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The Dutch ‘Dialogue and Dissent’ framework to support civic space in Zimbabwe

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List of Acronyms

AIPPA	Access to Information and Privacy Act
CSOs	Civil Society Organisation
D&DToc	Dialogue and Dissent Theory of Change
DFID	United Kingdom's Department for International Development
DSO/MO	Civil society unit of the Social Development Department of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs
EU	European Commission
FCAM	Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres (Spanish)
GoZ	Government of Zimbabwe
HIVOS	Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries
ICNL	International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law
IOB	Policy and Operations Evaluation Department of the Ministry
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organisations
LLMIC	Lower- and Lower-Middle Income Country
MDC	Movement for Democratic Change
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NWO	WOTRO Science for Global Development division of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research
PVO Act	Private Voluntary Organisation Act
NEZ	the Netherlands Embassy in Zimbabwe
NIMD	Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy
NIZA	Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa
POSA	Public Order and Security Act
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SP	Strategic Partnership for dialogue and dissent
UN	United Nations
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
WILD	Women Institute for Leadership Development

ZANU PF	Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front
ZEN	Zimbabwe Europe Network
ZWLA	Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association

Abstract

The ‘Dialogue and Dissent’ programme represents the Netherlands government’s guiding principles in supporting Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the Global South. The framework envisages strengthening the capacity of civil society organizations in lobbying and advocacy as comparatively more transformative than support for service delivery initiatives. Here I investigate how the policy framework engages with civic space (limitations) under restrictive environments and with a particular focus on Zimbabwe. The policy script provides an outline involving international advocacy pathways as well as localized efforts embedded within the activities of partners. However, a qualitative interviewing process involving the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its embassy in Zimbabwe, Dutch NGOs and a selection of Zimbabwean civil society actors, established that not everything within the script contributes to the cause and is reflective of the practice in Zimbabwe. Some of the pathways construed to be addressing the closing space do not necessarily do so but rather simply represent the partners’ resilience or ways of surviving in an unfavorable environment, and this perhaps explains the Dutch government’s own admission that the situation is actually getting much worse in many of those areas in which the policy framework is being implemented. I come to a cautious conclusion that the policy in its current state is yet to illustrate a convincing means to counter the threats to civic space in Zimbabwe and that this gap between the script and the empirics mirror structural policy oversights on the underlying assumptions and particularly the working environment under authoritarian regimes.

Keywords

‘Strategic Partnerships’, Civil Society, Civic Space, Zimbabwe, Netherlands

Introduction

This research investigates how the Netherlands government, through one of its policy instruments for international cooperation ‘Dialogue and Dissent’¹, engages via ‘Strategic Partnerships’ with the advocacy for civic space in Zimbabwe. Reference is made to the efforts towards ensuring an environment in which the “civil society is able to operate without fear of incurring official disapproval, hostility, violence, abuse, or of breaking laws or regulations” (Hossain et al, 2018: 13)

The ‘Dialogue and Dissent’ policy framework seeks to enhance the lobbying and advocacy capacities of civil society organizations in the “Least Developed Countries and Other Low-Income Countries (LLMIC)” (D&DToC). Džigurski (2016) explains it as a strategy “to ensure a deeper and more sustainable impact with fewer resources”. Yet, aid to civil society has been challenged both in theory and practice. Banks et al (2015) advance the argument that the aid system has depoliticized the civil society role. Others are of the contention that the partnerships arrangement is self-serving, political and neo-imperialistic in nature (Mutua, 2001; Hearn, 2007). Dupuy et al (2016:299) observed that “foreign aid flows are associated with an increased risk of restrictive law adoption...”.

Only a third of the world’s population is regarded as living in regimes that respect, promote and protect civic space (CIVICUS 2017). According to Howard (2016:10), only 30% of the Zimbabwean population confirms that it enjoys freedom of association and 27% to freedom of speech. The findings may appear outdated but this paper suspects that the situation may have gone worse especially discussing it in the context of a country trying to come to terms with a military assisted power transition witnessed in November 2017. The restrictions take various forms which among them include “legal, political, administrative, as well as extra-legal strategies such as violence and threats, and domination of public space to de-legitimate and stigmatize civil society actors for a range of reasons” (Hossain et al, 2018:10).

This paper recounts Zimbabwe as one of the spheres representing patterns of organized suppression of such space. The then Mugabe government in Zimbabwe has for long viewed the partnership between local civil society actors and external players as a regime change project (Chakawarika, 2011; Newsday, 2010). The opinion is strong to the extent that there are laws barring civil society organizations from conducting voter education activities with

¹ This paper shall use ‘Dialogue and Dissent’ and ‘Strategic Partnerships’ interchangeably.

foreign funding (ICNL). Furthermore, the main regulatory instrument, i.e. the Private Voluntary Organisations Act (PVO Act) demands a mandatory registration for any civil society organizations to be eligible for external funding.

The triumph of ZANU PF in the 2013 harmonized election marking the end of the coalition government brought with it a return to suppression of dissenting voices (*NIMD Program Manager*). However, this paper reports the ZANU PF oppressiveness as a long culture that can be traced way earlier than the said 2013 election outcome. The year 2008 arguably recorded the worst experiences in terms of restrictions to operations of civil society organizations and NGO.²

Individuals have also been persecuted and the worst took the form of abductions and forced disappearances. On 3 December 2008, a human rights activist Jestina Mukoko was abducted and kept in solitary confinement for 24 days and only to reappear in courts accused by the state of plotting to overthrow the then Mugabe rule. The latest involves a pro-democracy activist Itai Dzamara who went missing on the 9th of March 2015 in a suspected state's reaction to his critique of the government and to date, his whereabouts remain unknown.³

In a related demonstration of state heavy-handedness, Pastor Evan Mawarire, and other 300 protesters under the #Thisflag and Tajamuka movements were randomly arrested and brought before courts for protesting against economic woes. The accompanying online activism was met with propositions for a law in form of the 'Computer Crime and Cyber Crime Bill'. The proposed regulatory framework is still pending but if passed, would have an effect to strictly limit citizens' access to information. The then Mugabe government also introduced a Ministry of Cyber Security, Threat Detection and Mitigation responsible for overseeing the supervision of the pending law.

These restrictions add to a host of existing legal and administrative barriers to the operations of the civil society in Zimbabwe. At the apex is the Private Voluntary Organisations Act (PVO Act) with its complex and bureaucratic registration procedures. Further constraints are contained in other laws such as the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Access to Information and Privacy Act (AIPPA). The former has largely

² For further readings of ban of NGOs <http://www.irinnews.org/report/94890/zimbabwe-more-ngo-bannings-feared>

³ <https://www.zimeye.net/2018/08/17/amnesty-international-vows-to-pressure-new-president-on-itai-dzamara/>

been used to thwart citizenry efforts to organize themselves or gather whereas the latter has been instrumental in silencing alternative media sources (Chakawarika 2011).

1.1. The relevance of the study

The concept of civic space is relatively new (Wahed 2017:15) and so are the efforts to counter the downward spiral trend constituting the dominant narratives around it. Hence, an understanding of its extensiveness, manifestations and the corresponding efforts to counter it requires consistent profiling, documentation and or a continuous investment in research.

A development orientation also lies in Hossain et al's (2018), observation that "economic crises are more likely in settings where civic space is closed, and it is highly improbable that development has any chance of producing equitable, sustainable, or inclusive outcomes under conditions where civic space is restricted or closing" (Hossain et al, 2018:3). This research focused on Zimbabwe, is therefore hoped to bring in an exclusive overview of emerging trends on context-specific manifestations of the problems and the countermeasures to tame it...

Further to that, the distinct feature of the 'Dialogue and Dissent' policy framework setting it apart from the Dutch government's traditional interaction with civil society is an alleged shift in focus from supporting service delivery role to supporting lobbying and advocacy capacities (D&DToC:2017). The policy framework was introduced in the year 2016; meaning 2018 is just two years into its implementation. Hence, very little research has been done thus far on how the changing trajectories are contributing to the development, let alone in a global civil society environment under threat.

Also by focusing on Zimbabwe, this research leans on Džigurski (2016:2) observations that the dialogue and dissent interpretations and framing vary according to actors preferences and the given structural environments under which they operate. Hence, the Zimbabwean experiences and the specified focus on civic space is hoped to confirm known interpretations or bring about valuable alternative and empirical knowledge on how the policy framework is coping.

1.2. Objective

The objective is to critically investigate, examine and understand the ways in which the Dutch policies of “dialogue and dissent” engage with advocacy for civic space in Zimbabwe. The objective is supported by two interlinked research questions as follows:

1.3. Research Questions

1. How does the dialogue and dissent policy framework engage with advocacy for civic space in Zimbabwe?
2. What are the perspectives of Dutch institutions and individuals working in and or on Zimbabwe following the November 2017 power shifts

1.4. Methodology

1.4.1. Data Collection

Primary data

The study largely is a product of an interviewing process anchored on a mix of purposive and snowballing sampling. These methods were especially useful in reaching out to the somewhat closed partnership network and the civil society domain in Zimbabwe. Cognisant of the prejudices associated with conscious selection processes and chain of referrals as Brace-Govan (2004) reminds of, I leaned on Kvale and Brinkmann’s (2009) wisdom of embarking on data generation process as opposed to data collected. The idea of data generation apportions active responsibility to the researcher of alertness to potential biases and the need to continuously reflect on them throughout the interview journey (Kvale and Brinkmann’s, 2009:48).

A total of eleven interviews were carried out seven of which were done with people directly involved in the implementation of the ‘Strategic Partnership’ programme and the other four from outside the bracket, but whose contributions were deemed relevant to the study. It is also important to highlight that ‘Strategic Partnerships’ here mainly refers to the cooperation between the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), HIVOS, the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy and civil society actors in Zimbabwe⁴. The anonymized organizations of Zimbabwean origin shall be addressed as the Young Women-

⁴ The Zimbabwean organisations are anonymised for ethical reasons and shall be addressed through their line of work.

oriented and Policy Think-tank groups respectively. The Young Women-oriented organization seeks to promote economic and social justice in peri-urban, rural and mining communities. It also functions as a solidarity center providing economic and psycho-social support to victims of child marriages and Gender-Based Violence. The Policy Think-tank is into democracy, human rights, and governance activities and plays a mediation role between civil society and the government. However, the research also features individuals outside this bracket consulted as part of the researcher's efforts to neutralize biases.

The Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs found relevance through its position as the custodian of the policy framework under study. For NIMD, the theme of its Strategic Partnership (SP) programme in Zimbabwe "conducive environment for effective policy influencing" syncs very well not only with the dialogue and dissent's lobbying and advocacy niche but also with the biases of this research. HIVOS on the hand finds relevance through its strong desires for an open society that syncs so well with the language of civic space. An extract from its website reads,

"Our ideal world guarantees freedom, diversity and equal opportunities for all and... In such a world, all people have the same rights, irrespective of gender, beliefs or sexual orientation" (HIVOS).⁵

The selection criteria, however, went beyond considerations to participants' mere familiarity with the partnership arrangement but to include respective experience in advocacy work, geographical representation as well as an appreciation of cooperative efforts between the Netherlands and Zimbabwean civil society. I had also to consider their mandate and its relevance to this research.

The snowballing effect explains a chain of contacts and leads obtained to begin from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the consulted partners as they took turns to help me connect dots that form the network.

Further to the selection criteria, the interviewing process took a two-phase arrangement. The first involved interactions with the Dutch MoF and its strategic partners' personnel based in The Hague, the Netherlands and the second with their personnel in Zimbabwe. The first phase helped establish a good rapport with these institutions and created easy access to their personnel in Zimbabwe.

⁵ <https://hivos.org/>

This phased interviewing process served to capture data at different levels of reporting. The idea was for the research to benefit more from engaging both personnel at the management level (The Netherlands) and the functioning level (Zimbabwe). The personnel grounded at the functioning level were assumed to be more informed and richer in information compared to their parent offices.

Secondary data

The research was strengthened with a consultation with existing literature on civic space, civil society and NGOs in development work, as well as reports from the organizations, consulted in this research. The literature helped establish a firm understanding of the trends around the state of civic space around the globe and in Zimbabwe as well as the corresponding mobilizations ranging from local, regional to global efforts. In addition, it further enriched the theories on which this research is grounded on.

1.4.2. Data analysis

The study was largely qualitative in nature and the analysis took the form of an inductive process in which data was thematically organized, analyzed and summarised according to trends established during the research process. The approach was borrowed from Nowell et al's (2017) ideas on thematic analysis and with the intention to achieve a systematic and auditable analysis. Attempts were also made to support the process with a computer qualitative data analysis package; ATLAS.ti8.

Central to the process were efforts to making sense out of the recorded audio interviews, reflexive journal entries, notes, and reviewed documents. It was also a non-linear process involving familiarisation with the data itself, generating initial codes, searching, reviewing and redefining of themes. For instance, it was from such processes from which the broad pathways to the partnerships attempt to address the problem of closing civic space. Lapadat (2010:2) describes it as a “process of closely inspecting text to look for recurrent themes, topics, or relationships, and marking similar passages with a code or label to categorize them for later retrieval and theory-building”.

The ATLAS.ti8 was more useful in further narrowing the initial and abstract codes to relatively specific and relevant patterns. The package made it possible and easier to zoom into the initial dimensions from which the partners engage with the advocacy for civic space such as international advocacy. It, therefore, helped in further the clustering the data into context-specific themes and simultaneously facilitating the analysis, and presentation of findings in a chronological frame.

1.5. Research Ethical Dilemmas

The research setting presented several ethical dilemmas. The first relates to my position as a Zimbabwean researcher attempting to understand the relations between the Dutch and Zimbabwean entities in the discussion. In O’Leary’s (2004;42) wisdom, it brought with it certain biases in methodological choices, reasoning, and interpretation of certain aspects during the research journey. The matter was compounded by my background working for a Zimbabwean civil society organization over the past seven years. For instance, the DSO/MO personnel interviewed presented the ‘Strategic Partnership’ programme as a first of its own kind, yet I was involved in a USAID supported programme sharing the same niche and a relatively similar structure as far back as the year 2012.

The second relates to the positionality of the selected interview participants. The people most knowledgeable to the ‘strategic partnership’ under study are involved in the implementation of the policy instrument. The main challenge, therefore, lies in these professional and social intimate ties between the partnership arrangement and involved actors. More glaringly, consulting them on the ‘strategic partnership’ instrument in some way was tantamount to a discussion on their professional abilities as well as their source of income. Yet, avoiding them was not an option as they are probably the people with the richest information on the subject matter.

These dilemmas typify some of the challenges associated with the chosen purposive and snowballing techniques. In as much as they facilitate an entry point into a ‘closed network’, Heckathorn (1997:174), warns of a possible collusion and manipulation of the chain of referrals process. The respondents may capitalize on it to conceal what they consider unsuitable for public consumption (Heckathorn 1997: 174).

The other challenge was on access to some of my target interview participants. For instance, my initial list of target participants was composed of people of diverse backgrounds as part of efforts to balance the narratives on the subject under study. The list included seasoned individuals, knowledgeable about traditional Dutch-Zimbabwean civil society cooperation efforts whom I failed to meet over the past two months for two reasons. Three of them did not even respond to my communication efforts. The other two were in Zimbabwe observing elections under the EU observer mission. I had also to do three of my interviews through a WhatsApp call, otherwise, with resources permitting, I would have preferred a face to face interview.

1.6. Ethical Considerations

The sensitivity of the matter and the accompanying dilemmas discussed above called for an equal measure of responsibility and considerations to ethics. Leaning on Brynman and Bell's (2007) ten-point principles of ethical considerations, the safety of research participants was of high priority especially as read in the context of the sensitivity of the matter which I understood in two ways.

The first is a donor-recipient relationship between my participants from Zimbabwe and the Dutch International NGOs. Being recipients to the support of the Dutch government, and the Northern partners, the level of positivism I observed on participants from the Zimbabwean civil society was tempting to suspect the influence of monetary and material ties at play. It, therefore, goes without a say that the comments from the bottom end were nothing short of positive comments. The second relates to the implications of disclosing how these parties cooperate to the lobby and advocate against the Zimbabwean government's positions on the different and specific matter.

Having processed the contributions from these participants and figured the possible damage, in terms of both the donor-CSOs and the government-CSO relations, it was incumbent upon me as a researcher to take some measures to protect those relationships and broadly ensure no harm caused during research processes (Brynman and Bell, 2007). It is for that reason that most interviewees in this research are anonymized and partners on the Zimbabwean side are addressed by their line of work respectively. The decision had to be taken regardless of some of them through agreed to participate with their actual names.

It is also important to highlight that this act of due diligence was mainstreamed throughout the research process i.e. from preparation, field work to the processing of data. This included paying attention to the need for informed consent; not only to participate in the interview but to include permission to record the interviews. The interviewees also retained the right to withdraw their contribution at any point in a moment. In fact, I had one participant who on second thought had to request for his views to be withdrawn. Participants also had the option to use actual or pseudo-names. All these, together with other processes of due care also reflect the degree of confidentiality conferred to the research process and data collected.

1.7. Research Structure

This research is made up of six chapters. The first chapter is an introduction in which I give an outline of the topic itself and the rationale for focusing on it. It, therefore, consists of components such as the problem at hand, the objectives, its relevance as well as a brief insight into the methodology.

The second is my theoretical framework representing the academic pillars from which my research leans on as well as the lenses through which the study shall be subjected to. The chapter attempts to unpack the concept of civic space, the contestations around the conceptualization of civil society in Europe and the African context as well as the changing role of NGOs which I assume provide a rich understanding to the policy framework from its design to implementation.

The third chapter represents the contextual background; again outlining the obtaining situation from which the research is founded on. It provides an overview of the state of civic space, from local (Zimbabwe) level to the global level. It also provides a coverage of known current efforts to counter limitations of civic space. In this chapter, I also attempt to unpack the ‘dialogue and dissent’ policy framework, from structure to the envisaged pathways pursuant to supporting the political role of civil society organizations in the Global South.

Chapter four is a presentation of the research findings. I present the ways embedded within the Netherlands government’s support of the political role of the civil society in Zimbabwe. These broadly range from the initiatives by the Netherlands MoFA, delegated duties performed by embassies, the thematic based dimension embedded in partnerships as well as trickle-down effects from transitional activism.

Chapter five is an analysis of the findings; where I present general patterns of the partnership arrangement in relation to civic space and in the context of Zimbabwe.

The paper finalizes with a summary and concluding remarks drawn from the discussion. It also highlights potential future research areas.

Chapter 2 : North-South civil society cooperation amidst shrinking space

This chapter further defines the course the study takes and draws on various literature on capacity development support within the context of civil society and the changing role of NGOs. Those dimensions shall, however, be preceded by a brief insight into civic space as a concept and how it is understood in different space and time. The idea is also to review accompanying intricacies and establish a possible nexus between partnerships, the changing role of NGOs and civic space. The concluding remarks of the section will focus on the role and effects the ‘Partners’ are assumed to have in promoting and/or hindering the advocacy for civic space in Zimbabwe.

2.1. Conceptualizing Civil Society

This research leans on the characterization of civil society as “an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values” (White 1994:379).

This definition is broad enough to accommodate diversity in terms of the structure and activities of actors recognized under the ‘Strategic Partnerships’ programme. An inclusive understanding of this concept is important especially considering the policy’s recognition of the omissions characterizing the concept of civil society and the subsequent commitment to apply an inclusive interpretation regarding who and what is permissible (ToC 2017:7). This therefore also allows for an analysis of how the selected partners understand and apply it in their efforts to counter the shrinking space.

It, however, remains imperative to unpack the sources and nature of differences around the interpretation and application of this concept. Hossain et al (2018) posit that an understanding of the concept of civil society generally takes two dimensions. The first is embedded in the liberal thinking in which ‘voluntary associationalism’ is considered key in balancing the power of the state and the market (Hossain et al, 2018:18). The second the Gramscian view of civil society as a contested space situated in a capitalist system and within which the activities of civil society “serve to support the power (or hegemony) of the ruling class and their state, substantially within the constraints of the economic system but it can also be a space for contestation and challenge to political and economic power” (Hossain et al, 2018:18).

Gready and Robins (2017) however contend that the sector-bound classification of civil society (i.e. Civil Society/3rd sector, Private and State) is problematic and stands as a source for a misleading perception that civil society exists to play an intermediary or corrective role under circumstances where the other two sectors have failed to deliver. To that end, they have called for a need to move into a 'corrective' civil society discourse to do away with sector-bound explanations and rather accept the overlaps by suggesting civil society 'spaces'. (Gready and Robins, 2017: 11). The approach also allows for the recognition of diverse civil society activities beyond the organized institutions and civil activities.

