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The rise and fall of government support for small-scale voluntary development organizations—and their remarkable resilience

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Abstract

Motivation: The aid architecture for international development has undergone significant change in recent years, but it remains unclear how the established order has responded to the emergence of new actors in this field.

Purpose: The article closely analyses the entry of small-scale, voluntary development organizations to gain a better understanding of the changing aid architecture.

Methods and approach: Through extensive policy tracing over a 15-year period, combined with analysis of primary, longitudinal data, we study how private development initiatives (PDIs) have been received by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and established development organizations in the Netherlands. We focus on the type of support provided to PDIs and the (changing) rationale underlying this support.

Findings: After many years of generous support, PDIs are no longer part of the Dutch policy agenda as a result of vanishing attention to the rationale of public support. The professionalization agenda underlying both the financial and non-financial support provided to PDIs also prompted these organizations to move away from the traditional order. PDIs successfully sought alternative allies, surviving as actors in their own right. These two developments have resulted in mutual disengagement between the established order and PDIs, with increasingly less co-operation and interaction.

Policy implications: PDIs have not been genuinely included in the traditional development order in the Netherlands, making it questionable whether their emergence contributed to a more plural community as envisaged by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the turn of the century. To make use of the value of actively involved citizens, policy-makers will have to set up appropriate frameworks that recognize and preserve the distinctive nature of these organizations and, in so doing, capitalize on the comparative advantages of PDIs.

KEYWORDS

changing aid architecture, private development initiatives, public support, the Netherlands

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1 | INTRODUCTION

International development has famously been described by Develtere (2009) as a community with a distinctive language, working method, and way of thinking—a “relatively closed community” (p. 28). Indeed, for decades, development efforts in the Global South have been considered, both by policy-makers and academic researchers, as the exclusive domain of intergovernmental organizations—such as the United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—based in the Global North (Schulpen & Huyse, 2017). In the past decade, however, the international development sphere has undergone significant changes, including a growth in the number and diversity of actors (Richey & Ponte, 2014). It has become increasingly clear that the development community is becoming steadily more fragmented and complex (Develtere et al., 2012; Schulpen & Hoebink, 2014). By the 2000s, development co-operation was no longer the prerogative of traditional actors within the bilateral, multilateral, and civilateral (i.e. development NGOs, Schulpen, 2009) pillars of aid. As noted by Schulpen and Huyse (2017, p. 164), “confronted with the ‘emergence’ of new actors, the field of development was almost out of the blue broadened with a wide diversity of actors bringing in new money, other ways of working and an often-different vocabulary and thinking.”

The emergence and growth of these alternative actors have challenged the conceptualization of international development as a community in which actors share a domain-specific set of practices, values, and norms. Importantly, the new actors have contested the existing monopoly of traditional development actors and increasingly turned the development community into an arena characterized by competition for funding, legitimacy, and even recipients. Next to the three traditional channels (bilateral, multilateral, and civilateral), an additional aid channel can now be distinguished, which is referred to in the Netherlands as the “philantateral aid channel” and in Belgium as the “fourth pillar”, and refers to “non-specialists” such as “trade unions, farmers’ associations, social movements, schools, hospitals, foundations, migrant organisations, companies, sports clubs, and groups of friends” (Kinsbergen & Schulpen, 2009; Develtere & De Bruyn, 2009, p. 913).

One specific set of alternative development actors belonging to this fourth channel of aid consists of private development initiatives (PDIs), also commonly referred to as citizen initiatives. These organizations are defined most importantly by their being small scale and voluntary (for a more elaborate definition of PDIs see Kinsbergen, 2014).¹ As noted by Appe and Telch (2019, p. 2), these small-scale voluntary initiatives are “an expanding subset of international NGOs working in private development aid which are based in the Global North and fund foreign aid projects in the Global South.”

Since the turn of the century, PDIs have caught the attention of scholars, who regarded them as instances of the mainstreaming of development aid. This mainstreaming can be described as “a process in which groups within society become active in the field (e.g. development co-operation) seen formerly as the exclusive domain of professionals” (Pollet, 2017, p. 191). Although the members of these initiatives can participate in training and acquire knowledge on development co-operation, their starting point is non-occupational, which distinguishes them from the professional organizations across the three traditional pillars in the domain of development aid (Pollet, 2017).

Since the emergence of PDIs as alternative actors in development co-operation roughly 20 years ago, it is now time to evaluate whether and how their entry into the field is being received by the established development community. This article contributes to the study of development aid by providing a better understanding of the role of small-scale citizen initiatives and the effect of government policy on citizen involvement in development co-operation, in particular. Its unique contribution is that it traces in detail the rise and fall of government support for small-scale PDIs. This study demonstrates that the way the government (and its implementing partners) has organized support for civil society involvement has alienated small-scale organizations over time. In addition, by increasingly abandoning PDIs the government has also thrown away a potentially valuable impetus to building

¹In the Netherlands, small scale is defined as “having fewer than 20 regular members, or an annual budget of less than 1 million euros” (Kinsbergen & Schulpen, 2009a, p. 166). Their voluntary character is established by means of “an upper limit of 20% or less of paid members.”

public support for development co-operation and its development policy, especially regarding citizen involvement in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These policy insights make the study particularly relevant for policy-makers, confronted with the challenge of advancing a truly joint agenda for change in this new phase for international development. It is precisely PDIs, which, due to their strong reliance on people-to-people connections, have considerable potential to connect the public to the SDG agenda, more than large organizations that are more remote from citizens.

This study builds on previous research into PDIs by the first author and relies on a method of policy tracing—approximating the process-tracing method described by Collier (2011), but with central focus on policy—over a 15-year period combined with analysis of primary data collected from these citizen initiatives over a 10-year period. This method serves to help track changes in policy, aiming to detect and understand the origins and effects of movement between embracing and disregarding PDIs, i.e. policy actions and interactions indicating a “crowding in” or “crowding out.”² The information used for policy tracing is derived from official policy documents, letters to parliament, government reports, independent evaluations, transcripts of political debates, news articles, public statements, and the academic literature. These secondary sources originate from the early 1990s up until the current government period (2017–present).³ The primary data were derived from standardized online surveys conducted for earlier studies (CIDIN PDI Database 2008–2009 and Kinsbergen PDI Database, 2017; Kinsbergen & Schulpen, 2009b; Kinsbergen, 2017) with information collected in two waves (N=269), providing unique longitudinal data for the period 2008–2017.

