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Beyond the Immediate Effects of COVID-19: Exploring the Consequences of the Pandemic on the Southern NGO Partners of Dutch INGOs

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 has a significant impact on societies and individuals but also on organizations. Using a survey and focus group discussions, this article examines (perceptions of) Covid-19's impact on the Southern NGO partners of Dutch INGOs in the context of international development. The analysis explores how Covid-19 has affected Southern NGOs' (SNGOs) organizational capacity and relations with donors. This article finds that Covid-19 has had substantial and largely negative consequences on SNGOs' financial situation, staffing, and activities. Furthermore, the findings suggest that Covid-19 contributed (at least temporarily) to more equal relations between Southern NGOs and donors. The results emphasize the need for donors, including INGOs, to offer financial safety nets to ensure that SNGOs remain operational when crises hit and the need for both sides to keep up the momentum to shift the power relation.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19; Southern NGOs; civil society; INGOs; impact

Introduction

Often seen as part of 'the three-sector model of society' (Edwards, 2020, p. 22), civil society organizations (CSOs) have – next to states and markets – essential roles in development. Although the jury is still out on the question of what precisely these roles are or should be, a general distinction is often made between service delivery on the one hand and a more political role (e.g., lobby & advocacy) on the other (Banks & Hulme, 2012; Dupuy et al., 2016; Lewis & Kanji, 2009; Riddell, 2007). In the field of development cooperation, where terms such as CSOs and NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) are often used interchangeably, these roles are then often discussed in light of the international aid system and the relationship between International NGOs (INGOs)[1] and their Southern partner NGOs (SNGOs) (Brass et al., 2018).

Central to the discussion on the role of NGOs within (international) development is their ability to initiate sustainable change processes. In other words, how effective are

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NGOs in service delivery, lobbying and advocacy? Organizational capacity is widely assumed to be a major determinant of effectiveness. The general linkages between organizational capacity and effectiveness have been covered extensively in international development literature from perspectives such as systems thinking, complexity theory and organizational learning (for an overview, see: IOB, 2011).

In addition to organizational capacity, the literature points to structural inequalities within the aid system as another force shaping SNGO effectiveness. These inequalities directly shape NGOs' autonomy and ability to act as 'actors in their own right' and is seen as a pre-condition for ensuring local ownership and holding governments accountable (Elbers et al., 2014; Kapazoglou & Goris, 2021a; Knight, 2019).

Structural inequalities within the aid system concern the power imbalances in relations between Southern recipients (e.g., SNGOs) and Northern funders (e.g., INGOs). Research and debate about localization and shift-the-power reflect this (Baguios et al., 2021; Kapazoglou & Goris, 2021b) and basically deal with two sides of the same coin: the need for locally-led development and the need to empower SNGOs in their relationship with the international donor community (including INGOs).

This paper examines Covid-19's (perceived) impact on the Southern NGO partners of Dutch INGOs in the context of international development. It focuses on SNGOs' organizational capacity and donor relations. In our analysis, we look at how SNGOs are affected by the consequences of the pandemic (e.g., people becoming seriously ill) and the consequences of the measures taken to curb the pandemic (e.g., social distancing, travel bans, quarantining, lockdowns and curfews).

As of now, the effects of the pandemic on SNGOs in the context of international development have yet to be addressed in the academic literature. What does exist are several non-academic (policy) reports on the topic, commissioned mainly by INGOs seeking to learn about how the pandemic has impacted their Southern partners. These non-academic reports provide a valuable frame of reference and base of comparison for this paper. The experiences of SNGOs regarding Covid-19 also present a learning opportunity for donors, including INGOs, in terms of how best to support their Southern NGO partners in times of crisis. Hence, next to striving for academic relevance, this study aimed for societal relevance by teasing out policy implications for INGOs.

We seek to answer the following question: how do the SNGO partners of Dutch INGOs perceive the impact of Covid-19 on their organizational capacity and relations with donors? We examine these questions empirically using a mixed-method approach. Our study draws upon a survey of 136 SNGOs from 28 countries, supplemented by focus group discussions with 16 SNGOs from three countries.

Overall, our analysis suggests that Covid-19 has substantial negative consequences on the financial situation of SNGOs, has widely impacted what SNGOs do, and has caused substantial challenges to staff members. We also show that not all direct consequences are necessarily dim. Our findings also suggest that Covid-19 is seen as positively affecting the power relation between Northern and Southern NGOs. The main question is whether this positive effect will outlive the pandemic.

After presenting our methodology, we present the main findings of Covid-19's perceived impact on capacity and power imbalances in the aid system. We end with a brief conclusion and policy recommendations.

Methods & Materials

This study followed a quant-to-qual mixed-methods design (cf. Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), in which a survey preceded (and informed) a set of focus group discussions. Below, we provide more details on these two related elements in the study design.

Quantitative Methodology: Survey

This study was conducted in the context of a learning trajectory involving Dutch INGOs in 2021–2022. The starting point was that the experiences of Covid-19 present a learning opportunity for INGOs in terms of how to support their SNGO partners best when the next Covid-like crisis hits. Hence our empirical analysis focuses on the SNGO partners of Dutch INGOs.

In March 2021, we sent out an online survey to 323 partner organizations of ten different Dutch INGOs which participated in the learning trajectory (see Appendix 1 for background information on these INGOs). Besides ensuring the research findings would feed into the internal policy process of the INGOs, working with them was crucial to gain access to a wide range of SNGOs in different parts of the world. While the sampling approach fits the study's explorative nature and learning objectives, it does not permit generalizations to SNGOs in general. However, the study did identify several uniform patterns across different country contexts, suggesting a broader relevance. Furthermore, some of the critical patterns identified align with the findings of non-academic studies on the topic commissioned by INGOs.

