Building flourishing communities

Cordaid’s mission in the world of today and tomorrow

Cordaid’s Mission Statement

Building flourishing communities is the quintessence of what Cordaid does as a development organization, operating globally, from north to south and east to west. In flourishing communities people share values and interests and a common purpose. Flourishing communities create space where people can live in dignity, in security, enjoy the freedom to speak their minds, have the opportunity to realize their capacities and to participate in social, economic, cultural and spiritual life. In building and strengthening these communities we are making it possible to bring about change in society towards a more just, inclusive and sustainable world. This world will be one in which we share our global common goods, where we make space for diversity and where we reach out to all those who share our dream of a just, inclusive and sustainable world.

1. Introduction

Cordaid called its recent transformation process 'Ubuntu', an African word meaning that our existence as human beings, as individuals, is inherently dependent on our interconnectedness: 'I am because we are'. This notion of togetherness/interdependency/community is essential for the future of the organization, coherent with its history and relevant for our future role. In our globalizing world we are increasingly interconnected by economic, social and cultural relationships.

Cordaid’s earliest roots go back to 1914. From our very inception, caring for others, reaching out to people who are suffering or who are marginalized or deprived, has been at the heart of our mission. During these past (almost) 100 years, reconnecting people to the broader community has also formed an important part of our organization’s mission. We started by caring for refugees during World War I and continued by looking after people who suffered during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Then, after World War II, our focus moved south, to protecting the victims of dictatorships in Latin America and apartheid in South Africa, strengthening women’s groups and indigenous communities and providing support to discriminated groups. Caring for people and making sure they are not marginalized and set aside because of their gender or cultural identity, or because of their economic position or political or ideological convictions, has always been a core value of Cordaid. It's also deeply rooted in the organization’s catholic tradition – a community seated around the table breaking bread and drinking wine.

2. Responding to actual challenges

Perhaps even more relevant now than it ever was, that core value is still a driving force in our work. Four trends are currently fueling that drive and underlining the need to build flourishing communities.

- Inequality is increasing all over the world and the willingness to share resources and benefits is diminishing. This is creating divisions within societies. ‘Gated neighborhoods’ throughout the world are the most visible physical evidence of the inequality divide, while the discrimination of (lower) casts in India and indigenous communities in Guatemala are perhaps less visible, but no less impactful. And the gender inequality is still there. Growing inequality is a worldwide phenomenon; the divide it causes is even growing rapidly in rich countries, where it is undermining social stability. This increasing inequality goes hand-in-hand with an increase in the social and political marginalization of people. These people then have no voice or influence in decision-making processes and are effectively sidelined in our high-speed global world.

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1 The notion of ‘global common goods’ refers to those issues and items that are fundamental for our human existence and should be available to everyone, and which, if they are not available, can have cross-border consequences.
Global public goods are at risk. With the expected increase of the world population to 10 billion people in the second half of this century, and the justifiable demand that all those world citizens have the right to a life of dignity, we will face serious scarcities in natural resources if we don’t share what our world has to offer in a just and sustainable way. In future, we can expect competition for scarce resources (energy, water, raw materials and food) to become more intense, with the most powerful players being the best placed to grab the biggest shares.

There are conflicts going on almost everywhere. Although the number of civil wars and violent conflicts has decreased during the past 10 years, even relatively stable countries like Thailand and India are not immune from lingering conflicts. The reasons for these conflicts can vary from a desire to establish a religious, economic or cultural identity to a straightforward fight for power and dominance. The recent break up of Sudan, the Moro conflict in the Philippines, the ongoing instability in Central Africa and the increasing instability of the whole of Central America are just a few examples of the numerous minor and not-so-minor internal conflicts.

In western societies, which include the Netherlands, the process of individualization is increasingly unraveling the social fabric of society. The sentence 'I'm fine but society is rotten' reflects that disconnect between the individual and social life. Although new forms of communities are emerging (social media) the social fabric has become fragile over the past three decades.

