



Report

Brainstorm session with David Booth (ODI, London)

Meeting	:	Brainstorm session on support of local self-help initiatives
Attending	:	PSO and Partos members
Date	:	14 December 2010, 09.30-12.30

Introduction by David Booth, Research Fellow at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI)

The ODI-research group is halfway the five-year Africa Power & Politics Program. I am looking forward to discuss the initial tentative findings with you today. In the focus on Africa emphasis often lies on economic growth. Nevertheless, in spite of an average growth rate of about 6%, the (under)provision of public goods is a serious problem. The actual economic growth in Africa is not inclusive, even when looking at the better performing countries. The main concern should therefore be: what kind of governance could deal with the deficits in the actual provision of basic public goods? Governance has to be regarded as all those institutions and persons engaged in steering and managing a society, and is therefore broader than local government.

Prominent in the research is the idea that the doctrine of good governance does not provide the right answers. For example, we cannot copy the governance system from the Netherlands to African countries. The research shows that the type of governance that works best is on the one hand based on learning from previous successful experiences and on the other on local culture and institutions.

Today, the focus will be on local governance, it is there that the most serious deficits in basic public good provision are experienced. The answer lies in building on the formal or informal institutions that already exist in African countries at the local level. In other words it is about working with the grain. The research is focused on four key public goods: reducing maternal mortality, improving public security, facilitating economic enterprise including markets and improving water and sanitation services.

Improving these public goods is subject to some serious bottlenecks on which we can form three clusters of issues:

1. The policy regime concerning the provision of public goods is incoherent, often due to donor influence (different and incoherent waves of policy sector reform) and populist presidential policy (e.g. promises made in election times);
2. The situation regarding local governance (the discipline of public sector professionals) cannot be disconnected from the political regime;
3. The part of public good provision that involves self-help, meaning collective action by local people of different kinds to address problems directly.

On this third issue, two points can be made on which this session will be focused, one more negative, and the other more positive. Firstly, there are quite a lot of instances where the potential for self-help has been hindered and even destroyed as a result of the kind of support that has been given by the international community. When money is provided, the recipient needs to install accountability requirements and there needs to be installed a committee for monitoring the results. This introduces new forms of inequality, increases materialistic motivations, promotes clientelism and can be divisive from a social point of view (favouring the educated and those who know how to comply with the donor's requirements). So in fact, well-intended support to NGOs can work out counterproductive.

Secondly, and more positive, one can find local problem solving initiatives, which may receive some external funding, but are not driven by it. We should look for those ways of solving problems

that are culturally understood, and are as a consequence sustained by local people. This kind of local problem solving is not going to work if large numbers of donors offering money to support local efforts, because this kills any initiative to do voluntary work. One of the preconditions to promote self-help therefore is improving the regulation of donor funds by coordination through the national government when possible. The main question to ask ourselves is: how to create an enabling environment that avoids practices that kill local self-help initiatives?

4 points for discussion by Johan te Velde, senior advisor fragile states at PSO:

1. The research works with a factual and business-like approach, looking at how things really are on the ground, and is not lead by ideology. It is about realism. In the practice of development work for example, the promotion of decentralization policies is assumed to be a good approach in any circumstance. This research makes clear that the increase in bottom-up accountabilities only works, when it is matched by a vertical pressure. It is this kind of research that is helpful and much needed.
2. The focus of this research is on service delivery and from this angle the role of NGOs is evaluated but there is much more to the work of NGOs: to promote emancipation, social and political change and empowerment. We should be aware that this research has the limited perspective to only look at NGOs in as far as they are efficient in service delivery.
3. The story of development is not only a story of fact and figures. Research and science gives us insights on what works and what does not. Societies are shaped by rationality but also by irrationality. People are inspired by a vision and visionary persons. Blue-prints and fixed ideologies are rightly criticised in the research, but we still need an overall vision on which to base directions. The question is then how to have a vision, without this vision becoming a rigid ideology.
4. The research also leads to a number of moral dilemmas, such as; should the principle of good enough governance imply that we regard a neo-patrimonial regime sometimes as positive as long as it is positive in the results regarding service delivery to the people? The case of Rwanda as treated in the research clarifies this moral dilemma. Some regard Rwanda as a repressive state, but the research points out that service delivery is sometimes quite well organised in Rwanda. How should NGOs judge this and how should they position themselves?