Fowler and Biekart (2013:2-4) are further of the view that neo-liberal narratives have manipulated this concept through a "selective application of theories consistent with liberal market democracy" and to serve desired ideological interests. A good given example is the narrowed understanding of civil society equating it to formally organized institutions

Yet, much of the associational forms that characterize the thick web of socio-political life in Africa is not formal and is usually omitted in the aid narratives (Fowler, 2014:422; Wahed 2017). A related argument to this selective understanding of the concept of civil society and the conditions that accompany it is that it has depoliticized the role of civil society through a process of incentives and disincentives (Banks et al, 2015). These definitional and interpretive inconsistencies have in turn made it difficult to use the concept as a point of reference.

To that end, Fowler (2014:417) made a compelling argument that "...the way authors use the concept of civil society is self-referential to the theory in which it is embedded, making sound empirical comparisons impossible". And pursuant to the same, Biekart (2018)⁶ added clarity by subjecting the concept to normative, descriptive and pluralist dimensions. And for him, White's (1994) definition constitute the pluralist conceptualization while Crook's (2000) understanding of civil society as "all types of self-chosen group-based activity which has grown out of interest divisions in society, and which are not formally part of the state" may represent the descriptive dimension. This definition accommodates 'uncivil' forms of association. And normatively, he cites Diamond's (1997) understating of civil society as "voluntary associations organized according to democratic principles, associations which are independent of the state and narrow parochial, vested interests".

⁶ Adapted from the lecture presentation on civic driven change and civil society on 19 April 2018

2.2. Problematizing Civic space

Civic space is broadly defined in terms of the preconditions necessary for the functioning of civil society and constitutes part of indicators to any democratic society (Oxfam, 2017; CIVICUS, 2017; ICNL; Edwards, 2014; Malena, 2015; Hossain et al 2018).

There are however overlaps between the concepts of civil society and civic space to the effect that the latter is perceived as part of successive efforts to address imagined irregularities with the former (Wahed, 2017:11; Fowler & Biekart 2013: 463). Yet, Hossain et al (2018:13) seem to dismiss any redress when they make a revelation that discussions around closing civic space are still largely discussed within the aid system and particularly framed within the international human rights context. These inconsistencies for a start point to lack of clarity on what exactly constitute these preconditions and which of them matters the most. This, therefore, gives the zeal to inquire into how then the threats around it are unfolding, understood and combated.

The Civic Space Watch gives a more inclusive conceptualization by defining civic space as “the political, legislative, social and economic environment which enables citizens to come together, share their interests and concerns and act individually and collectively to influence and shape policy-making” (Civic Space Watch)⁷. It seems clear, however, that the focus in this definition is on highlighting broadness and diversity, hence the effort to frame it in a way that acknowledges the multiple environmental angles. However, the definition seems to fall short of clarity on the properties of these abstract environmental dimensions.

However, a modest definition that explicitly unpacks what constitutes this enabling environment is from Oxfam (2017) which characterizes civic space as “the structures, processes and legal instruments, and the absence of restrictions that make it possible for citizens to associate, organize and act, whether formally or informally, individually or collectively, on issues of interest to them”. A similar conceptualization is shared by Malena (2015:14) who presents civic space as a determinant of citizens’ ability to freely, effectively and without discrimination exercise their basic civil rights.

Yet, the concept also seems to suffer from selective and customized conceptualizations, particularly carrying a legal and political skewness. Further to the political and legal biases, the dominant narratives are often mean to construe the indicators of the prevalence of civic

⁷ <https://civicspacewatch.eu/what-is-civic-space/>

space (i.e. fundamental freedoms of association, expression, and assembly) as the actual definition. For instance, the International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) through its Civic Freedom Monitor looks at it in terms of the legal challenges to civic freedoms (ICNL).⁸ The Freedom House's reports from which its accounts pay tribute to are also laced with political rights and civil liberties bias. Likewise, the "CIVICUS Monitor's working understanding of civic space is kept intentionally narrow", focusing on the fundamental freedoms which are assumed to be the basis for civil society advocacy (CIVICUS).⁹

The dialogue and dissent policy framework acknowledges the diversity of the properties by giving elaborate distinctions according to three fields of study and functions (D&DToC 2017: 31-33). The first relates to the practitioners' conceptualizations as discussed above. The 2nd is the sociological dimension that looks at "the impact of national contextual factors on civil society related aspects such as the (financial) size of the non-profit sector, CSO membership, and volunteering" (D&DToC 2017: 31). The third is the political science and social movements' theories employed in analyzing "the threats and opportunities in the political system for social action" (D&DToC 2017: 31). However, the policy framework equally takes an approach with political and legal connotations.

These are 'political' biases that exist both in theory and practice, notwithstanding the interconnectedness of these environmental dimensions. Yet, Fowler (2014:11-12) presents us with an elaborate reflection on how intertwined these dimensions are, and the examples in which non-political factors have equally and significantly affected the functions of civil society actors in different parts of the world. For instance, he made the following observations on Sierra Leone

"poverty and the harsh impact on children and youth – as combatants and sex slaves – has created an inter-generational problem for establishing trusted relationships that civil society needs in order to function" (Fowler 2014:12)

In factoring in the socio-economic dimensions of the enabling environment, the argument hinges on survival regarded as "the priority for collective action and associational life" (Fowler 2014:11). From such observations, I remain so skeptical about the efficacy of selectivity or treating these properties in isolation.

The last but not least is a concern which, for purposes of this discussion I will frame in the agency-structure language of the systems theory as it remains complicated as to which

⁸ www.icnl.org/research/monitor/

⁹ <https://monitor.civicus.org/whatis-civicspace/>

between civic actors and civic space is the product of the other. Many scholars to include the dialogue and dissent policy framework are agreed on the conceptualisation of civic space as a precondition to the functions of civil society and or that the success of civil society depends on structural and institutional arrangements in the country they operate in (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Risse et al, 1998; Fowler 2014; Kamstra, 2014; D&DToC 2017). Within that context, the support to lobbying and advocacy work seem to be based on assumption that governments are liberal enough to allow for the operations of civil society. Yet, this research comes in the back of the closing of such space and focuses on the ability of civic actors, to influence those conditions.

2.3. The Changing role of NGOs

The idea on ‘the changing role of (development) NGOs’ draws from a growing literature calling for NGOs to take a political role in development work (Banks et al, 2015; Fowler and Biekart 2013, Fowler 2014, Edwards, 2005, Edwards 2010; Brass 2016). The idea comes in the back of critiques to the domination of the service delivery role embedded in the neo-liberal narratives of development. It is further premised on assumptions that the real challenge to issues of poverty and inequality lies in societal asymmetrical power relations, hence the need to nurture interventions with the ability to alter such structural problems.

Edwards (2005) traces the call to the New Policy Agenda of the early 1990s when NGOs were co-opted as preferred driving engines of its political and economic objectives. His stock-take further cites the Birmingham conference in 1999 that called for adjustment of NGO roles in accordance with the changing global trends. It also remains important to highlight that this research is biased towards the activities of International NGOs.

In my attempt to unpack the changing role, I wish to acknowledge the challenges associated with generalizing the conduct of NGOs across the globe or even at the continental level. There is a growing consensus that the sector has grown big, both in size and diversity and hence, exceptions are bound to exist (Hearn, 2007; Fowler and Biekart, 2013; Fowler, 2014). However, I pick three interrelated topical issues surrounding this political role. First is the shift in focus from service delivery (economic) to advocacy role (political) as already mentioned. The second is an accompanying change in approach; symbolically a move from the managerial to a social transformative approach to development or at least an integration of the two. The third is a crosscutting discussion about the efficacy of NGOs assuming this political role.

The key features of the proposed approach include flexibility and shared responsibilities in interactions between Northern development partners and civil society organizations in the global south. Edward (2010) explains it in terms of the need for efforts to integrate expert knowledge with indigenous knowledge. He emphasizes the need to "...invest in the knowledge-making and interpretive capacities of the broadest range possible of the population, especially among disadvantaged or excluded groups who can then provide more accountability and feedback, challenge accepted notions of what is needed or effective and bring their own ideas to the table (Edward 2010:5).

These ideas are further echoed by Sousa Santos (2014) in his 'epistemologies of the south' framework which Escobar (2016:13) describes as the "most compelling and practical framework for social transformation to emerge at the intersection of the Global North and the Global South, theory and practice, and the academy and social life in many decades". The idea put forward stresses the need for a compromise marked by a shift from elitist ideas presumably from which dominant development approaches are founded on (Edward 2010).

However, how these ideas unfold in practice largely reflect a self-serving restructuring of the aid system in the face of criticism to its rigid and technocratic traditional approaches as opposed to a genuine recognition of knowledge and capacities of actors in the global south (Hearn, 2007: 1101; Carothers, 2015). For Hearn (2007), the International NGOs are agents of neo-imperialism. She further describes these changes in approach as a process of 'Africanising NGOs' that follows the realization that the "heavy white foreign presence, with its overtones of colonialism, was politically unsustainable" (Hearn, 2007: 1101). Pender (2007) as cited in Hearn (2007: 1099) characterizes the 'partnership', arrangement as a situation in which "Africans now 'own' Northern neoliberal policies".

The underlying argument to this dimension is that partnerships are self-serving and cautions readers from over glorifying the unfolding of calls for recognition of indigenous knowledge. For Carothers (2015), it is the closure of civic space in the global south that force funding partners to operate remotely or through local NGOs.

This leads us into several contentious issues on the operations of international NGOs in Africa. In my essay on the 'role of International NGOs in human rights work in Zimbabwe'¹⁰, I discussed the challenges with financial and material support as well as the subsequent ability of these institutions to upset the structural and societal power arrangements. And The positioning of NGOs and CSOs chronicled herein relates to the dilemma with

¹⁰ This was an essay I produced as part of the course 'Social movements and civic innovation'

donor support to the former's long-term goals of 'transformative social justice' (Banks et al, 2015). The critical views revolve around the effects of the direction and flow of financial and material support which in turn compromises the legitimacy and accountability of NGOs and CSOs in the execution of their duties.

A widely shared view is that the aid system has a bias on formalized approach typified by an obsession with targets and outcomes at the expense of the long-term development goals they purportedly exist to address (Hearn 2007; Banks et al 2015 and Edwards 2005; Fowler and Biekart 2013 and Fowler 2016). For Banks et al (2015) the professionalization of development work has had an effect to erode and depoliticize participatory approaches, reduce cultural sensitivity and compromise the core values as "NGOs become implementers of donor policy rather than independent actors" (Banks et al 2015: 710).

Hearn (2007: 1107) had a relatively similar view describing African NGOs as managers of donors and northern governments' budgets than development projects.

It is also important to highlight that it is within the same aid system in which the concept of civil society largely assumes a narrow and professionalized understanding as donors prioritize working with formal institutions with the capacity to master the technical requirements it comes with (Banks et al 2015: 710).