All these trends point to a world in which the culture of ‘take and hold’ has become dominant, and in which only financial and economic yardsticks are seen as relevant. It’s a culture that leads to an unjust and unsustainable world. Cordaid is committed to working towards a fundamental transformation to a culture of ‘share and bestow’, in which justice and sustainability can flourish. Cordaid believes that building and strengthening communities is a fundamental strategy that will provide answers to the questions posed by these trends, and help us meet the challenges of the future. In an interdependent world, sharing with each other and belonging to one another are the cornerstones of respecting human dignity, and they are crucial if we are to avoid conflicts caused by self-interest, in which it is invariably the poorest and most vulnerable that suffer or are forgotten. It’s only by helping communities to flourish that we’ll be able to respect the dignity of life and creation – our world and everything in it – and conserve its natural resources for future generations. By building and strengthening communities we will also be underscoring our conviction that it’s only the communal efforts of poor and marginalized people that will improve their rights and their position in the societies in which they live.

**Building flourishing communities in areas of conflict and fragility**

Entrenched poverty is endemic in countries and areas that are, or have been, affected by conflict and where the structures of society have become fragile and vulnerable. In these countries and areas, the ability to escape the vicious circle of poverty is limited because of a lack of security, empowerment and opportunities. There are little or no basic social services and, due to a lack of security, the possibilities for making a living (often through agriculture) are minimal to non-existent. It’s in circumstances like these that flourishing communities are a fundamental prerequisite to creating the basic conditions for human dignity. They also create the trust that’s needed to accumulate social capital and a structural basis in which people can rely on one another. Flourishing communities serve as important foundations on which governments can build their credibility and reliability. In conflict, post-conflict and fragile regions, credible governments need these flourishing communities to serve as the basic social structures on which to reconstruct their societies.

**... in times of disaster and emergencies**

Natural disasters and emergencies often destroy the basic physical and social infrastructures of a community and society. The necessity to build or rebuild a flourishing community is therefore very urgent in times of natural disasters and emergencies. It brings people together in difficult and often unsafe circumstances, helps them overcome ethnic, religious and cultural barriers, and makes an important contribution to the empowerment of those people in rebuilding their lives and that of their communities.

**... in Dutch society too**

The Netherlands, with its well-organized welfare state, offers various forms of social protection to poor people. But even in the Netherlands people are falling through the safety net of its welfare state and becoming marginalized and disconnected in the process. Increasingly, people, especially those...
working in low-paid jobs and living in poor neighborhoods, are becoming unable to cope with the high expectations and demands of modern society, so they are being excluded. Among these poor and marginalized people, many are migrants who are finding it difficult to establish their place in Dutch society. Those who are not officially registered with the authorities, and are thus forced to eke out a living in illegality, are particularly vulnerable to being exploited and they cannot connect with society. Cordaid is therefore also committed to building flourishing communities in Dutch society.

3. Flourishing communities: aiming for impact

Our aim then is to ensure that communities are given every opportunity to flourish. It’s a highly ambitious objective because with it we are targeting the impact that our work has on the community, going beyond the output and outcome of our interventions. We also intend to go beyond the level of individuals’ wellbeing, seeking interconnection between the individual and the community. When we refer to communities we mainly mean local communities, but not exclusively. We also see communities as being women in Colombia, Dalits in India, indigenous groups in the Philippines, pastoralists in East Africa and women all over the world who share joint values and interests and support each other in the way forward. In the context of building flourishing communities we aim to improve people's lives by working on:

1. Security²
   - protection and justice, so that people can live in safety and know that their rights as citizens are protected
   - mutual responsibility and caring for one another

2. Empowerment
   - influence for people of all strata in decision-making in social and political issues
   - the right of people to express their culture, identity and religion, freely and openly
   - the capacity to realize inclusion and to deal with diversity

3. Opportunities
   - economic wellbeing, an end to poverty and gainful employment or self-employment
   - access to basic social services and infrastructure (health, education, water and transport)
   - a healthy and diverse ecological environment

The qualities that are inherent to flourishing communities, as are listed in the eight above-mentioned bullets, represent neither an abstract nor a romantic notion, but a very concrete reality. In our interventions and impact studies, Cordaid will define how they contribute to building flourishing communities.

In the context of flourishing communities Cordaid wants to underline the need for social synergy. In creating that synergy we take the community element into account right from the beginning of our interventions, often making that community element the ultimate goal of an intervention. The concept of community doesn’t disregard the individual; indeed the uniqueness of every individual remains important. Ubuntu reflects both: the ‘we’ and the ‘I’: the mutual relationship between the individual and the community is at its very heart.

