

Workshop Report

sef Expert Workshop 2013

sef:

Shifting Parameters. The Post-2015 Process and the Future of International Cooperation for Development

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International development cooperation and its parameters have been the subject of intense and critical debates for many years, and these debates are certainly not over yet. At present, the “post-2015 agenda” seems to be their focal point. This is not only true with regard to the content and reach of a potential new development agenda but also in terms of relevant actors and alliances, where substantial upheavals can be observed.

At the sef Expert Workshop 2013, a group of around 25 stakeholders (including representatives of the UN, the OECD, the g7+, MICs, think-tanks and NGOs) and researchers explored how the debate on the post-2015 agenda is changing not only global decision-making but also the prevailing development paradigm. In particular, they focused on the question whether international cooperation for sustainable development is becoming more participatory and universal and what role global institutions can play in this process.

The political landscape on the global level is in flux. The once-powerful G7/G8 – an elitist club for the world’s leading economies – has been more or less replaced by the more representative G20. Within the G77, the diversity that has always existed is increasing. The leading members of the G77 are joining new clubs, such as the G20 and BRICS. The middle income countries (MICs) are looking for new ways to cooperate and formulate their common interests: this was evident at the MICs’ first High-level Conference in Costa Rica in June 2013. And even the most vulnerable countries have started to organise themselves: the g7+ is a group of fragile states keen to make their voices heard in international negotiations.

The emergence of new actors and alliances results not only from shifting power relations but is also a response to a number of pressing global challenges, such as climate change, the (in)stability of financial markets and the latent food crisis. And the phenomenon is not limited to the state level. Almost all of these new fora and clubs involve business and/or civil society, both formally and informally.

Against this background, traditional patterns of international consensus-building and international policy formulation have been progressively failing since the beginning of the 21st century. And this has implications for international cooperation for development, which will not only have to adapt to the diversification of actors, fora and processes in formulating a post-2015 agenda. It will also have to change radically in form, in language and in substance. Are we on the right track?

Universality as a must... and a challenge

With regard to the relevance of a new development agenda, some workshop participants saw development as being at the centre of the UN agenda as never before, also as a result of the partial success of the MDGs. However, most experts noticed a fading interest in talking about development and an excessive focus on the process rather than the content of a future agenda. They identified two main reasons for this: the sober recognition that the quantitative MDG approach has not been able to free the world from poverty, and the fact that many issues, such as

ODA, are simply no longer relevant to most actors. The MDGs were created as a basic agenda for the poorest countries and are driven by donor countries. But today, aid is becoming less significant for most countries, playing a decreasing or even a marginal role compared to remittances, for example. “We should eliminate the notion of ODA being a relevant factor in a post-2015 framework,” one participant therefore claimed.

Moreover, an overarching idea, a narrative that could electrify people, is missing. A broader understanding of poverty and inequalities seems to be one out-



SEF-Expertenworkshop 2013: H.E. Saúl Weisleder, Dr Helder da Costa, Jens Martens, Dr Hildegard Lingnau und Professor Rehman Sobhan (f.l.t.r.)

come of the debate so far. The structural sources of poverty have to be addressed. What is really needed is distributive justice at the national level and a more just world, several participants argued. This includes a substantive change in the terms of reference in international economic relations. Most participants agreed that without such a paradigm shift, any new agenda will fail.

Despite these rather unfavourable circumstances, most observers and many relevant actors strongly argue for a single global agenda with universal scope, integrating the post-2015 agenda with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Such an agenda should describe common global goals or benchmarks and provide monitoring instruments, but it should also allow for different regional, national and local models of implementation. It might also incorporate specific sets of goals (and financing) for specific groups of countries (e.g. the LDCs), recognising their particular needs and vulnerabilities.

Real universality has its perils, of course, and this was the subject of lively debate during the workshop. One participant asked: “Do we really want the UN to reach every single poor person in Germany?” “We have to be respectful of sovereignty,” another partici-

pant warned, explaining that we need smart sovereignty which is open for global governance when national solutions are not viable.