A context-based example that seems to confirm this commercialized route to development is from DFID's (2012) declaration on its duty in Zimbabwe...

"... to show that we are achieving value for money in everything we do... and that ... In Zimbabwe, DFID will embed a strong focus on value for money, monitoring, and evaluation, ensuring all feedback is effectively incorporated." (DFID 2012:2).

Jeater (2011) had an explicit comment on state-funded Northern NGOs operating in Zimbabwe that "regardless of their rhetoric, these organizations are primarily answerable to their taxpayers and thereby to their electorates". Sharing the same view is Mutua (2001:151) who suggests that it is "only after conceding that INGOs indeed have a specific political agenda can... conversations about the post-liberal society start in earnest."

Among Banks et al's (2015) ideas was to expose the unhelpfulness in the technocracy and prescriptive tendencies embedded in the aid system which include directives for NGOs to concentrate on service delivery roles or resorting to strategic partnerships with governments especially under repressive governments (Banks et al 2015:712). Brass (2016) as cited

in Kushner (2017) shares relatively similar views that service delivery roles may pacify the citizenry and lower their demand for democracy.

However, Kushner (2017) on the hand argues that a taste of a good life that comes with service delivery may as well inspire citizens to organize and demand their political rights as means to protect the material gains they would have realized (Kushner 2017). Batley and Rose (2011) as cited in Banks et al (2015) further celebrates governments-NGOs partnerships claiming that they present an “opportunity for NGOs to pursue their civil society functions through stealth rather than contestation, demonstrating through partnerships strategies for more effective and democratic service provision” (Banks et al 2015: 712).

This paper does not dismiss the contradictions and controversial side of NGOs and CSOs work but still finds the merits for partnerships outweighing the negativities. The essay remains guided by the view that exceptions always exist and therefore the experiences and operations of these entities do not need to be generalized.

2.4. The envisaged net effect: local and beyond

The immediate beneficiary to the activities of the partnership arrangement in this context is the Zimbabwean civil society. However, that the threats to civic space are framed as a global challenge (D&DToc, 2017), successes in Zimbabwe are equally considered a victory to the global challenge probably envisaged through trickle-down effects. The point I am trying to drive home is that the net effect of the dialogue and dissent policy framework and supporting the political role of civil society has an effect to force states to comply with global treaties.

And while central to global compliance are concerns around adherence to treaties or its lack thereof, the contribution of the dialogue and dissent policy framework needs to be understood in terms of the link between the subject of civic space as defined in terms of fundamental human freedoms and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR1948) as a funding source. Therefore, any intervention to support the respect, fulfillment, and protection civic space should equally be seen as a contribution towards global compliance or at least specific treaties and international instruments that support it.

Therefore, by supporting the political role of CSOs in the global south and further commit to protect the political space under which they operate, the dialogue and dissent policy framework and subsequent interventions articulated in the previous section conform to theories of international advocacy networks upon which the connection between International

NGOs and global compliance are premised on. Global compliance is founded on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and subsequent treaties and optional protocols that constitute international law (Gauri and Gloppen 2012). Through this dimension, human rights treaties are presumed to have a significant role in influencing member states to change policies in positive ways. The functions are further defined along legal and political lines (Gauri and Gloppen, 2012). The legal aspect speaks to the power that lies in the act of ratification as it implies commitment and binding to member states, while the latter relates to presumed costs associated with failure to comply; framed in the language of acculturation process of norm-violating governments into the international human rights system (Risse et al, 1998:25; Risse 2013 et al: preface)¹¹.

However, more relevant to this research is the role apportioned to International NGOs and the Civil Society in promoting the aforesaid compliance. International NGOs are presented as drivers of advocacy, grounded in transnational activism (Keck and Sikkink, 1998 and Riise-Kloppen et al, 1998). They put pressure on governments to adopt and internalize international norms. Neumayer (2005) as cited in Gauri and Gloppen (2012: 490) states that “civil society strength increases the likelihood of compliance with human rights treaties”.

However, the effectiveness of this dimension remains a subject of debate. Gauri and Gloppen (2012:490) argue that “partial and non-compliance are common than full compliance” and further argue that the major challenge is the “absence of a political authority above states”. Furthermore, Keck and Sikkink (1998) finds that the success of advocacy networks also depends on the nature of political institutions within which they operate.

¹¹ Refer to the 3rd phase of Risse et al’s (1998) spiral model of human rights change on how norm-violating states gave in to the human rights language.

Chapter 3 : The Netherlands' Partnerships model

3.1. The transition from economic to political role

The dialogue and dissent policy framework presents a trajectory shift to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs' approach to its interactions with civil society organizations; primarily from capacity building for service delivery (economic role) to supporting lobbying and advocacy activities (political role) (*DSO/SO Researcher*)¹². The idea is informed by the assumption that the problems of exclusion, inequality, and poverty the world faces, are complex and embedded in asymmetrical power relations - hence the need to support the political role of civil society (D&DToc 2017). The assumption is that a strengthened lobbying and advocacy capacity of civil society organizations aids the potential to influence the drivers of change (D&DToc 2017).

Furthermore, the policy framework's agenda is to part ways with the 'managerial' approach to development. By managerial approach, the Ministry basically refers to the top-down development approaches embedded in the neo-liberal arrangement in which the civil society organizations in the global south are viewed as passive recipients of instructions from the ideologically and technically rich institutions from the global north (D&DToc2017). In the managerial sense, CSOs role is seen as to implement projects originated by donors in their form and design. In this new arrangement, the Netherlands government assumes a partner role as opposed to the 'big brother' tag entrenched in the aid narrative, and risks and responsibilities are shared with its strategic partners.

Džigurski (2016) however observed that there is more to what informed this change in policy direction than the simplistic explanations of the need to support the lobbying and advocacy role. His research on alternative explanations to the 'Strategic Partnership' profiles the change as a response to an interplay of many forces ranging from the waning legitimacy of international cooperation compounded with challenging power dynamics at national and organizational levels to a deliberate internal systematic reflection on the Dutch International Cooperation efforts.

For instance, the legitimacy crisis landed the Dutch International Cooperation efforts in a tricky situation that required innovation and creativity to retain relevance. Budgets were

¹² For purposes of maintaining a systematic referencing pattern, this research italicises all contributions from interviewees.

cut, and it is in the same sense that Džigurski (2016:60) argues that the partnership arrangement was a culmination of mounting pressure on the Dutch government to “spend less on development cooperation and spend more in the Netherlands”. The policy framework, therefore, in that context is seen as a cost-cutting measure and switching to the political role was a creative way to remain relevant in the face of the limited resources. Simply put, the economic role could not be sustained with small budgets. Džigurski (2016) also expressed it as having been an act of managing pessimists and critics of development cooperation within the Netherlands’ coalition government.

The accompanying explanations centers around positive ideas that “partnerships are beneficial, efficient and effective (Džigurski 2016: 21) This is premised on economics’ theories of comparative advantages of specializations and development work is envisaged to benefit more from the recognition of knowledge and abilities of civil society organizations in the global south. A related reasoning is the thinking that being political is strategic in the sense that it allows actors to “engage into policy processes instead of intervention” (Džigurski 2016: 21).

A further resonance is founded on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Džigurski (2016) observes that the Netherlands operates “within the SDGs architecture and the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation”. And indeed, the ‘Strategic Partnership’ arrangement is in sync with UN (2015:10) resolution on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to apportion CSOs with the role to “facilitate an intensive global engagement in support of implementation of all the Goals and targets, bringing together Governments, the private sector, civil society, the United Nations system and other actors and mobilizing all available resources”. Most relevant to this research is SDG 16 that seeks to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.” (SDGs).¹³

It is in the same sense that this paper locates this policy framework and related mobilization efforts within global concerns that the development discourse has failed to end social injustice such as poverty and inequality despite having been in existence for over five decades purporting to deal with same problems (Alejandro Leal 2007:539). At its peak, the backlash

¹³ <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/>

came to the proposition that it is “time to think about alternatives to development instead of alternative ways of reaching development in the Third World” (Ziai 2007: foreword).

3.2. Mapping the partnership in the study context

The immediate focus in examining the strategic partnership bordered around five identified entities namely, The Netherlands MoFA, NIMD, HIVOS, and two Zimbabwean civil society groups which for ethical reasons are characterized as the Policy Think-tank and Young-Women group respectively.

The Netherlands community is, however, not new to the support for lobbying and advocacy work. And neither is it new to cooperating with Zimbabwean civil society actors and the Southern African Region at large.

The Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa (NIZA) Archives holds insurmountable evidence to the effect that Dutch institutions have been supporting the lobbying and advocacy work of civil society groups in Zimbabwe since time immemorial.¹⁴ This interest in Southern African affairs is rooted in “early Dutch colonization of South Africa, traditional religious connections, links with the Afrikaner language, and the relatively large number of Dutch emigrants in South Africa” (NIZA).

In addition to the Dutch’s anti-apartheid mobilization efforts in the region, the Dutch community too supported the liberation movements in Zimbabwe (NIZA). For instance, The Netherlands in 1974 “co-organised a Seminar on sanctions against white Rhodesia with the Transnational Institute (TNI) in November... with both Dutch participants and speakers from liberation movements and other liberation support groups” (NIZA). On 11 December 1992, it convened a seminar in Amsterdam on the legal position of women in Southern Africa that featured speakers from Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique and Namibia (NIZA).

HIVOS, on the other hand, published a pocketbook “Zakboek Zimbabwe” in September 1986 as part of the national Zimbabwe campaign (NIZA). It contained background information on Zimbabwe and tips and suggestions for campaigns in the Netherlands

Furthermore, the existence of International advocacy networks itself is a testimony. The formation of NIZ in 1997 itself was a merger of three Dutch organizations that focused specifically on solidarity with Southern African struggles. These were “Komitee Zuidelijk

¹⁴ <https://www.aluka.org/struggles/collection/NIZA>

Afrika (Holland Committee on Southern Africa, formerly Angola Comité), the Anti-Apartheids Beweging Nederland (Dutch Anti-Apartheid Movement), and the Eduardo Mondlane Stichting (Eduardo Mondlane Foundation) merged to form the Nederlands Instituut voor Zuidelijk Afrika'' (NIZA). The contemporary networks include the Zimbabwe Watch to the Zimbabwe Europe Network is another confirmation. Similarly, none of the Zimbabwean partners consulted in this research are new to lobbying and advocacy work.

