



Debate about report of the WRR: “Minder pretentie, meer ambitie, -
ontwikkelingshulp die verschil maakt - (Peter van Lieshout c.s.)”

Present: - WRR (Scientific council for government policies) : Peter van Lieshout,
Monique Kremer, Robert Went
- member organisations of PARTOS and PSO
- international advisory board (IAB), (Dominique Hounkonnou, Louk de
la Rive Box, Allen Fowler, Alfonso Gumucio Dagrón, P.N. Vasanti)

Ref: The Hague (Crowne Plaza hotel), 26th of January.

I General Remarks

Also with contributions of Sasja Bokkerink (Oxfam Novib) and P.N Vasanti (PSO International Advisory Board)

- The report defines development as a deliberate process of accelerated modernisation referring to a simultaneous process of transition of economy, government, political system and society.
- Aid could be divided into three aspects: 1) combating poverty 2) structural improvements for economic development (self-reliance) 3) contribution to global public goods. The report argues that the second aspect – development for self-reliance – should be enhanced relative to the others.
- We should be more modest in what can be achieved by development cooperation. Other aspects of the global relations with the developing countries have increased in importance (remittances, FDI, trade barriers).
- ‘One size fits all’ - approaches and use of blue-prints (like neoliberal policies coming from the Washington consensus) should be avoided.
- The accountability and reporting to the Ministry has become too heavy a burden. It blocks professionalisation.
- There should be a concentration of Dutch development efforts to the extent that the Netherlands reduce the number of development relations to only 10 developing countries
- The report proposes to establish an NLAIID-office in these 10 countries, referring to examples of structures like DFID, USAID. This would increase the professionalization and the effectiveness and efficiency of the aid.

II Remarks from a civil society perspective

Also with contributions of Dominique Hounkonnou (PSO International Advisory Board) and Paul Wolvekamp (Both Ends)

- The Netherlands tops the charts in terms of the percentage of the development support going through the NGO-channel; i.e. 20% of the Government budget for aid that goes through the NGO-channel.
- The WRR discerns different roles of NGO's: role of service delivery, a watch dog function, a function of supporting societal processes (empowerment, mediation in conflicts, bridging/bonding etc.). The government should treat these NGO's differently.
- The concept of (supporting) civil society does not fit every society. Sometimes the societal dynamics can not be easily moulded into a frame that can be financed. In turn, sometimes the local civil society does not fit our view about what represents a "good" civil society.
- The NGO's contribute increasingly and effectively to the discussion on public goods (climate change, migration issues, financial crisis, etc).
- The MFS system seems to have passed its expiry date.
- NGO's have rather become bureaucratic than more professional due to pressure to demonstrate results.
- NGO's, in as far as dependent on government money, should specialise and professionalise, i.e. reduce the number of countries (to really have context knowledge, to specialise in those areas in which the Netherlands really has expertise as the water sector, agriculture, rule of law, HIV/AIDS and reproductive rights and focus on participation and the political dimensions of programmes).
- Since the capacity of Southern NGO's has been built, the need for Northern capacity building decreases.
- Southern NGO's can be supported by the to be established decentralised offices of NLAID in the resp. developing country.

III Remarks from a sector learning and knowledge perspective

Also with contributions of Peter Konijn (Cordaid) and Margo Kooijman, (PSO)

- Knowledge infrastructure should be inter-disciplinary, it should not be based on knowledge transfer, - since innovation arises from learning-by-doing in a specific context rather than from knowledge transfer.
- In the Netherlands there are few scientific institutions which concentrate on development. In the Netherlands there is a small financial contribution to knowledge development about development (Euro 200 million, and should be minimally Euro 300 million yearly; should be minimally 6 % of the total budget).
- There is a lack of organisations that combine research and practice. Investment in research and development through having a coordinating institute and investment in the organisation of knowledge networks is urgently needed.
- Knowledge development thrives by diversity! There is an unhealthy domination of the World Bank and Anglo-Saxon authors on civil society development.
- Research capacity in the South needs to increase. 3 or 4 knowledge banks e.g. in Africa and Asia could be developed (ref. to World bank model). This could also increase the self-discovery of a country regarding its own development path.
- Universities could be encouraged to liaise with Southern Universities. Each University could (or should) have explicit development goals.