Most participants agreed that while the responsibility for sustainable development will remain with the nation states, we still need a global framework to give people a reference point to hold their governments accountable. This would also include a “one size fits all approach” to basic rights. Poverty, which deprives people of their dignity, is a global issue. A consensus on universal rights would be a huge step forward, but how can we avoid lowering standards and how can we create an upward spiral? One participant proposed that the highest prevailing standard should be the goal for everyone. Another participant favoured incentives and stretching goals, taking into account local capabilities. And yet another predicted that the North will have to change its mindset about universal values, postulating that the common normative framework will have to be renegotiated.

Then, the challenge will be to build a bridge between a universal agenda and local implementation. To avoid a top-down approach, some participants suggested that each state should prepare a national agenda or national pledges as their contribution to the global agenda. The UN’s role would be to set the framework and to provide support, finance or peer reviews – with the nation states in the driving seat. “Please stop with: we have to define/to control/to measure,” another participant objected, claiming that instead of defining another set of global goals, we should set concrete (financial) targets, e.g. for technology transfers in the field of renewable energy. Just three international cooperation agreements of that kind would make a real difference, she argued.

Who’s at the table... and who holds the pen?

As one reaction to the shifting power relations and the ensuing increase in the number of stakeholders who are willing and able to make their voices heard, international processes are increasingly emerging from behind the closed doors of diplomacy into the public arena, with goals and strategies for global cooperation being negotiated in broad-based participatory processes.

This has certainly been true of the post-2015 debate so far. Many participants highlighted the enrichment dimensions of broad participation. It was generally seen as a success that the post-2015 debate brought so many different constituencies worldwide together in a fruitful exchange. However, others complained that charismatic leadership has been missing so far. “Who are the actors, the Clintons and Blairs, who want to move forward?” one participant asked.

Another argued that the times have changed, and that we will not have a single mover, but an agenda “moved by all of us”, which could be good news. But how can we translate the many voices raised in the intergovernmental process? How can we bring diversity together and reach consensus in a world that, increasingly, is a world of competition and polarisation? And can we ensure that the visions are not watered down? One participant who was actively involved in the participatory process warned against “raising too many expectations with our consultations”. It was very important, he added, to manage the expectations of all the various stakeholders. While a new sense of participatory and democratic rights is evolving, the post-2015 debate will eventually end with an intergovernmental decision. And most probably, it will be “a small group of guys” who will decide in a club policy manner. “At the end of the day, it matters who holds the pen,” one participant concluded. Another added that it is still about power politics; those who want to be heard have to learn to work with the system. The formation of alliances to strive for common goals is one important strategy. This is true of states as well as social groupings. One example is the newly formed g7+, currently comprising 18 fragile states which are combining their energies to include peacebuilding and stability goals in the post-2015 agenda, for example. They make well-directed use of leaders to bring their goals to the table and into the documents. Their strategy also includes lobbying like-minded countries, as one participant explained.

Although more democratic with regard to the participation of states and stakeholders at the international level, a complementary bottom-up process is essential for successful implementation at the regional and local level. Some participants therefore proposed promoting participatory good governance as part of a post-2015 framework. Furthermore, people living in poverty should be strengthened as new partners in building knowledge on development, particularly at the local level. While the problem of meaningful participation in shaping global policies (beyond consultation) remained unresolved during the workshop, bottom-up participation in the implementation phase seemed to be more viable. Finally, one participant added that participation might also play a vital role in ensuring accountability.

The UN as a broker... but not as a power centre?

