The use of the 5C framework in MFS II

RESULTS OF THE BASELINE ASSESSMENTS IN JUNE 2011
The use of the 5C framework in MFS II

Results of the baseline assessments in June 2011

OUR CAPABILITY IS...

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HOW TO MEASURE CAPABILITY
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1. Introduction

This report presents the main findings of interviews conducted with alliances of Dutch NGOs that are funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs under its current co-financing program known as MFS II. The interviews focus on the use of the ‘5 Capabilities’ (5C) framework for assessing the organisational capacity of Southern partner organisations at baseline. Interviews were held between 6 December 2011 and 23 January 2012 and are part of the joint initiative of PSO and Partos to support mutual learning in the NGO sector.

Section 2 provides some background to the subject: the MFS II grant framework, the 5C framework and the interview set-up. The interview findings themselves are presented and used in sections 3 to 5. In section 3, a description of the tools developed for the baseline assessment is provided. Section 4 elaborates on how 5C baseline assessments were carried out. In section 5, the results that were derived from the baseline assessments are discussed. The report ends with a list of topics relevant for the future use of the 5C framework in MFS II.

2. Background

MFS II grant framework

MFS II is the 2011-2015 grant framework for Dutch NGOs directed at achieving a sustainable reduction in poverty through strategic partnerships with Southern partners and by establishing and strengthening civil society. It is the successor to MFS I, which covered 2007-2010. A total of 20 alliances of Dutch NGOs have been awarded approximately €1.9 billion in MFS II grants by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereafter called: The Ministry). Alliances are comprised of two to seven Dutch NGOs. Some organisations are a member of more than one alliance.

The Ministry formulated four priority result areas on which alliances should monitor progress within MFS II:

- Achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) & themes;
- Capacity development of Southern partner organisations;
- Efforts to strengthen civil society;
- International lobbying and advocacy.

5C framework within MFS II

For organisational capacity development purposes – and sometimes also for selection purposes – the international NGO sector uses a wide variety of organisational capacity assessment (OCA) instruments. They typically contain a checklist to be used by project staff (for external assessment) or partners (for self assessment). In recent years these instruments have undergone some criticism, both by practitioners and academics. The 5C framework was developed endogenously and provides an opportunity for a more flexible assessment process and an approach based on reflection and dialogue.

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1 E.g. Bringing the invisible into perspective Reference document for using the 5C framework, (ECDPM, December 2011, box 6, pp. 15-16)
The 5C framework was chosen by the Ministry as the monitoring and reporting framework for the result area ‘Capacity development of Southern partner organisations’. This framework was developed by the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) as a tool for dialogue and (self-) reflection to assess capacity of programmes, organisations and institutions. The 5C framework is based on field research conducted between 2002 and 2008.

In Annex 5 accompanying the MFS II grant decision letter, the Ministry describes the 5Cs as follows:
1. The capability to adapt and self-renew;
2. The capability to act and commit;
3. The capability to deliver on development objectives;
4. The capability to relate to external stakeholders;
5. The capability to achieve coherence.

The selection of the 5C framework was based on the Ministry’s experiences with the 5Cs for its evaluation of Dutch support to Capacity Development. This extensive evaluation by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) covered the period 2008-2011. IOB concluded that the 5C framework is in principle a sound methodology but also noted that it requires improvements to make it suitable for broader application. IOB stated that there is a serious risk of unprofessional use of the 5C framework by those who have an insufficient understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the framework or those who want to use it as a tick-box in a traditional accountability function between donor and receiver.

The Ministry has formulated guidelines for monitoring and reporting on progress on its four priority result areas mentioned earlier. The main conditions in these guidelines are:
- Each alliance should provide a monitoring protocol by 1 March 2011. In addition to being an accountability instrument, this protocol is an instrument for learning and programme steering;
- A baseline report on the four priority result areas should be submitted by 1 June 2011;
- Annual monitoring is expected at output level. There is an annual policy dialogue with the Ministry.
- Concerning monitoring and reporting of capacity development of Southern partners organisations: alliances should report annually on the quality of the institutional capacity of the Southern partner organisations with which it is working in terms of the 5Cs and indicate which activities carried out by the grant recipient have contributed to it (output level). This report may present aggregated data on the entire group of Southern partner organisations with which the grant recipient is working, preferably per individual country.

