

Policy Paper - Engaging Grassroots Voices - March 2025

Meaningful participation in and between North and South

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1. Introduction

Woord en Daad has defined three policy priorities for the 2026-2031 policy period, guided by key sector trends and needs of target groups. This document elaborates the theme 'Engaging Grassroots Voices', covering its relevance, definition, application, systemic integration and long-term ambitions.

2. Reason and relevance for this policy theme

Globally, deepening divisions and weakening cohesion hinder dialogue on critical issues like poverty, responsibility and solidarity. Polarization is rising, and respect for diverse opinions is not guaranteed. Biblical values, justice, compassion and care for the vulnerable, risk being overshadowed by individualism and exclusion. As inequalities grow, vulnerable groups are increasingly silenced.

Civil society is key to strengthen grassroots voices, yet not all (I)NGOs truly represent local communities. Development efforts must go beyond identifying unreached groups to ensure their (meaning)full participation. **Engaging Grassroots Voices** builds on our 'Reaching the Unreached' (2020-2025) focus, ensuring marginalized communities are empowered to shape solutions impacting them.

Meanwhile, civic space is shrinking, with rising authoritarianism limiting freedoms of speech, assembly, and association. Governments restrict the ability of communities, churches and organizations to advocate for justice. These challenges test the Biblical call to justice. By choosing **Engaging Grassroots Voices** as our policy theme, we affirm our role in this context. This aligns with the roots of our organization, as localization has been part of Woord en Daad from the start.

3. Definition and scope

We are committed to genuine participation, ensuring that people and communities, in the Netherlands and worldwide, are **seen, respected and heard**. We seek them to be **connected and empowered** to take responsibility for one another and for Creation. Meaningful relationships are fundamental to a dignified life. Through this policy theme, we seek to elevate the voices of people and communities directly affected by poverty, exclusion and injustice. For international development policies, we value the involvement of grassroots voices from all parts of society.

Rooted in dignity, our approach recognizes target groups in the Global South and the Netherlands as active **agents of change**. We encourage them to **develop leadership**, organize collectively and strengthen their voices within their neighbourhoods, communities, constituencies and relevant decision-making spaces. We highlight the global interconnectedness of communities. In the Netherlands, we strengthen societal support for international cooperation and solidarity.

Grassroots organisations can play a crucial role in bridging target groups and decision-makers to shape policies and solutions impacting their lives. We create conditions for sustainable change through strengthening trust, supporting local leadership, addressing structural inequalities, and **enhancing capacities** for advocacy and decision-making. This ensures that development efforts grow from within, enabling target groups to be resilient, flourish, and take ownership of their future.

Our commitment takes shape in various ways:

1. Strengthen **Southern leadership** and invest in the development of **grassroots organizations** (see 4.1)
2. Facilitate dialogue within and between groups and strive for **inclusive communities** (see 4.2)
3. Strengthen civil society **to advocate for the common good** and invest in **(local) governance structures** for inclusive (policy) development (see 4.3)
4. Ensure **meaningful stakeholder participation** in all project phases (see 4.4)

Definitions:

- **Communities** are groups of individuals with shared characteristics (e.g. women or disability), geographic locations, values or interests.

- **Grassroots Voices** represent experiences and insights of communities, often marginalized and/ or unheard. Their voices are crucial to understand real-life impacts of policies, offering local knowledge and context and affirming their dignity and worth.
- **Grassroots Organizations (GROs)** are often volunteer-based and locally-activated groups focused on improving their communities or specific situations. These include e.g. community organizations, youth and women’s associations, farmer groups, faith-based organizations (FBOs) and churches, Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), Water User Committees and trade unions. Their **strong community roots and bottom-up approach** unites them, connected to the culture, norms and values of the people they represent. Strong and well-functioning GROs can offer a more inclusive, locally-driven perspective that complements national and regional organizations.
- **Engagement** has different levels: 1) Inform; 2) Consult; 3) Involve; 4) Collaborate; 5) Empower. In different contexts and roles, different levels of engagement may be required and applied.