On a more general level, participants pointed out that the UN, with its universal membership, remained unequalled with regard to legitimacy. With its high mobilising potential, it could act as an efficient broker. But can it also come up with decisions? In that regard, the UN has time and again proven to be weak,

particularly in the economic field. Many participants therefore considered the UN – faced with the huge challenge of moving into a new era of international cooperation – to be at a crossroads. The new variety and multiplicity of actors and the multitude of new partnerships and initiatives could be an opportunity, with the UN as the logic centre of such a broad debate and process. Particularly with regard to a necessary systemic change, the UN’s debating function was seen as very important. Some participants also hoped that the post-2015 agenda could re-energise the UN. The UN system would have to be adjusted to a new and universal set of goals, and it should set up an accountability system, e.g. in the form of special rapporteurs for sustainable development.

On the other hand, most participants were somewhat sceptical as to whether the decision-making frontier towards more radical change will be crossed within the UN. The more than outdated North-South divide is still played upon in the UN, although there is no longer one united South, but – as one participant put it – “a continuum from BRICS to g7+”. The different groupings within the G77 – including the growing group of MICs – have increasingly distinct interests. However, when it comes to negotiations within the UN, they still “hide” behind the G77.

So where is the place to negotiate a new global agenda? “Northern” institutions as the OECD and the World Bank are “on stand-by”, as one participant put it, “ready to provide the technical skills to define doable goals and a matrix of indicators appropriate to an integrated framework embracing both new MDGs and SDGs”. But will the South once more accept an agenda dominated by the North? Probably not. Preparatory work can be expected from the UNGA Open Working Group on Sustainable Development. But when it comes to taking decisions on disputed issues, these will be taken by the powerful actors. The G20 could be the place to build geo-political consensus; it could, as one participant explained, “serve as a critical energiser or fixer of policy bottlenecks, probably around some of the important but politically demanding innovative policy domains that will likely emerge from the SDGs”.

Without being an alternative to the UN, the G20 could play a constructive role in bringing together different country groupings, helping to overcome the stalemate between North and South within the UN. As an important step forward towards becoming a global “mediation board”, the G20 could create a permanent g7+ seat, one participant suggested.

In addition to the G20, flexible networks can create positive forward-looking outcomes with the potential to serve as models. The proliferation of institutions and the forum-hopping are an increasing problem, however, particularly as there is no universally accepted arbiter in the international system at present.

The way forward

So can the post-2015 process act as a catalyst in changing the parameters of international cooperation for development? It might, at least, provide an important impetus. To make this happen, the four following elements are of utmost importance:

1) The MDG agenda was widely perceived as donor-driven. In contrast, the post-2015 debate has, so far, brought many different constituencies worldwide into an open and fruitful dialogue. This momentum should not be lost. Even taking into consideration that the final document will, eventually, have to be selectively formulated and negotiated by a small group of people, it is hard to imagine that this group will be in a position to ignore the many voices raised during the debate.

2) It would be a huge step forward if the members of the United Nations were finally to agree on SDGs with universal scope. Even if the advocates of a merger of the post-MDG and SDG processes seem to be in the majority right now, a single global agenda – with a direct impact on the North as well – remains a major and, above all, a mental challenge. It also requires an end to thinking in traditional categories of development policy and development aid.

3) Such an agenda would define the global framework and benchmarks while necessarily showing a high degree of flexibility in formulating national targets. To avoid any lowering of standards, this new flexibility would have to be accompanied by strong accountability mechanisms on different political levels. Furthermore, flexibility should also include cooperation with a variety of new (and old) partnerships, initiatives and networks in a global framework – particularly with regard to implementation.

4) Finally, the United Nations system will have to partly redefine its role in international development cooperation. While it should keep its function as a forum for debating global challenges and strategies to overcome them through a common but differentiated

approach, it should also foster a global governance approach for necessary systemic changes and set up an accountability system for the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

Could we end up with no post-2015 agenda at all? While there are many controversial issues on the table and consensus will be difficult to reach, “the post-2015 agenda could be saved in the end by a development version of ‘too big to fail,’” as one participant put it, adding that neither the North or the South would want to take the blame for a complete failure.

Participants of the sef Expert Workshop 2013

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