ONG, Speech presented in Brussels, September 17, 2008 and Cabinet of the Minister of Development Cooperation, ONG: vers une aid plus efficace (unpublished).

[14] Interview with leaders of the Flemish federation and umbrella.

[15] It is estimated that the ngo-openboek data cover about 75% of all Belgian NGOs financial information.

[16] This data must be interpreted cautiously, as it does not involve the NGOs who are not a member of the federation or did not supply information. It also involves national NGOs, although these should even out the figures as they are generally members of both coordinating organisations.

This high degree of fragmentation, apparent in the whole Belgian NGO landscape but more pronounced in the Francophone region, is linked to two particular internal Belgian tendencies: pillarisation^[17] and regionalisation. However, it also manifests itself externally when it concerns the countries and partners to which these indirect actors channel funds. We discuss these two dimensions of the fragmentation of the Belgian NGO landscape below.

2.3. Internal fragmentation

Within Belgium, two remarkable features of the NGO landscape stand out: the organisations' links with societal pillars and the regional split of the sector. In table 3 we summarise both characteristics in a ranking^[18] of the twenty NGOs with the largest 2008-2010 programmes. To start with the connection between the NGO world and the societal pillars, Stangherlin (2001: 51), using data from 1976-1998, found most of the larger NGOs to be linked to the societal pillars, either through their ties with the Catholic structures or with the main political parties. Table 3 clearly shows today's continued strength of the organisations with Catholic roots (half of the organisations) but also the preponderance of bigger, technical (mainly medical) and even humanitarian NGOs, which are often part of a bigger international organisation. One effect of NGOs' connection to the societal pillars is their strong link to politicians, political parties and parliament. Some federal and regional parliamentarians were at some time or still are active in a NGO, e.g. as a member of the Board. Through these contacts and networks, NGOs are known to have a fairly large lobbying power when it comes to defending their interests, including through parliamentary questions.

[17] Until very recently the Belgian socio-political scene has, like the Netherlands, strongly been characterised by the dominance of vertical ideological pillars who managed their own social institutions (political parties, unions, women's groups, the provision of certain social services, etc.). The pillars existed on both side of the Flemish-French language border. Belgian society is still very much marked by these pillars but they have lost their predominance.

[18] The ranking was based on data supplied by the DGD at the end of 2008.

Table 3: Twenty NGOs with the largest federally subsidised programmes (2008-2010)

NGO	Historical background	Regional affiliation
Broederlijk Delen	Catholic	Flemish
Vredeseilanden	Catholic	Flemish
Trias	Catholic rural movements and entrepreneur groups	Flemish
11.11.11	Umbrella organisation, not linked to pillars or structures	Flemish
DMOS	Catholic	National
Damiaanactie	Catholic	National
Handicap International	Subsection of international NGO	National
Médecins sans Frontières	Subsection of international humanitarian NGO	National
Wereldsolidariteit	Christian worker's movement	Flemish
Disop	Unknown	Unknown
SOS Faim	Outside of pillars – sprung from international campaign	Francophone
FOS	Socialist movement	Flemish
Oxfam Solidarity	Member of international organisation	National
Memisa	Catholic – subsection of Memisa Netherlands	National
FCD	Socialist movement	Francophone
Protos	Outside of pillars – conceived by private persons	Flemish
Louvain Développement	Catholic University	Francophone
ACTEC	Catholic	National
Croix Rouge	Subsection of international humanitarian organisation	Francophone
Rode Kruis	Subsection of international humanitarian organisation	Flemish

Sources: data supplied by the DGD and www.acodev.be

In table 3 we have also added a column that specifies the regional affiliation of the NGOs given that, apart from being composed of organisations from different societal pillars, the Belgian NGO landscape also encompasses NGOs from different regional groups. It is difficult to categorise NGOs by regional identity, and generally NGOs do not define themselves as “national” or “regional”, but we can do this on the basis of where NGOs implement their north activities. There are three regional groups: national (active on the whole Belgian territory), Flemish (mainly active in Flanders and Brussels), and Francophone (mainly active in Wallonia and Brussels, including a small fraction of organisations from the German community). A remarkable feature is that generally little cooperation and coordination takes place between organisations originating from the different regions.^[19]

About 80% of all NGOs are member of at least one of the four coordinating NGO organisations. Two umbrella organisations work towards equitable north-south relations and increased awareness of development issues of the Belgian public, which i.a. translates itself into lobbying and advocacy, support of partner organisations (umbrellas) in the south, coordination

[19] Interview with member of the NGO service of the DGD.

of Belgian NGOs, and the organisation of a big coordinated yearly campaign.^[20] The federations have the double role of inducing quality improvement and professionalisation in NGOs' work, and at the same time defending these organisations' interests vis-à-vis the DGD (Lambert and de Smedt 2006: 35-40).

2.4. External fragmentation

Recently, the federal government emitted a discussion note (Cabinet of the Minister of Development Cooperation, 2008, unpublished) in which it stated that fragmentation of NGOs' work in the south undermines follow-up, added value and sustainability of NGO activities. Some figures on budgets and areas of activity were given to illustrate this fragmentation. For the period 2008-2010 DGD funds NGO programmes in 62 countries. In most countries only three Belgian NGOs are active (ibid.). Five NGOs are active in more than 15 countries, ten are active in more than ten countries and 19 NGOs are active in more than six countries.^[21] Knowing however that on average, the yearly budget per NGO per country is only of €360 000, this demonstrates that many modest budgets are spread thinly over large numbers of countries and activities. Added to that, most NGOs also have different partners within one country and this also implies a further scattering of funds per country.

The problem of a fragmented landscape is furthermore linked to the lack of synergy between bilateral and indirect Belgian aid. Having been criticised by the DAC on this (OECD 2005: 17) the issue has become a major headache for the Belgian official aid actors (Michel 2008). In the aforementioned discussion note, the Ministry complains that only 52% of funded NGO activities take place in bilateral partner countries, which diminishes possibilities of cooperation, exchange of knowledge, and coordination between indirect and bilateral actors. It also makes it more difficult for the administration to follow-up the subsidised projects and programs (Cabinet of the Minister of Development Cooperation 2008). Several evaluations, and the NGOs themselves, confirm a lack of communication and coordination of NGOs with other actors of Belgian development cooperation in the field (Acodev 2007:40; NGO Delegation to the steering committee). It also resulted from our survey that the attachés of Belgian bilateral cooperation are the actors (except for attachés from other countries) with which cooperation is least organised: 35% of the respondents indicated that no structural cooperation with Belgian bilateral cooperation in the field existed. Only 19% actively coordinated with Belgian bilateral attachés (through mapping of activities and identification of possibilities for cooperation) while half of the respondents indicated that they exchange information with these actors.

The issue of external fragmentation of course raises some questions with regard to the effectiveness of aid. But before dealing with these questions we dig into some of the dynamics that lie at the roots of this fragmentation.

[20] The proceeds from this campaign are then divided among their member organisations for funding of projects and programmes.

[21] This data refers to the 37 NGOs that received programme funding in 2008.