Demarcation: engaging grassroots voices is not a top-down approach or tokenism. It requires long-term relationships. It should avoid contributing to polarisation and must serve as a source of connection within and between societies, not as a political tool deepening conflict. Engaging grassroots voices is not another term for supporting democratization initiatives. Power sharing is a mutual process, not one that flows from North to South or from decision-makers to communities.

4. Important considerations for implementing this policy theme in our work

In four paragraphs we address a number of considerations for engaging grassroots voices in the work of Woord en Daad.

4.1 Strengthen Southern leadership and invest in the development of grassroots organisations

We want to ensure that grassroots voices and their leaders, are not only heard but are actively shaping the future of development. **Southern-led development** is key, empowering local actors to take the lead in addressing their own challenges. It is crucial for Woord en Daad and its partner organizations to work closely with **grassroots organizations** and **maintain connections across different levels**. Our approach includes participation and joint planning through co-creation with local organizations, placing Southern leaders at the forefront of decision-making, and ensuring transparency and accountability among decision-makers at all levels.

Collaborating with grassroots organizations in the Global South offers strong potential for meaningful impact and inclusiveness. However, it requires a deep understanding of their needs, cultural context and capacity gaps. Some GROs are not yet fully functional or well developed in terms of administration. Managing expectations, understanding the pace of change and investing in capacity are essential, as organisations may lack systems or use different communication channels or resources. A gradual approach fosters trust and understanding over time. Woord en Daad can work directly with GROs, but more often collaborates with them through partner organisations or in consortia.

Key considerations for successful partnerships with grassroots organizations include:

- **Understanding Local Context:** recognize the unique cultural, social and economic environment.
- **Building Trust and Relationships:** requires consistent, long-term engagement and respect.
- **Inclusive Participation:** ensuring that all voices are included in decision-making processes.
- **Capacity Building:** training, funding and network access, can help achieve goals.
- **Sustainability:** Initiatives should be designed to thrive locally.
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** respond to the evolving needs and circumstances of GROs.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Respecting traditions, while addressing practices that may have negative consequences.
- **Alignment of Goals:** a common vision between GROs and partners is crucial for collaboration.
- **Navigating Power Dynamics:** aim to empower leadership and promote a collaborative approach.

Engaging grassroots voices involves deeply understanding their history, experiences and daily lives. It requires patience, time and small steps to ensure that their voices are not only heard, but also valued and acted upon. Woord en Daad and its partners may need to establish different working

relationships and methods with e.g. informal GROs and churches, prioritizing long-term relationships, rooted in mutual respect and shared goals.

When grassroots organizations are lacking, support can help establish them, either independently or in partnership with other local groups or overarching grassroots organizations.

4.2 Facilitate dialogue within and between groups and strive for inclusive communities

In a society facing growing polarisation, the role of civil society is becoming increasingly important for social cohesion. As national and local government lose connection with citizens, Woord en Daad can play an important role in connecting, strengthening and forming communities at the grassroots level while raising awareness. Woord en Daad has always been deeply embedded in society and can build on this unique position to expand in the coming years by mobilizing strong groups of volunteers and influencing (local) governments through their involvement (see also paragraph 4.3).

The volunteer groups within our thrift stores, entrepreneurial networks and others, form dynamic communities that foster connection and mutual support. Over the next few years, our focus will be on strengthening these communities, ensuring that their impact resonates locally, nationally and globally. Central to this effort is empowering global citizenship through our volunteer groups. We will amplify the value of these communities by demonstrating their profound social and economic contributions. Our mission is to showcase our story of hope, transformation and impact, underscoring the crucial role they play in both the local neighbourhoods and broader society. Each Woord en Daad community has the potential to become a "Baobab tree" – a symbol of strength, resilience, and connection.

In the coming years, we will broaden our volunteer base to include more individuals distanced from the labour market. We will also explore collaboration with other like-minded Christian civil society organisations. Woord en Daad needs these organizations (such as job coaches and welfare organizations) to connect with grassroots communities in Dutch society.