The survey, made available in English, French and Spanish, was eventually filled out by 136 respondents; a response rate of 42.1%. This provided information on 136 different SNGOs, as organizations could only submit a single response. In almost all cases (90%), the questionnaire was filled by the organization's director (CEO/COO) or another senior management member. The survey data is partly anonymous: the names of the organizations are known to the researchers, but no personal details were asked from the respondents. The SNGOs in the sample represent 28 countries, with a strong concentration in Sub-Saharan Africa and South(east) Asia (see full country list in Appendix 2). The sample features the largest SNGO clusters in India, Uganda, and DR Congo, covering 12, 15 and 18 organizations.

The survey consisted of questions on the (perceived) impact of Covid-19 on the organization in terms of (1) projects, programmes, and activities, (2) staff and organization, (3) finances, and (4) a broader assessment, including (current and future) threats and opportunities and other challenges in comparison to Covid-19. Also, questions were included that zoomed in on the organization's relation vis-à-vis the state and donors and the support received from both.

Table 1 offers a selective profile of organization-specific characteristics in the sample, all about the situation prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. It shows that variations in

Table 1. Pre-pandemic profile of SNGOs in sample ($n = 136$), selected characteristics.

Size of annual budget	%	Dependence on foreign funding (% of budget)	%	No. of paid employees	%
<50K	25.7	[0,20]	4.4	[1, 5]	18.4
[50K–200 K]	18.4	[20, 40]	5.9	[6, 20]	31.6
[200K–1M]	30.1	[40, 60]	4.4	[21, 50]	20.6
[1M–5M]	16.2	[60, 80]	22.8	[51, 100]	13.2
≥5M	9.6	[80, 100]	54.4	100+	16.2
	100.0		100.0		100.0
Type of role	**%**	**Type of sector**	**%**	**Religious orientation**	**%**
Active in service provision	66.2	Active in health	48.5	Faith-based organization	18.4
Active in advocacy	54.4	Active in emergency relief	31.6	Dutch donor identifying as Catholic	64.7

annual budget size are vast, with one in four SNGOs on a budget smaller than US$50,000, whereas almost one in ten has a turnover of more than US$5,000,000. Dependence on foreign funding is generally high; more than half receive over 80% of their funds from international donors. The number of paid employees mimics the wide variation in size, ranging from no more than five (18.4%) to more than 100 (16.2%). As shown at the bottom of Table 1, service delivery is the most common role the sampled SNGOs engage in, and advocacy comes in second. About one in five combines service delivery and advocacy activities. With a view to our subsequent analysis, nearly half is active in the health sector and nearly a third in emergency relief. Regarding donor relations, linkages to two of our ten collaborative INGOs dominate the scene. Almost two-thirds of the Southern partners are linked to either one of them. Both INGOs have Catholic roots, which may explain the substantive proportion (almost one in five) of the Southern partners that self-identify in the survey as a faith-based organization (FBO) rather than an NGO.

For the empirical analysis we make use of standard descriptive statistics, bivariate analyses in the form of two-group proportions Z-tests (Table 4), and a multivariate regression (Table 5). The latter concerns an ordered logit regression on the perceived power dynamics between INGOs and SNGOs. Apart from a set of organization-level variables, the model includes a Covid-related country-level characteristic as explanatory variable, namely lockdown stringency. The severity of lockdown measures shows substantial variation across our country set; the strictest nationwide lockdown in the sample to curb the pandemic in 2020 was recorded for India and the lightest for Burundi (Hale et al., 2021). We distinguish three groups for inclusion in the model, featuring a light, medium, or strict lockdown, respectively. Appendix 2 has further details on group membership.

The ordered logit regression has been run in SPSS (version 27) using the PLUM procedure. To check whether this procedure produces unbiased estimates, a test of parallel lines (cf. Liu, 2009) is performed. Test statistics are reported in the bottom row of the regression table, showing that conditions for accurate model fit are met. We have also checked the robustness of the estimates by applying bootstrapping under country and donor stratification (results available on request). Since no spurious results came to light, the standard errors reported in the regression output are non-clustered ones. Descriptive statistics of the variables included in the regression are available in Appendix 3.

Qualitative Methodology: Online Focus Group Discussions

To gain an in-depth understanding of the survey data, we conducted focus group discussions with a selection of survey respondents. Focus group discussions are particularly suitable for learning more about people's thoughts and experiences (Hollander, 2004; Kitzinger, 1994, 1995). This method helps explore what participants think and why and how they think so (Kitzinger, 1995). The social interaction between participants is an essential aspect of focus group discussions (Barbour, 2007; Halkier, 2010; Hollander, 2004; Kitzinger, 1994, 1995; Sim & Waterfield, 2019). As Kitzinger (1995, p. 299) argues, 'the idea behind the focus group method is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less accessible in a one-to-one interview'. In this research, SNGO participants could share their experiences on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and respond to one another.

Three focus group discussions were held online with a selection of survey respondents from DR Congo (four participants), Uganda (six participants) and India (six participants). These countries correspond to the most prominent response clusters in the survey. Within these clusters, we invited specific respondents to the FGDs based on responses that triggered further reflection. The discussions with the participants from Uganda and India were held in English and from DR Congo in French. During the focus group discussions, three main topics were tabled: (1) innovations due to Covid-19, (2) the relationship with the government, and (3) the relationship with the Dutch partner.