3. UNDERSTANDING FRAGMENTING DYNAMICS

3.1. History: four NGO generations

Belgium's colonial background in the Great Lakes region, its segmentation into societal pillars and progressive federalisation have strongly determined the Belgian NGO-landscape and continue to influence NGO dynamics today. Evolutions at the international level have also had an effect on NGOs' creation and focus.

Stangherlin (2001: 6-19) distinguishes four Belgian NGO generations.

The first generation of Belgian non-governmental development organisations can be traced back to the universities and the Catholic pillar from the 1930's onwards. These created NGOs to send out volunteers to the colonial areas for work in community development projects or as technical assistants in the education or health sector. The two World Wars and the civil war in Spain also instigated the founding of numerous humanitarian organisations which during the 1960s redirected their focus to the developing world. Organisations like Volens, founded by the Belgian Catholic school system and originally specialised in technical assistance in education, and Caritas and Vredeseilanden came into being during this period and are still large players in the Belgian NGO landscape today.

The second generation of NGOs emerged after the independence of the colonial territories in the early 1960s. Many new NGOs originated in the Catholic pillar and from pre-existing personal and societal links with the former colonial areas. Other NGOs sprang from international campaigns, e.g. the FAO campaign against hunger, or were created by political parties or their associated workers movements. These organisations were especially active in supporting their "natural" partners, or counterparts, abroad. Two other developments of this era are important. Firstly, the creation of federation (1964) and umbrella (1966) organisations^[22] and secondly, the establishment of a financing system for NGO expat work (1964) by the Belgian state. In 1976 the project co-financing system was also launched by the government. In terms of development activities, Belgian NGOs' work focused on the transfer of technical and professional resources and organisations were mainly involved in the agricultural, education and health sectors. Examples of NGOs that were created in this period are: COMIDE DMOS, Caraes, and CDI-Bwamanda, which are all founded or connected to missionary works in the developing world. "Ieder voor Allen" and "Wereldsolidariteit" emerged from the Catholic rural movement and the workers' movements respectively. "Solidarité Socialiste" is an example of an NGO that was created within the socialist pillar.

The third generation of NGOs increasingly started to embody the "tiers-mondist" paradigm. Emerging in the 1968-period, rooted in student movements, in radicalised parts of the Catholic Church, and also outside of the common institutional structures, these organisations were critical of the traditional aid of the Belgian NGOs. The new organisations carried out less charitable and more political work, founded in a structural socio-economic analysis of development instead of one based on a resource imbalance. This was of course in part fuelled by the heightened intensity of the Cold War, the oil crises and the famines in certain parts of the

[22] On the role of these coordinating organisations, see *infra*.

world. Organisations also became increasingly aware that development education for a broad public was an important feature to maintain strong support for development cooperation. The Belgian state encouraged this by starting to fund these activities since 1980 which led to certain NGOs focussing exclusively on educational work in Belgium. IPIS and Wereldmediatheek are two organisations that exclusively work in Belgium, and are active in research and education on development issues and in north-south relations respectively. At the same time international NGOs, for example Plan International (1983), TearFund (1979) and Handicap International (1986), started arriving on the Belgian scene.

Lastly, *the fourth generation* emerged more or less after the end of the Cold War. With the victory of democracy and the demise of communism, quite some NGOs redirected themselves from the political to the technical. Furthermore, humanitarian aid gained prominence in the face of devastating wars and natural disasters. The focus of these new NGOs lay in technique and pragmatism instead of ideology and politics. Numerous increasingly professional and technically specialised NGOs started managing large projects and programs in the agriculture and health sectors, while some of the already longer established organisations turned to these activities. Micro-finance activities and other support to local economies, financially supported by the Belgian state since 1997, also became en vogue during this period. Vétérinaires sans Frontières and AZG/MSF are organisations that originated during this phase and rely on high technical capacities to supply medical/veterinarian and humanitarian help on a relatively large scale.

3.2. **Activism and legitimacy outside the traditional pillars and organisations**

As stated in the first section, quite some NGOs are linked to the main societal pillars. Although the gradual depillarisation of Belgian society in the 1990s has blurred many distinctions between organisations of the different pillars, there still is some path dependence which remains important. Organisations' connections to societal pillars have for example had an impact on their geographical focus. NGOs which are linked to socialist or liberal parties and unions or to the Third World movement in the 1960s and 1970s started out their activities in the political hotbeds of that time, which include many countries in Latin America that were not and are not partner countries of the Belgian bilateral aid.^[23]

Research in the Flemish part of Belgium has shown that secularisation and depillarisation are the most probable cause of decreasing levels of traditional associational membership (Hooghe 2003: 79). It is therefore not unimaginable that this has affected the mobilisation of support and resources for those NGOs linked to these pillars (Stangherlin 2001: 58-60). Many NGOs have pointed out that they are indeed concerned about seeming to have lost some of their traditional legitimacy, which makes them more worried by the competition they have begun to endure from, the new organisations that have emerged from the increased activism outside the

[23] Although this disconnection from bilateral aid in terms of the countries where one is active might not have been an issue the last couple of decades, today it is increasingly seen as a potential source of fragmentation. Since the Paris Declaration, donors are increasingly thinking about concentrating their aid resources in a limited number of countries and in a limited number of sectors. The obvious question that surfaces from this evolution is if NGOs, as indirect actors in development cooperation who implement activities with ODA, should be inserted in that logic or not. In other words, should all NGOs wishing to receive funding, focus on the same countries and sectors, or not. In many European countries this discussion is ongoing, including in Belgium, see also infra.

traditional structures.^[24] These development cooperation or aid initiatives taken by actors that do not belong to the recognised governmental (i.e. bilateral aid or first pillar), intergovernmental (i.e. multilateral aid or second pillar) and non-governmental (i.e. third pillar) development agencies or organisations are called the fourth pillar. The fourth pillar encompasses a very heterogeneous group of individuals and organisations, such as schools, foundations, companies, groups of friends, migrant organisations, organisations of professionals, private (voluntary) development organisations, missionaries, that in some way implement projects or programmes in development countries. These individuals and organisations may, but often do not have development cooperation as the primary focus of their daily activities. A 2007 study (Develtere and Johan 2007) estimated that this pillar might consist of more than 1100 initiatives in Flanders and is gaining prominence. Unfortunately, similar data are not yet available in the French-speaking regions of Belgium.

3.3. The weak role played by the DGD

Turning to the role of DGD, there are some complaints that it lacks vision with regards to the role of indirect actors in aid.^[25] The guiding principles in dealing with the indirect actors are ‘the right of initiative’ and ‘autonomy’.^[26] This freedom has always been strongly vindicated by the organisations, but is in fact not an official government policy. Actually, in contrast with other European countries, no NGO-policy or strategy, operational objectives or specific connection with bilateral aid objectives exist. As no official consensus on this matter has been agreed or formalised, the relationship between the indirect and the bilateral cooperation channels is left open to interpretation, and hence the DGD’s and the organisations’ views on the role of the subsidised non-governmental aid channel continues to diverge (Acodev 2007: 12). The DGD varies between subsidising activities fully freely conceived by the NGOs, and trying to gain some grip on NGO programmes and projects, more recently by trying to push for guarantees on their coherence and complementarity with the bilateral aid policy. This strategy is strongly objected to by the NGO-sector out of fear for “instrumentalisation” (11.11.11 2008: 8).