The article is structured as follows. First, we present an analysis of the rationale shaping the support for PDIs and describe the (type of) support resulting from this rationale. Second, we describe the changes and drivers of change that have taken place in the Dutch field of international co-operation specifically related to the positioning of PDIs. We trace the developments in funding and inter-actor co-operation starting almost 20 years ago with policy under former Minister for Development Cooperation Jan Pronk (1989–1998) up to policy under the current minister, Sigrid Kaag (2017–present). Third, we look into the implications of these changes for the role and positioning of PDIs and what they entail for the development sector as a whole. Finally, we discuss the broader relevance of the findings as well as policy implications.

2 | THIRTY YEARS OF SUPPORT

Although PDIs are believed to exist throughout the Global North (Pollet et al., 2014), little is known about the extent of recognition and (financial and non-financial) support they receive from governments and traditional development organizations in European countries other than the Netherlands and Belgium. Nonetheless, it has been observed by Pollet et al. (2014, p. 22) that “most European countries either have an explicit or an implicit policy with regard to Citizen Initiatives.” This might be in contrast to Northern countries outside Europe. Appe and Schnable (2019) have noted that in the United States, such initiatives “have not been the target of financial support or capacity-building from the national development agency or from large NGOs” (p. 2), and Cochrane and Davis (2020, p. 4) have pointed out that “the vast majority of INGOs in Canada are relatively small and operate with little or no funding from the Government of Canada.” In an exploratory study across Europe, however, researchers found that the overwhelming majority of countries have public funding windows for PDIs,⁴ be it in terms

²This is derived from the concept used by Ostrom (2000) of “crowding out citizenship.”

³Government policy regarding PDIs can be inferred from expressed policy goals in policy documents and public statements and from the financial mechanisms in place (Pollet, 2017). The policy instruments are essentially threefold: direct financial support, direct non-financial support, and fiscal policy. In this study, we focus on the first two types of policy instruments—that is, the direct forms of support—as these have been the most prominent in the Netherlands. Financial support can include funding schemes or co-financing arrangements. Non-financial support can take the form of workshops, training and networking activities (Pollet, 2017).

⁴Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (Pollet, 2017).

of national, regional, or local opportunities (Pollet, 2017). It should be noted that PDIs may also deliberately choose to forgo government support. According to Fechter and Schwittay (2019, p. 1773), “many citizen aid initiatives are reluctant to interface with government apparatuses or formal development institutions.” This may be for various reasons; some might simply prefer to remain small and independent from government funding (Cochrane & Davis, 2020); others wish to avoid the bureaucratic process or quality requirements that tend to accompany such support (Kinsbergen, 2014). This will be discussed in more detail below.

In European countries with a support system for PDIs, two key drivers have been identified in the relationship between traditional actors and these new development initiatives: a public support agenda and a professionalization agenda. As found in a mapping of citizen initiatives across Europe, “in many cases, governmental policies consider citizen initiatives as vehicles of public support for international development” (Pollet, 2017, p. 189). It is expected that, because PDIs are strongly embedded in local communities in the Global North, they are able to reach a large and partly not yet converted part of the community in relation to international co-operation. As a result, most subsidy schemes request that PDIs organize public gatherings and generate attention in the local media in return for the project funding received. At the same time, subsidy schemes and support programmes are primarily geared towards the professionalization of these organizations, being designed to make this financial and non-financial support conditional on meeting a set of quality criteria (Pollet, 2017). As PDIs are typically founded by citizens with no professional background in development, they tend to face a number of challenges, which it is expected could potentially be remedied through training and/or capacity-building support, helping them acquire various skills (e.g. managerial, administrative, and technical) in the development domain (Appel & Schnable, 2019). This process of addressing the lack of experience and expertise can be referred to as “professionalization.” It should be noted that capacity-building is not the same as professionalization, but is often considered as a means to stimulate such processes. The professionalization agenda implies a call for PDIs to become more similar to traditional organizations, promoted by the belief that this would make them more effective.⁵ While the public support agenda has been the principal driver of engagement with PDIs, the professionalization agenda emerged in the midst of this and has further influenced the interaction between the established order and these new actors (Pollet, 2017).

2.1 | The years of great abundance

Traditionally, the Netherlands has been a “very generous donor” according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC). Each year from 1975 to 2012, the Netherlands exceeded the agreed UN target of spending 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) on official development assistance (ODA) (OECD, 2017, p. 11). In the following years, however, several government decisions, including budget cuts and changes in reporting requirements, have led to less predictable support for development co-operation and to ODA dropping below the 0.7% of GNI (OECD, 2017).⁶ Nonetheless, the Netherlands remains in the top 10 DAC donor countries⁷ (Donor Tracker, 2021). The international NGO sector comprises around 20% of the total government budget for development aid, and government funds made up more than 40% of the sector's overall income across 2010–2017 (Schulpen & Kempen, 2020). Although smaller organizations tend to rely on government funding for 10% or less of their budget, many of those have traditionally also received indirect financial support from the government through co-funding schemes accompanied by non-financial support from larger NGOs (Schulpen & Kempen, 2020; CIDIN PDI Database 2008–2009; Kinsbergen, 2017).

⁵In contrast, it appears that in the public perception, very small organizations are “often associated with ... high effectiveness” (Pollet, 2017, p. 190).

⁶Although the current government has decided on relative increases, projections in the government's policy note “Investing in Global Prospects” still indicate that net ODA as a percentage of GNI will fall from 0.6% in 2017 to 0.54% in 2022 (<https://donortracker.org/country/netherlands>).

⁷The seventh largest, with total ODA amounting to USD 5.3 billion in 2019 (0.59% of GNI) (<https://donortracker.org/country/netherlands>).