By forging partnerships with civil society organizations, we will create pathways for individuals to become a volunteer, developing their skills and contributing to our stores and events. Listening carefully and actively will be a cornerstone of our strategy. Volunteers and visitors should feel deeply valued, with a welcoming atmosphere that reflects the heart of Woord en Daad. The stores are not only places of commerce, but serve as vital touchpoints for building relationships between volunteers, the local community and our broader mission. By fostering connections across borders, we will develop and continue to bridge North and South, raising funds and sharing stories of hope and impact. We support collaboration between civil society in the North and South, fostering value-based partnerships built on shared values such as justice, compassion, and mutual respect, to ensure lasting and meaningful impact.

Also in the Global South, we apply the principle of facilitating dialogue within and between groups and striving for inclusive communities, e.g. in conflict-prone communities or situations of injustice. Peacebuilding has become increasingly urgent in a number of countries, and several organizations are adopting a triple nexus approach that integrates humanitarian aid, development, and peacebuilding. Many of our partners and their networks are facilitating dialogue, building alliances, and promoting peaceful coexistence through collaboration with various stakeholders. Churches and church leaders also play a critical role in peacebuilding efforts on grassroots level, strengthening community ties and fostering a culture of understanding and cooperation.

4.3 Strengthen civil society to advocate for the common good and invest in (local) governance structures for inclusive (policy) development

The Woord en Daad Policy Influencing strategy is based on the assumption that a grassroots perspective is essential for inclusive governance and sustainable development. The principle "*Nothing about us without us*" reflects this. This is particularly crucial at a time when ODA budgets and the underlying principles of solidarity and compassion are under significant political pressure.

Firstly, in Northern lobbying and advocacy, maintaining close ties with one's constituency is essential. Both governments and NGOs must foster public support for development cooperation to

secure financial resources. In reality, we rarely see mass protests in The Hague against ODA budget cuts, nor widespread solidarity campaigns opposing shrinking civic space in countries where our partners work. The very poor in the Global South have little influence on Dutch and European policies. With minimal electoral risk, politicians can propose cuts to development budgets. To sustain support, development cooperation must reconnect with broader societal concerns and demonstrate its relevance both globally and locally.

Second, constituency ties not only secure financial support but also help align policy actions with public expectations, preserving trust in development cooperation. Part of the lobbying effort should therefore focus on ensuring that NGOs, ambassadors and other key actors invest more energy in *selling* the value of development cooperation to the public that largely funds it. Citizens must be able to relate to development policy; therefore, ODA must be promoted more effectively within Northern societies. This requires:

- a) Stronger connections between lived realities of people in the Global North and South, highlighting shared challenges and interdependencies.
- b) Emphasizing *enlightened self-interest*, showing how investments in economic partnerships and climate resilience ultimately benefit donor countries as well.

Third, policy influencing in the Global South is crucial for systemic change and lasting development. While international cooperation provides resources and political leverage, sustainable development outcomes depend on policies shaped and owned by local actors. Communities in the Global South, alongside their governments, bear primary responsibility for creating the conditions that enable economic growth, social inclusion and climate resilience. When citizens, CSOs and local businesses effectively engage policymakers, they help ensure that policies reflect domestic priorities, enhance accountability and strengthen governance. Locally driven policy reforms are more sustainable, as they align with national debates, legal and policy frameworks and political realities. A strong independent advocacy ecosystem in the Global South is fundamental for equitable lasting progress.

4.4 Ensure meaningful stakeholder participation in all phases of our work

We want to involve **stakeholders** in meaningful ways in projects in all phases, **listening deeply to lived experiences** (of end users and GROs), using both qualitative and quantitative insights to improve inclusion strategies, and ensuring that development efforts are rooted in local realities.

