



## A Joint Pursuit: How can Norway's assistance in settings of conflict and crisis benefit from a shared strategic framework?

### 1. NORWAY'S AID CO-OPERATION AND THE 'STRATEGIC GAP'

Norway's flexibility in its aid co-operation is widely known and admired. Its advantages in supporting context-specific, relevant and responsive assistance have been recorded in multiple assessments, evaluations and reviews.<sup>1</sup>

Such flexibility also supports the 'Norwegian model' of a partnership-based ethos of aid, particularly between the Norwegian government and its civil society partners.<sup>2</sup> This partnership is characterized by high levels of trust and mutual respect.

Norway's preference for supporting flexibility has meant that it has often preferred to avoid explicit strategic frameworks or statements to shape its assistance.

1 See for example OECD (2013) Development Co-operation Peer Review Norway 2013; Norad (2014) Evaluation Report 8/2014; Evaluation of Norway's Support to Haiti after the 2010 Earthquake; Norad (2016) Striking the Balance: Evaluation of the Planning, Organisation and Management of Norwegian Assistance related to the Syria Regional Crisis; Norad (2016) Evaluation Report 5/2016, Evaluation of Norway's Support for Advocacy in the Development Policy Arena; and Norad (2017) Evaluation Report 9/2017, Evaluation of Norway's Support to Education in situations of Conflict and Crisis through Civil Society Organisations

2 For example Norad (2016) Results Report on Civil Society 2016; Norad (2016) Striking the Balance: Evaluation of the Planning, Organisation and Management of Norwegian Assistance related to the Syria Regional Crisis; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2016) Meld. St. 24 (2016-2017) Joint responsibility for the common future: The Sustainable Development Goals and Norwegian development policy (Felles ansvar for felles fremtid Bærekraftsmålene og norsk utviklingspolitikk); Bistandsaktuelt, 'Bistandsarbeidere er ikke diplomater', 18.02.2016, <http://www.bistandsaktuelt.no/nyheter/2016/kritikk-av-norsk-freds-megling>; and OECD (2013) Development Co-operation Peer Review Norway

Multiple evaluations of Norwegian development and humanitarian assistance have identified a 'strategic gap', even in situations of crisis and conflict.

*In 2017, Norad's Evaluation Department commissioned an evaluation of Norway's assistance to Education in situations of Crisis and Conflict through partner civil society organisations (CSOs). The evaluation included desk studies in South Sudan and Somalia, and field studies in Lebanon and Jordan.*

*The evaluation found that:*

- > Norway's support to EiCC through its CSO partners was generally appropriate to needs and delivered some significant results for vulnerable children experiencing crisis and conflict. However, the Government of Norway's willing, but largely passive, approach meant that the assistance did not benefit from any **overarching statement of strategic intent**.
- > Consequently, achievements were realised largely on **CSO's 'own terms.'** The assistance did not combine or leverage partners' collective capabilities, to deliver higher-level or broader-ranging results i.e. **'more than the sum of the parts'**.
- > Whilst supporting the 'Norwegian model' of a trust- and partnership-based approach, therefore, the evaluation found that Norway's support to education in crisis and conflict through its CSO partners is not yet fully realising its potential for the greater good.

‘Norway is by far a society in which civil society organisations have an established and legitimate place in negotiations with the government. In many instances, it is also an important partner in policy development and implementation. The organisations have taken this tradition with them in their work in developing countries

Norad (2016) Results Report on Civil Society 2016

“Strategy is about shaping the future. It is the human attempt to get to desirable ends with available means”

(Max McKeown)\*

## 2. WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS OF A STRATEGIC ‘GAP’?

Yet a wide range of literature,<sup>3</sup> including assessments of donor co-operation in fragile situations, signals that such a strategic gap can limit effectiveness. Constraints can include the following:

- > **An unclear view (or assumptions) of ‘what the future looks like’** – In the absence of clear and commonly agreed goals, partners lack clarity on (or may assume different understandings of) ‘where we are headed’, leading to diverse visions and goals being pursued;
- > **Risk of fragmentation** – More operationally, when disparate visions of the future are held, assistance can become diffuse, with resources geared to different goals and objectives;
- > **Limited partner co-ordination** – The absence of an explicit common vision/overarching framework to guide assistance can create disconnects between actors – with different partners unaware of what others are doing;

- > **Inefficient resource allocation** - Without strategic guidance/common objectives in place, resources may be allocated in different directions, or duplicate efforts, rather than being cohesively geared to address the problem at hand;
- > **Risk of reactivity and fire-fighting** – Without a clear forward view, assistance can become reactive or geared only to the immediate term, rather than helping to implement a roadmap which is clearly geared to future aims;
- > **Weakened accountability** - In the absence of a clear statement of intent, the argument for ‘why’ financing has been invested in a particular area or sector, or to a particular partner, is inexplicit, and vulnerable to challenge;
- > **Lost opportunities to make connections and share knowledge** – where initiatives are unframed by a strategic overview, opportunities for portfolio-wide learning and knowledge-sharing on policy, strategy and operations, are lost.

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Darcy, J. (2016) Evaluation Synthesis and Gap Analysis. Syria Coordinated Accountability and Lessons Learning (CALL) Initiative; Independent Commission for Aid Impact (2015) Assessing the Impact of the Scale up of DFID’s Support to Fragile States; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (2015) Evaluation of the Strategy for Danish Humanitarian Action 2010-2015

\* McKeown, M (2011) The Strategy Book, Financial Times / Prentice Hall



Wau, South Sudan. Photo: Ken Opprann

## 3. WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF FRAMING ASSISTANCE WITHIN A SHARED STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK, PARTICULARLY IN SITUATIONS OF CRISIS AND CONFLICT?

An argument is often made that developing a common strategic framework is sometimes difficult, and often unfeasible, in situations where contexts are rapidly changing. This particularly relates to situations of conflict or crisis, where the operating environment is fluid, and the situation on the ground can change fast.

Yet the wider literature and body of experience does not support this argument. Much recent and current guidance argues that, in fact, anchoring common efforts in fragile situations within a clear strategic framework

Strategic planning for adaptive problems will therefore need to acquire more of an emergent nature, and initial planning documents will need to be continually adapted and fine-tuned according to the learning generated within the system. One way to do this is to build a learning strategy and a degree of flexibility in from the onset.

de Weijer, F. (2012): Rethinking approaches to managing change in fragile states.

helps guide the assistance in an overall direction - without constraining partners' programmatic choices.<sup>4</sup>

Some authors recommend that such strategic statements should embrace the concept of **emergent planning**: recognizing that change is not linear; embedding frequent learning; and revisiting/adapting the strategic framework frequently. Recently, the approaches of **adaptive management and programming** have come to the fore as appropriate for humanitarian and development programming in situations of conflict and crisis.<sup>5</sup>

Current global strategic priorities include the importance **bridging the humanitarian-development divide**, and building **links to transition** into humanitarian assistance in particular.<sup>6</sup> A coherent strategic framework allows for these links to be made from the outset. For example, a 2015 evaluation of Sida's humanitarian assistance praised Sida's co-operation, under its Humanitarian Strategy, for forming links between humanitarian and development actors.<sup>7</sup>

Additional advantages of guiding assistance through a common strategic framework include:

- > Where the framework is **collectively developed**, it can help to minimize resistance and barriers, since all partners are signed up to common objectives from the start;
- > **Accountability and transparency** are supported, since partners sign up to deliver on 'their' commitments as part of the wider partnership;
- > Partners' efforts/resources can be **collectively leveraged** to deliver on common goals, meaning that the assistance can generate results which are 'more than the sum of the parts';
- > Coherent approaches can be adopted to specific **cross-cutting priorities**, such as on targeting vulnerable populations such as women and girls/the disabled, or on the implementation of the Humanitarian Principles;
- > **Learning opportunities** can be identified and maximized among and between partners, rather than taking place on a discrete 'project by project' basis;
- > Knowledge and priorities can be **institutionalized**, leaving choices and decisions less to individual judgement.