In the Netherlands, PDIs in the past were always (financially) supported because of the importance attached to public support ('*draagvlak*') for international co-operation. For decades, stimulating public support for development co-operation has been an important pillar of Dutch development policy (Carabain et al., 2012). This dates back to 1970, when UN resolution 2626, which was based on a report by the Dutch Nobel laureate Jan Tinbergen and called for investment in development co-operation, led to the establishment of the National Committee for Development Strategy (NCO) in the Netherlands, one of the predecessors of the more recent National Committee for International Cooperation and Sustainable Development (NCDO) (Carabain et al., 2012). In the context of Dutch development policy, public support has most commonly been interpreted as "the attitude and action, whether or not supported by knowledge" with regard to the goals of international co-operation (Develtere, 2003; Hart, 2009). Although the objectives of strengthening public support can be various and have changed over time,⁸ working on public support has long been a constant factor in Dutch development policy, which motivated government engagement with small-scale voluntary development organizations. While the Dutch government did not (completely) disregard PDIs' contribution to reducing poverty, the primary rationale to support these initiatives was to strengthen public support (Beerends & Broere, 2004). According to Plaisier and Schulpen (2014), regardless of whether strengthening public support is actually a (main) goal of PDIs themselves, it is clear that the financial support provided to them was largely inspired by that objective. This was based on the understanding that the people behind PDIs, by being active in development co-operation, were an expression of public support themselves, and because they largely depended on donations from the general public, they could also contribute to promote awareness and influence the behaviour of others (Plaisier & Schulpen, 2014).

It is worth noting that the tradition of active government investment in public support for international co-operation has been accompanied by, and possibly reflected in, relatively high levels of support for development aid among the Dutch public. Although opinion polls on public support for government spending in the field of development co-operation have indicated a slight decline in times of economic hardship, the overwhelming majority (around 90%) has traditionally been in favour of helping people in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (van den Berg & de Goede, 2012; European Commission, 1984, 1999, 2010).

A first expression of support to PDIs as part of the public support strategy in the Netherlands dates back to 1991,⁹ when Jan Pronk began to support small-scale initiatives in the field of international development co-operation by introducing the Small-Scale Local Activity (KPA) programme, which came to be managed by the NCDO in 1994 with a budget of 2.5 million guilders¹⁰ (Bouzouba & Brok, 2005; van den Berg & de Goede, 2012). As explained by van den Berg and de Goede (2012), "the idea behind the programme was that supporting the activities of small local Private Initiatives would broaden the public support base for development cooperation" (p. 47). In the late 1990s, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs under then Minister Eveline Herfkens started to stimulate the mainstreaming of development co-operation (van den Berg & de Goede, 2012). It was expected that the development field would transform from being an exclusive zone into an integrated, pluriform system comprised of different parts (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2001). Herfkens believed that the pressure of public support was necessary to counter the erosion of political support and thus to prevent damage to the budget for development co-operation and the position of the minister (IOB, 2009). To encourage the contribution of a

⁸Including "1) formal support for current or changing policy (legitimacy of political decision-making), 2) (financial) support for the work of NGOs, 3) to show legitimacy of NGOs within Dutch society and 4) to stimulate activities of citizens who can contribute to eradication of poverty and inequality" (Hart, 2009, p. 142).

⁹It should, however, be noted that PDIs had already been on the government's radar decades earlier. In 1963, the Dutch government was first approached for financial support for private development activities. In that same period, the government also began to recognize the importance of broad public support. In this context, it was decided in 1970 to establish the National Development Strategy Committee (NCO, later NCDO) to support private organizations in undertaking information and awareness activities (Bouzouba & Brok, 2005).

¹⁰Converted to euros including inflation: EUR 1,828,439.02. The programme's budget increased nearly to EUR 6.75 million in 2004 (Bouzouba & Brok, 2005).

plurality of actors to strengthen such public support, the government would “in collaboration with the large development organisations, increase access for smaller development organisations and non-traditional actors to the subsidy system” (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2001, p. 9). In 2001 Herfkens therefore asked a number of large NGOs and the NCDO to jointly develop a financial and institutional support system for PDIs (Kinsbergen & Schulpen, 2010). This resulted in the establishment of a special desk where PDIs could request funding and advice (Kinsbergen & Schulpen, 2010). Subsequently, from the early 2000s onwards, the opportunities for PDIs to receive indirect financial support from the government through co-funding organizations, accompanied by non-financial support from the larger NGOs, increased considerably.

During the three following government periods, the (vice) ministers of development co-operation kept expressing support for small-scale organizations and citizen initiatives (Knapen, 2012; Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009a, 2009b; van Ardenne, 2004). This was in line with the increasing political emphasis on the so-called “participation society” stimulated by the Christian Democratic Party (CDA) under the Balkenende cabinets (see e.g. Kalshoven, 2005). The policy framework introduced by van Ardenne as Foreign Minister in 2005, which was later to be led by Bert Koenders (2007–2010), explicitly mentioned mainstreaming as an objective of the government’s civil society co-funding programme (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005a).¹¹ This new subsidy (literally, co-financing) scheme (*medefinancieringsstelsel* [MSF] 2007–2010) included a special category called “Young and Innovative” for which EUR 40 million was made available (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008). To help these organizations integrate into the system, the special subsidy arrangement launched for young and innovative initiatives under MFS 2007–2010 was aimed at enabling these organizations to get access to regular funding; the arrangement would provide them the opportunity to professionalize and prepare for the next MFS. While this shows that real efforts were made to open up the development community for an increasing diversity of actors, it also shows that professionalization was considered a prerequisite.

The public support agenda continued to be a key driving force at the time. In fact, in 2009, a special public support note, the so-called *draagvlaknotitie*, was introduced. The document explicitly mentioned that the object of public support was not the policy of the minister or the position of development organizations. In contrast to the earlier government policy of Eveline Herfkens as minister, the *draagvlaknotitie* followed by Bert Koenders when he was minister regarded public support as a means to realize structural change with the goal of reducing poverty (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009, p. 4). This reflected a transition towards emphasizing the more active component of public support,¹² moving towards investment in the potential of citizens as change agents (Develtere, 2003; Hart, 2009). Importantly, the minister anticipated an important role for organizations and individuals in giving substance to stimulating such global citizenship (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009; Plaisier & Schulpen, 2014).¹³ It was recognized that this would require an implementation structure that was flexible and open to different types of actors, with the government investing in both knowledge availability and a new subsidy programme that included a specific part to support small-scale private initiatives (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009).

Notably, the established organizations that provided co-funding to PDIs followed the government’s public support objective. However, right from the start, to qualify for support, PDI project applications had to meet certain quality benchmarks to meet the co-funders’ own main *raison d’être*: poverty reduction¹⁴ (Sikkema et al.,

¹¹“the policy framework is open to mainstreaming and for the involvement of new actors ... The policy framework supports the importance of mainstreaming and the active investment in public support for development cooperation in the Netherlands” (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005a, p. 5).

¹²As noted by Hart (2009), “the policy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ‘Investing in global citizenship’ can be regarded as a silent revolution, since it fundamentally differs from previous policy on public support” (p. 146).