In that regard, I am therefore cautious to consider the political role as new; and neither can I call it a replication of ideas and approaches in their traditional forms. Rather, the distinctive feature is probably the Netherlands government's scaled up efforts or commitment to pursue the political role in supporting civil society as reflecting in both the script of the 'Dialogue and Dissent' and its implementation.

3.3. Chronicles on closing space

Further to my opinion that there is a lack of clarity and consensus on what civic space really is, this section presents a compilation of the diversified dimensions from which the subject has been documented. I, therefore, present the accounts not only to reproduce the inconsistencies in the interpretation of the concept but again to reflect the dominant patterns along which how people experience it in different space and time and how that seemingly influence reactions to the limitations confronting it.

The point of departure shall, however, be a Zimbabwe-specific experience relating to interpretations around the November 2017 military assisted power transfer. Being a relatively fresh experience, most of what is known are opinions and the most competing are those scrutinizing the legitimacy of the military hand or its lack thereof. The military intervention came on the pretext that the succession dispute in the ruling party (ZANU PF), on who was to take over from the 94-year-old Robert Mugabe, was becoming a national security threat (Chiwenga)¹⁵. The deposed president, Robert Mugabe contends that the act amounted to a subversion of democratic principles and ZANU PF's own values of "politics leading the gun" and not vice versa as was the case in Zimbabwe¹⁶. Handmaker (2018), on the other

¹⁵ This was the statement issued by Chiwenga as justification for military intervention accessed on 18 August 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgDmEOM1x3c>

¹⁶ An excerpt from Mugabe's statement during a press conference at his home on the 29th of July 2018.

hand, posits that “most liberal, constitutional democracies permit the military to intervene during states of emergency, albeit under specifically prescribed and narrow circumstances”.¹⁷

It is, however, the implications on civic space and not the rationale of the intervention which is of interest to this research. And in an incident that seemingly confirms that it was fundamentally wrong and deceptive to rope in the military on the pretext of safeguarding national interests, seven people were shot dead by uniformed military personnel on the 1st of August 2018 during a protest on ‘delayed’ announcement of the 30th July harmonised election results (Newsday 2018). To date, no one accepted the responsibility of having instructed the military personnel to get into the streets to shoot or at least control the protesters. A commission of inquiry on the matter was set up and investigations are still ongoing.

The shootings came on top of a queer situation in which the military appeared to have taken control of every dimension of the day to day running of the state. For approximately a month, all state-owned broadcasting services (television and radio stations), the print and online news outlets were literally controlled by the military (IOL 2017, Munhende, 2018). Private media companies were constantly reminded to “*report what was happening accurately*”, and coming from the military, this produced a deterring effect (*TellZimbabwe Editor*). The traffic control duties (management of roadblocks) also went to the military approximately for six months (Munhende 2018). This even explains the reason why the military is implicated on August 1, post-election violence; approximately eight months after the departure of former president Robert Mugabe. Furthermore, the new Vice President in April 2018 gave an order for dismissal of the entire public healthcare nurses who went on strike demanding better working conditions, an increase in salaries and availability of drugs in public health centers (Chronicle 2018).¹⁸ All these seem to justify the sentiments that the executive arm of the state is not a domain of the army but the civilians (*University of Johannesburg Lecturer-Ruhanya*).

Putting it differently, Musarurwa (2018) wrote of civic space in Zimbabwe in terms of politically related constraints to youth participation in electoral and governance processes. Kagoro (2005) and Karekwaivenane (2012) corroborates the view of suppressed freedoms in Zimbabwe through separate narrations on how the state made use of law to thwart dissenting voices at different times and space.

¹⁷ This was a comment made during the presentation of the first draft seminar on 22 May 2018

¹⁸ <https://www.voazimbabwe.com/a/general-chiwenga-retires-military-coup/4169161.html>

A complementary body of knowledge covers collective efforts to counter civic space at an international level. These include theories on how global efforts are struggling to materialize or have triggered a backlash from repressive governments (Edwards, 2014; Kamstra, 2014; Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014; Carothers, 2015; Rutzen, 2015; Brechenmacher, 2017). However, what distinguishes this dimension the most is its attempt to summarise the triggers of closing space at a global level and the most cited excuse borders around anti-terrorism projects (Kamstra, 2014; D&DToc, 2017; Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014; Hossain Et al, 2018).

3.4. The North and Zimbabwe relations

The case of Zimbabwe is interesting not only because it falls within the jurisdictions classified as repressive as according to the CIVICUS (2017) report, but also considering the bad relations between Zimbabwe and the Western World dating back to the year 2000. Zimbabwe was put under economic sanctions by the European Union and the United States of America for its bad record on governance and human rights (The Guardian, 2002; ZIDERA 2001).

Despite the continuous revisions to these sanctions over time and based on the latter's own assessments, the association of NGOs with the Western world has been a major inhibitive factor to their operations. The Zimbabwean government used the sanctions as a scapegoat to thwart operational space for NGOs and any other civic actors suspected to have a connection with the Western World (Chakawarika, 2011). Their relationship with the Western countries have earned them the label 'agents of the regime change agenda' and are further seen as responsible for the political and economic problems the country faces (The Guardian, 2002; Chakawarika, 2011). It, therefore, becomes imperative to investigate how the Dutch government and its partners protect the civic space for advocacy work in a territory in which they double as a contributing factor to closing civic space.

3.5. The frame for countering closing space

The 'Dialogue and Dissent's commitment to countering the downward spiraling of civic space is informed by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department of the Ministry (IOB) evaluation of the year 2015 that states that "...indeed donors can help defend the operational space for conducting advocacy activities" (D&DToc 2017:9). Furthermore, the

policy framework recognizes that “changing power relations often needs and/or breeds friction and conflict”, hence the pledge by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to protect its partners in hostile environments and in “lobbying for improved political space” (D&DToc 2017: 9).

The policy is in sync with emerging calls for partnerships in international development premised on the assumption that the problems the world faces today are interconnected and requires scaled-up international cooperation efforts (CIVICUS 2017; CIRI 2011; dialogue and dissent policy 2016-2020). This brings a trajectory shift from the traditionally localized approaches to analyzing and understanding limitations to civic space.

The envisaged advocacy strategies in repressive environments are grounded in the Political Opportunity Structure’s (POS) theorization of states and societies as “complex and multi-layered” thereby correspondingly presenting multiple entry points (D&DToc 2017: 35). Furthermore, the policy framework contends that restrictive environments do not “necessarily coincide with a weak civil society” but rather change them from formal to informal entities (D&DToc 2017:35). The thinking further borrows from Balassiano and Pandi’s (2013) ideas as cited in Montero (2017:8) that Malaysia and Thailand are examples of countries in which civil society flourishes despite the limited provision of the freedoms of speech and assembly.

In reaction to these diminishing trends, the policy framework technically presents the advocacy for civic space as crosscutting in its support of the political role of civil society organizations. At a broader level, the ministry participates in many regional and international advocacy initiatives. At EU level, the Netherlands is part of the “Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment and...is also a member of the ‘Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society’ of the ‘Community of Democracies’.” (D&DToc 2017:14).

Embassies are also entrusted with delegated duties such as the identification and challenging “restrictions in a specific country or to provide political support to an organization under threat.” (D&DToc 2017:14)

Furthermore, the alertness to civic space is presumably backed by a research component. This research function is steered in partnership with the WOTRO Science for Global Development division of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). And to cater for easy access to the research material by end users, the ministry makes use of a knowledge platform running under the name INCLUDE. The end users in this context are largely the strategic partners to the policy framework and the idea is for their programming

to tap into the scientific and empirical knowledge base as part of efforts to promote evidence-based advocacy initiatives (NWO 2018). Thus, INCLUDE brings together “researchers from African countries and the Netherlands who work with the private sector, NGOs and governments to exchange knowledge and ideas on how to achieve better research policy-linkages on inclusive development in Africa” (INCLUDE).

In addition, the ministry has an arrangement with CIVICUS and the International Centre for Not for Profit Law (ICNL). The Netherlands government supports these institutions for monitoring civic space, produce reports and subsequently coordinate international advocacy platforms on the subject.

Pursuant to the same, both CIVICUS and ICNL make use of indexes to measure civic space (D&DToC 2017). The former runs a ‘Civic Space Monitor’ whilst the latter has the ‘Civic Freedom Monitor’ to its name. The performance measurement scales of both organizations portray Zimbabwe as one of the jurisdictions with a repressed enabling environment. From the framing of the policy framework, these indexes are envisaged to inform interventions and strategies.

Chapter 4 : Closing Civic Space and Perspectives for Action

The policy takes cognizance of the dwindling operational space for civil society organizations across the globe and sets the pathways to counter the problem. The chapter, however, begins with chatting findings on how civic space is understood within the partnership arrangement under study. Such an inquiry had to be made on the firm belief that how the challenge is understood represents the foundation to the corresponding measures and efforts in addressing limitations to civic space.

4.1. Understanding civic space from the partnership perspective

“This is crucial because if you do not have the right to assemble, if you do not have the right to gather your people and organize yourselves, then it is very difficult to do lobbying and advocacy” (DSO/MO Researcher)

The above statement is presented here as a first marker signifying that the concerns of civic space are acknowledged in practice and to begin at the apex of the partnership hierarchy. However, none of the partners had a programme exclusively spelled in the language of addressing specific challenges of closing civic space.

Civic space in this partnership arrangement is framed contextually and particularly seen through the lenses of specific institutional mandates. This lack of a shared definition is pitched at policy level itself and presented as part the flexibility leverage that comes with the shift from a managerial to a social transformative approach. For the DSO/MO Researcher *“Civic space is not one concept which means the same to everybody (DSO/MO Researcher)”*. And true to his words, two of the other consulted partners explained their contributions from different angles. NIMD had this to say,

“...by working with the politicians and the parliament, we amplify the voice of the civil society. Who do they lobby anyway?... it is the politicians” (NIMD Program Manager).

From the Zimbabwean side, I had a partner that said;

“...When we successfully assisted two child brides to file a court case against the Zimbabwean government over the laws that allowed marriages of children under the age of 18 years in 2016, we were contributing to space for young women in the society. And that’s what we do” (Young Women group).

This research, however, wishes to bring to fore an awkward side of this approach. A colleague of mine asked a question on the sidelines of the draft presentation seminar of these findings that “...if there is no shared definition, how do they measure the ups and downs of the phenomenon? (Jamila)¹⁹” For a moment I thought I had an answer, for I knew of the existence of the CIVICUS and ICNL indexes; an arrangement which the ministry is part of. I also thought the scientific researches which the Ministry seem to be investing a lot in through the INCLUDE knowledge platform is an answer. But again, there is no ministry sanctioned research on ‘strategic partnerships’ in Zimbabwe on the INCLUDE platform thus far.