Where strategic frameworks are **collectively developed**, the development process itself contributes to enhanced partnership – by enabling views and visions of the future to be shared, assumptions brought to light and addressed, and disagreements aired and discussed in the spirit of partnership.

#### EXAMPLES OF THE 'STRATEGIC GAP' IN NORWEGIAN ASSISTANCE TO SITUATIONS OF CRISIS AND CONFLICT

Norad's 2014 evaluation of Norwegian support to the Haiti earthquake reported that Norway's approach had several weaknesses linked to lack of structure. This included a loose strategic framework without clear overall objectives, an institutional set-up that relied too much on individuals and the lack of systems that promoted learning. The related Policy Brief pointed out that flexibility and structure are not incompatible in development practice: in the case of fragile states particularly, a combination of both may be ideal.

The 2016 evaluation of the Planning, Organisation and Management of Norwegian support to the Syria regional crisis found that an explicit strategic statement of intent of Norway's intentions regarding the Syria regional response was lacking. It noted that such a statement does not have to be rigid or restrictive: it should articulate the dilemmas of the context and be revisited on a regular basis. But its presence would ensure that priorities are explicit, transparent and appropriately synergised with the international response.

The 2017 evaluation of Norwegian Assistance to Education in Conflict and Crisis found that limited aggregate-level analysis to inform investment choices, combined with limited oversight at country level, constrained the strategic overview of the portfolio. It also found that coherence at country level among and between actors was dependent on CSO partners' own willingness and ability to forge these.

References: Norad (2014) Evaluation Report 8/2014; Evaluation of Norway's Support to Haiti after the 2010 Earthquake and Norad (2015) Policy Brief: Norwegian flexibility vs. structure: a balancing act; Norad (2016) Striking the Balance: Evaluation of the Planning, Organisation and Management of Norwegian Assistance related to the Syria Regional Crisis; Norad (2017) Evaluation Report 9/2017, Evaluation of Norway's Support to Education in situations of Conflict and Crisis through Civil Society Organisations

#### 4. HOW WOULD A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK CHANGE NORWAY'S ASSISTANCE, PARTICULARLY IN SITUATIONS OF CONFLICT AND CRISIS?

The recent evaluation of Norway's support to Education in Conflict and Crisis through its CSO partners found that if Norway's assistance were supported by a clearer strategic statement, its flexibility could be retained, but the assistance would benefit from several advantages.

For example:

- > Investments would be framed as part of **an overarching Norwegian 'whole'**, in line with the partnership-based ethos and model of Norwegian assistance, rather than an individualized series of projects taking place 'on their own terms';
- > Partners' **collective capabilities and expertise** would be leveraged to create results which were broader and higher-level than the currently individualized achievements – leading to effects that are 'more than the sum of the parts';
- > The existing **CSO-Norwegian government partnership would be strengthened**, through the process of building together a statement of strategic intent, and forming a sense of shared ownership;
- > The assistance would be **more coherent** at country level particularly, with CSO partner activities geared to support common aims, and with stronger co-ordination and horizontal links among partners (and therefore reduced risks of duplication);
- > **Accountability and transparency** would be enhanced, since roles and responsibilities would be more clearly defined, with actors' individual contributions to wider goals clearly set out from the start.