¹³In the respective letter to parliament, the minister revitalized “the UN call of the 1970s” and “stated that every citizen in the Netherlands can contribute to development by taking up his or her responsibility as a global citizen” (Hart, 2009, p. 142).

¹⁴The criteria also included requirements relating to sustainability, embedding in local structures, gender, participation, and ownership by the local population (Sikkema et al., 2006).

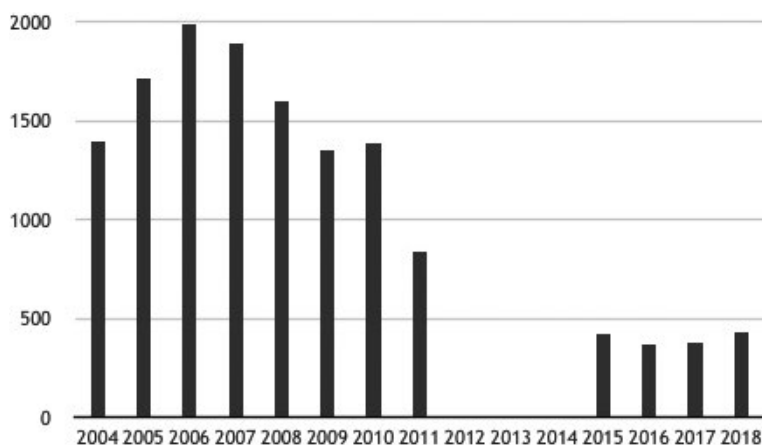


FIGURE 1 Number of PDI projects co-funded by established development organisations

Note: data unavailable for 2012-2014

Source: own calculations based on (annual) reports of (former) support organisations

2006). Nonetheless, despite this additional focus on the contribution of PDIs to poverty reduction, the public support rationale formed an essential part of the equation—that is, in their calculations to provide support for PDIs. As noted by one of the co-funding organizations, “if it were only about combating poverty, we wouldn’t do it, but we are also working on this to build public support” (Sikkema et al., 2006, p. 49). The co-funding organizations hoped not only to increase support for development co-operation in a general way—or government policy in particular—through support of PDIs, but also to increase support for their own organization—with public support being a means to support their existence and goals (Kinsbergen & Schulpen, 2014). In 2006, nine established Dutch development organizations together co-financed nearly 2,000 PDI projects with a total budget of about EUR 40 million (see Figure 1). About 75% of this budget stemmed from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, indicating that government subsidies represented a significant proportion of funding for PDIs.

All the above resulted in extensive financial and non-financial support, with the relationship between established actors and PDIs being rather instrumental: whereas PDIs needed the financial support to realize their development objectives in the Global South, the government and established development organizations required PDIs to take up an active role in the Global North to maintain or strengthen public support.

2.2 | The years of famine

Over time, several important policy changes influenced the dynamics between the established actors and PDIs. At the political level, political parties like the liberal party (VVD) questioned the use of investing in public support activities and called for the abolition of the NCDO (Boekstijn, 2008). At the administrative level, significant general budget cuts in government spending and in the field of development co-operation in the Netherlands led to stricter subsidy criteria and resulted in significant reduction of financial support for PDIs by co-funding organizations (Kinsbergen, 2013; Schulpen et al., 2013).

Strikingly, while the policy framework under Bert Koenders had mainstreaming as an explicit goal of its co-financing programme for 2007–2010, the minister’s subsequent policy framework stated that no specific funding would be reserved for public support activities. The 2011–2015 co-financing framework (MFS II) stipulated that only a maximum of 4% of financial support received from the ministry could be spent on PDIs. The programme co-ordinator of one of the co-funding organizations pointedly noted at the time that “private development initiatives [are] hidden away and limited to a footnote” (De spiegel van het particulier initiatief, 2010). Moreover, in

2010 the NCDO lost its task of subsidizing private aid initiatives (Coppens, 2019),¹⁵ leading to the end of the KPA programme¹⁶ (van den Berg & de Goede, 2012). This was replaced by the Subsidy Facility for Citizenship and Development Cooperation (SBOS) programme, which was mainly aimed at financing awareness-raising activities in the Netherlands and set high standards for justifying the effect of those activities (van den Berg & de Goede, 2012). As noted by van den Berg and de Goede (2012, p. 50), “for private initiatives, the majority of which are mainly aimed at financing projects in developing countries, this was a less suitable grant facility.”

Although State Secretary Bert Knapen (2010–2012) and Minister Lillianne Ploumen (2012–2017) still expressed support for PDIs, the options for established development organizations to co-fund PDIs with government support were significantly reduced (Kinsbergen, 2014). In the policy note “A World to Gain,” the government announced that it would provide room for the innovative forces of civil society organizations and private initiatives by financing proposals through an innovation fund (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). According to the Dutch network of young professionals, however, Ploumen’s plans appeared to prioritize the business community over support for innovative ideas (Zijlstra, 2013), and specific funding programmes by the national government intended to support small organizations were gradually abolished (Pollet, 2017). In parallel, a further emphasis in policy debates was on professionalization and the need for large-scale efforts and expertise, stimulated by the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) with the publication of WRR report number 84, *Less pretension, more ambition* (van Lieshout et al., 2010). Under the current minister, Sigrid Kaag, official support for PDIs appears to have completely disappeared. There is no longer any mention of PDIs, and terms such as citizens, individuals, private initiatives, public support, or global citizenship seem to be entirely absent from policy documents.¹⁷

As a result of changes in government policy and budget cuts, apart from PDI support organizations Wilde Ganzen and Vastenactie, which have continued to support PDIs for poverty-reduction purposes, the established organizations adapted their focus, and most have ceased to co-finance PDIs (see Figure 1). From 2006 onwards, an almost continuous downward trend can be observed in the funding provided by Dutch development organizations to PDIs (see Figure 1). In 2018 only four established development organizations provided support to PDIs; just over 400 projects received a total of EUR 10 million (see Figure 1), most of which came from organizations relying solely on private donations instead of government subsidies. In 2017, only 11% of the PDIs referred to PDI support organizations as their most important donor compared to nearly 25% of the organizations in 2008 (Kinsbergen, PDI Database, 2017; CIDIN PDI Database 2008–2009).