The weakness of the DGD in terms of a vision on the role of indirect actors in aid, is a symptom of a more general flaw. Belgian aid is in and by itself fragmented and this is shown in four dimensions.

Firstly, DGD is integrated in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its political head (sometimes a minister, sometimes a state secretary) is often overruled by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Recurring tensions between both directorates resulted in weak coherence and weak coordination between the agendas of Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation.^[27]

Secondly, Belgium has a list of 18 bilateral partner countries which, with every new minister, tends to change. Added to this there is an abundance of ODA budget lines, inside and

[24] Comments from NGOs in the survey and at a presentation of the preliminary results of the research. It must be noted that Francophone organisations, which are smaller, are often stronger embedded locally and regionally. They are often connected to an institution like a university, or a specific city or region, and are therefore relatively close to the constituency that supports them (interview with a member of the NGO service of the DGD).

[25] Interview with member of the NGO service of the DGD; Acodev 2007: 12.

[26] Interview with member of the NGO service of the DGD.

[27] Interviews with DGD staff.

outside the DGD e.g. in the directorate Bilateral Affairs, the directorate Multilateral Aid, budget lines for humanitarian aid and aid for conflict prevention, which ensure that aid still flows to a wider range of countries than just partner countries. Belgium also still scatters its aid over a multitude of projects and sectors. Hence, little to no focus can be found in Belgian ODA, although recently attempts are being undertaken to increase concentration and specialisation.

Thirdly, the policies of DGD are implemented by a separate aid agency: the Belgian Technical Cooperation which (much like GTZ) is specialized in implementing projects and programmes in the field. These two entities do not perfectly align their work, which creates an extra level of internal fragmentation.

Lastly, DGD's non-governmental funding channels are themselves fragmented. Currently, the Belgian government funds development NGOs through five different budget lines^[28], of which the bulk is the co-funding of the projects and programmes of Belgian NGOs. In addition, the "Belgian Survival Fund" subsidises NGOs' long-term programmes on food security in Sub-Saharan Africa, while Belgian and international NGOs can also receive financing for emergency aid, rehabilitation and food aid activities. Specific funding for Belgian and international NGOs is also available for projects and programmes that focus on conflict prevention, peace consolidation and human rights. Lastly, Belgian embassies directly fund southern NGOs.

[28] Information obtained from the DGD website (<http://diplomatie.belgium.be/nl/Beleid/Ontwikkelingssamenwerking/>).

4. ATTEMPTS TO FIX FRAGMENTATION: OPPORTUNITIES OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

4.1. Co-funding reforms: gains and missed opportunities

On both the government and the NGO-side there is a consensus that Belgian NGOs have made substantial progress over the last years in terms of professionalization, results-orientedness and coherence of their activities. It is also clear that the subsequent changes in the subsidization system have helped in pushing this professionalization (NGO survey 2008; Acodex 2007:16). DGD has reformed the NGO co-funding system three times (1991, 1997, 2005), each time trying to move more towards programme approaches and away from project approaches.

The first two reforms of the subsidy system (in 1991 and 1997), attempted to counteract the fragmentation of the Belgian NGO landscape through encouraging merging and specialisation of organisations. From 1991 on the Belgian government started defining stricter criteria by demanding proof of NGOs' professionalism and experience. It also created a differentiation between project- and programme funding, with programme funding (programmes defined as a collection of projects) over five years reserved for the largest and most professional NGOs. This arrangement was intended to incentivise organisations to collaborate and concentrate their efforts in terms of countries and sectors. The new arrangement had the effect of reducing the number of registered NGOs from 221 in 1989 to 85 in 1991. This strong reduction in the number of NGOs can also be accounted to the fact that many organisations did not qualify for registration anymore because of the new regulation, while others had ceased to exist. In any case, the reform generated quite some critique from the organisations themselves, especially the smaller and less professionalized Francophone ones (Stangherlin 2001: 24).

In 1997, a new reform (often referred to as the "Moreels reform", named after the Development Minister who launched it) was introduced, again hoping to reduce the administrative burden of the co-funding system and increase specialisation, professionalization and collaboration between NGOs. The new regulation introduced a redefinition of the concept of the five-year programme. The programme now embodied the strategic framework that specifies the goals of the NGO on the medium-long term. The subsidies were allocated based on the annual submission of an action plan, which concretises the programme for that year. Activities could be financed for 75% or 85%, depending on organisations' size and specialisation. In 1997, organisations with a budget lower than €2 million could only be co-financed for 75%, while those exceeding that number could get funded for 85% of their projects and programmes. These were attempts to again reduce the number of NGOs, as many new organisations had been created in the '90s, leading to the existence of 151 NGOs in 1997 (ibid.).

In 1998, the DGD also attempted to introduce and institutionalize the practice of evaluation. Up until then external evaluations of projects and programmes of Belgian NGOs were very limited in numbers and organised on an ad-hoc basis. The 1998 funding regulation with its 1% rule^[29] stipulated that NGOs had to allocate a minimum amount to evaluation, and

[29] This rule is known as the '1% evaluation rule', but actually stipulated that 10% of the administrative overhead had to be used for evaluation. Starting from 2002, this was replaced by 0,85% of the total budget NGO's received from the funding agency.

commissioned independent evaluators to execute these evaluations. This led to a significant increase of evaluations, amounting to about 500 over the period 1998-2003. A screening of the '1% evaluations' commissioned by the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Doligez et al. 2005: 15) identified a growing evaluation culture within the Belgian NGO-community and the Federal funding agency, but highlighted at the same time several quality problems, such as weak evaluation methodologies, an exclusive focus on evaluations at the project and programme level, the lack of feedback of evaluation findings into new programming of the NGOs, and the ambiguity around the final aim of the evaluations (creating confusion around the learning objectives and the demands for accountability). The 1% rule was continued in the 2003-2007 programme period, during which a number of Belgian NGOs started experimenting with more strategic approaches to external evaluation, with long term contracts with evaluation units, and more programme-level, and thematic and transversal evaluations. In the latest programme period (2008-2010), funding regulations with regards to evaluation were changed again, and it remains unclear whether the fragile evaluation culture amongst NGO's has been sufficiently nurtured to achieve institutional sustainability.