The Perceived Impact on Organizational Capacity

While academic literature on the impact of Covid-19 on NGOs in the context of international cooperation is completely absent, several non-academic (policy) reports have been published on the topic (see, for example, Aflatoun, 2020; Partos, 2020; WACSI, 2021). In most cases, these are reports written on behalf of INGOs seeking to learn how the pandemic has impacted their Southern partners. Most of the reports only explore the effects of Covid-19 on the functioning of SNGOs in terms of programmes and funding. Furthermore, besides generally being based on small sample sizes, the reports are limited because they were nearly all conducted in the first months after the pandemic hit. Nevertheless, they are relevant to discuss here as they provide a helpful frame of reference and base of comparison. In this section, we position the findings of our study within the context of the non-academic 'grey literature'.

Operations and Programmes

With roughly 60% of the Southern NGOs pointing out that operations and programmes are the most critical area affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, our study confirms earlier findings in the grey literature (see EPIC-Africa & @AfricanNGOs, 2020, p. 11). Three impacts of Covid-19 related to operations and programmes stand out from our study. The first impact covers the disruption in the implementation of existing NGO programmes. Our findings show that such disruption has occurred on a massive scale.

Many organizations have had to reduce their scope of operations or close them altogether (see also Arntz & Alexeeva, 2020; Civic Engagement Alliance, 2020; EPIC-Africa & @AfricanNGOs, 2020; Wood & Majumdar, 2020). However, an indefinite stop to (specific) regular activities is relatively rare. In our study, just 8% of SNGOs were forced to do so. With 61%, a temporary stop is much more likely.

Second, the pandemic forced NGOs to do things differently. Doing things differently relates to 'the way [NGOs] organize to carry on with their activities' and 'how they reach out to beneficiaries and beneficiary communities to deliver on their mission and organizational objectives' (see also WACSI, 2021, p. 4). Unsurprisingly, doing things differently relates to working remotely, entirely or partially, quickly becoming a new reality for many NGOs.

Although 'going digital' (e.g., teleconferencing, live-streaming, using social media or WhatsApp groups for personalized messages) is a crucial adaptation allowing NGOs to maintain contact with their target groups and continue their regular activities, it is certainly not their only adaptation strategy. NGOs were also quite inventive in reverting to radio and print as communication means. Besides, our study shows that Southern partners of Dutch INGOs maintained face-to-face contact with their target group despite social distancing measures. They split groups into smaller ones and moved from group-based to individual contacts or from indoor to open-air meetings. Table 2 shows – in descending frequency – the lockdown-induced adaptation strategies of SNGOs in reaching out to target groups.

Table 2. Reaching out to target groups: lockdown-induced adaptation strategies.

★★★ 	**Maintaining (physical) face-to-face contact** • Split groups into smaller ones • Open up more points of contact • From group-based to individual contact (door-to-door campaigns or centre-only attendance) • Appointment-based contact (assignment of slots) • From indoor to open-air meetings
★★★ 	**Re-creating face-to-face contact online** • Teleconferencing (e.g., Zoom) • Live-streaming (e.g., cultural and educational performances)
★★ 	**Switching from face to voice** • Radio (in some cases 'blended' with other technologies) • Mobile phone calls • On-site public address (roadshows)
★★ 	**Switching from face to text** • Personalized messaging/consultation (WhatsApp groups) • Generic mobile or social media messaging • Generic messaging in print
★ 	**Changing (faces in) chain of delivery** • Introducing new local intermediaries • Leapfrogging intermediaries by capacitating (caregivers of) beneficiaries • Piggybacking on other intermediaries

Source: survey Southern partner NGOs of Dutch INGOs.

Third, many SNGOs adapted to the pandemic by taking up new activities. They showed substantial flexibility, willingness, and ability to step outside their comfort zone. The latter is particularly clear in SNGOs principally being active as lobbyists and advocates becoming active in service delivery. These new activities often address the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak (see also Aflatoun International, 2020; Arntz & Alexeeva, 2020; CSPPS, 2020).

The most important among the new programming activities then is emergency aid. One organization from the Philippines stated:'Covid-19 has taken our attention more into emergency response for humanitarian purpose'. Many examples are provided (e.g., health awareness, dry food distribution, hygiene kits provision). Occasionally, reference is made to related new interventions such as training to manufacture these hygiene products (e.g., masks, soap) by members of the target group themselves, the 'construction of water facilities', or the adoption of 'household direct support interventions' with the added value according to the concerned SNGO of creating 'a closer relationship with our target stakeholders'. Also, numerous SNGOs started measures aimed at child protection and gender-based violence protection due to mounting tensions at the family level. This is similar to the findings of Aflatoun International (2020), NNNGO (2020) and Partos (2020).

To better understand these new activities in terms of sectoral focus and organizational roles required, we compare each sector's representation level and role in these new activities to their pre-pandemic share for the SNGOs in our study. Four sectors stand out as more prevalent among the new activities than if the pre-pandemic pattern would persist: (1) emergency relief/humanitarian assistance, (2) health, (3) WASH, and (4) disaster risk reduction (DRR) (also see Table 3). Across these four sectors, there is substantial variation in the extent to which organizations perform these activities with/without prior experience in this particular sector. Half of the new emergency relief activities are undertaken by organizations that would not be involved with humanitarian assistance under normal circumstances (labelled as 'newcomers' in Table 3); this only applies to a quarter of the new health initiatives (WASH and DRR take intermediate positions). Therefore, the most substantial move out of organizations' comfort zone has been picking up emergency aid as a new activity, which applies to 18% of the organizations.

Less change is discernible among roles performed during the pandemic. The only role that has gained prominence during the pandemic is the one of service provider, which is

Table 3. Shifts in sectors/roles embodied in new activities during COVID-19.