Co-operation between the established development sector and PDIs thus appears to have been, in essence, a marriage of convenience that lasted only as long as PDIs were deemed valuable enough by the government and professional organizations for realizing their own policy and organization agendas to outweigh the costs of investing in PDIs. The instrumental approach by the established order was reflected both in relation to PDIs’ contributions to public support and in relation to their activities in the Global South, where they had to fit into the vision, methods, and practices of the traditional sector by being required to become more “professional.” This instrumental approach meant that support immediately faltered when public support was no longer an objective and PDIs lost their value as a means to reach this goal. The forced exercise of professionalization, which turned out to be too demanding and/or ill-suited for PDIs, also presented an additional difficulty for PDIs to receive support from the established order, further hindering their co-operation with these actors and integration into the traditional development community.

¹⁵The NCDO still received EUR 38.5 million from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the period 2011–2014, but with the precondition that it would transform from an institution that was to stimulate public support for development co-operation by providing subsidies to third parties into an organization functioning as a “knowledge broker, advisor and strategic driver” (IOB, 2014, p. 13).

¹⁶In the 16 years that the KPA programme existed, the government supported private initiatives with EUR 73.5 million (Kinsbergen & Schulpen, 2014).

¹⁷In the policy framework, the only references to citizens are in relation to “there.” The document states for instance that, “In the coming years, the Netherlands will invest more in strengthening citizen participation in local decision-making processes” (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018, p. 42).

3 | IMPLICATIONS

As demonstrated above, the support structure for PDIs in the Netherlands was traditionally characterized by: (a) a strong focus on these initiatives as vehicles for catalysing public support; and (b) a professionalization drive. What are the implications of the developments in relation to these two agendas and the corresponding embracing–disregarding sequence in the relationship between the established actors and PDIs?

3.1 | PDIs: Still standing strong

Interestingly, we find that despite these policy developments and their significant impact, PDIs are still standing strong. A unique longitudinal study (2008–2017) of 269 Dutch PDIs shows that 81.8% of PDIs survived over time, and that only 3.7% of PDIs developed into a new type of organization, leaving behind their original small-scale and voluntary character (Kinsbergen et al., 2020). Despite the significant decline of financial support from the development establishment, on average, the PDIs that participated in the panel study did not experience a budget decline. The average budget stayed virtually the same (EUR 63,372 in 2008 vs. EUR 63,308 in 2017). The primary data therefore indicate that instead of being a temporary trend, PDIs remain actors in the development field (Kinsbergen & Koch, under review; Kinsbergen, PDI Database 2017). Moreover, rather than maturing into large-scale, professional organizations and transforming into the new establishment, PDIs have maintained their own identity.

The longitudinal study among PDIs shows that, against the background of reduced budgets from established development actors, PDIs successfully sought alternative allies to compensate for this loss. Although a causal relation is difficult to prove, we find that an increasing number of PDIs started to engage in successful partnerships with private (family and/or corporate) foundations (see Figure 2).¹⁸ At the same time, from 2005, a decreasing number of PDIs requested support from co-funding organizations (Schulpen et al., 2013). Different evaluations commissioned by co-funding organizations on the declining number of applications by PDIs have highlighted an increasingly bureaucratic approach, with demanding accountability criteria leading to complex reporting requirements that turned out to be difficult or impossible for private initiatives to achieve. PDIs themselves explicitly mentioned the strict conditions and complex procedures as reasons for not applying, discouraging co-operation with these support organizations (PI Wijzer, 2012; Schulpen et al., 2013).

Although PDIs have managed to survive despite the declining support from the established development community, government policy has nonetheless had a significant impact on the role of PDIs and their positioning within the aid architecture.

3.2 | The disappearance of the public support policy

In terms of measuring the level of public support for development co-operation, a distinction can be made between the importance attached to helping people in LMICs in general and the specific support for public spending in this area (Spitz et al., 2013). As mentioned, regarding the former, an overwhelming majority have traditionally (since the 1980s) been in favour of such assistance (van den Berg & de Goede, 2012). The specific support for public spending in this area shows slightly different, but still high, figures. From 1994 onwards, public support surveys (NCDO, 1994, 1998, 2002) in the Netherlands have shown a more or less steady percentage (around 80%) of the population that supports the official development budget (Beerends & Broere, 2004; Context, 2005). Although

¹⁸This reliance on private donations may reflect a more general trend also observed elsewhere. In the US, for instance, most of the new international aid organizations “rely mainly on private donations” (Schnable, 2015, p. 311).

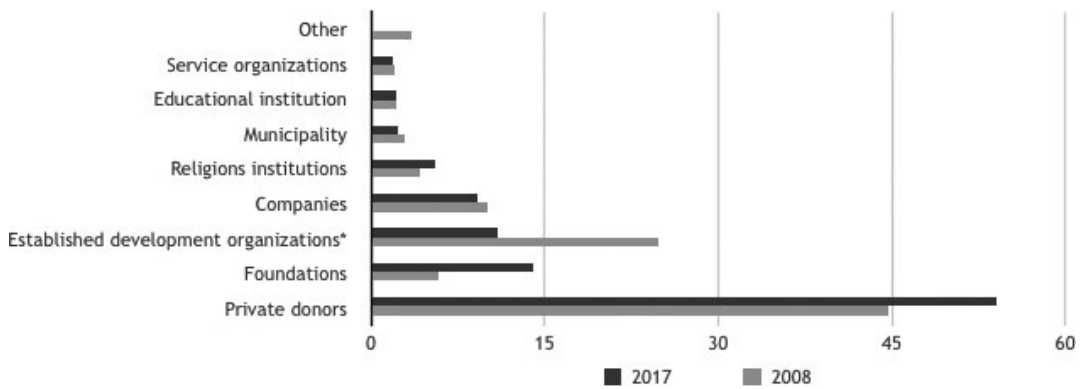


FIGURE 2 Most important donors to PDIs 2008-2017 in %

*Wilde Ganzen, Impulsis, Kerk in Actie, Cordaid, Stichting Bisschoppelijke Vastenactie, Edukans

Source: CIDIN PDI Database 2008-2009 and Kinsbergen PDI Database, 2017

this support base continued to be relatively stable over the years, in 2012 the NCDO noted that public support for government policy and the budget for development co-operation—the traditional benchmark for involvement in international co-operation—had steadily declined (Carabain et al., 2012; Hento, 2011). Comparable figures to those in the early 2000s or before were no longer achieved in recent years (Coppens, 2019). In 2016, the NCDO noted a slight decrease in the proportion of respondents in favour of helping LMICs, and a similar decrease regarding spending on government development co-operation (Carabain, 2016). According to the report, this slowdown in public support could be considered quite remarkable, considering the Netherlands was doing well economically (Carabain, 2016). Still, this latest survey by the NCDO found that a majority (61%) of Dutch people consider it important to help people in other countries to develop, and some recent research findings point to increased opposition to further budget cuts in development co-operation (e.g. Kanne, 2021). It is therefore too early to conclude that the disappearance of the public support policy and the declining support for PDIs by the established order is not reflected in the level of public support for development aid. However, considering the increasing importance of the more active form of public support, further analysis may be advisable.