The reports should map the growth path of the institutional capacity of the group of Southern partner organisations with which the grant recipient is working (outcome level).

Evaluation of the MFS II programme including capacity development of Southern partner organisations is taken up jointly by 19 of the 20 alliances, with measurements in 2012 and in 2014. To facilitate this relatively complex evaluation, the alliances have established the ‘Joint Evaluations Trust’ in close cooperation with Partos. On behalf of this trust, NWO-WOTRO has provided grants to research teams in order to conduct evaluations in eight pre-selected countries. The board of the trust is comprised of directors of four lead organisations of alliances and the director of Partos. The joint MFS II evaluations are expected to increase the efficiency of evaluation resources and to provide opportunities for mutual learning.

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2 Baser and Morgan, Capacity, Change and Performance, ECDPM April 2008.
4 See Facilitating Resourcefulness, Chapter 5, Methodological Experiences, pages 126-127.
5 Annex 5 accompanying the grant decision letter, 1 November 2010.
Introduction of the 5C framework
To support the alliances’ preparations in using the 5C framework, two discussion meetings were organised. On 13 January 2011, Partos asked ECDPM to explain the background and possible use of the framework in MFS II, which was followed by a discussion amongst representatives of the alliances. On 20 April 2011, PSO organised a second gathering. This meeting focused on the question how to use the framework in the baseline assessments and discussed a number of burning questions (see Box 1). In the period hereafter, the alliances started gaining experience in working with the 5C framework.

Box 1: 5C Questions formulated by MFS II alliances on 20 April 2011

1. Indicators and measurement
   - How to measure progress, based on which fixed indicators?
   - How to deal with subjectivity or make sense of inter-subjectivity?
   - In case of self-assessment, how can we objectify the process of measuring
2. Reporting to the Ministry
   - How to apply the 5Cs in a standardized way, so that all partners will use it in the same way? (aggregation of data)
   - How to ensure that the 5Cs application in practice as required in MFS II, will not lose its power to gather qualitative/reflexive data?
   - How to aggregate all data without quantifying too much?
3. 5C as reflection tool
   - How to translate an academic framework into a consistent working practice?
   - How to keep focus and keep it feasible within a limited amount of time?
   - The link between measurement and reflection can be conflicting, how to deal with that?
4. Link between current Organisational Capacity Assessment tools (OCA’s) and the 5Cs
   - How to integrate the existing OCA instrument with 5Cs
   - Translation from existing tools to 5Cs or vice versa
5. Relation to partners
   - How to fit a good use of 5Cs with the type of relation we have with our partners (e.g. a sister lobby organisation that has no specific capacity development (CD) needs)?
   - How to convince my partner / do I want to convince my partner (option)?
   - How to make it a participatory process with partners?
6. Other
   - Do we as “Northern” organisations have the capability to use the framework?
   - The next step: How to use it for following CD process
   - How to actually empower our own practices in a more broad way, while using of 5Cs (not only see it as M&E requirement!)
   - How to involve partners in the designing process?

Interviews to assess experiences of alliances
Although the IOB capacity development evaluation, mentioned above, incorporated the 5C framework, there is little experience in using the framework as a monitoring instrument. Therefore, PSO and Partos decided to host a gathering in February 2012 to exchange experiences among the alliances and to learn from each other’s practices in working with the 5C framework during the MFS II baseline assessment.
An interview checklist was designed to structure the experiences and formulate priority issues to be discussed. Interviews were based on open questions and consisted of four main topics:

- Prior knowledge and expectations of the framework;
- Development of the tool to measure 5Cs;
- Implementation of the tool;
- Results of the assessment.

Interviews were held with all 20 alliances. In most cases the lead organisation of an alliance was interviewed. The interviews were conducted face-to-face as much as possible. On average, the duration of an interview was 1.5 hours. Interviews were carried out by staff from PSO and Partos and an external consultant. Its findings were presented and discussed in an exchange workshop on the 14th of February 2012. In the following three sections the interview findings are summarized.