In addition, there was one component that seems to have remained hanging, and that was something to do with locating the partnership. I find the lack of a shared definition defeating the idea of partnership or collective effort towards the challenge at hand. In as much as I acknowledge the centrality of ‘flexibility’ in the strategic partnership programme, it remains a bit confusing to understand how they cooperate within the network with those different understandings.

With that in mind, I also got reminded that the problem of coordination is acknowledged at the apex (Ministry) level. DSO/MO Policy Advisor had this to say,

“We have seen a gap in the integration of country-specific plans with regional platforms ...and the situation has been made worse by limitations of staffing within the Ministry and the responsible department (DSO/MO Policy Advisor).”

These, put together are clear pointers to the deficits in the strategic partnership arrangement and how it unfolds on the ground.

Further to the policy-based approaches, this research identified a two-tier approach in practice. The first is a thematic and relatively context-based approach embedded within the interventions of strategic partners. The second is an international advocacy dimension. It is also important to highlight that international advocacy took on three different forms. The first is direct initiatives by the Netherlands MoFA. The second took the form of delegated duties actioned through the Dutch embassy in Zimbabwe and the final rides on existing and independent networks the dialogue and dissent partners are part too.

¹⁹ Jamila Said Sulu is a fellow Masters student and served as one of my discussants during the draft seminar presentation

4.2. Thematic based arrangements

The first tier takes a thematic and collaborative dimension on which issues of civic space are entrenched within the interventions of strategic partners. The NIMD “*SP program runs under the theme conducive environment for effective policy influencing and was developed in partnership with the Association of European Parliamentarians with Africa*”²⁰ (NIMD Program Manager). It is also implemented through a local partner in Zimbabwe (*Ibid*). And For HIVOS’ advocacy activities around civic space are pursued within programmes such as ‘Right Here Right Now’²¹ and the ‘Women Empowered for Leadership Programme’ (*HIVOS Program Manager*). They are all implemented through a network of local partners in Zimbabwe (*Ibid*).

Through this arrangement, the prioritization of interventions is a prerogative of the strategic partners of the policy framework and not the parent ministry. There are twenty-five strategic partners to the Dialogue and Dissent, most of them participating in thematic based consortiums. The dialogue and dissent, therefore, offer the flexibility on choice from preferred cluster to the formulation of strategies as part of its perceived strength.

Pursuant to that change in approach, “*partners have the freedom to choose who to work with and their areas of interest*” (DSO/MO Policy Advisor). The flexibility is presumed to further its desire to neutralize the traditional managerial approach in which resource holders wields absolute influence on preferences. The arrangement leaves the government as an equal partner with its main leverage being its international and diplomatic recognition in the facilitation of advocacy activities (ToC 2017). The database of those institutions working in Zimbabwe, however, seems to suggest that their programmatic priorities are more informed by their traditional core mandates. However, below are trends that were established:

4.3. Opportunistic Interventions

Further to the text-based pathways to deal with limitations of civic space articulated the policy framework, the partnership thrives on context-specific opportunities. This has to be understood more in the context of the partners’ reactions to my inquiry on their perceptions on the change of government in November 2017.

²⁰ The Association of European Parliamentarians with Africa (AWEPA) was founded in 1984 with a focus on strengthening parliamentary democracy in Africa.

²¹ The ‘Right here, Right Now’ program has a focus on protection, respect and fulfilment of young people’s Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), including girls, young women and young lesbians, gays, bisexuals and trans genders (LGBT).

The whole network from the parent ministry to the organizations on the ground was agreed on that they are capitalizing on the change and relatively permissible environment to simultaneously advance their specific mandates as well as protecting and expanding the given space. For instance, the Policy Think-tank in Zimbabwe was of the view that the *“new dispensation is indebted to prove a change to the world and this also entails opening up for engagement with civil society”* (Policy Think-tank Coordinator). Likewise, HIVOS claimed that the change has provided with *“access to policy and decision makers, both at the party and national level”* (HIVOS Program Manager). In light of the presented opportunities for each of these partners, they, in turn, took chance to scale up their activities.

4.4. Formal and informal adaptation mechanisms

The partners also employ a mix of legit and covert mechanisms in the face of threats to their work. This appears to be in tandem with the policy text that heavily borrows from social movements theories on calculating threats and opportunities ((D&DToC 2017: 35). Selling the ideas through, the DSO/MO Researcher confidently hinted that;

“No matter how closed space is, usually you will find an entry point somewhere. It is never 100% closed” (DSO/MO Researcher).

And again, true to his words, my chats with partners in Zimbabwe established approaches relatively in sync with his words.

The consulted partners hinted having employed discreet and at the same time deceitful means at some point. The young women-oriented group said,

“For those activities that are viewed with suspicion by the system...we sometimes, choose to disguise ourselves as partnering with the government’s (i.e. GoZ) trusted development partners such as UNICEF.” (Young Women group Director)

Further to that, these organizations hinted having convened some underground meetings at some point arguing that all one need is to be calculative to critical issues such as proximity to the police station and who to collaborate with (Young women group). *“And sometimes it even calls for you to bribe the relevant government officials”* (Policy Think-tank Coordinator).

However, what I see in these approaches is that they do not necessarily address the problem; in this case the state’s ruthlessness. Rather, these pathways simply represent the partners’ survival strategies. And if anything, the strategies may have an effect to heighten state suspicions on civil society work and at worst may trigger further persecution of groups

caught on the wrong side of the law. In addition to that, these are strategies which some of them are not comfortable being disclosed to their funding partners.

The formal engagements largely relate to the legit execution of their mandate. These take the form of outreach programmes, litigation, and dialogue with policy and or decision makers. Some of their dialogue initiatives have already been alluded to when reference was made to their conceptualization of civic space earlier.

For instance, the NIMD's multi-party dialogue initiatives in Zimbabwe have "*contributed to the signing of the 2018 election code of conduct and political parties peace agreement*" respectively (NIDM Program Manager). HIVOS, on the other hand, indicated that some of its policy advocacy initiatives under the women empowerment programme are coordinated through reputable and specialist organizations such as the Women's Institute for Leadership Development (WILD) as well as the Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association (HIVOS Program manager). These organizations are apportioned with doing the technical work like engaging policymakers and handling legal proceedings where necessary. The young women-oriented organization as indicated earlier already boasts of having helped successfully challenged the Zimbabwean government in court over the laws allowing marriages of the girl child under the age of eighteen years.

However, the formal pathways have their own share of limitations. The most outstanding is its reliance on the structures and institutions' preparedness to engage or embrace them whatever civic actors try to sell through. And this goes beyond the partners' admission that their work became easier with the end of Mugabe rule. For instance, I questioned the young women representative how they deal with cultural barriers and primarily challenges of patriarchy in their efforts to empower young women. The response pointed to the same idea of adjusting to the dictates of the society to have an easy access to the community.

Probably that's the reason why they marry the formal and informal mechanisms and the idea is to ensure that they complement each other.

4.5. International Advocacy

This research established three interconnected dimensions which international advocacy takes in Zimbabwe. The first is a networking and research component directly coordinated by the parent ministry. The second is a delegated duty through which advocacy is decentralized and pursued through embassies' diplomatic charm. The third arrangement is external and independent networks of the strategic partners to the policy framework. The

following sections shall be an attempt to unpack these identified routes and more so in the context of Zimbabwe.

4.5.1. Ministry-led initiatives

The Theory of Change is the main document that guides the Ministry of the Netherlands on how to support civic space (*DSO/MO Researcher, DSO/MO Policy Advisor*). *“We recently commissioned a research on civic space under pressure and partners will have access to the findings through the INCLUDE platform.” (DSO/MO Researcher).*

However, this research notices a visible disconnect between the CIVICUS/ ICNL and partners programming, the ministry-led initiatives simply exist in a generic framework as articulated in the third chapter of this research. Nothing specific relating to Zimbabwe could be established. There is no research focused on Zimbabwe thus far. Furthermore, the call for proposals for the theme relevant to this research was only made in July 2018 and was due to close in September 2018. This, therefore, means that the work on ‘civic space under pressure’ is still in its infancy.

This research has two possible explanations for the missing link. The first could be that the accelerated resolve to counter closing civic space came on board through the updated theory of change in June 2017, otherwise, it appeared, was not a priority in the initial policy design. The referenced update was partly a culmination of continuous reflections and learning processes (D&DToC 2017). The gap between the lettering of the initial and updated theory of change is a telling story on its own. The former only refers to limitations of civic space as a precondition for meaningful advocacy work, but without putting much emphasis on the magnitude of urgency to respond. The latter transformed the urgency of the matter from just a means to an end to an end into itself. The updated theory of change presents the issue of diminishing civic space as a matter of urgency and both a precondition and goal for the policy framework.

From such a perspective, it, therefore, could mean that the lessons learned are yet to be integrated into the current partners’ programming and possibly would be more reflective in the forthcoming phases. However, given that it is over a year since the last referenced review, the arrangement defeats the flexibility attribute (i.e. effecting adjustments in accordance with changing environments) on which the policy framework prides on.

The second and related explanation lies in a seeming disconnect between the Ministry-CIVICUS/ICNL arrangement and the policy framework itself. For instance, in all the interviews conducted with the ministry officials, this arrangement was visibly treated as isolated

from the other policy instruments under the dialogue and dissent policy framework, albeit its resonance and existence to inform strategic partners' responses to shrinking civic space.

4.5.2. Embassy-led diplomatic offensiveness

The embassy performs delegated duties as set out in the policy framework. However, this research could not establish specific and elaborate mechanisms targeted at ameliorating limitations of civic space in the context of Zimbabwe. Matters of civic space and the subsequent interventions are treated as highly sensitive and therefore participants from both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Netherlands Embassy in Zimbabwe could not be drawn into disclosing how they go about it.

The closest I unearthed was a generic hint that embassies are operated by sophisticated diplomats and opportunities always arise regardless of the magnitude of repressiveness. The word from the ministry was,

“They are diplomats and a lot of what they do, you will not be able to see that; because they do it behind closed doors. They do it in a non-confrontational way” (DSO/MO Researcher).

Efforts to reach out to the Netherlands Embassy in Zimbabwe gathered that they financially and technically support various activities of the Zimbabwean civil society. The embassy also confirmed engagements with the Zimbabwean government on different issues and through various means which among them include engagements meetings and reports on specific and general governance matters. A good and recent example was *“the embassy’ participated in a collective EU member states’ position paper on the post-election violence” (NEZ Political Advisor)*. This followed the brutal attack of protesters demanding the release of harmonized elections on the 1st of August 2018. This came as a fulfillment to the D&DToc’s (2017:14) claims that the Dutch government in partnership with other democratic countries, “works on joint diplomatic or any other action in countries where civil society is repressed.”