Sector	% in pre-Covid-19 activities	% in new activities (change in percentage points)	% of new activities performed by newcomers to sector/role	% of organizations entering sector/role during Covid-19
Emergency relief	5%	12% (**+7%**)	48% (24/50)	18% (24/136)
Health	8%	13% (**+5%**)	24% (13/54)	10% (13/136)
Water, Sanitation & Hygiene	4%	6% (**+2%**)	31% (8/26)	6% (8/136)
Disaster risk reduction	3%	4% (**+1%**)	39% (7/18)	5% (7/136)
Role				
Service delivery	19%	20% (**+1%**)	16% (11/68)	8% (11/136)

Source: own calculations based on survey Southern partner NGOs of Dutch INGOs.

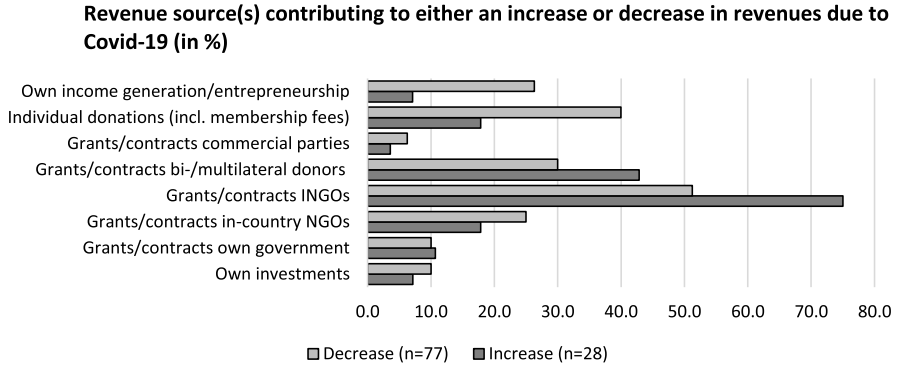
plausibly linked to the surge in emergency relief activities. However, only 8% of the organizations have assumed service delivery as a completely new role, implying that emergency relief was mainly taken up by (traditionally) 'non-emergency' service providers. The shift towards emergency relief has primarily happened in countries where the stringency of lockdowns was medium or strict, suggesting that the economic disruption caused by lockdowns prompted immediate hardship.

Funding and Financial Issues

Next to operations and programmes, the pandemic also has significantly impacted organizations' financial health. Financial health is understood here as pressure on an organization's budget, considering changes in revenue as well as in expenditure. Organizations were asked to indicate whether their revenue and expenditure increased, decreased, or remained more or less the same. In case of an increase or decrease, respondents qualified the change as either 'moderate' or 'substantial'. No frame of reference was provided for these qualifications (no cut-offs in terms of share in total revenue/expenditure), since we are primarily interested in how the financial impact was perceived by respondents themselves using their own reference frame. Note that we use the terms revenue and income interchangeably when referring to budget inflow, which we discuss first.

The SNGOs in our study widely report a reduction in income, confirming a key finding from the grey literature (see Aflatoun International, 2020; Arntz & Alexeeva, 2020; CIVICUS, 2020; EPIC-Africa & @AfricanNGOs, 2020; Phuong Linh & Van Anh, 2020; Yayasan Hasanah, 2020). At the same time, our study shows that the negative impact of Covid-19 on the financial revenues of SNGOs is not in all cases bleak. In some cases, the financial impact lessened over time (not captured by the above reports) while also depending on the different income sources of SNGOs.

Our study found that 60% suffered a decrease in revenues, two-thirds of which were qualified as 'moderate' and the remaining third as 'substantial'. On the upside, 21% experienced increasing revenues, but almost all of these were labelled 'moderate' only. Finally, 19% of the respondents reported no change in income. While the findings



Source: own calculations based on survey Southern partner NGOs of Dutch INGOs

Figure 1. Revenue source(s) contributing to either an increase or decrease in revenues due to Covid-19 (in %). Source: own calculations based on survey Southern partner NGOs of Dutch INGOs.

Table 4. Risk factors for budget pressure (revenue fall, expenditure rise, and combination), $n = 134$.

	Type of budget pressure experienced						
	(1) Revenue fall		(2) Expenditure rise		(1 + 2) Double squeeze		
Organizational characteristics	Likelihood ratio	*Z*-statistic (*p*-value)	Likelihood ratio	*Z*-statistic (*p*-value)	Likelihood ratio	*Z*-statistic (*p*-value)	% in total sample
Small budget size (<US$ 200K) (pre-Covid-19)	1.07	0.49 (0.313)	1.02	0.13 (0.447)	1.46	1.44* (0.075)	*43.3 (n = 58)*
Service delivery role (pre-Covid-19)	0.88	−0.94 (0.173)	1.46	2.40*** (0.008)	1.46	1.34* (0.090)	*65.7 (n = 88)*
Active in peacebuilding & reconciliation (pre-Covid-19)	1.13	0.84 (0.200)	1.18	1.20 (0.116)	1.67	1.96* (0.025)	*47.0 (n = 63)*
% in total sample	*59.7 (n = 80)*		*59.7 (n = 80)*		*31.3 (n = 42)*		

Source: own calculations based on survey Southern partner NGOs of Dutch INGOs.

clearly show that NGOs are hard hit financially by Covid-19, the role of specific income sources varies. Figure 1 shows that most Southern NGOs view INGOs as the most crucial source for increasing or decreasing revenues. It is striking to observe that many SNGOs point out that in-house income generation (from entrepreneurial activities or otherwise) and individual donations (incl. membership fees) are more often seen as contributing to a decrease rather than an increase in revenues. The opposite is true for bi- and multilateral donors, confirming asymmetric effects.