The concentration effort of the Moreels reform was not in vain, as it incited many organisations to group themselves in consortia^[30], and the number of registered NGOs decreased to 115 in 2008. Nevertheless, the DGD nor the NGOs were satisfied with the way in which the regulation was implemented. It totally distorted the programme logic by basing subsidisation and evaluation on a yearly action plan (ibid.: 17). A full revision of the NGO funding scheme took place in 2005. The latest reform of the subsidy system has introduced a tiered financing system and aimed to give more flexible and programmatic funding to organisations with sufficient capacity. In theory, this arrangement would make it possible for the DGD to screen organisations ex-ante on their organisational capacity and financial management, which lowers the burden of the detailed ex-post financial control. For the first time, yearly funding proposals and evaluations would not be necessary (programmes are funded for three years) and space would be opened up for a more substantial dialogue between the "programme"

It is still too early to assess the functioning of this financing system, as the first programmes started in 2008. Unfortunately, already concrete implementation again seems to undermine the spirit of the reform. 76 NGOs applied for the programme registration. 58 organisations, more than half of all Belgian NGOs, effectively passed the PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC) screening (PWC 2007). Apparently, the relative leniency of the screening was related to the fact that if the criteria were not lowered, the balance between Flemish and Francophone organisations that received the more flexible funding would be distorted. In any case the group of "programme" NGOs is now composed of very diverse organisations, including many small players with weaker organisational capacities. As a result, the DGD has resorted back to its old ways, which means heavy administrative and financial control and a focus on inputs and activities.^[31] The assessment of funding proposals, ex-post evaluations and financial controls of

[30] In reality however, many of these consortia were artificial constructions on paper, only existing in name. Although they would apply for subsidisation jointly, in reality they often continued to exist as separate entities, carrying out their own activities.

[31] NGO survey 2008; interview with leaders of Flemish umbrella and federation 2009. It is interesting to note that when programme-financing was introduced for the first time in 1991, the same implementation issues obstructed a real implementation of the programme approach: too many organisations, partly for political reasons, received programme financing and the DGD continued to work in a project logic, with all of its implications, see Ekstermolengroep, *Naakte keizers of volwaardige partners? Rol en plaats van de NGO-beweging in de internationale samenwerking*, (Brussels: NCOS, 1994), 50-57.

the use of subsidies entail high transaction costs for all parties involved. Heavy administrative prerequisites are transferred down the aid chain, with the danger of southern partners being chosen because of their capability to handle all the administrative issues. Furthermore, Belgian NGOs feel that the huge paper burden might reduce their role to a financial channel, as it limits the investments they can make into the more qualitative aspects of their partnership relations (Acodev 2007: 17).

The inevitable conclusion is that, notwithstanding all the above mentioned reforms, an overall feeling of dissatisfaction exists among all stakeholders (although each partner puts different accents) that progress towards the goals of professionalization, results-orientedness, coherence and administrative simplification has not been adequate.^[32]

4.2. Towards a new landscape? The ramifications of the new aid approach (NAA) for the Belgian NGO landscape

4.2.1. Belgian NGOs' shift in roles

The Paris Declaration (2005) on aid effectiveness (OECD, 2005) forwards the principles of respecting recipient ownership, increasing donor harmonization, striving toward alignment, results-orientedness and mutual accountability between donors and recipients. These principles have fuelled an international debate on –among other things- the role of NGOs as deliverers of aid and on the focus of activities of civil society. Pushed by these international evolutions, the DGD and the cabinet of Minister of Development Cooperation Charles Michel in 2008 launched a consultation round with the NGOs on the effectiveness of the indirect cooperation.^[33] Intense discussions between the government and the organisations on their roles and the specificity, specialisation, complementarity and synergy of and between the different aid channels resulted in a pact with reciprocal engagements, which could potentially remedy some of the internal and external fragmentation of the non-governmental aid channel (DGD 2009a).

The consultations also led to several 'consensus-notes' that describe the results of the discussions between the DGD and representatives of the federations and umbrellas. One of these documents discusses changing roles of Belgian NGOs under the NAA (DGD 2009b). The role of Belgian NGOs in the south is summarized in the consensus-note as the 'strengthening of local development actors and support to the efforts of vulnerable population groups in the south who strive for a sustainable exercise of their rights' (ibid.: 3). Further on, this is described more in detail as the support of the Belgian NGO to the capacity development of its southern partners, in terms of empowerment, networking, political lobbying etc... The DGD and the NGO-sector agree in the note that non-state actors should not substitute the state in the provisions of services.

[32] This opinion quite strongly emerged from the survey conducted among the NGOs, but also in conversations with DGD and Ministry staff, and representatives from the federations and umbrellas.

[33] 'Indirect cooperation' is the term generally used in Belgium to describe that part of Belgian ODA which is channelled through subsidisations to state-, quasi-state and non-governmental organisations. The indirect cooperation channel includes actors other than NGOs, such as universities. When we use the term indirect cooperation in this paper we however only mean to refer to the subsidisation of NGOs.

These statements are in line with the NAA, launched around the turn of the millennium with the PRSPs, endorsed by the Paris Declaration^[34] and followed up by the Accra Agenda for Action (OECD 2008), which aims at strengthening the recipient state in better taking up its responsibilities in freeing citizens from want and need. A strong civil society is considered crucial in this endeavour because it can play different roles in pushing the good governance agenda: representing the voice from below, articulating demands and interests of the poor and vulnerable, pushing the government towards more transparency, responsiveness, accountability and improved performance, forming a counterweight to authoritarian tendencies, etc. (UNRISD 2000). As Cornwall and Gaventa (1999) rightly state, today civil society in the south is increasingly expected to move their focus of attention from micro to macro, from projects to policies, from beneficiaries to citizens. This is not to say that organizations should completely drop service delivery, but it is ideally a (temporary) role for non-state actors limited to those cases where the state structures are totally missing, or for trying out innovative approaches to service delivery, which if well coordinated can afterwards be scaled-up by state actors. This is also not to say that all services should be delivered by the state, but the state should -in case non-state actors take up this responsibility- at least play a regulating role. The consensus-note therefore also strongly urges that intensive coordination and alignment with national policies is indispensable in these cases.

In the resulting pact between the NGOs and the government, Belgian NGOs' officially commit themselves to focus their interventions on the capacity building of their southern civil society partners, especially in their role as watchdogs, so that they can take up the new challenges assigned to them under the NAA, while restricting the implementation of hands-on projects and programmes which deal with beneficiaries directly to certain specific exceptions.^[35]

Important to mention is that the underlying rationale of this NAA is that development is a politico-institutional process. External actors (such as donors) must therefore use aid as a leverage for institutional change (which is per definition a long term endeavour). Tapping in on local reform drives, identifying drivers of change and smartly supporting these are considered more sustainable (though slow) strategies than say financing service delivery projects which show visible and tangible results, but do not necessarily change the structural (hence) causal conditions of poverty and exclusion.

In the agreement with the government, NGOs commit themselves to frame their interventions within a thorough analysis of national and local contexts and policies, within which they situate their own specificity, specialization and added value. The implementation of the commitments in the pact will however require strong efforts from many Belgian NGOs. Today, a lot of them are still considered to be focusing too much on the implementation of service delivery projects in the traditional sectors with political research, lobbying and advocacy still playing second fiddle. As an illustration, it is interesting to mention that 11.11.11. has established that among all Flemish NGOs, there are only nine people fully employed to do political work. In our survey NGOs were asked to give their view on the evolution of their roles. 74% of respondent

[34] Paris High Level Forum

[35] Specific cases in which service delivery projects can still be implemented by the Belgian NGOs are: situations in which marginalised groups do not receive these services from other (non)-governmental actors, innovative or experimental projects, fragile states and emergency situations.