My further research on the matter established that issues and experiences on civic space are closely guarded. The policy itself dictates not every finding from researches commissioned on ‘defending civic space’ should be made public (D&DToc 2017). Reports on the subject matter are screened against the degree of risk before publication.

4.5.3. Transnational advocacy networks

The advocacy for civic space in Zimbabwe also benefits from networks outside the dialogue and dissent framework to which its strategic partners are members too. One of such groupings is the Zimbabwe Europe Network (ZEN), which is a conglomeration of more

than 30 CSOs of European origin with an interest on Zimbabwe²². ZEN serves as a platform through which these institutions formulate and exchange ideas on their respective interventions in Zimbabwe. Through such interactions, the platform further functions as an amplifier of Zimbabwean CSOs concerns beyond borders. It is through such networks that European NGOs contributes to policies on Zimbabwe. HIVOS and NIMD are members of this platform.

Further to ZEN, there is another platform running under the name Zimbabwe Watch. Its mission is to “keep Zimbabwe in the public and political spotlight through lobbying, communication work, and networking” (Zimbabwe Watch). However, in an interview with Emiel (2018), I established that its vibrancy seems to be waning due to an apparent duplication of roles with ZEN. ZEN is a much bigger grouping as it is made up of organizations drawn from across Europe. Yet, both organizations seek to lobby decision makers with influence on Zimbabwe at a European Union (EU) level.

However, efforts to reach out to the coordinators of these platforms were futile as they were part of the EU observer mission in Zimbabwe during the time of research.

4.6. Perspectives on change of government

The sentiments from the network on both the change of government and the accompanying enabling environment have already been pre-empted in the ‘opportunistic interventions’ section above. The outstanding and crosscutting observation, was the participants’ hesitation to give a stand-alone position statement regarding the new government. All of them preferred to comment within the confines of the civic space phenomenon.

There was, however, a ‘stray’ comment from the Ministry that awakened me to other possible realities.

“Our position on Zimbabwe is informed by a multiplicity of factors and way bigger than the dialogue and dissent” (MoFA- Africa Desk Advisor).

The statement basically called for a corresponding need to broaden the analytical lenses beyond the physical and glaring limits of the partnership arrangement. The challenge, however, was on establishing what could those other interconnected factors be.

²² www.zimbabwecurope.org/

The common and shared view was, however, that the change of government brought with it an improved operational space compared to the Mugabe era. They echo same sentiments that those in power seem to have relaxed the constraints that used to hamper the enjoyment of fundamental freedoms to assembly, association, and expression. NIMD was cautious enough to say;

“...it is not for us to make a moral judgment about what happened, but it made our work easier...the new president is showing the will to move away from the winners take all attitude that had characterized Zanu PF from the year 2013” (NIMD Program Manager).

Neither was it surprising for me for I also knew it would have had implications on their own operations and most likely negative. The restraint however limited my own chances of identifying biases around the shared perceptions and what informs them.

Further to the granted space, the renewed ruling party, the Zimbabwe National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) leadership is believed to be open for engagement and it is taken as a plus given that the previous leadership is presented as having been of the opposite look. A comment from HIVOs captured it all;

“The ‘Zimbabwe is open for business mantra’ seems to be paying off. We have seen change both at the party and national level. They seem to be cooperating, to include actively participating in many of our initiatives.” (HIVOS program Manager)

However, for HIVOS, the same power change has its own share of drawbacks particularly as read in terms of the empowerment of women. HIVOS claims that the military assisted change of government also oiled the “militarization” of both politics and state institutions and eroded incremental gains towards the political role of women. The argument was that the military in Zimbabwe is dominated by male, and it is not a coincidence that its assumption of a presidential and civilian duty in November 2017 saw a decrease of women representation in both party politics and government in the 2018 harmonized elections. The claims were buttressed on the 2018 elections statistics showing a decline in women representation at council level from 16.2 % in the preceding term to 13.3% in the current leadership.²³ The Zimbabwe Gender Commission (2018) also states that women constitute only 12.4% of the 210 elective National Assembly seats.²⁴

²³ Research Advocacy Unit (2018) “A Gender Audit of the 2018 Elections” Accessed on <http://researchandadvocacyunit.org/publication/womens-programme-12> 8/10/2018

²⁴ <http://kubatana.net/2018/08/17/zimbabwe-gender-commission-preliminary-election-monitoring-report-2018-harmonised-elections/> Accessed on 8/10/2018

A University of Johannesburg (UJ) lecturer was so negative of both the process of change and the actual 'new' administration describing them as a "*façade*" (UJ Lecturer-Dr *Ruhanya*). For him, it is the system which is rotten and not just Mugabe the person. However, an Editor with TellZimbabwe expressed his nervousness pointing to inconsistencies on what is said and what is happening on the ground. "*On one hand we have an administration that highly speaks of respect for fundamental freedoms to include expression, yet they brutally suppress dissenting voices with impunity on the other...it's a tricky moment for journalists*" (TellZimbabwe Editor).

Chapter 5 : Reviewing partnerships and the political role in Zimbabwe

This section proceeds by way of subjecting the research findings to the theories of civil society, civic space and ‘the changing role of NGOs with the hope to establish resonance or its lack thereof. These parallels are drawn with the hope to establish patterns of similarities and dissimilarities between what is theoretically known and the actual practices in Zimbabwe. This will include analyzing how the identified pathways to countering civic space take shape in Zimbabwe. The section further zooms into the political role and examines how it is unfolding. The point of departure, however, zooms into the language as an expression of the extent to which the political is domineering NGOs and CSOs work.

5.1. The changing patterns: ‘Schools of Democracy’

The pathways to defending civic space are framed in a way that portrays the Netherlands government and its strategic partners as schools of democracy. At the level of the wording of the broader policy framework, lies an assumption that these entities have a role to protect the operating space for advocacy work in the Global South (D&DToC 2017:41). The policy also conceptualizes civic space as a homogeneous precondition for advocacy work and the framing of the cause in form of the pursuit for international best practices, with the Netherlands government being the torch bearer in that regard.

The attribute is further reflected at a partner level and NIMD presents a role more appropriate to this research. First and for most, it even defines itself as a school of democracy²⁵ (NIMD). In relation to Zimbabwe, its programming is founded on the collapse of the Government of National Unity in 2013²⁶. The end of the inclusive government brought with it, a ‘winner takes all mentality’ especially on the part of the revolutionary party, Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), hence the identification of the need for a mediation role. NIMD’s role in the context was to support dialogue between political parties. Pursuant to the same, NIMD together with a local partner, instituted an interparty dialogue initiative. The initiative in this context is assumed to have a direct contribution to space.

²⁵ <https://nimd.org/>

²⁶ The Government of National Unity (GNU) was a product of the GPA. It followed a disputed election in June 2008. The GNU therefore subsisted for five years; from 2009 to 2013.

5.2. Recognition of indigenous knowledge(s)

The recognition and advancement of indigenous knowledge are envisaged as both a means and a result. It is a means to the identification of indigenous agents with the potential to influence the drivers of change and an end in the sense of being a characteristic and product of the support for the political role of civil society organizations. It syncs with the ideas of the need to strike a balance between expert knowledge and the popular and indigenous knowledge (Edward, 2010; Fowler, 2014; Santos, 2015). True to that trajectory, the 'dialogue and dissent' is founded on a marked departure from the managerial to social transformative approaches to development. The support of the lobbying and advocacy role of civil society organizations in Zimbabwe and the broader global south is central and envisaged to prop up their chances of representing their interests. Furthermore, all the research participants from within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, from where I largely drew my appreciation of the dialogue and dissent text expressed great emphasis on the capacity development of civil society actors in their advocacy work. *"The idea is to strengthen individuals, formal and informal civil society actors' capacity to demand accountability from their respective governments"* (DSO/MO Policy Advisor).

However, there are certain arrangements that remain problematic to explain or relate to the assumption of the political role. Probably it could be just a challenge embedded in transcending from the managerial to social transformative approaches. I will, however, picture them as below.

5.3. Professionalization of development work

Despite the overwhelming intentions to move away from the managerial development approach, the actual implementation of the policy framework seems to continue entrapped in the same enclave. The terminology of professionalization is borrowed from Banks et al (2015) and basically refers to a commercialized approach to development work. However, reflected in this research is a narrower element relating to the obsession with formalized institutions and accompanied with what Banks et al (2015) described as inward accountability (i.e. skewness to funding partners).

The dialogue and dissent framework seem to be doing well as regards to the former as it recognizes informal and loosely organized organizations. However, the 'value for money' and risk consciousness seem to continue dictating the pace. For instance, this research established that only one programme out of the 25 consortia is led by an organization located

in the global south and the rest are led by Dutch Institutions (DSO/MO Policy Advisor). The referenced institution runs by the name Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres (FCAM) and is in South America. Capacity limitations and accompanying risk concerns have been cited as one of the reasons for the continued coordination of activities from the North (DSO/MO Policy Advisor). The arrangement, however, defeats logic to the 'leading from the south' instrument that seeks to spur civil society organizations in the global south to take a lead in the implementation of the policy framework, particularly in organizing, coordinating and strategizing (D&DToC 2017).

Another good example is NIMD's glaring biases to this 'value for money' approach in its selection of implementing partners, strategic partners and funding partners (NIMD)²⁷. On implementing partners, it prefers among other things, teaming up with an implementing partner with a "proven track record of financially responsible project delivery" (NIMD). On strategic partners, it recognizes a leverage to "secure funding from a wider spectrum of sources" (NIMD). Funding partners weigh into the same cause. This hyped considerations to money and risk play into the claims that NGOs have become more of managers of their funders' budgets than managers of development work (Hearn, 2007; Fowler and Biekart, 2013).

5.4. Limited capacity to influence drivers of change

The characteristic underlined here stems from the realization that all the interviewees were agreed to the position that political space in Zimbabwe has improved ever since the departure of Mugabe as the president. However, none of them claimed the credit on the change, but rather, they concede themselves as mere beneficiaries too from the change in leadership. Their shared experiences reveal that, since November 2017, they found it easy to carry out their mandates or at least with minimal hindrances.

And in a surprising turn of events and challenging the rhetoric of an improved environment since the departure of Mugabe, six people were shot dead on August 1; 2018 at the hands of the state in what seems to be a display of the state's continued heavy-handedness on dissenting voices (The Herald 2018). The deceased w part of a group of people who were protesting an alleged delay in the pronouncement of the July 30; 2018 election results.