Turning to budget outflow, 59% report increased expenses, a quarter of which concerns a rise that is considered 'substantial'. Just over 30% saw their expenditure decrease and nearly 10% maintained the same level of expenditure. Hence, on the expenditure side, the norm is increased outflow, while funds tend to evaporate on the income side. This raises the question what share of organizations faced both types of pressure on their budget. Just under one-third of our SNGOs experienced such a double squeeze, witnessing a decline in revenue while simultaneously being confronted with an increase in expenditure (note that only two organisations report the reverse; a rise in revenue coupled with falling expenditure).

We identify three risk factors for experiencing a double squeeze. First, small organisations (budget < US$ 200,000) are significantly more likely to fall in this category than their medium and large counterparts. The likelihood ratios, as reported in Table 4, show that the probability for small organizations is nearly 1.5 times the probability for larger ones. Second, those operating as service providers (often among other roles) were more exposed to this 'twin' financial risk, with a similar likelihood ratio of 1.5 against non-service providers. Finally, organizations working on peacebuilding & reconciliation have been relatively hard-hit. Their probability of facing a double squeeze is close to 1.7 times the likelihood for organizations operating in other sectors. Table 4 reveals that the financial risk pattern underlying this outcome is not uniform per organizational feature. Small organizations are (modestly) overrepresented among those who lose revenue and (marginally) among those who cope with higher expenses as well. Service delivery organizations, however, are at higher risk of a double squeeze due to a marked over-representation in the higher expenses category, despite slight under-representation among those losing revenue. This signals the need for stepping up service

levels during the pandemic. The pattern for organizations active in peacebuilding mimics most closely that of small organiations rather than that of service providers.

Staff and Organizational Issues

Our study shows that SNGOs struggle to pay salaries, confirming existing reports (see CIVICUS, 2020; EPIC-Africa & @AfricanNGOs, 2020; Phuong Linh & Van Anh, 2020). At the same time, we find that 'staff and organisation' is only considered by 6% ($n = 134$) of the SNGOs as the most critical area affected by the pandemic. Most NGOs in our survey (58%, $n = 136$) have stayed the same regarding paid staff due to Covid-19.

The latter should not distract us from the fact that the impact of changes in this field on individual staff members might be high. That is, for instance, because over 61% ($n = 57$) have reduced the salary of (part of) their staff. At the same time, 32% have furloughed (part of) paid staff members, and 30% have laid off paid staff. One SNGO 'encouraged voluntary contributions from paid staff to survive the crisis'. Another explained that a lack of funding forced them to ask staff to work 'voluntarily' while adding that there is now 'less work as our programmes have been temporarily stopped'. One Syrian organization explicitly calls for attention to the consequences for staff by stating that 'staff salaries were stopped/disallowed because activities were put on hold during the lockdown. This resulted in much hardship for the staff and their families'. It is hardly a solace that only eight organizations (14%) took on additional staff members (also see Figure 2).

The Perceived Impact on Donor – SNGO Relations

The picture emerging from the grey literature concerning how Covid-19 has affected donor-SNGO relations suggests that donors responded to the pandemic differently. Some donors have tried to support SNGOs in a variety of ways, including offering moral support, technical and in-kind support (usually online software offices or Covid-19 prevention equipment), allowing NGOs to repurpose current grants, flexible accountability requirements and offering additional funding to face the crisis (see CIVICUS, 2020; Martins, 2020; Partos, 2020). There are also reports of less positive experiences with donors. These include general unavailability of flexible, unrestricted funding that can be quickly redirected to address urgent needs, donors revoking

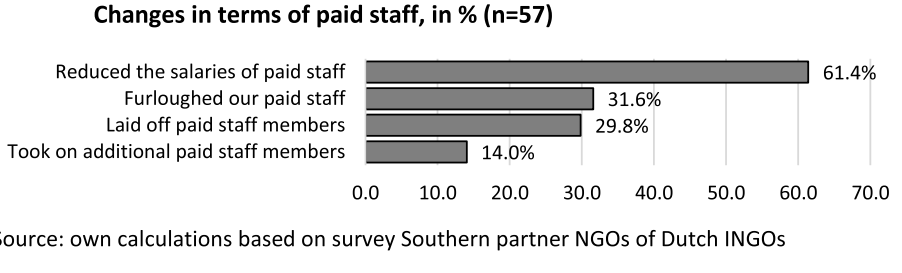


Figure 2. Changes in terms of paid staff, in % ($n = 57$). Source: own calculations based on survey Southern partner NGOs of Dutch INGOs.

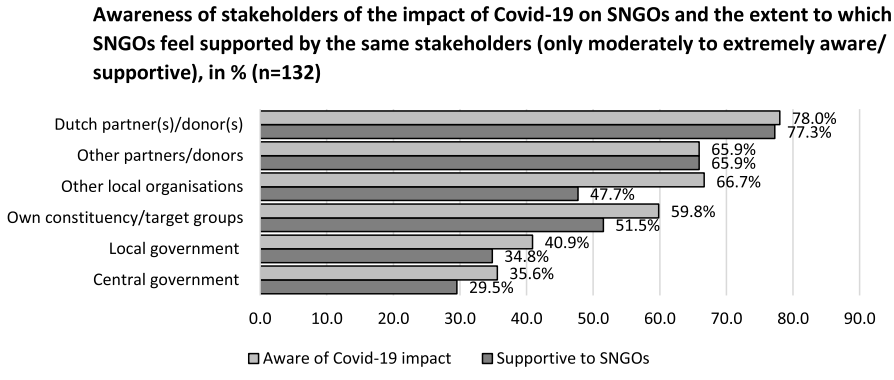


Figure 3. Awareness of stakeholders of the impact of Covid-19 on SNGOs and the extent to which SNGOs feel supported by the same stakeholders (only moderately to extremely aware/ supportive), in % ($n = 132$). Source: own calculations based on survey Southern partner NGOs of Dutch INGOs.

current or prospective grants, freezing grants, and no longer covering project expenses despite fixed costs (see CIVICUS, 2020; Phuong Linh & Van Anh, 2020).