Specific about civil society and knowledge

- There is a lack of knowledge in the Netherlands about how civil society organisations can contribute to development. There is the need for more conceptualisation, also about what Dutch (international) ngo's could actually contribute to the development of a Southern civil society.
- The degree of interaction, exchange of knowledge and feedback between Dutch NGO's is rather weak.
- Knowledge development on civil society and conceptualisation on civil society could become a field in which the Netherlands could specialise.

IV Summary of various contributions to the discussion:

The report and more specifically the analysis is praised by almost all present.

- Any stable and functioning state, democracy or society is based on (government) power on the one hand and the control of power on the other (countervailing power). Active citizens are crucial for good governance at all levels. The role of civil society is to hold the state accountable and critically monitor the activities of the private sector.
- In the report key words seems to be: better context analysis, more attention, more capacity, more focus, critical mass, whereas in the civil society jargon issues as connectivity, shared values, leadership and solidarity are key. Development cooperation in the eyes of civil society in this sense is also about to engage oneself and liaising with organizations and groups which encourage modernization.
- Although the report starts with a balanced definition of development, in its details more importance is attached to economic development at the expense of the social development. This is also reflected in the recommendations.
- The recommendations in the report for the Dutch Aid are prepared in such a manner that the implementation does not depend on liaison with the EU, in other words the report proposes a wait-and-see attitude. A better recommendation would be that the Dutch Ministry uses its experience and position to more effectively influence EU policies regarding development and aid.
- Speaking about the Netherlands being less-and-less a centre of expertise about civil society, it should be realized that the national knowledge base regarding civil society that still is there are the Dutch civil society actors. This should be treated with care.
- There are some downsides to the proposed NLAID agency:
- In many societies NLAID cannot play/support the role of countervailing power as NLAID is an extension of government policy. This is the governmental channel. This does not do proper justice to the NGO-channel.
- The diversity and pluriformity of the civil society arena is not recognized, - development is seen as modernization.
- Development is context specific, as becomes clear from the report. The set-up and implementation of ten offices of NLAID runs the risk to become yet another blueprint solution!
- A transfer of the mandate to Southern NGO's must, should be and largely is an integrated part of CS support strategies. Ownership and participation have lead to quite some decentralization efforts by Dutch NGO's.
- In stead of announcing that the MFS system has passed its expiry date, it would be good to monitor the MFS-II system and evaluate the outcomes of it.
- The WRR report underestimates that development is a political issue. Development is not a neutral process that can be planned, analyzed and implemented, in stead it deals with society, consensus, direction and political choices peoples and theirs governments make.
- Also, (the use of) knowledge is not neutral, but it is about power. Any knowledge effort must take knowledges (scientific knowledge, context knowledge, etc.) and different perspectives and polycentrism as points of departure.

- a. Innovations come up through modern and flexible ways of generating and handling of knowledge. Clones of the World bank, as proposed in the report, might not serve this purpose.
- b. We must create space / interface between researchers and practitioners in order that that meet
- c. Existing (scattered) knowledge initiatives must be better linked.
- d. We should realize that the use of scientific knowledge leads to generalizations. And the report is particularly stressing the uniqueness of development/modernization.
- e. There is a gap between all the evaluations which are done about development projects and the scientific knowledge, which is sometimes not useful or relevant for development programmes.

V Concluding remarks by Pieter van Lieshout (WRR):

- Although the intellectual debate about civil society in the Netherlands has diminished, if the proper energy is put into it, this weakness might become a strength and civil society might be one of the themes in which Dutch Aid could specialize. Civil society in combination with citizenship could be a focus for Netherlands.
- Professionalism (through NLAID) protects the sector against the political tides and the diplomatic culture; professionalism also allows you to be politically more effective and concentration of efforts increases your potential political impact.
- Netherlands NGO's can continue to play their role vis-à-vis the Southern civil society, but in the report it is proposed that Dutch bilateral aid (through NLAID) will focus on ten countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, thus creating a critical mass.
- The Dutch NGO-sector is warned not to be conceited ('do not flatter yourself!'). Instead the NGO's are encouraged to prepare themselves for the debate on the role of Dutch NGO's. This debate will come anyway– and then better be prepared!