3. Development of tools to measure 5Cs

Prior knowledge and expectations

When the Ministry introduced the 5C framework (1 November 2010) some alliances had prior experience with the framework. Some were quite knowledgeable of the framework and a few had only heard of it. The larger NGOs had gained experience with the use of the framework as part of the IOB evaluation. Other organizations had internal discussions on the ECDPM publications or participated in the 5C exchange meetings by PSO and Partos. Early 2010, PSO had already incorporated the 5C framework in its Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation system for capacity development support to Southern partner organisations.

Overall, respondents were positive about the use of the 5C framework for organisational assessment (OA) and monitoring Southern partners’ organisational development (OD). Various respondents consider the framework to be a more complete and systematic way of looking at organisational capacity, compared to the frameworks they were using before.

When the Ministry introduced the framework, a number of challenges arose that needed to be tackled. Three main challenges were mentioned:

- Developing pointers\(^6\) relevant for the alliance. A qualitative framework like the 5Cs encourages the differentiation of pointers. However, there was confusion on how to develop these pointers.
- Translating the framework from an instrument that guides the dialogue between the Northern organisations and their Southern partners to a quantitative tool that provides baseline scores. The 5Cs are not mutually exclusive\(^7\), therefore, for baseline purposes, a more rigid structure needed to be developed.
- Practical constraints of carrying out the assessments in a relatively short time period. Especially when an alliance works with a large group of partners (the largest mentioned was 800), logistical constraints come into play.

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\(^6\) Various words are used for the elaboration and specification of the 5 capabilities: (sub-) indicators, markers, sub-Cs, characteristics and pointers. We will use the term ‘pointer’.

\(^7\) Baser and Morgan, 2008, p. 28.
In two alliances, some alliance members perceived the 5C framework as not relevant for their work within the alliance. The main reason provided for this was that the alliance is not involved in the area of strengthening organisational capacity. Although these alliances may be concerned with training of Southern partners, they do not link training results to organisational effectiveness. Another explanation provided was that they may have an indirect approach to strengthening organisational capacity by lobbying for better living/working conditions or setting up a communication platform.

The tool to assess the 5Cs
The alliances took a pragmatic approach in dealing with the challenges mentioned above. Within their alliances – often solely by the lead organisation – the member organisations developed instruments that could provide scores on the 5 capabilities. Some alliances requested external consultants to assist in preparing the instrument. The main questions that came up in the starting phase of MFS II were:

- Do we use our regular organisational scan or are we developing something new?
- Do we ask all our partners to join the assessment or do we take a sample?
- How participatory will the assessment be; which pointers do we select and how do we score?

The formulation of pointers and the number of pointers used for assessing the 5Cs varied among the alliances. About six alliances centred their instrument around the 14 pointers provided by the Ministry (with a range of 12 to 16 pointers). The others added pointers and used a total of 20 to 32. One alliance provided a list of possible pointers (a total of 42) in its monitoring protocol. The Southern partner organisations of this alliance developed their own pointers for organisational improvement during separate workshops.

The assessment instruments used can be divided into two types of instruments. About half the alliances developed a new tool specifically for the baseline assessment. The other alliances used OCA tools that were already being used to assess capacities of Southern partner organisations. Relevant 5C information was then extracted from these tools. The larger Dutch NGOs, for instance, already used OCA tools that contain most of the items needed for the 5C assessment. In a few alliances, the members used different types of instruments.

Partner involvement
Mainly due to time constraints partner involvement in developing the instrument was limited. Two alliances tested their instrument among a selection of partners and local alliance staff members. Most respondents acknowledged the need for increased partner involvement and participation of local alliance staff for future assessments. One alliance contributed to this need by allowing local alliance staff to weigh the importance of the pointers for each capability. This enhanced the enthusiasm among local programme staff to work with the framework.
**Scoring**

The scoring range varied enormously between the alliances. A large group (11) used a 4 point scale (1-4), probably because most of the OCA scoring tools use this range (‘hardly’ – ‘fully’). Other alliances used a 5 or 6 point scale and a few alliances used 10 point scale. One alliance did not use scores at all. They had negotiated with the Ministry to use their instrument only as a tool to guide the dialogue on organisational development. In this dialogue process, partners formulate their own pointers. Additionally, critical learning incidents and organisational phases take over the role of ‘scoring’. This alliance is gradually implementing the assessments, largely depending on a partner’s readiness for this kind of intervention.