Strong and mature communities have the capacity to:
- create communality so that people feel at ease and stronger for being part of the community they belong to;
- accommodate diversity so that others of a different culture, gender or religion still feel welcome and accepted;
- deal with controversy so that adversaries feel they are taken seriously in dialogue that addresses (potential) conflicts.

A flourishing community offers a space where people can build trust and cohesion, where they can develop and use their abilities in a safe environment and where they can collectively find the solutions to the social, economic and cultural problems they face. Downward accountability and ownership are essential.

On a broader scale, when several communities flourish they build networks and coalitions with other groups and communities so they can work together for societal change. This is the bridging capacity of communities. The concept of communities initiating change, reaching out to other actors and irregular partners, is therefore important. It offers a framework to perceive change as something in ² The three dimensions of security, empowerment and opportunity refer to the three dimensions of poverty in the World Bank framework.
which a commitment to values, such as justice and sustainability, goes hand-in-hand with an open mind to all those who want to contribute.

The concept of building flourishing communities is not just good fit with our interventions in developing countries. The trends outlined above have clearly identified a need for a community orientation in the interventions carried out via domestic programs in the Netherlands too.

4. **Flourishing communities for social and political change**

There are no easy answers to the challenges of inequality, global public goods, conflict and an unraveling social fabric. They are all interconnected; each with local and global aspects, so there is no blueprint for an all-encompassing solution. We see the building of flourishing communities as a prerequisite for bringing about change in societies. Cordaid believes that the change we seek to implement must be civic driven. Strong civic actors are indispensable in bringing about the change that is urgently needed in a world threatened by growing inequality, facing the depletion of its natural resources and in danger of becoming unsustainable. Strong communities are important in a complex and unstable world. They can organize the critical mass (numbers, knowledge and networks) that is necessary to deal with the multilayered, complex and globalized reality of today, which is often characterized by multiple conflicts of interest.

Flourishing communities are essential for the social and political dimensions of change. Cordaid’s service-oriented programs contribute to a stronger social fabric. Our RBF-healthcare and CMDRR programs are more than just delivery programs; they are social interventions in which the delivery itself helps communities to flourish by strengthening the cohesion, voice and participation of the people.

Flourishing communities serve as the pillars of civic-driven political change. The political dimension is everywhere when we address inequality, marginalization and the scarcity of global common goods. The political change that toppled apartheid in South Africa, that at least formally secured dignity for Dalits in India and that gave indigenous people power in Bolivia was based on strong and dedicated communities with shared values, who were convinced of the validity of their cause. Political change is needed at all levels: local, regional, national, and international. The Cordaid Communities of Change concept was developed to connect the different levels and to bring together the different actors that can bring about that change.

Flourishing communities are communities that have sufficient self-confidence and mutual protection to engage in the often-unavoidable struggle that is inherent to social and political change.

5. **Ubuntu: Cordaid as a partner in change**

It starts with ourselves. If we want to build flourishing communities and if we are building Communities of Change to realize this goal, we must take a long hard look at ourselves to ensure that we are living up to that ideal. In the changing reality of development cooperation, and the way it is financed, Cordaid has to reinvent itself. As a social enterprise we remain committed to the social benefits we want to realize, but we will have to pay more attention to the financial sustainability of the organization in a competitive, international environment. In terms of the future of the organization, the interconnectedness and synergy of its different activities is vital: ‘I am because we are’.

But it doesn’t end with ourselves. In the context of Communities of Change we have explicitly positioned ourselves as a partner of other actors who are committed to a just, inclusive and sustainable world. True partnerships form the basis of our work. Partnerships with actors, both to the north and south, and a commitment for change that we share with these actors and with people living in inequality and without dignity, form the basis of our legitimacy. In the changing reality of the world order, with new emerging global powers and stronger and more self-confident developing countries, relationships within the global civil society will develop and change. So, in that context of Communities of Change we have also explicitly repositioned ourselves as an equal partner in a community of actors who are committed to the necessary change. This partnership requires accountability to all actors, and, most of all, to the people who want to be members of flourishing communities in a just, inclusive and sustainable world.