²⁷ <https://nimd.org/organization/partners/>

Further challenges were acknowledged at the ministry level. In addition to the limited successes to accord organizations from the global south with leadership positions, the implementation process faces coordination challenges (*DSO/MO Policy advisor*). She further indicates that some of the partners even make oversights in giving updates on their interventions. It was the DSO/MO Researcher who had a bold one by disclosing opening that,

“We are now halfway into the implementation of this program and it is only getting worse. In many, many countries the situation has worsened in those countries that this policy direction is pursued” (DSO/MO Researcher)

This, instead of representing the Dutch Ministry and its Northern CSO’s role in protecting the CSOs in the global south, plays to the claims that NGOs have no capacity to influence drivers of change but rather operate within the confines of a given operational space by the respective territorial authorities (Banks et al, 2015; Brass, 2016; and Edwards, 2007).

5.5. Polluted agency

Here I refer to the seemingly compromised position of International NGOs and the aided civil society organizations within the whole partnerships matrix. The virtual nature of the aid system; particularly the domination attached to the direction of flow of funding and ideas appear to bear challenges to the partnership and sharing of responsibilities arrangement on which the ‘dialogue and dissent’ policy framework is premised on.

This display of asymmetrical power relations can be traced starting from the conceptualization of ideas. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the custodian of the policy framework appears to retain an upper hand in the sharing of responsibilities. The pathways to countering civic space are framed at a ministry level and the other parties have no defined roles serve for the broad assumption that considerations to civic space are mainstreamed in their thematic and individual programming. And the arrangement that these other institutions appear to be performing delegated duties makes it difficult to identify their own levels of creativity and initiatives.

Furthermore, my own stock-take of the interviews journey points in the same direction. I picked a lot of variations from the research participants’ levels of knowledge and degree of comfortability to comment on the subject matter which I take as a testimony of the imbalances. For instance, the pattern of comprehension of the policy framework was more articulate at the upper end of the ladder and regresses as the chain moved down. The most ironic

part was a discovery that two of the participants from the bottom end were not that familiar with the branding ‘dialogue and dissent’, yet they are part of the partnership network. Their conceptualization and understanding are limited to specific policy instruments. The same applied to the pattern of comfortability to comment on the subject matter. All the research participants from the top end had no problems with the disclosure of their names in this research whereas one of the participants from the bottom end requested to be anonymous citing organizational culture and her position as an excuse. All these revelations confirmed ideas that these partnerships are self-serving and that NGOs are agents of neo-imperialism (Hearn, 2007; Jeater, 2011).

5.6. Contentious activities and intent

There are certain areas, intentions, and activities that remain questionable owing to omissions and commissions of the partners. The first I wish to highlight is the Policy Think-tank’s partnership with the main opposition party, i.e. the Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance (MDC-Alliance) during the 2018 elections. This research established that the Policy Think-tank provided capacity development support to the MDC-Alliance’s election agents in the just ended harmonized elections in Zimbabwe (*Anonymous MDC-Alliance member*).

Whether the arrangement was separate from the ‘Strategic Partnership’ programme, the alliance with the opposition presents a conflict of interest. It compromises its position as an apolitical entity. Traditionally those are activities that would prompt the then Mugabe government to impose restrictions. Even the new president is on record discouraging NGOs and the civil society to meddle in politics.²⁸ It also remains unclear if the activities were above board and particularly the laws that govern the operations of NGOs in Zimbabwe. Considering those factors, the act also had a possible effect to invite suspicion and restriction.

The second issue relates to the network’s position regarding economic sanctions on Zimbabwe. Their position regarding this issue is herein assumed valid for three reasons. Firstly, the United States of America (USA) in July 2018 extended the lifespan of economic sanctions on Zimbabwe (ZIDERA). Secondly, the Zimbabwean government continuously claims that economic sanctions are the reason why Zimbabwe is politically and economically underperforming and lastly, economic sanctions have been a scapegoat for the government’s suspicions around the work of NGOs and CSOs and basis for accusations of fronting the

²⁸ <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2018/03/stay-out-of-politics-ed-warns-ngos/> accessed 8/10/2018

neo-imperialistic 'regime change agenda'. The subsequent effect has been the close monitoring of NGOs and CSOs and at the worst banning of their operations.

Considering the above, it would ordinarily be important to invest in at least a research to establish not only the level of suffering sanctions have brought on the people of Zimbabwe but to include how it could be contributing to the closure of the political space. However, none could be drawn into commenting on the subject and apparently none of them have ever invested in the area in whatever way. Efforts to establish if ZEN had ever coordinated engagements with Northern governments over sanctions on Zimbabwe were futile as the focal point persons were not reachable by the time of research.

It is awkward that the network(s) appear to give a blind eye to the matter despite their experiences and knowledge to the effect that sanctions have not only caused suffering to the people of Zimbabwe but frequently provides states with a scapegoat to limit their operations (Hove, 2012:72-84). In Peksen and Drury's words (2010:240) "economic sanctions worsen the level of democracy because the economic hardship caused by sanctions can be used as a strategic tool by the targeted regime to consolidate authoritarian rule and weaken the opposition". A related and supporting view is from Fowler's (2014:12) observation in Uganda that "...levels of poverty remain a barrier to gaining the economic foundations for associational life to move much beyond survival, while inequality gains ground."

Their 'reserved' positions seemingly conform to claims that the aid system compromises the agency and role of NGOs (Mutua, 2001; Banks et al, 2015). The 'Dialogue and Dissent' partners in this context seem to find themselves in a tricky situation that requires to either sacrifice principles for monetary and material gains or vice versa. In this case, the flow of resources seems to have taken precedence. The difficulty is on deliberating an issue sponsored by their back donors.

Chapter 6 : Conclusion

The support to civic space is extended through a mix of creative and complementary programming at both local and international levels. The partner level programming takes the form of collaborations, opportunistic initiatives, and formal engagement efforts. The efforts also benefit from international advocacy networks involving local and international NGOs. The Dutch MoF, on the other hand, steers advocacy at an international level through research, networking, and use of the embassy in Zimbabwe. These efforts also resemble the policy's flexible and long-term partnership-based support for the political role of civil society organizations. The flexibility includes broadening its scope of civil society organizations from the obsession with formal institutions to include informal structures. Thus, the distinct feature(s) is not just a marked shift from supporting service delivery to lobbying and advocacy role but to also integrate expert knowledge with indigenous knowledge and capacities.

However, the state's heavy-handedness on dissenting voices seems to reflect a mismatch between the model for combating the challenge and the setting in which it is implemented. The government in place with its military flavor has proved to be too strong for the 'Dialogue and Dissent'. Such an experience may suggest that the efficacy of the Dutch policy is more compatible with mature democracies and lessens as the trend moves toward authoritarian governments. But this is also not to take away the evident incremental efforts (adjustments and scaling up) the 'Dialogue and Dissent' has shown in countering civic space.

Regarding the power shifts, the gathered data illustrates that the 'new administration' is rated better than the previous leadership at least based on an assumed expression of intent to make things right with respect to interactions with civil society. Many shared the view that the 'new administration' has changed the tone for the better and is showing intent to respect differences. This research imagines this perspective as suggesting that the new administration is in some kind of transition into Risse et al's (1999:12) "instrumental adaptation phase of the norms socialization process". The observation is backed by a perception seemingly shared by many of the local and international partners that November 2017 to date is a period too short to judge, thereby giving the impression that there may be a need to wait and see how it will unfold.

Slight differences were however observed along the geopolitical divide. The Dutch government and International NGOs were shy to give their opinions regarding the subject. This

research assumes that the reservations are a result of ethical considerations relating to the nature of their work. On the domestic front, a competing reaction was negative and at a minimum, expressed hesitation to put trust on a leadership that came through military assistance. The perception is an expression of fears that it could just be 'Mugabe the person who is gone but the system may still be intact'. These are extremists who challenge the leadership change process as having been procedurally inappropriate and continue to view the conduct of the new government with high suspicion.

In light of the study findings and the accompanying conclusions, this research sees a need for a follow up comparing how the 'Dialogue and Dissent' deals with the same issues of civic space in relatively mature democracies and authoritarian regimes respectively. The findings of such a proposed research are envisaged to provide patterns of similarities and differences which are important for a better understanding of the assumptions underpinning the whole model on supporting civic space. A follow up is also finds significance on the need to track progress or its lack thereof post the policy framework's first four-year piloting phase.

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List of research participants: table 1

Organization	Designation	Date	Venue/Mean
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Researcher in DSO/MO	12 July 2018	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Policy Advisor (Social Development Directorate)	17 July 2018	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Advisor to the Sub-Saharan Africa Desk	17 July 2018	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD)	Program Manager-Sub Saharan Africa	19 July 2018	NIMD offices
Hivos	Program Manager	20 July 2018	Skype
Netherlands Embassy to Zimbabwe	Political advisor	10 August 2018	WhatsApp call
MDC	Party Provincial Secretary	10 August 2018	WhatsApp call
Young Women group	Director	14 September 2018	WhatsApp call
Policy Think-tank	Coordinator	15 September 2018	WhatsApp call
TellZimbabwe (Media House)	Editor	20 September 2018	Skype call
University of Johannesburg	Lecturer Dr. Ruhanya	15 October 2018 & 26 October	Skype calls

Appendices

The Dialogue and Dissent Structure

The 'Dialogue and Dissent' is supported by policy instruments which, from my own findings, cumulatively come on board through the continuous process of reflections and or as informed by emerging trends. The main and initial instrument on which the policy framework advances the political role of CSOs in the global South run under 'strategic partnership' programme. The instrument is driven through a grouping of 25 NGOs mostly of Dutch origin and assembled along thematic lines.

However, as of June 2017, the instruments had increased to four, with the coming on board of the '*leading from the south*', '*Voice*' and the '*accountability fund*' (D&DToC2017). These instruments contribute to the main agenda but under issue-specific and customized arrangements. The Leading from the south is inspired by women empowerment sections within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework and supports women's movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. The *Voice* caters for the most vulnerable and marginalized groups that are often excluded from aid arrangements. The *Accountability Fund* is an acknowledgment of growing capacities of CSOs in the global through a direct fund managed by Embassies. The embassies leverage their proximity to the ground and work with local partners.

The latest development is the coming on board of a 5th and probably more relevant instrument at least to this research paper under '*defending civic space*'. This development seems to be a culmination of cumulative efforts to counter the continued diminishing of civic space. The development presents a shift from the initial approach in which civic space was considered crosscutting and embedded within other programmes, to becoming a stand-alone instrument.