**4. Implementation of the tools**

The baseline assessments were partly carried out by using existing information and partly by acquiring new information in the period January - June 2011. Assessments were done in a variety of ways, depending on time and resources available and the number of partners to be covered. The figure below presents the main implementation modalities.

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**Implementation modalities for 5C assessment**

**DESK JOB**
- By (local) Project Staff
- Self-assessment by partner
- Joint discussion/ verification
- Aggregated scores

**WORKSHOP/MEETING**
- With one partner or all country partners together
- Facilitated by external consultant and/or (local) project staff
- Aggregated scores

**ALLIANCE BASE-LINE REPORTS**

Eight alliances mainly used a ‘desk job’ approach in which the local offices or the Southern partner organisations generated the information that was requested by the lead organisation. This process was sometimes supported by an external consultant. Most of the larger Dutch NGOs – working with a large number of partners, in many countries and having an OCA tool already in place – used this approach.
Seven alliances organised workshops with their partner organisations to provide the information needed. Five alliances used both implementation modalities (desk job and workshop): one alliance carried out workshops with 20 of its partners and because of time constraints the remaining 10 partners filled in a computer generated questionnaire. In two alliances, the participating members had a different approach, and in two other alliances their local project staff was free to decide how they wished to carry out the assessment: as a desk job, using a meeting/workshop or by asking for a partner self-assessment.

When participatory assessment workshops were organised, these were often carried out by local or regional facilitators, covering one to three days. The results of both the desk job and workshop activities were transferred to questionnaires (the assessment instrument), paving the way for a dialogue on capacity development (CD). Two alliances specifically requested the partners to identify three pointers from their questionnaire results, that would become priority areas for future CD.

Because of the overlap between the frameworks for 5C assessment and measuring the civil society\(^8\) (one of the other priority result areas in the MFS II programme), some alliances partly merged the two baseline assessments. One alliance acquired information on efficiency (pointer for the Coherence Capability) using the assessment of civil society. Alliances that used their own more extensive organisational capacity assessment (OCA) tool were able to acquire information on both the 5Cs and civil society using one instrument.

For future assessments the respondents came up with a few suggestions:

- Ensure that local project staff is properly prepared and trained in the methodology. Due to the time constraints, this preparation was not always possible, which resulted in differences in approach and in scoring.
- Make prudent use of external facilitators and consultants. At alliance level they were perceived as welcome process facilitators. During local workshops there was a mixed reaction to the presence of external facilitators and consultants: on the one hand they can take away part of the work load, on the other hand they are outsiders that might lack the necessary trust of Southern partner organisations to obtain sensitive information. Furthermore, important knowledge and experiences may not get internalised. Positive experiences were reported when local facilitators were known by the partners and when local alliance staff joined the workshop.

\(^8\) In the Ministry’s letter to the alliances with sample indicators for the result area ‘civil society’ (22 December 2010), some indicators overlap with the 5C indicators, e.g. networking, target group involvement and financial management.

As diverse as implementation has been the exchange meeting showed according to Jenny Pearson that: “While listening to the many stories shared at this exchange event, it became clear to me that a great deal of learning has been achieved - some by design, some by chance, some by trial and error, and some by reflection and analysis.”, and: “An additional bonus for some is that they see themselves developing new skill sets as they increasingly move to facilitate processes rather than doing or managing tasks.”
Only assess those organisations with which a longer term relationship is expected. Especially the alliances with larger numbers of partners experience a turn-over in their partner portfolio (10-15% annually), making careful selection more important.

Only enter into an assessment situation after a proper working relationship is established with the partner. The assessments with new partners were more difficult to carry out because communication was less open and a relationship of mutual trust has yet to be established. One alliance decided not to carry out assessments with new partners.