Brainstorm on the question: “Do you recognize the issues presented by David Booth in your work?”

Remarks from the discussion groups

There is a huge challenge in rethinking the role of civil society in the perspective of becoming more and more institutionalized as a result of funding by the government. Often when there is no local government, NGOs create a structure and institutions themselves, which is often unsustainable. The situation is recognizable. This is often due to political and media pressure, making NGOs to look for the safe option. Having said this, there appears to be a marked differentiation between regions and different former colonial areas.

We would like to hear a bit more about power dynamics at the local level and what this means for international NGOs. Booth explained we should not engage too much with and leave the problem-solving to traditional governance. But what if they are gender biased or something else? When we assume collective action is good, how do we perceive this process? Bottom-up civic driven ownership development should be our main concern.

It is high time we start redefining our role, but also our attitude. How can we support processes without coming up with all the answers? Should we have a mere facilitating role?

Reaction by David Booth

Working with the grain of Africa is not just about following the tradition; it is about picking up on ways of effective problem solving at the local level. When considering solutions, NGOs should draw on existing understandings in the local culture. This is sometimes called the ‘Cultural Repertoire’.

We are actually experiencing an alienation process of NGOs in the North. Development work is an area that demands projects showing measurable results to the tax-payers. Risky long-term projects are not picked up and can not be attractively presented to the public. We should therefore focus on what already exists in poor countries, without using inappropriate Western concepts. We should reflect on how the potential of people on the ground can be realised without promoting a Western model.

Brainstorm on the question: “What do you practically take back home from this session?”

Remarks from the discussion groups

Collective platforms should be between us as organizations and the donors, as mediators. Then we can be freed from the constraints in order to allow shaping our own agenda and be efficient. Our framework is still too small, since we are linked to the ministry, spending our time on writing proposals. We should therefore also look at the coherence of Western Policies via the EU.

Financial injections can be poisonous sometimes, but providing certain trainings and workshops in order to work on empowerment and emancipation could be a solution.

Reaction by David Booth

Umbrella organisations (Partos/PSO) have indeed an important role to play in explaining the complexity of development processes to the public. Because NGOs have to raise funds, they have an incentive to present results and this in such a way that is best to make people feel guilty. This is one of the reasons why the long term story of change never explained well to the public. Individual NGOs cannot change this practice, but the umbrella organisation can educate the public in what development is really about.

The role of governments in the North and in the South is to enable and facilitate initiatives that lead to change. However, we have gone far too far in paying people to help themselves. We should turn our thinking upside down in thinking about what kind of governance is good for development and empowerment. We should start by what already exists and improve that, instead of holding on to the unrealistic idea of perfect solutions. Here again, there is a role for the umbrella organisations to start a debate on this.

Three concluding remarks by Johan te Velde

1 We come from a time where grand solutions were heralded everywhere. Privatisation, liberalisation, etc. were seen as general solutions and as practically achievable. In this historical perspective it is also understandable that NGOs adopted the general paradigm: the more civil society, the better it is for democratization and development. However, now is the time to differentiate and make refinements to this model, under what circumstances can civil society be promoted to become healthy. Quite some self-help initiatives were mentioned today that could serve as an inspiration.

2 It is made clear today that having to be accountable and sustainable can have destructive effects. It needs to be pointed out here that it is not only about the machinery of the aid chain that are in place, but also about our attitude. It is about using these instruments well. In relations between Northern and Southern partners issues like trust and attitude are becoming more important.

3 What are new lines of thinking for the future of support to civil society? One possible way forward is to regard the world as principally different from before. Manoeuvring in an interconnected world is the challenge. This could be called a multi-actor approach. What role do we see for ourselves as NGOs in this multi-actor approach? Civic driven change is another way to explore. It is more about going back to the roots. This starting point here is that the institutionalisation of Ngo’ism has had negative effects, so we should rediscover the authentic core of civil society.