4 See for example OECD (2011), International Engagement in Fragile States: Can't We Do Better? Conflict and Fragility, OECD Publishing; International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding: A New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States [http://www.pbsbdialogue.org/media/filer\\_public/07/69/07692de0-3557-494e-918e-18df00e9ef73/the\\_new\\_deal.pdf](http://www.pbsbdialogue.org/media/filer_public/07/69/07692de0-3557-494e-918e-18df00e9ef73/the_new_deal.pdf); Overseas Development Institute (2017) How to support state-building, service delivery and recovery in fragile and conflict-affected situations: Lessons from six years of Sustainable Livelihoods Research Consortium research; Medinilla, A and Herrero Cangas, A (2016) 'Living Apart Together' EU Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid in Situations of Fragility and Protracted Crisis: Discussion Paper No. 206, December 2016

5 Ramalingam, B., Laric, M. and Primrose, J. (2014) 'From Best Practice to Best Fit: Understanding and Navigating Wicked Problems in International Development'. Working Paper. London: ODI; DFID (2017) Learning, monitoring and evaluating: achieving and measuring change in adaptive programmes; Mercy Corps. (2016) 'Managing complexity: Adaptive management at Mercy Corps'. Portland, Oregon: Mercy Corps.

6 World Humanitarian Summit: Outcomes paper <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A-71-353%20-%20SG%20Report%20on%20the%20Outcome%20of%20the%20WHS.pdf>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (2015) Coherence in Conflict: Bringing Humanitarian and Development Streams Together

7 Mowjee, T et al (2015) Evaluation of Sida's Humanitarian Assistance



Wau, South Sudan. Photo: Ken Opprann

## 5. HOW CAN SUCH A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK ADEQUATELY ENCOMPASS FLEXIBILITY?

### – SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE:

The challenge for Government of Norway is to retain the much-admired flexibility of Norwegian assistance, particularly valuable in situations of conflict and crisis, whilst building in the structure for which the now-considerable body of evidence calls.

To achieve this, Norwegian assistance in situations of crisis and conflict should:

- > In specific thematic areas, and/or at country level, **develop a joint and overarching statement of strategic intent**, which sets out 'what we want to achieve' and 'how we want to get there'. This should be collectively formed between all Norwegian partners, including government and CSOs;
- > Frame such a strategic statement as **'emergent'** in situations where context is especially fluid, such as fragile situations; recognizing the need for **regular learning and review**. At operational level, embed **adaptive programming** approaches;
- > **Define roles and responsibilities within the partnership** – who will contribute what, based on their own specific comparative advantages;
- > **Gear all partners' intended actions** to the goals of the strategic statement, and reflect these in framework and project grant agreements;
- > Create a **common platform for dialogue**, to bring the partners together at appropriate points as part of a process of collective strategic oversight and review;
- > **Report collectively on the achievements of the partnership** as part of accountability to the taxpayer and as part of a 'whole of Norway' approach to humanitarian and development co-operation.

“Strategy is the determination of basic long-term goals, and the adoption of courses of action”

(Alfred Chandler)\*\*

\*\* Chandler, A (1962) Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the history of industrial enterprise, Doubleday

**The Evaluation Department**, located in Norad, initiates evaluations of activities financed over the Norwegian aid budget. The Department is governed under a specific mandate and reports directly to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The evaluations are carried out by independent evaluators, and all evaluation reports are made public.

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## EVALUATION OVERVIEW

This evaluation brief draws on an evaluation of Norway's support to education in conflict and crisis through civil society organisation. The evaluation was commissioned by the Evaluation Department in Norad and conducted by The KonTerra Group.

**Purpose of the evaluation:** to provide decision-makers with information about the results of Norwegian aid to education in crisis and conflict situations through civil society organisations, and information about factors contributing to attainment or non-attainment of results, that can be used to improve future Norwegian civil society support to education in situations of crisis and conflict.

**Methodology:** The evaluation drew on evidence from multiple streams, including interviews with stakeholders from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Norad plus key Oslo-based CSOs; systematic review of a sample of projects; a telephone survey of CSO representatives; desk study of two sample countries (Somalia and South Sudan); and field study in two others (Lebanon and Jordan). Detailed mapping of Norwegian support to EiCC through CSOs was also conducted. A systematic approach was adapted to the methodology, including the use of structured tools to support analysis.

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