NGOs are of the opinion that the Belgian NGO-sector should continue to equally develop both projects and programs in the south and awareness and lobbying in the north. Only a few (10%) NGOs viewed their activities and presence in the south as the central focus of Belgian NGOs in the future, but what is striking is that these were all very small organisations.^[36] More than 50% of respondents, including half of the small organisations, also agreed to the statement that “Political lobbying/advocacy is mainly something for the large NGOs and the networks”. Furthermore, half of the respondents felt that “Belgian NGOs should be more present in the field in the south”. These results show that, especially for many small organisations, implementation of own projects and programs in the south continues to be a central activity. It also shows that smaller organisations are often viewed to be lacking potential for more political work and self-renewal. Important to mention however is that smaller NGOs have more limited staff and organisational capacity, but receive substantial (some would even say disproportional) subsidy amounts. The administrative costs of these small NGOs are proportionally higher than those of the larger organisations and many of them are extremely busy with the management of their budgets and projects. Big portions of their yearly cycle are dedicated to the preparation of funding proposals and yearly reporting. It is therefore difficult for them to become fully engaged in the debates and reflections that go on in within the sector, as they often do not have enough time or human resources available to attend trainings or debates on policy or quality.^[37] This lack of resources and time for coordination and reflection means that these NGOs are also less connected at the international level.^[38]

4.2.2. The influence of the NAA on the relationship between the DGD and the NGOs

The international tendencies sketched above also have implications for the relationship between the government and the organisations on two levels: the articulation of the relationship between direct and indirect aid and the rethinking of the co-funding system.

Firstly, donors are starting to look at (international) civil society as allies in trying to use aid as a leverage for change. Harmonisation as a concept can thus be stretched. It is used by some donors as a justification to rethink the coherence, synergy of the different aid agencies, -actors and -channels within one donor. In Minister of Development Cooperation Michel’s 2008 policy note, he vows to strive for more coherence within the Belgian development policy (Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2008) and in 2008, the DGD experimented by involving Belgian NGOs in the preparation of the bilateral aid programmes in a couple of countries. It has also often been suggested that the development attaché should play a more prominent role in the indirect cooperation, e.g. in the evaluation of funding proposals (Acodev 2007: 54-55). For the DGD, synergy to a certain extent also means channelling the aid through indirect actors with the

[36] Categorising Belgian NGOs as “small” or “large” is very difficult. What should be used as criterion: budget or staff? Some organisations with a small staff have huge budgets because of the high subsidy amounts they receive for their highly technical interventions. According to the Flemish umbrella, the NGOs have not come to their own definition of size. Degree of popular legitimacy has even been suggested as a criterion of size. Furthermore, as often put by the organisations themselves, “large” is a relative notion: with the exception of AZG/MSF, all the Belgian NGOs are very small on an international scale. “Large” organisations are therefore actually only “big in Belgium”. In this paper, when we refer to “very small” NGOs, we mean those employing maximum five people in Belgium. Small is defined as employing at most ten people in Belgium. Overall figures on the size of Belgian NGOs do not exist, but according to our definition, 60% of the respondents to our survey can be characterised as small and 26% as very small.

[37] Comments from NGOs in our survey.

[38] In our survey, we found that small organisations were generally less implicated in international networks, umbrellas or federations (57%) than larger NGO’s (85%).

same logic as the bilateral aid (ie indirect aid should go to partner countries and coherent with bilateral aid objectives).

Belgian NGOs strongly reject the analysis that improving synergy means working more in and under bilateral aid strategies and claim specificity of their roles (motor for innovation, watchdog, focus on “forgotten” groups and inequality) and respect for the diversity of the NGO sector which impedes alignment of NGOs geographic/strategic choices with those of the bilateral cooperation. NGOs therefore argue that it is cooperation – and harmonisation – with organisations (not necessarily Belgian) that specialise in the same themes and support similar types of partners that should be pursued (11.11.11. 2008: 6-8; Acodev 2007: 39).^[39] They therefore contend that the main goal is to increase specialisation and task division within the Belgian NGO sector and that this means that in the south, NGOs or bilateral agencies from other countries or multilateral agencies might be the most appropriate cooperation partners, rather than a forced and exclusive coordination effort with Belgian bilateral aid.

True enough, cooperation, synergy, should probably not be looked at from the Belgian perspective, but rather from the logic of the field. Unfortunately little to no data exist on these forms of cooperation. This being said, it seems that both forms of coordination and cooperation need not be mutually exclusive. Where possible and relevant, at least some attempts should take place to coordinate and actively look for synergies between organisations, but also between direct (bilateral) and indirect actors.

The pact between the DGD and the NGOs refers to this strengthening of Belgian NGOs’ coordination, complementarity and synergy with all other development actors present in a given country, sector or region. With regards to synergy between Belgian development actors in particular, it establishes a permanent consultation process between the Belgian delegations and NGOs in the Belgian partner countries. NGOs are also to be involved in the preparation of the country, sectoral and thematic policies of the bilateral cooperation. And, in spite of NGOs’ initial strong objections, the DGD has agreed with the NGOs that from 2011 on project subsidisation will be limited to 22 countries^[40], of which 18 are the Belgian bilateral partner countries.

Secondly, the increasing importance of political roles for all aid actors questions the whole co-funding system and the incentives it produces. First of all, today in Belgium, funds are not allocated on a really competitive basis, and the dialogue with the DGD is more about the financial accountability of NGOs than about their strategies or roles. Discussions often centre around financial control of subsidised activities and details of activities and less on policy and strategic choices.^[41] File administrators are themselves overburdened with the administrative handling of enormous dossiers, only seldom go into the field, often lack the specific expertise to thoroughly understand NGOs’ programmes (Acodev 2007: 19; Lambert and de Smedt 2006: 111)^[42] and are frequently replaced. The DGD does not push NGOs to adapt their policies or un-

[39] While it is often pointed out that Belgian NGOs do not cooperate enough in the field, the common trait of being Belgian and being financed under the same co-funding system indeed does not automatically mean that organisations have reasons to cooperate. Indeed, being funded by the same back donor may imply more reason for competition.

[40] In the future, NGOs who receive programme funding will have to focus on 50 countries, the list of which will be decided in mutual agreement between the administration and the organisations.

[41] Interview with the leaders of the Flemish and Francophone umbrellas and federations, comments from NGOs in the survey.

[42] And Also based on the comments received from 30 NGOs participating in the survey.

dertake certain risks. At the same time, the DGD also feels that the lack of a substantial dialogue is related to NGOs' dependence on official funding which makes the relationship between the DGD and organisations very asymmetrical and often leads to a defensive stance being taken by NGOs during the discussions on their funding proposals.