Our sample broadly confirms such findings starting with the idea that many donors are aware of the extent to which Covid-19 has impacted SNGOs and were seen as supportive (see Figure 3). Note that this is in sharp contrast to local and central governments which score relatively low in the eyes of SNGOs, both in terms of awareness about the impact of the pandemic on SNGOs and in support for them. As Figure 3 shows, they see all other stakeholders as more aware and more supportive than governments, and the fact that 25% of all NGOs feel that the central government is 'not aware at all', and 36% that this central government is 'not supportive at all' is telling. This is not to say that (local) governments did not support NGOs, as evidenced, for instance, by DR Congo's government facilitating a flight back home for NGO workers.

Looking more closely at the Dutch INGO partners, SNGOs feel that they responded primarily by offering moral or strategic support (58%), allowing for flexibility in repurposing or reprogramming current grants (56%) and by offering financial or material support (51%) also in the form of additional funding to face the Covid-19 crisis (45%). Interestingly, whereas all the above could be regarded as 'positive responses' from the side of Dutch partners, it is also worth noting that these responses were negative in some cases. That is the case with 15% of the partners who feel that the Dutch partner did not respond at all and with one in ten who experienced a reduction in the current or prospective grants from Dutch partners due to Covid-19. Still, a positive view prevails, which was also clear from the reaction in the focus group discussions. So, we have Ugandan and Indian NGOs calling their Dutch partner 'a good donor who listens to our realities', 'really supportive in the process', and 'flexible'.

For two-thirds of the SNGOs, awareness, flexibility and support from their foreign donors go hand in hand with them being in the driver's seat when designing their Covid-19 response. With this, we are in the middle of the so-called 'shift-the-power' or 'localisation'-debate. This discussion starts from the recognition that North–South relationships in development cooperation are marred by power imbalances in which

the roles of INGOs 'are biased towards decision-making' and the roles of SNGOs 'are biased towards decision-taking' (Partos, 2022, p. 7). One of the biggest and most essential questions dominating the sector is how INGOs and other stakeholders in the aid chain can shift power and resources to their partners globally.

Respondents were presented with the following four statements concerning 'shift the power' dynamics: (i) we are in the driver's seat in designing our Covid-19 response; (ii) Covid-19 has made it more likely that international aid will respond to locally-led priorities, and – in working with our Dutch partner/donor organization in the time of Covid-19 – (iii) we have achieved more equal ways of working together, and (iv) gained more power to make independent decisions about the directions of our programmes.

Generally speaking, organizations indicate positive outcomes (or expectations) on all four counts, as the modal response on each item equals 4 ('agree') out of a 5-point ladder of agreement (1 = fully disagree, … , 5 = fully agree). Average scores range between 3.6 on programmatic decision-making power (iv), and 3.9 on autonomy in pandemic response (i). Only four organizations are clear outliers, indicating strong disagreement on one or multiple items. Based on the responses on these four items, we bin the organizations into deciles according to their overall score, where each of the items is awarded equal weight. The bottom decile scores 2.4 on average across the items, while the top decile's mean score equals the maximum score of 5.0.

The ordered logit model in Table 5 regresses this overall 'power shift' variable on four (pre-pandemic) organizational characteristics, two pandemic-related changes (in funding and activity portfolio), and also includes lockdown stringency as a country-level variable. First, we find no effect of an organization's budget size on perceived power shifts. However, an organization's degree of donor dependence proves marginally significant. Its negative sign suggests that relatively strong reliance on foreign donor funding is unhelpful in transferring ownership, which is in line with the idea that dependence implies relatively weak bargaining power vis-à-vis donors. To gauge the effect size, the predicted probability of belonging to the top quintile of the power shift variable is only 17% for the most dependent organizations (at least 80% of foreign funding) against 30% for the least dependent (less than 20% of foreign funds). Yet, the most significant factor is the change in revenue that an organization experienced in 2020. Despite the tendency to have lost income in 2020, which proved the reality for most SNGOs, 21% of the organizations witnessed an increase in funds. This sub-group of 'winners' stands out in agreement with the indicated power shifts. Organizations experiencing an increase in revenue are predicted to have a 35% probability of belonging to the top quintile of the power shift variable, compared to 15% for organizations whose income stream was flat or fell during Covid-19.

Table 5 also reveals that the thematic area of an organization matters. Organizations engaged in health interventions ($n = 66$) experienced a significantly lower autonomy transfer than those outside the health domain. The predicted probability of occupying a position in the top quintile on power shift is only 15% for health organizations, as compared to 23% for organizations in other sectors. This may be inherently linked to the pandemic, as the global health sector is considered particularly resistant to de-colonizing pressures (Adeyi, 2021). While the nature of an organization's activity portfolio is relevant, expansion of this portfolio during the first pandemic year seems unrelated to (perceptions of) power shifts. Nor do we observe a significant effect when distinguishing

Table 5. Ordered logit regression: exploring variation in the perceived power shift during the pandemic.