Remembering that PDIs themselves are regarded as an expression of public support and that support for PDIs has been a way to strengthen public support, we distinguish two trends that could be considered first effects of the significant budget cuts in PDI support. The first is related to the implications of PDIs having come to rely increasingly on private (family) foundations. Since the building of public support is not an explicit objective of these donors, PDIs are less incentivized to foster such an understanding of their role, resulting in diminishing efforts in this area.¹⁹ This could be expected to result in decreasing interactions between PDIs and private individuals. This appears to be reflected in the declining financial support from Dutch households to PDIs over the last years; whereas in 2015, households gave an estimated EUR 47 million to PDIs, by 2018, these contributions had fallen by more than half to EUR 20 million (Teunenbroek & Bekkers, 2020; see Figure 3). This trend is especially striking, because it deviates from household contributions to development co-operation in general or to other charitable causes (Teunenbroek & Bekkers, 2020).

¹⁹Hence, the reorientation of PDIs towards private foundations reinforces the trend initiated by declining government emphasis on public support, with implications for the role of PDIs and their contribution to the overall development sector. As part of the public support strategy, established development organizations requested PDIs to raise part of the budget from fund-raising activities and to look for public outreach (e.g. in local newspapers, presentations in schools) in exchange for funding. This was to encourage PDIs to inform and involve the public in their work and hence in the world of international co-operation. Neither of these are funding preconditions for most of the private foundations. The strengthened relationship of PDIs with private foundations has therefore had a significant impact on the public role of PDIs.

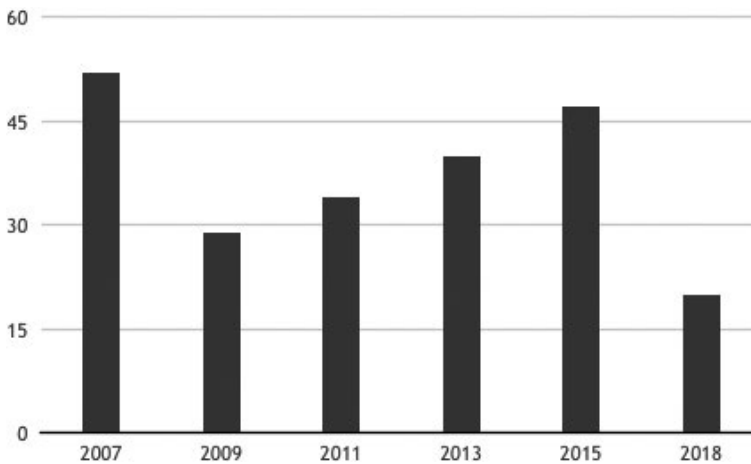


FIGURE 3 Donations by Dutch households to PDIs

X €1,000,000

Source: Geven in Nederland, 2009-2020, VU, Centrum voor Filantropische studies

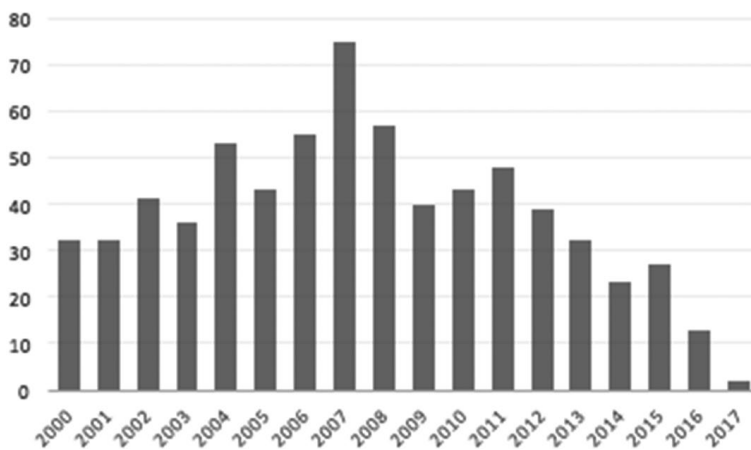


FIGURE 4 Number of PDIs established per year

Source: Kinsbergen PDI Database, 2017

Against the background of decreasing support for PDIs over the past decade, we also observe a second trend of declining growth in the number of PDIs being established in the Netherlands (see Figure 4). While it is again impossible to demonstrate a causal relationship, the coincidence of these developments might indicate that the decreasing support for PDIs has contributed to a flattening of public enthusiasm for development aid, which is further expressed in a declining number of people starting their own development organization. To be sure, the slackening of an upward trend could reflect the possibility that the expansion of PDIs has simply reached the point of saturation after so many years of growth. However, it might also be a more fundamental indication that the system in which PDIs have to operate has become less receptive and has made it increasingly difficult or unattractive for citizens to start their own initiatives.

The disappearance of the public support policy and the associated implications for the role of PDIs might be considered an important loss for citizen involvement in development co-operation and could become problematic for the government's ambitions in the field of development aid. The decreasing attention to and investment by

the Netherlands in public education and awareness-building on development co-operation have also caught the attention of the OECD. The latest OECD country report on the Netherlands (OECD, 2017) observed that the budget for development co-operation was frequently criticized in parliament and recommended that the Dutch government dedicate more resources to promoting development awareness and support. Importantly, the OECD concluded that in the Netherlands “opportunities are ... being missed for engaging with other ... stakeholders to raise development awareness at home,” pointing to the reduction in communication resources and the end of government investment in development education for a civil society (OECD, 2017, p. 76).

3.3 | Mutual disengagement

Next to changes in the public support agenda, the role and positioning of PDIs (their contribution to development co-operation and interaction with the established order) has at the same time been influenced by developments in the professionalization agenda. As mentioned, this agenda was reflected in criteria from co-funding organizations and translated into a large number of training sessions and networking events, stimulating knowledge exchange. The PDIs’ new allies are not giving their funding unconditionally, but the overall criteria are less strict and their services tend not to include training.