Thirdly, the more political roles for NGOs challenge the current assessment set-up of DGD. Small, concrete service delivery projects that straightforwardly show local, tangible results are easier for the DGD to assess. Some voices in the NGO sector complain that organisations who implement these kind of projects therefore get funding proposals approved more easily and receive more positive evaluations than NGOs who try to work towards long-term change at higher levels through more diffuse – political – work. The co-financing system is not designed to reward innovation or untraditional approaches and a lot of NGOs do not have enough funding of their own to play the forward-thinking role they used to.

The DGD and the NGOs have agreed to a more policy-based relationship between the administration and the sector. In the pact, the DGD engages itself to reform the dialogue and the project/programme assessment procedure and make them less centred around the financial aspect of the subsidisation. It has also agreed to award different levels of “quality certificates” to NGOs (after a screening of their internal management systems). On the basis of this certificate, the frequency and intensity of financial controls will be adapted.

4.3. The internal push for reform within the NGO-landscape

A hugely important step taken by the umbrellas and federations is that they have recently decided that the push for quality should outweigh the defence of the sector's interests. For example, the Flemish umbrella is of the opinion that smaller organisations should specialise, merge or cease to exist and both NGO federations support a stricter screening of candidate programme NGOs. The problem is that the Board of Directors of the federations, composed of representatives from NGOs, can thwart the determination of the coordinating organisations. It has in the past objected to positions from the federations or umbrellas that did not fully support all NGOs interests. Small organisations often refer to their singularity and the importance of diversity as justifications of their refusal to merge with or be absorbed by other NGOs. Certain initiatives from the federations and umbrellas consequently do not evoke a lot of enthusiasm in many organisations, who do not want give up their ways of working and have few incentives to engage in a costly, potentially painful, process of self-reinvention (Aertsen 2008). Individuality and variety can however only deliver added value when organisations specialise, possess a specific expertise and in this sense complement each other.

The call for a division of tasks within the NGO sector is therefore resounding increasingly strongly, and the pact between the NGOs and the government contains several measures to this effect. It states that Belgian organisations should strike a balance between maintaining the diversity of their partners and concentrating geographically, thematically and sector wise. More specifically, each NGO can only be active in ten different countries, with a minimum intervention budget for each country of €500.000 for three years.^[43] Specialisation, themati-

[43] Naturally, this rule will only be applicable to federally co-funded programmes, not NGO-interventions financed by private funding or subsidisation from other entities.

cally and/or geographically, inevitably entails however very tough choices and measures from organisations, as decisions to cut back activities in certain countries or sectors affects partner organisations and sometimes even their own staff. Thorough changes in NGOs roles' and higher expectations regarding the quality their work will inevitably not be in the interest of the whole variety of organisations in the sector. It is therefore not guaranteed that the rather soft call of the pact to concentrate and specialise will result in real changes in the sector.

Another unresolved issue is the aforementioned inherent conflict of interests in federations' roles, who in a certain sense play a union role towards the state for the organisations, but at the same time must try to push the NGOs forwards (Lambert and de Smedt 2006: 105). Inevitably, future developments in the whole context of indirect cooperation will bring more tensions in the relationship between small and large NGOs, the federations and the umbrellas. It remains to be seen if these challenges will finally result in an opening up of the debate.

5. REVERSING THE TREND? TENDENCIES WHICH CONSTRAIN CHANGE

The above-mentioned attempts to limit the fragmentation of aid and promote the quality of the NGO sector are strongly challenged by a couple of tendencies at three different levels: inside the DGD, within the NGO sector, and at the level of popular perceptions on development cooperation.

First, although at the top level management of DGD there is a consensus that the relationship with NGOs should change from form (administrative and financial controls) to substance (strategies and content), it will be a challenge to materialize this change at the lower levels of the administration. We have discussed some of the sticky traditions in DGD and these will remain important obstacles for change. Added to that, it is by now acknowledged that Belgium, as a smaller donor, is not a very good pupil in the OECD/DAC class in terms of donor behaviour (OECD 2005: 17). It is therefore not surprising that NGOs argue that DGD should first get its own act together and tackle its own internal fragmentation before projecting high demands on the NGO-sector.

Secondly, obstacles to change lie within the NGO-sector itself. Although there are some drivers of change within the sector, quite some Belgian NGOs frequently react quite defensively to claims about their lack of transparency, inefficiency or ineffectiveness. The real debate about the essence of the organisations' identity and tasks has very seldom been embarked on. Organisations find it difficult to question themselves, especially in a context where they are increasingly being interrogated about their effectiveness and added value. Moreover, many NGOs are afraid of losing their identity and autonomy, having to make painful changes or even ceasing to exist as an organisation. This focus on their own organisational survival is a constant stumbling block for cooperation within the sector, with each NGO trying to secure its place in the private market and the subsidisation system (NCOS/11.11.11., 2000: 21-22). No wonder that most organisations are hesitant about discussing an urgently necessary, but profound, restructuring and reorientation of the sector.

Resistance to change within the NGO-sector and the DGD has the potential to thwart a thorough implementation of the aforementioned pact – of which the agreements are rather vaguely described and the implementation modalities still have to be specified.

Thirdly, a lot of people who donate money to NGOs, want their money to go directly to the south – and preferably also to have direct and visible results there. The construction of water wells and the direct donation of vaccinations and tuition money are activities that offer instant gratification to contributors and have consequently not lost their popularity. In part, this explains the success of a certain segment of the fourth pillar and the effectiveness of the so-called “begging letters”, which appeal directly to the emotions of the receiver by highlighting the tragedies of poverty. This fundraising method, often labelled as unethical and contrary to the message NGOs would like to give people about development, generates about 2,5 times more gifts than traditional mailings (Roos 2007). Many NGOs therefore feel a strong tension between on the one hand appealing to the wider public and guaranteeing sufficient own funding, and on the other hand their task of raising the awareness of the Belgian population (De Standaard 2007).

Evidently, Belgian NGOs perceive this popular perception of development cooperation as a threat, as the competition for private gifts is strong. 12.7% of private charity is given “directly” to the south, e.g. through personal connections, without going through an intermediary Belgian organisation. 60% of those who engage in this direct support mention trust and effectiveness as their motivation; they feel more secure about their money “reaching the right destination” (Pollet and Huybrechts 2007: 40–41). According to estimates from the study by Develtere and Stessens (2007), Flemish fourth pillar organizations managed to mobilise between 47 and 68 million euro in 2005, of which about 80% consists of gifts from individuals and companies and from income generating activities. The remainder 20% are local, regional and national subsidies.

Belgian NGOs have difficulties countering many people’s traditional views on development and kindling their interest for the structural and political aspects of development, and convincing them of the ways private gifts can have an impact on these (De Standaard 2007). For example, in 2007 a book that claimed in its title that “€100 euro for 11.11.11. only means €1 for the south” (Debels 2007) caused a stir in the NGO-world. The author attacked Belgian NGOs for spending too much donated funds on personnel and other costs in the north, with only a fraction of gifts really ending up in developing countries. The publication was strongly criticised by NGOs, not only because its claims were inaccurate, but mainly because they were based on an outdated vision on development cooperation. The NGOs riposted that accusing them of not transferring enough resources to the south completely bypasses the complexity of the structural political work many Belgian NGOs in Belgium try to develop and promote towards the public (Vanden Berghe 2007).

