

Pooling forces



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Over the last few months I have attended a number of conferences that focused on the future of development cooperation. Among these were the Practice of Civic Driven Change in the Hague, the Netherlands, and the High Level Policy Forum, After 2015: Promoting Pro-poor Policy after the MDGs in Brussels, Belgium. Other conferences were aimed at designing a new architecture for 'international cooperation', which has been framed as a replacement for 'development cooperation'. Some of these conferences are reported on briefly in this issue of *The Broker*, and they are all covered much more extensively in reports, blogs and debates on the magazine's website.

Many of the conferences were inspiring because of the depth of the debates; others were disappointing. They covered different topics, but had one thing in common: the participants were all from the development sector. The development community is still very closed and inward looking. Many conferences did bring together government officials, NGO workers, policy makers, academics and, in some cases, business representatives who manage corporate social responsibility initiatives. That may sound like quite a mix of people, but they all had a development background or focus. There were no representatives from the environmental NGOs. Or from human rights organizations, trade unions, or organizations that focus on the consequences of globalization in Northern countries. They were not invited. Perhaps no one thought their inputs would be useful.

Even the successful workshop of the Civic Driven Change Initiative (see 'Deep democracy', *The Broker*10) was attended only by representatives of development NGOs, even though the initiative goes beyond development, aiming at change processes driven by citizens from any country or sector.

This issue's feature article – 'Peak phosphorus' by Arno Rosemarin, Gert de Bruijne and Ian Caldwell – illustrates once more how urgent it is to pool together forces from a wide range of fields in order to tackle global issues. The availability of phosphorus, in the form of phosphate rock, may seem a rather technical subject, but the impending depletion of these reserves could have far-reaching consequences. Rather than being an issue only for agriculturalists and environmentalists, diminishing supplies of phosphate could severely worsen the food crisis. If there is a rise in the price of fertilizer, of which phosphorus is a crucial ingredient, food prices will also rise. The main victims will be the poor living in developing countries. The authors also show that geopolitical motives and the policies of big multinationals have a heavy influence on the phosphate and fertilizer industry. The situation is urgent, requiring global initiatives to regulate the extraction of the earth's remaining phosphate reserves, and to promote phosphorus recycling.

Many conferences walk the line between academic debate and policy. They influence how policies are framed and affect the direction in which debates about issues move. And, for some participants and speakers, conferences are opportunities for gaining exposure, for defending the interests of their organizations and for networking to find new coalition partners or funding sources. There is nothing wrong with that. But one important consequence seems to be very cautious exchanges of ideas and an almost complete neglect of the powerful interests that drive global processes. No one wants to offend anyone else, and everybody wants to stay friends. Therefore they strive for compromise and look for win-win situations in which all stakeholders get their share.

While I am making a case for more honest, direct discussion about what experts from various backgrounds think needs to be done, I do not believe the starting point for development efforts should be institutional interests or Northern political and policy debates. The starting point should be the interests of the people concerned: the populations of the developing countries, or in the case of climate change, the entire world.

In their article on participatory development assessment (PDA), Ton Dietz, Francis Obeng, Jerim Obure and Fred Zaal present a new evaluation method that begins with input from aid recipients. What is interesting is the central position of subjectivity in this method: it attaches great importance to how people perceive and judge a specific intervention. Even if we, as foreign 'experts', disagree, the perceptions of the local people make their assessment 'true'. Or, on the flipside, if local people judge a policy measure, project, intervention or process as being faulty or failing to add anything to their well-being, no results will be possible even if objectively it is effective. Such an approach opens up new ways to become really serious about the rhetoric of ownership that formally drives all development policies. But it would also entail a much more modest attitude on the part of foreign (and even national) experts.

This issue's special report offers an introduction to the world of web 2.0, and how new social media can be used by researchers worldwide. *The Broker* is also looking at ways to use these online tools to deliver information to readers. There are no wikis on *The Broker* website – yet – but we have launched several new blogs. Researchers could use these new technologies to share and collaborate on research as it is happening. But the academic world faces an important dilemma that has not yet been resolved: how to guarantee the quality of information and knowledge, given the enormous amount of data that is now accessible on the web. Does the 'wisdom of crowds' really apply to academia, as some people assert? I offer space in *The Broker* to anyone who can prove that. ■