It is not very clear from the points above how the organisational assessments have been valuable instruments in building relationships with partners. This has been duly recognized in the experiences and suggestions for further use of the framework in sections 5 and 6 of this report.

5. The assessment results

Results from the baseline assessments are divided into three parts: general impressions on the entire assessment phase, the specific 5C results and planning for capacity development actions as follow up on the assessments.

General impressions

There are two aspects of the 5C baseline assessment that were perceived as very positive. Firstly, the assessment results provided a broadening and deepening of the understanding of the specific Southern partner. Secondly, the assessments have proven to be useful for preparing a future dialogue on capacity development.

There is a tension between using the results of the 5C assessments as a tool for learning versus complying with strict monitoring requirements. Most alliances are still struggling with this issue which may therefore be an issue for further elaboration. The baseline reports provide the required monitoring information; the next steps for alliances are to develop systematic linkages with the various thematic programmes, to create ownership among Southern partners, and to use the information for organisational strengthening. An important question for each alliance is “how does organisational development fit into the Result Chain Civil Society in a way that it is acceptable to the Southern partner?”

One very telling comment on scoring summed up much of the feeling about the subject - ‘Scores don’t teach us what to do.’ “, Jenny Pearson remarked, while adding: “I was impressed by the strong feeling that scoring has its limitations as a tool for starting or continuing organisational development support processes and that tools that facilitate dialogue with the partners are much more useful.”

9 MFS II, Annex 5, Figure 1, p. 11
The specific 5C results

During the second half of 2011 the alliances (except for one) presented their baseline reports to the Ministry, most of them in June. They aggregated the scores at country level, programme level or alliance level. Some findings:

- The separate scores of each Southern partner are seen as an important entry point for dialogue with the partner on subsequent capacity development support from the alliances.
- The scoring range for country data varies greatly between alliances, e.g. from 2.4-7.6 (0-9 scale), 1.1-3.8 (1-4 scale), 5-7 (1-10 scale), 2.7-3.5 (0-4 scale), 2.0-4.7 (1-5 scale). Aggregated figures at country level are not perceived as useful information by the respondents. For policy development purposes these aggregated data seem even less useful, even though two alliances indicate to carry out additional analysis on their aggregated scores. One alliance is looking for ways how aggregated data may help in selecting topics for country CD support in which peer support may also play a role, the other has found different scores between countries which may hint to differentiated country approaches. One alliance suggested that if reliably collected, aggregation at country or programme level per pointer may yield useful information.
- The 5C framework has been introduced as a baseline measurement, to be followed up later with progress measurements. Because of the request of data aggregation, there may have been reliability and validity problems. Reliability issues arise for instance because different instruments were used in the same alliance. Furthermore because of limited preparation of country project staff and partners there may be bias by those who have used the instrument. One cannot safely assume that all have used the instrument in the same way. There also may be validity issues, because the 5C approach has not yet been validated as an OA baseline instrument.
- The monitoring protocol required baseline and target scores. In this case the targets can be defined as the expected scores to be reached in 2015. Most of the alliances have provided these target scores per country and per capability. Understandably these are seen as estimates rather than as strict calculations. The alliances simply did not have the time to discuss which actions are needed to achieve these targets with each partner. Two alliances decided not to work with strict targets for 2015.
- The narratives that most alliances have provided to explain the scores yield important additional information for understanding partner capacity. Narratives were provided in the questionnaires behind each pointers or were provided as a separate annex.

Using the data for partner strengthening and change

Although organisational assessment and organisational development can be seen as two separate processes, in practice they are part of one change process carried out in their own way by individual Southern partners. The MFS II framework requires an assessment of all partners at a specific moment (June 2011). The alliances collected this data – some of which was already collected during earlier assessments – and then based (or will base) their OD support on subsequent discussions with their partners. For baseline assessments that were carried out recently, OD plans are still being formulated.
The interviews did not address possible differences in OD plans between those alliances that used an existing OCA type or OA instrument and those that used a specific 5C instrument. Similarly, there may be differences in results between those alliances that uses a desk job approach and those that used a workshop/meeting approach.