Research conducted by the Social and Cultural Planning Office in the Netherlands has established that PDIs have been able to develop thanks to civil society infrastructure (van den Berg & de Goede, 2012). The study also recorded a positive trend towards improved quality among PDIs. According to the authors, the closing of the various support desks would probably not herald the end of the growth of PDIs, but could mean a significant loss of growth opportunities and incentives for professionalization, especially for new initiatives. PDIs themselves have also indicated that they benefitted from the training in development co-operation provided to them voluntarily or at very little cost. In a survey of PDIs, one pointed out that the training “has been extremely important” (van den Berg & de Goede, 2012, p. 79). The increased skills have been confirmed by members of development organizations, observing the effects from their steering and advisory services. Someone from Wilde Ganzen noted: “You see that people indeed do grow” (cited in van den Berg & de Goede, 2012, p. 79). Hence, there are clear benefits to be derived from encouragement and knowledge transfer. This is especially relevant considering that the capacity of PDIs to contribute to development co-operation is broader than their role in strengthening public support. In an independent evaluation of a sub-KPA programme, the so-called Matra-KPA programme,²⁰ it was found that small-scale activities had been effective not only in terms of increasing public support for international co-operation “here,” but also in terms of achieving project goals—that is, in contributing to social transformation “there” (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005b; Evaluatiegroep Overheid en Bedrijf, 2005). Moreover, a longitudinal study found that the development interventions of PDIs are often long-lasting: “small as they are, the interventions can make a difference in the lives of people and can continue to do so long after the initial investment”; the authors concluded “that PDIs are successful in fulfilling their service delivery functions” (Kinsbergen et al., 2021). The challenge for the established actors is to help improve the contribution of PDIs while keeping in mind the distinct character of these initiatives. The distinctive feature of reliance on people-to-people contacts may give PDIs a comparative advantage in terms of incentivizing public support through word of mouth, motivating others to give to international causes based on personal networks and trust (Appel & Oreg, 2020). As noted by Cochrane and Davis (2020, p. 3), “citizen aid might offer a complementary aid delivery mechanism with large INGOs and state agencies through direct people-to-people connections, enabling higher levels of altruism, and enacting more flexible and responsive approaches.” In their comparative interpretive policy analysis, Appel and Telch (2019) found that these grassroots organizations, supported by their personal connections, have quickly

²⁰The Matra-KPA programme aimed to support the change process in countries in Central and Eastern Europe towards a multiform, democratic constitutional state (Evaluatiegroep Overheid en Bedrijf, 2005).

learned to work in challenging environments and to respond to context-specific development complexities, possibly indicating that they can be more creative and innovative. In this way, they could potentially complement the more professional and larger NGOs.²¹ So far, however, the established order has tended towards enforcing increasingly demanding professionalization requirements, thereby alienating rather than stimulating PDIs.

In conclusion, it can be said that there has been a movement of mutual retreat: declining support for PDIs on the part of the established development community, and a move on the part of PDIs towards alternative forms of support, increasingly relying on private foundations. This has resulted in less interaction between professional development organizations and PDIs. Importantly, faltering government support in the past decade and the suboptimal co-operation with the established order seem to have hindered the full potential of PDIs. As demonstrated above, many opportunities for enabling PDIs to contribute both to building public support at home and improving the quality of their work in the Global South are being missed.

Using the concept from Ostrom (2000) of “crowding out citizenship,” we could describe a crowding out effect in relation to PDIs, with the government constraining, rather than embracing, the élan and motivation of people in such organizations. Research by the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office found support for the notion that up to and including 2010 there was support for global citizenship—a so-called “crowding in” as a result of government actions stimulating such initiatives (van den Berg & de Wilde, 2012). However, while at first there appeared to be a crowding in of PDIs, in the last decade there has been a significant reversal. Rather than embracing PDIs, the government is moving increasingly towards a policy of crowding out or abandoning PDIs, thereby rendering the integration of PDIs into the established development community an increasingly distant prospect.

4 | DISCUSSION

The initial co-operation between PDIs and the government and its traditional implementing partners seemed to challenge Develtere’s categorization of the development sector as a relatively closed community. However, today Dutch PDIs seem increasingly excluded from this community. We might even conclude that they were never really integrated as much as they were in some other countries. Whereas government policy and the attitude of professional organizations at first appeared to indicate a crowding in of PDIs, it has become increasingly apparent that the relationship of the established actors can now be more adequately characterized as a crowding out. The development community in the Netherlands has ultimately remained relatively closed, confirming Develtere’s portrayal of the sector.

4.1 | The need for PDIs in the era of SDGs

From the perspective of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, the mutual disengagement on the part of PDIs and the establishment could be considered particularly worrying. The SDG campaign Project Everyone (Global Goals, n.d.) and SDG17, co-operating to achieve the SDGs, have called on everyone to play their part and stressed the importance of co-operation between different actors. The Netherlands Action Plan for implementation of the SDGs recognized that different types of actors across various sectors have a role to play in realizing this ambitious agenda, that communication through these actors is necessary for the benefit of a new citizen perspective, and that citizens are also participants (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016).

The importance of such co-operation between various actors, including citizen initiatives, is relevant for the development sector on two fronts. First, it can be a way to revive public support, notably the active form of public

²¹PDIs have also identified this ability to adapt their organization and objectives to local circumstances, including barriers to entry and changing needs, as something that distinguishes them from larger, professionalized NGOs (Appel & Telch, 2019).

support that is critical in the context of the SDGs. As has been noted by the WRR (van Lieshout et al., 2010), actively involved citizens provide the public support base for policy: they provide support for the implementation of policy through their everyday actions and ensure social renewal by introducing new approaches, subjects, and ideas. The many vociferous parliamentary debates in the Netherlands suggest that the government is struggling to garner enough support for its development policy and for spending tax money on projects in the Global South. Although the Dutch public has been—and continues to be—relatively supportive of development co-operation in general, traditional forms of international co-operation are under attack and significant questions have been raised about the authority and legitimacy of traditional development organizations (Deloffre & Schmitz, 2019; Hart, 2009; Rauwers, 2019). As noted by Schmitz (2020), “for various reasons, traditional INGOs are no longer the unquestioned intermediaries between wealthy donors and poor aid recipients.” Among diverse audiences, there has been growing scepticism towards traditional development organizations, leading to a considerable backlash against their programmes and activities (Schmitz, 2020). The revival of populist sentiments in politics (starting with conservative politicians such as Pim Fortuyn and continuing with Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet) has put development co-operation further in the shadows (Coppen, 2019). However, neither the government nor development organizations have been able to offer an effective response to the negative criticisms (Coppen, 2019). PDIs, because of their small-scale nature and personal approach, could play an important role in reinvigorating public support and countering the negative image of international development (Kinsbergen et al., 2011).