	Coeff. (st.dev.)	Wald (*p*-value)
Organization-specific		
Small	−0.071	0.02
(<$200 K) [1]	(0.468)	(0.878)
Medium	−0.652	2.29
($200K–$1M)[1]	(0.431)	(0.130)
Foreign funding dependence (% intervals)	−0.268	2.95*
(1 = <20%, … , 5 = ≥80%)	(0.156)	(0.086)
Experienced funding increase in 2020	1.250	8.34***
(1 = Yes; 0 = No)	(0.433)	(0.004)
Active in health sector (pre-pandemic)	−0.728	4.00**
(1 = Yes; 0 = No)	(0.364)	(0.045)
Started new (pandemic-induced) activities in 2020	0.266	0.46
(1 = Yes; 0 = No)	(0.393)	(0.498)
Other Dutch donor (non-Catholic)	0.681	2.56
(dummy)	(0.426)	(0.110)
Country-specific		
Strict lockdown	0.923	4.83**
(dummy)[2]	(0.420)	(0.028)
Medium lockdown	0.213	0.28
(dummy)[2]	(0.402)	(0.596)
Obs.	$n = 121$	
Overall model test	$X^2 = 23.59$*** ($p < 0.01$)	
Test of parallel lines	$X^2 = 70.84$ ($p > 0.1$)	

*, ** and *** denote significance at 10%, 5% and 1%, respectively.
[1]Size dummies; omitted category = pre-pandemic annual budget >$1M (large).
[2]Lockdown stringency in 2020; omitted category: light lockdown (see Appendix 2 for details).

between different international donors to which the Southern NGOs in the sample are tied. As mentioned before, relatively large clusters of SNGOs in our sample are related to one of two Dutch donors with a Catholic background. Still, adding the variable increases the overall model performance, which hints at some notable variation in behaviour across individual donors. Finally, at the country level, organizations that operated under strict lockdowns express a more optimistic view on progress towards 'shifting the power' than those in countries where lockdowns were either short-lived or relatively lax. SNGOs in the latter context have a predicted probability to belong to the top quintile of the power shift variable of 16%, which increases to 26% for those operating under strict lockdowns.

The relevance of lockdown stringency may shed some light on the parallel finding that the 'winners' (in financial terms) identify most with power shifting to SNGOs. Whereas we might dismiss this latter finding by arguing that a stronger stream of revenues follows a power shift (e.g., being a symptom rather than a driver of power transfer), the apparent importance of lockdown stringency opens up an alternative scenario. The extreme economic hardship caused by mobility restrictions may have put the onus of emergency relief squarely on local organizations, to which donors may have responded by providing additional economic resources. Such a positive correlation is evident in the Sankey diagram in Figure 4. The left-hand axis shows the distribution of organizations according to lockdown stringency and the right-hand axis the distribution in terms of income dynamics experienced. The flowchart connects these

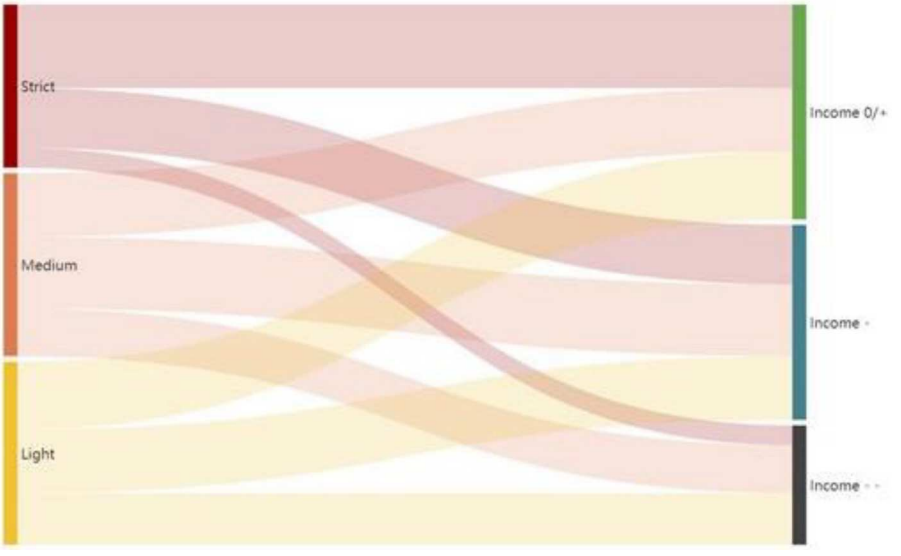


Figure 4. Relation between lockdown stringency and revenue change in 2020. Source: own survey.

distributions, where the width of a particular flow indicates the strength of association between connecting categories.

Strict lockdowns appear more closely associated with growing, or at least stable, revenues than moderate or light-touch lockdowns, where income declines proved to be the norm. It is plausible, therefore, that Southern organizations harnessed the resource flow into heavily affected countries to exercise previously unfamiliar levels of autonomy in programme design. Hence, a combination of (policy response to) direct pandemic-related circumstances and ensuing resource shifts in the aid chain would at least be consistent with our quantitative findings.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This paper examined perceptions of Covid-19's impact on the Southern NGO partners of Dutch INGOs in the context of international development. In particular, it explored how the pandemic affected SNGOs' organizational capacity and relations with donors. The study confirms key findings of policy reports found in the grey literature but makes several important contributions.

The study found that Covid-19 is perceived as having had substantial and largely negative consequences on SNGOs' financial situation, staffing, and activities. Most SNGOs reported a decrease in revenue whilst their overall financial situation worsened. Regarding the impact on staff, most SNGOs had to reduce salaries, with numerous organizations having to furlough or lay off staff. Activity-wise, nearly all SNGOs in the study had to change their regular activities, although complete shutdowns have been rare. SNGOs have responded by doing things differently, doing new things altogether, and targeting new beneficiary communities.

The perceived impact of Covid-19 on relations with donors has been positive. Covid-19 has positively affected the power inequalities between SNGOs and their donors. Most

respondents experienced increased autonomy in making independent decisions about their programmes and using allocated budgets. The main question is whether a structural change in the power relation can be expected in the long run. The observation that power shifts were more salient in countries where lockdowns were stricter reminds us that autonomy was granted under exceptional conditions.