5. Application of a system approach lens

Our value-based **systems approach** acknowledges that change occurs across multiple levels—**individual, community, and societal** and requires engagement from actors at all levels, from national to grassroots level. Understanding (local) power dynamics and addressing them where needed, is crucial for embedding grassroots voices in systemic change. Sustainable alliances must be formed, including relevant key actors such as GROs, who can together identify leverage points for systemic change. We will give specific attention to the role of local government actors, as they are crucial for inclusive policy development.

The realisation and effective implementation and monitoring of legal and policy frameworks for inclusion, can serve as a leverage point. Strengthening grassroots organizations in **leadership and advocacy** empowers them to influence the systems in which they operate.

6. Multi-year ambition

In this paragraph, we outline our concrete ambitions up to 2031.

6.1 Strengthen Grassroots Voices and Southern Leadership

By 2031, Southern leadership and grassroots actors will take a central role in shaping and driving development agendas. We will actively facilitate locally led strategies, ensuring that local organisations have the authority, resources and platforms to influence decision-making, lead implementation and hold stakeholders accountable. We want to listen to the unheard.

We plan to move from consultation to co-creation and being accountable to grassroots:

- **Embed grassroots voices in projects:** Woord en Daad will systematically integrate grassroots engagement across all projects, from design, implementation, monitoring to evaluation. Each project will set SMART objectives and clear indicators to track meaningful grassroots participation.
- **Empower core partners as enablers of grassroots leadership:** Beyond service delivery, core partners will take on a stronger role in nurturing and amplifying grassroots voices. Woord en Daad will support this shift through capacity-building and collaboration.
- **Ensure accountability and removing barriers:** Woord en Daad will establish accountability, feedback mechanisms to prevent barriers to grassroots engagement and ensuring autonomy, direct participation and balanced partnerships, keeping grassroots voices central to decision-making.

6.2 Strengthen communities in the Netherlands and Global South

In the coming years we will explore how to cooperate with selected civil society organizations in The Netherlands, to include more individuals distanced from the labour market in our activities and communities.

Our volunteer groups will play a crucial role in empowering global citizenship, fostering connections between the North and South and sharing stories of hope, impact and learning.

Woord en Daad will focus on a dual approach of awareness-raising and advocacy, inspiring broader engagement with global issues and encouraging active participation in sustainable development. We will cooperate with organizations such as Goede Doelen Nederland and Partos in this regard.

Woord en Daad develops campaigns that highlight the interconnections between global and local challenges, ensuring that the voices of those in the Global South are heard in the Netherlands.

Woord en Daad aims to strengthen inclusive communities in the Global South by promoting dialogue within and between groups, especially in conflict-prone areas and situations of injustice. We will support our partners and their networks in facilitating dialogue, building alliances, and enhancing collaboration among stakeholders, including churches and community leaders, to promote peaceful coexistence, strengthen community ties, and nurture a culture of understanding and cooperation.

6.3 Advocate and invest in (local) governance structures for inclusive policy development

Over the next six years, Woord en Daad aims to strengthen the effectiveness of policy influencing by building a robust network of influential actors in the North and South. We have observed that lobbying will be increasingly important towards the future. More efforts will be required in terms of policy influencing to achieve similar progress as in the past five years. This will be achieved by promoting meaningful participation of local groups in policy development and implementation, increasing public support for development cooperation and enhancing local advocacy to achieve sustainable systemic changes. Capacities of (local) government structures, will be built to promote inclusive policy development.

6.4 Strengthen meaningful engagement in projects and partnerships

By 2031, we will establish a standardized framework for meaningful stakeholder engagement across all our projects and partnerships, ensuring that local communities and end users co-design, implement, and evaluate development efforts. We will prioritize lived experiences by embedding participatory methods such as focus groups, community forums, and user feedback loops into decision-making processes. To achieve this, we will develop a mixed-method PMEL toolkit, combining qualitative insights (e.g., stakeholder narratives) and quantitative metrics (e.g. participation rates, satisfaction scores) to monitor engagement and refine and implement inclusive strategies.

For GROs the PMEL toolkit can be used for capacity development.