NGOs feel somewhat frustrated by the fact that accountability claims of the media and the public towards them are thus often based on incorrect ideas of what these organisations’ roles and priorities should be (Aertsen and Bouten 2007). A rift is growing between on the one hand what people want NGOs to do and what they think the organisations do, and on the other hand what NGOs should and want to do. To counter this growing gap between organisations, their constituencies, and the general public, several voices within the NGO world have called for an open debate on the visions and roles of the Belgian NGOs, who should, in the words of the general secretary of 11.11.11.; “do what they say and say what they do” (De Standaard 2007b).

The NAA indeed demands of Belgian NGOs that they increase their political work in Belgium: holding the government accountable for the set-up and results of the donor aid policies, but also sensitivising the public opinion on the need for and the complexity of aid for development. Development education and awareness on the complexities of development cooperation should therefore also take on a more prominent place within the sector. The importance of this work in Belgium is of course a potential source of synergy between NGOs and the fourth pillar. NGOs as well as the regional and local governments of Flanders have been acknowledging the (potential) role fourth pillar organizations, with their strong personal links in society, can have in development cooperation and awareness. In collaboration with the Flemish International Cooperation Agency, 11.11.11 has erected in 2008 a supporting structure for fourth pillar organizations. This consists of a website, a help desk and courses. According to our survey, in the whole of Belgium at least 18 other NGOs cooperate with fourth pillar initiatives. This cooperation mainly consists of provision of information, campaigning, financial support and capacity building. Moreover, the majority of respondents in our survey (22 out of 28) agreed that NGOs needed

to collaborate more with fourth pillar organizations in the future. Arguments for this include increased possibilities for synergy, sharing of expertise, participation and professionalization of fourth pillar initiatives. However, there is less support for subsidising fourth pillar organizations than for other forms of support. On the other hand, some NGOs mentioned the risk of further fragmentation of development efforts and the supposedly inherent different role and dynamics of fourth pillar organizations vis-à-vis NGOs. One of the Belgian non-governmental aid sector's central challenges is indeed to combine the developmental effects of the structural work of the (larger) NGOs with the benefits for public support for development that flow from the strong societal legitimacy of the fourth pillar (and the smaller NGOs) (Mevis and Goethals 2009).

6. CONCLUSION

The Belgian NGO landscape is, for such a small country, quite fragmented. This fragmentation is visible within Belgium (pillarisation and regionalization) but – and this is probably more problematic in terms of improving aid effectiveness – also outside Belgium. Too many actors are channelling relatively small amounts of aid to a great number of countries and to a huge number of recipients. There is thus a substantial risk that aid arrives in recipient countries in a very fragmented way and fragmented aid, so the aid effectiveness debate argues, is failed aid. There is however a need to consider the idea that aid which parts in a fragmented way from Belgium, might not be fragmented in the field. If Belgian actors cooperate a lot with all kinds of different actors in the field, if they pool funds and efforts with other donors (whether governmental or non-governmental), then the problem might not be as substantial as currently argued by the Belgian government. In order to assess this however, more and new data are needed in terms of how cooperation in the field takes shape, and to which extent synergies are actively created with other (non-Belgian) donors and NGOs.

The attempts to decrease fragmentation in the Belgian NGO sector date back to the beginning of the 1990s with three subsequent reforms in the co-funding system. Although some progress was made, reforms did not achieve the hoped for results. The international aid effectiveness debate however boosted the fragmentation concern in Belgium. DGD and the NGO-sector have been negotiating the role of indirect actors in development cooperation with a two-fold objective: improving the quality of the NGO-sector as an actor in development cooperation and rethinking the co-funding system in order to improve overall ODA. It remains to be seen to which concrete changes the pact, which resulted from these negotiations, will lead.

This double goal encounters strong countervailing tendencies within Belgium. On both sides of the actor spectrum there are deeply embedded institutional practices that go against change. On the side of the NGO sector smaller project NGOs feel threatened by the call for more specialization, more political work, more concentration and professionalization. They fear to lose their local embeddedness. The success of the fourth pillar furthermore seems to suggest that small is indeed beautiful and very capable of tapping into the generosity of the Belgian public. From the point of view of popular legitimacy thus it seems more worthwhile to stick to small scale projects which deliver directly to poor people. On the side of DGD there are deep reaching bureaucratic traditions which always seem to focus on financial controls and a preference for visible and easily measurable results.

The ideal co-funding system, according to both the DGD and the federations and umbrella organisations, would provide for a long term partnership agreement between the DGD and a couple of high quality NGOs. Organisations which respond to certain management standards, like the institutionalisation of M&E into their organisations, would receive flexible funding and be able to deliver core-funding (rather than project-funding) to their partners in the south. Administrative demands would thus be loosened while organisational requirements would become stricter, which means that in this very selective approach only a couple of high standard NGOs enter in such a co-funding relationship with the government. As past reform attempts have demonstrated, the political feasibility of such an evolution is slim.

When putting all the insights together, the new aid approach with its calls for scaling up, professionalization, concentration and specialization seems to fit larger policy-oriented lobbying and advocacy organisations particularly well. But this does not mean that there is no room for small project-based organisations. Societal change must take place through both bottom-up and top-down processes, preferable in a synergetic way. Lobbying and advocacy organisations need information from the field, which can be provided by small project organisations. Project organisations on the other hand need to be aware that sustainable development can only take place in an enabling structural environment. Both macro and micro approaches become particularly relevant and pertinent if they are synergetic and nested in a 'learning cycle' where both streams of information feed into and strengthen each other. For a lot of project organisations however this requires a different mindset: projects are only a micro means to a macro end, and not a micro end in itself (e.g. reaching the beneficiaries).