Even though most alliance members have been working on organisational development with their partners for many years, they now wonder how the 5C framework may improve the quality of these efforts. A difference expressed by one participant between the 5C model and an OCA tool that identifies capacity gaps is: “Sometimes we have the best impact by building on strengths rather than focussing on gaps and problems.”

During the period July-December 2011 some experiences were gained. First, by discussing the assessment results and later by implementing plans for improvement that will be embedded in the overall MFS II programme. Some respondents indicated that the assessments which were carried out under time pressure, are now followed up with more intensive dialogues with partners.

6. The future of the 5C approach in MFS II

Using the 5C framework is not seen as another “flavour of the month”. The alliances appreciate the framework, especially as a basis for dialogue with partners on capacity improvements. Although the way the framework was introduced by the Ministry is seen as less optimal, working with the frameworks is seen as a useful experience that resulted in improved plans for further capacity development. After providing the baseline data in June 2011, a number of alliances have started to use the 5C framework the way it was originally intended: as an instrument for reflection and dialogue. Initial responses from Southern partners are very positive.

The exchange of experiences among alliance members on 14 February 2012 on the use of 5C framework as a baseline instrument for MFS II was much appreciated. Around 66 participants representing 54 organisations took part in the workshop. As a result of the interviews conducted and discussions that took place on February 14 some recommendations can be made. Recommendations provided during the interviews and workshops were grouped and provided below.

Experiences are building in the MFS Alliances with the 5C framework. Jenny Pearson: “As the use of the framework extends to implementation there will be an ongoing need for open and honest sharing of experiences in order that understanding and learning can deepen and contribute to more effective capacity development practices.”
Recommendations concerning the practical applicability of the framework:

- Use the 5C framework in a multi-stakeholder environment if possible. Looking at Southern partners in their network environments may result in better opportunities for capacity improvements.
- A ‘one size fits all’ approach to the 5Cs is not desirable. A focus on dialogue will imply a context specific use of the framework. This can be realized by developing the pointers in dialogue with the partners. In practice this is already taking place; after the pressure of the base-line deadline had subsided, some alliances started to work with their partners with a more reflective approach.
- Develop a manual with ideas, experiences and suggestions on how to use the 5C framework for OD processes. The way the framework is currently presented is often perceived too complicated, both for alliance partners and local partners. Especially when working with Community Based Organisations, translation into less abstract terms appeared difficult. Therefore, a guide with simple and clear language explaining the 5Cs is needed.

Recommendations concerning the alignment with other actors:

- Keep a fruitful dialogue between the Ministry of Foreign affairs and the MFSII alliances on the experiences with the framework. Within this dialogue the successes as well as the challenges should be discussed. Possible topics which result from the interviews and the discussions on February 14 are the following: the reporting frequency, aggregation of monitoring information, attribution vs. contribution to capacity development, linkages with monitoring of civil society and the question how to differentiate between accountability and reflection.
• Improve cooperation and coordination among alliances and alliance members regarding OD support activities. Especially within alliances where there is one large lead member and several smaller other members, the smaller members might not be sufficiently involved in OD efforts. In addition, cooperation between alliances needs attention in case they are working with the same Southern partner organisation. Coordination between the alliances is required in order to prevent ‘double assessment’ and several OD support programmes for one Southern partner.

Recommendations concerning future learning on the 5C framework:
• Continue learning on the 5C frameworks during learning events. Some suggestions for further learning events that were given are:
  - Exchange of experiences yearly after the next assessments.
  - Exchange/learn on the 5C framework as a dialogue tool.
  - Learn on how to use 5C follow up implementation in project cycle, CD action planning, what works under which conditions, and to put 5C into strategy and context.
  - Exchange more with presence of Southern partners.
• Document and share experiences. The present report is an example. Additionally, ECDPM is gathering further experiences for their reference paper 10.

10 Bringing the invisible into perspective. Reference paper for using the 5Cs framework to plan, monitor and evaluate capacity and results of capacity development processes (www.ecdpm.org/5c)