Most scientists agree that the question is not 'whether' a new pandemic will occur but 'when'. This begs the question of what we can learn from this study to better prepare for the next Covid-like crisis. Crucial here is that donors may prioritie ensuring that the core tasks of partners remain operational when crises hit. During such a crisis, this implies offering financial safety nets that provide the necessary flexibility to deviate from existing plans and cater to emerging needs.

However, donors need to understand that offering flexibility during a crisis is insufficient for safeguarding operational sustenance as many organizations face higher costs and declining revenues. To compensate, they can provide the necessary funds that enable Southern partners to build a financial buffer as a shock absorber whilst ensuring they have an internal financial buffer to reallocate funding where needs among individual partners arise.

Overall, a takeaway message is that policymakers need to acknowledge that SNGOs' ability to act autonomously intrinsically links to their ability to withstand shocks. Their ability to deal with threats to their functioning, survival and further development has to be an integral part of any policy vision to build strong and autonomous civil societies. Supporting grantees in dealing with shocks requires donors to be aware of the impact of crises on their Southern civil societies and acknowledge that they have a crucial role to play.

Note

1. The phrase INGO extends the concept of a non-governmental organization (NGO) to an international scope. In the context of international development, INGOs are 'rooted in Northern Headquarters and collect funds from a variety of sources to spend in projects run in the Global South'. Most INGOs do not implement projects themselves but do so via Southern NGO 'partners' (Banks & Bukenya, 2022, p. 106).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Background on Dutch INGOs

The Dutch INGOs involved in this study are Cordaid, Hivos, ICCO, Liliane Fonds, Max Foundation, Mensen met een Missie, Save the Children, The Hunger Project and World Vision. Next to these, also specific partners of Right2Grow have been included. Right2Grow presents itself as a global movement and partnership. Four Dutch INGOs included here (e.g., Max Foundation, The Hunger Project, Save the Children, and World Vision) play a central role in this movement.

The nine other INGOs are household names in the Netherlands in international cooperation. All are also a member of Partos, the Dutch branch organization for development organizations. In 2021, they had a combined budget of around €480 million (about 22% of the total budget of 244 Dutch INGOs for which data are available – also see: www.cbf.nl/register-goede-doelen). That budget is unequally divided among the nine. Cordaid, one of the largest Dutch INGOs, takes in nearly half, while with the other INGOs in our study, the 2021 budget ranges between nearly €4 million (Max Foundation) to €60 million (Save the Children).

Except for Liliane Fonds, all INGOs are primarily (from 60% in the case of Save the Children to 83% with Cordaid) dependent on government subsidies. The Dutch government is most likely the dominant, but not necessarily only, government donor. Important as well is the income from private citizens; for Liliane Fonds, this is the primary source of income, while Save the Children takes 32% of its income from this source. With the other organizations, the share of private donors ranges from 1.7% (Max Foundation) to 15% (World Vision).

Appendix 2: Country overview of SNGO sample and nationwide lockdown stringency in 2020

Country	*n*	Lockdown stringency*
Afghanistan	1	Light
Bangladesh	4	Strict
Benin	1	Light
Bolivia	7	Strict
Burkina Faso	9	Light
Burundi	2	Light
Cameroon	8	Light
Colombia	1	Strict

(*Continued*)

Continued.

Country	*n*	Lockdown stringency*
DR Congo	18	Light
Ethiopia	5	Medium
Ghana	1	Medium
India	12	Strict
Indonesia	7	Medium
Iraq	2	Strict
Kenya	1	Strict
Mali	6	Light
Nepal	4	Strict
Nigeria	7	Medium
Pakistan	1	Medium
Philippines	7	Strict
Rwanda	3	Strict
Sierra Leone	1	Light
South Sudan	8	Medium
Syria	2	Light
Tanzania	1	Medium
Turkey	1	Light
Uganda	15	Medium
Zimbabwe	1	Medium
	136	

*We calculate the stringency of a national lockdown over 2020 using daily indices published by the Oxford COVID-19 government response tracker (https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/covid-19-government-response-tracker, see Hale et al., 2021, for details). Category cut-offs are ours; countries with scores ≥54.0 are classified as 'strict', scores 44.0 ≤ x < 54.0 as 'medium', and x < 44.0 as 'light'. Scores range from 14.3 (Burundi) to 60.8 (India).

Appendix 3: Descriptive statistics in support of ordered logit regression (Table 5)

	min	max	mean	st.dev.
Dependent variable[#]				
Perceived power shift (4-item mean score)	1	5	3.74	0.686
Perceived power shift (after binning into deciles)	1	10	5.40	2.368
Independent variables				
Organization-specific				
Small budget (<$200 K)	0	1	0.44	0.498
Medium budget ($200K–$1M)	0	1	0.30	0.461
Large budget (>$1M)	0	1	0.26	0.439
Foreign funding dependence (% intervals) (1 = <20%, … , 5 = ≥80%)	1	5	4.27	1.124
Experienced funding increase in 2020 (1 = Yes; 0 = No)	0	1	0.21	0.406
Other Dutch donor (non-Catholic) (dummy)	0	1	0.30	0.461
Active in health sector (pre-pandemic) (1 = Yes; 0 = No)	0	1	0.49	0.502
Started new (pandemic-induced) activities in 2020 (1 = Yes; 0 = No)	0	1	0.75	0.435
Country-specific				
Strict lockdown (dummy)	0	1	0.30	0.461
Medium lockdown (dummy)	0	1	0.34	0.475
Light lockdown (dummy)	0	1	0.36	0.482

[#]Not included in regression, but used to construct binned 'perceived power shift' variable.