*Cordaid’s Business Units must, in their strategies and implementation, make sure:*


they are helping to build flourishing communities and that they know what aspects of flourishing communities their programs are contributing to;
- they are aligned with Cordaid's focus on conflict and fragility or on emergencies and disasters;
- they are measuring the impact of their interventions within the flourishing communities impact framework;
- they are living up the principles of flourishing communities by investing in true partnerships with other actors.
Annex 1: Reflections on the concept of community and social capital

All this - the development agenda for the future, the history and DNA of Cordaid and its predecessors, and Cordaid’s actual programs, contribute to a theory of change for Cordaid with communities as the cornerstone.

The Oxford Dictionary carries the following description for ‘Community’:

1. group of people living in the same place or having the same characteristic in common
2. the condition of sharing or having certain attitudes or interests in common
3. (ecology) a group of interdependent plants or animals growing or living together in natural conditions or occupying a specified habitat

Cordaid’s understanding of ‘Community’ adds to this descriptive entity with two further descriptive and normative characteristics:

4. There is freedom to join or leave and there is no coercive power imposed on the members of the community.
5. There is ownership with the members of the community.

These additional descriptive and normative characteristics would lead to Cordaid’s definition of a community as being ‘a social entity in which members, voluntarily and with ownership, are organizing their shared interests so that they lead to social benefits’. Community is neither always local nor is it only consisting of natural persons.

Communities are the vital nexus between individuals and society. Communities are personal and collective. They create the space for individuals to be heard and to find mutual support for their views and their interests, and they are the place to organize collective power to influence the structures of society. In communities, the person and his or her dignity is the starting point of any action or intervention. Human dignity in this approach is therefore not only an objective; it is the very starting point of any social action and social change. Even in situations of abject poverty and exclusion there is human dignity that can have a voice and therefore human power that can be organized. Communities are the most important factor when it comes to organizing this power for change. Time and time again, it appears that the inherent power of people and communities are overlooked and underestimated.

A community is the place where social capital is accumulated and organized. Robert Putnam in his studies on social capital sees two basic features of social capital: bonding and bridging. The bonding quality of social capital is that it strengthens the relationships within communities and binds people together in their common efforts. But if it was only about bonding, the social capital of communities would lead to isolated groups. The real quality of social capital is in developing its bridging capacity: linking communities across their own borders and limitations with others. Bonding and bridging are mutually reinforcing and indispensable characteristics. Communities, according to Cordaid’s vision on society and change, are the pivotal structure in society where its vitality is to be found.

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3 The sociological difference between community and society (‘Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft’) is an important pillar in this theory of change.
4 Refer to the ‘eigen kracht conferenties’ in Dutch society, where solutions for social problems are built on the capacities of clients themselves and their network.
5 Among others, Making Democracy Work, Bowling Alone, Democracies in Flux.
In rapidly changing societies communities are of the utmost importance. They help people to both understand the changing environment and to cope with it. They are able to reconcile the interests of community members with a changing social reality. Thanks to their bonding capacity, they offer security and trust in uncertain times and with their bridging capacity they help to engage with the changing reality and other actors that play roles in the change process.

In communities, people organize their negotiating power to engage with other actors in society. All developing countries are societies that are facing rapid and fundamental change. Traditional patterns, structures and cultures are under pressure and are changing. Developing countries are comparable to pressure cookers: they facilitate rapid changes in a relatively short timeframe. Processes that took centuries in Europe are taking place in decades in developing countries.

Communities are vital in helping people to cope with these changes and to defend their interests while, at the same time, connecting them to the changing realities of their societies. In developing countries communities play an important role as a change actor. This is particularly the case in fragile societies, where the formal political structure is either poorly organized or has been hijacked by powerbrokers.

Cordaid does not perceive the relationship between communities and the state as a zero-sum relation in which one thrives at the expense of the other. When communities flourish they strengthen the state and the state, in turn, shapes the legal and judiciary framework for communities to play their role in fostering the wellbeing of (members of) society. Cordaid acknowledges the role of governments and the need to build strong and credible institutions. State structures and regulations are essential in providing (legal) protection to citizens and in making sure they have access to basic social services. But credible states need communities that give legitimacy and credibility to the state. They need communities to act as critical references and to serve as checks and balances.