Second, for development actors joining forces is a precondition for achieving the complex global goals in the Global South (Oldekop et al., 2016; United Nations, n.d.). Disengagement might stand in the way of mutual learning, exchange, and innovation. Synergies between different types of intervention strategies can only come about when joint programmes are designed and implemented. PDIs' sustainable first-generation style of interventions could achieve more impact when complemented by second- and third-generation interventions from more established development organizations—and vice versa (Kinsbergen et al., 2021). Merging PDIs' long-term embeddedness in local communities with larger NGOs' networks at the meso and macro level might enhance the effectiveness of both, and help to bring about the sustainable change that is needed to achieve the SDGs. Compared to larger NGOs that tend to be more distant from citizens both in the North and in the South, PDIs, due to their strong reliance on people-to-people connections, have considerable potential to connect the public to the SDG agenda and respond flexibly to local challenges (Appel & Oreg, 2020; Appel & Telch, 2019; Cochrane & Davis, 2020).

4.2 | The Flemish complementary approach: Respecting and capitalizing on diversity

A better understanding of the comparative advantages of PDIs, and what would be needed to (re)enable them to play this role, could be useful for practitioners and policy-makers alike. It could provide insight into the benefits of fostering the inclusion of PDIs within the established system of international development. Those insights could be applicable to other countries which have a similar government support system to the Netherlands. While this might be different in the US, across Europe there seem to be various opportunities of this nature. Important lessons might be drawn from the policy approach taken in Belgium (more precisely in Flanders). The first step in the recognition of PDIs in Flanders was to establish a focal point for Flemish PDIs in 2009, the Vierde Pijler Steunpunt, which provided PDIs with advice, training, network events, and, since 2017, limited funding (4de Pijlersteunpunt, & / 11.11.11 (2020)). Since 2012, the focal point has been integrated in 11.11.11, the North–South coalition of established NGOs, unions, movements, and various solidarity groups in Flanders. The idea is not to co-opt PDIs into the system of established development actors; rather, the coalition recognizes small organizations as critical actors in fostering global citizenship and expresses its intention to give voice to PDIs as part of the broad, diverse landscape of actors. PDIs in Flanders now have their own seat at the table in the development community, illustrated by being invited to take part in the public campaigns initiated by 11.11.11. In 2017, part of the budget

resulting from joint fund-raising of the coalition members was transferred to PDIs. Stimulating dialogue, mutual respect, and recognition, and the ambition to join forces in order to achieve shared goals, were the starting points of the co-operation between PDIs and established development actors in Flanders (Ibid). The latest OECD country report (OECD, 2020) specifically praised "Belgium's exemplary commitment to global citizenship, including focus on SDG communication and inclusive partnerships, based amongst other things on active cooperation with civil society."

4.3 | How to re-engage?

Considering the importance of joining forces arising from the SDG agenda and the critical political voices in the Netherlands, a mutual acquaintance on the part of PDIs, established development organizations, and the government might be needed now more than ever. This does not mean integration into the traditional system, but rather acknowledgement of PDIs as development organizations in their own right, providing the "recognition" that would enable them to flourish as alternative actors and contribute to a new form of pluralism that can benefit the development field as a whole.²² To make use of the value of actively involved citizens, policy-makers have to set up appropriate frameworks to capitalize on the comparative advantages of PDIs and, by doing so, recognize their distinctive nature. As was already acknowledged in the special policy document on public support published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs more than a decade ago, when it comes to implementing global citizenship, society has a great deal of knowledge and experience. However, this has to be made systematically available to make the various forms of private initiatives as effective as possible, and to translate passive public support into more active support. As noted in the document, "the fact that knowledge and experience are insufficiently accessible leads to an underutilisation of the social potential for global citizenship" (p. 1). It might therefore be worth (re-)investing in a system that enables a plurality of actors to engage in mutually beneficial co-operation and together contribute more optimally towards achieving the SDGs.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

This study has sought to provide a better understanding of the changing architecture of development aid by analysing the entry of PDIs as alternative actors in the field of international development, using the Netherlands as an illustrative case. Considering the complexity of policy-making systems and the mutual influences of the plurality of actors involved (Kay & Baker, 2015), we chose to rely on a method of policy tracing to gain insight into relevant interactions and mechanisms in this within-case account of policy change. Although policy tracing does not offer the same rigour as robust causal process-tracing analysis, this method nonetheless helps to understand complex processes embedded in strategic interaction, offering useful indications about the mechanisms driving this and potential factors explaining policy outcomes (Kay & Baker, 2015). Through extensive policy tracing over a 15-year period, combined with analysis of primary longitudinal data, we found that, while PDIs initially appeared to be embraced by the established development community through generous support from both the government and professional organizations—primarily stimulated by a public support rationale—these actors have increasingly lost interest in partnering with PDIs as public support disappeared from the agenda as an important policy theme. At

²²Insights from other sectors make the significance of such recognition even clearer. In research on citizen neighbourhood involvement, Tonkens and de Wilde (2013) found that the relationship between residents and government institutions tends to become heated due to feelings of misunderstanding and of not being taken seriously. In re-establishing contact, it is therefore important to recognize the differences between the working methods of citizen initiatives and those of professionals. As observed by van Daal and Winsemius (2005) in relation to the health sector: "The enthusiasm with which many volunteers do their work sometimes does not compare well with the demands placed on the work of professionals" (p. 65).

the same time, PDIs have also moved away from the established actors. This retreat was prompted by an increasing push for professionalization accompanied by increased funding and bureaucratization requirements that appeared difficult or impossible for such small-scale voluntary initiatives to meet. Although it is difficult to prove, we detected the first indications that this risk of disengagement might affect citizens' involvement in international development co-operation, either as initiators of PDIs or in making donations. This is all the more problematic considering the much-needed potential of citizen action and support if the SDGs are to be achieved. We therefore end this article with a clear policy call to build towards a plural system of mutual recognition where various actors—rather than competing with one another within a firmly established system—complement each other as communities in their own right and are able to form flexible and unconventional coalitions for addressing today's complex, newly emerging, and rapidly evolving challenges.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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