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ANNEX I: LIST OF ALL FEDERALLY RECOGNISED NGOs

Name	Region	Subsidisation
Koepel v/d vlaame Noord-Zuid beweging (Consortium : 11.11.11+Vodo+Wereldwijd mediahuis)	Flemish	Programme
Association des Rotary clubs belges pour la Coopération au Développement Stichting van de Belgische Rotaryclubs voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking	National	Programme
Association pour l'action de développement communautaire (Consortium ACORD)	Francophone	Project
Association pour l'Aide aux Populations du Kivu (Consortium Louvdev)	Francophone	Project
Association Belgique-Bolivia-Amérique Latine	Francophone	Project
Association Belgique Rwanda (Consortium SAERP)	Francophone	Project
Action et Coopération pour le Développement dans les Andes (Pérou)	Francophone	Project
Association for Cultural, Technical & Educational Cooperation	National	Programme
Action Damien-Damiaan Actie	National	Programme
Aide au Développement Gembloux (Consortium CHAKA)	Francophone	Project
Action Développement parrainages mondiaux	Francophone	Project
Amis de Gatagara (Consortium Caraesco)	Francophone	Project
AQUADEV	Francophone	Programme
Informatiebemiddeling en Kennisbeheer in Internationale Samenwerking	Flemish	Programme
AUTRE TERRE	Francophone	Programme
Artsen Zonder Vakantie - Médecins Sans Vacances	National	Programme
Balkanactie van de Gemeenten	Flemish	Project
Broederlijk Delen (Consortium Komyuniti)	Flemish	Programme
Bevrijde Wereld - Terre Nouvelle (Consortium Bolo)	Flemish	Programme
Commission Justice et Paix (Consortium Juste Terre)	Francophone	Project
Comité pour l'Annulation de la Dette du Tiers Monde	National	Project
Caritate Aegrorum servi (Consortium Caraesco)	Flemish	Programme
Conseil des Communautés Africaines en Europe/Belgique	National	Project
Chaîne de l'Espoir/Keten van Hoop	National	Project
CDI-Bwamanda - België (Consortium CDIBWACo)	Flemish	Programme
Coopération par l'Education et la Culture	Francophone	Project
Centre Scientifique et Médical de l'ULB pour ses activités de coopération (Consortium Acord)	Francophone	Programme
Centre Tricontinental	Francophone	Programme
CARITAS International Belgique - Internationaal België	National	Programme
Centre National de Coopération au Développement	Francophone	Programme

Coopération au Développement de l'Artisanat (Consortium Chaka)	Francophone	Project
Service de Coopération Missionnaire au Développement Dienst Missie & Ontwikkelingssamenwerking	National	Programme
Collectif d'échanges pour la technologie appropriée	Francophone	Programme
Croix-Rouge de Belgique - Activités internationales	Francophone	Programme
Collectif Stratégies Alimentaires	Francophone	Project
CUNINA	Flemish	Project
Défi Belgique Afrique	Francophone	Project
De Wereldschool (Consortium Bolo)	Flemish	Project
Dienst voor Internationaal Samenwerking Ontwikkelinspr.	Flemish	Programme
Centrum voor Mondiale Vorming	Flemish	Programme
DYNAMO International	Francophone	Project
Entraide et Fraternité (Consortium Juste Terre)	Francophone	Programme
Echos Communication	Francophone	Programme
Enfance Tiers Monde - Kinderen Derde Wereld	National	Project
Fonds André Ryckmans (Consortium Itinerans)	Francophone	Project
Frères des Hommes	Francophone	Programme
Foodfirst Information & Action Network	National	Project
Fonds Ingrid Renard	Francophone	Project
Formation de Cadres Africains - Kadervorming Voor Africanen (Consortium Itinerans)	National	Project
Fonds voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking	Flemish	Programme
Fonds de Soutien Tiers Monde - Steunfonds Derde Wereld (Consortium Intal)	National	Programme
Fondation des Facultés Universitaires Notre Dame de la Paix pour la Coopération Internationale au Développement	Francophone	Project
GEOMOUN	Francophone	Project
L'Atelier Graphoui	Francophone	Project
Groupe de Recherche pour une Stratégie Economique Alternative	Francophone	Project
GROENHART	Flemish	Project
Groupe de Recherche et d'action sur le développement durable et le développement économique local	Francophone	Project
Handicap International Belgium	National	Programme
Iles de Paix	Francophone	Programme
International Peace Information Service	Flemish	Programme
Ingénieurs sans Frontières (Consortium CHAKA)	Francophone	Project
Coopération Technique Internationale - Centre de formation pour le développement	Francophone	Programme
Le Coron (Consortium Bolo)	Francophone	Project
Laïcité et Humanisme en Afrique centrale	Francophone	Project

Le Monde Selon Les Femmes	Francophone	Programme
Association de Louvain pour la Coopération au Développement (Consortium LouvDev)	Francophone	Programme
Max Havelaar	National	Programme
Médecine pour le Tiers-Monde - Geneeskunde voor de Derde Wereld (Consortium Intal)	National	Project
Médecins du Monde - Dokters van de Wereld	National	Project
Medical Mission Action (Consortium CDI-Bwamanda)	National	Programme
Mutualités des Grands Lacs	Francophone	Project
Miel Maya Honing	National	Programme
Magasins du Monde - Oxfam	Francophone	Programme
Médecins Sans Frontières - Artsen Zonder Grenzen	National	Programme
Muzieklabrynt	Flemish	Project
Œuvre Belgo-Colombienne de l'Enfance - Belgisch-Colombiaans Werk Voor Kinderwelzijn	National	Project
Oxfam Solidarité - Oxfam Solidariteit	National	Programme
Oxfam Wereldwinkels	Flemish	Programme
Partenaire Libéral pour le Développement	Francophone	Project
Petits Pas	Francophone	Programme
Platform Handicap & Ontwikkelingssamenwerking	Flemish	Project
Plan Belgique - Plan België	National	Project
PlaNet Finance Belgique - België	National	Project
Projectgroep voor Technische Ontwikkelingssamenwerking	Flemish	Programme
Quinoa	Francophone	Project
Rode Kruis-Vlaanderen Internationaal	Flemish	Programme
Solidarité Afghanistan Belgique	Francophone	Project
SCI - Projets internationaux	National	Programme
Service d'Information et de Formation Tiers-Monde	Francophone	Project
Search For Common Ground	National	Project
Sensorial Handicap Cooperation	National	Project
Solidarité Internationale des Maisons Familiales Rurales	Francophone	Project
Service Laïque de Coopération au Développement (Consortium Acord)	Francophone	Programme
Solidarité Mondiale - Wereldsolidariteit	National	Programme
Solidarité Socialiste - Formation Coopération Développement	Francophone	Programme
Soutien aux ONG à l'Est et au Sud	Francophone	Project
SOS Village d'Enfants Belgique aide le Monde / SOS - Kinderdorpen België	National	Project
SOS Faim	Francophone	Programme
SOS Layettes Solidarité et Développement	Francophone	Project

Solidarité Protestante - Protestante Solidariteit	National	Programme
Studio Globo (Consortium Komyuniti)	Flemish	Programme
Tearfund - Christelijke Solidariteit voor een Wereld in Nood	Flemish	Project
TRIAS - (Consortium Trias : IVA et Trias)	Flemish	Programme
Universitair Centrum voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking	Flemish	Programme
Vlaams-Rwandese Vereniging	Flemish	Project
Unicef Belgique - Unicef België	National	Project
UNIVERSUD-Liège	National	Programme
Vlaams Internationaal Centrum	Flemish	Programme
VIVA AFRICA	National	Project
Volens (Consortium Itinerans)	National	Programme
Vredeseilanden	Flemish	Programme
Vétérinaires sans Frontières - Dierenartsen Zonder Grenzen (Consortium SAERP)	National	Programme
Wereldmediatheek	Flemish	Programme
World Wildlife Fund – Belgique	National	Project
Wereldwerkplaats	Flemish	Project

Sources: www.DGD.be and www.acodev.be



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