

Debating politics and poverty

How politics ticks ...

The Broker is currently hosting an international debate on the thorny questions that surround the politics of aid and poverty alleviation. The contributors agree that pro-poor policies affect the interests of many groups, not only the poor, and are essentially political. By failing to address the root causes of poverty, the technocratic approaches of many donors are unlikely to succeed.

By **Ellen Lammers**

When Bert Koenders assumed office as the Netherlands Minister for Development Cooperation earlier this year, he made it clear that he wants to ‘bring back politics’ into international development cooperation. If we are to make a real difference in terms of poverty alleviation, and if we want to explore new ways of making aid more effective, Koenders argues, we must not shy away from complex issues that concern ‘the messy world of politics’.

The Effectiveness and Quality Department (DEK) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked Kees Koonings, associate professor of development studies at Utrecht University, to reflect on the subject of the politics of poverty. His article, ‘Bringing politics into poverty’, sets the tone for the volume *A Rich Menu for the Poor: Food for Thought on Effective Aid Policies*, produced by the same department. [Read more](#)

The Broker asked a number of academics at universities and research centres in Belgium, France, Italy, Scandinavia and the UK, a think-tank in Rome, the OECD, the World Bank and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to respond to Koonings’ article. Their contributions show that none of them objects to the thesis that politics and poverty are inextricably linked. Koonings argues, however, that the *concepts* of poverty that donors work with today do not sufficiently incorporate these political dimensions. Politics is the blind spot. There is need for ‘a more

thorough conceptualization’.

At first glance, most contributors show little enthusiasm for such a reconceptualization exercise. Perhaps unusual for academics, they say there is no urgent need for more theory; the question now is what do we *do*? Concepts must be translated into practice: it is tools rather than ideas that are lacking. And yet the wide range of the issues they raise leads to another set of questions: when talking about the ‘politics of poverty’, what politics, whose politics, are we really referring to? What definitions do we use?

‘Politics’ often serves as a catch-all term to which everything that takes too much effort to pinpoint can safely be relegated. Politics is all that is not measurable, that happens largely out of sight, as the manoeuvring of the powerful. But if we agree that politics is interlinked with poverty – and with development in general – then should we not at least agree on what it is we are talking about? That would help to avoid a Babel-like confusion of tongues and, ultimately, make aid more effective.

The contributors to this debate direct their gaze at different levels of the politics involved in poverty and poverty alleviation. They reflect on the role of domestic politics, on donors and the international community’s political interests, and on the political voice of those living in poverty.

Domestic politics

‘Politicians are the ultimate arbiters for success of foreign assistance’, write Steven Ndegwa and Doris Voorbraak of the World Bank. In order to design programmes that make both technical and political sense, it is essential to understand the

Ellen Lammers is a researcher and writer based in Amsterdam. She was trained as an anthropologist (PhD, University of Amsterdam) and worked for several years in Uganda, researching young men’s individual experiences of war and displacement.



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dynamics of local support for *and* opposition to different reform measures. Yet it is a fact that for many donors, issues such as the politics going on ‘behind the façade’ in developing countries, the workings of patronage and clientelism, or identifying who are the enlightened political ‘drivers of change’, are still quite unfathomable. Rosalind Eyben, leader of the participation, power and social change team at the Institute of Development Studies in Brighton, UK, adds an interesting perspective. It is not just a question of donors looking in from the outside at other people’s politics, she writes. Instead, donors that operate in a country with staff and resources must also learn to see themselves as *domestic* political actors. They should reflect much more on the question: ‘with whom am I forming political relationships and what influence for good or for ill might I be having as a political actor in this arena?’

The crux of the matter, however, may be the grave misconception that no one loses from pro-poor policies. Brian Pratt, a political scientist at INTRAC in Oxford, UK, notes that elites often stand to lose, but in South Asia, even the lower middle classes have fought against ‘poverty-based’ policies that they felt encroached on the resources they had managed to collect. They have also protested against reserved university places and government jobs for low-caste and other minority groups. So ‘pro-poor policies’ are political by nature. But the language of development remains far too neutral.

Technocratic donors

Marco Zupi, Brian Pratt and Nadia Molenaers criticize the technocratic language and approaches used in development cooperation today. But one could ask what is wrong with technocracy? Should we not be pleased that it avoids the ‘great ideological battles’ (a phrase used by consultant Nils Boesen) of earlier days, which influenced international cooperation in spurious ways? But technocratic language tends to conceal things: it has no eye for the very real day-to-day political

interests. As noted above, it fails to make explicit that where one group gains (the poorest, such is the ambition), another will lose. Those who are currently better off – often the very elites that donor governments work with – will protest and resist reform measures.

The criticism of technocracy also extends to the area of ‘good governance’, onto which, together with sound macroeconomic policy, the development community has projected its hopes since the late 1990s. Marco Zupi, development economist and deputy director of CeSPI, an Italian think-tank: ‘the concept of good governance is used simply in the reduced and technical sense of better public sector management and accountability’. But poverty reduction, adds Brian Pratt, will not be achieved through better public administration. Nor will improved donor coordination and aid harmonization, vital though they are, be enough to realize this. Poverty is tangled up with real political power, with people who do not want to give up their privileges, who want the riches of natural resources to flow to themselves and their own, and who are willing to use their power – or even violence – for that purpose.

The character of today’s most widely shared development commitments, the Millennium Development Goals, can be explained in similar terms. Zupi writes that the MDGs reflect the misleading, apolitical perception of poverty that is a legacy of the basic needs approach of the 1970s, which held that simply providing more goods and services would do the job. And, according to Pratt, through the MDGs we are ‘tackling what in many ways are the symptoms of poverty, not its causes’. The weakness of the MDGs is that, once again, we are sidestepping controversial political issues.

International politics

But then again, the world of politics is not only messy, but also tricky. Donors who are too politically outspoken risk being

accused of being patronizing. Jean-Christophe Deberre, of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, points to the meaning of the word ‘cooperation’: both sides are free *not* to accept the terms of negotiations. We are supposedly all equals in the development endeavour, and national sovereignty is a phrase that carries weight. Is that why donors judge it safer to stick to being what most of them have been all along: mainly technocrats? Nadia Molenaers, a political scientist at the University of Antwerp, Belgium, observes that ‘when donors do get political, it is often ... after a political crisis in a country and/or is limited to pushing for formal democratic procedures, such as elections’. This is a rather narrow definition of what a political approach could be.

But there is another, more important explanation for the technocratic approach of many donors. Tackling the politics of poverty head-on is also proving difficult because it implies that donors will have to come clean too. What are their political interests? And how do their interests in other areas – such as trade, security, migration, foreign investments, development – weigh up? ‘Poverty alleviation may be the stated common ground for international cooperation’, Koonings writes, ‘but it is certainly not the only priority within the international community at large – if it is a real priority at all’. Pratt singles out his worry that donor governments are increasingly basing their decisions on their own short-term security concerns. The ways of the political and economic elites in developing countries may not be all that different from those of decision makers in ‘the developed world’.

Juhani Koponen, professor of development studies at the University of Helsinki, Finland, goes one critical step further, claiming that poverty reduction and other development activities do not just *overlook* politics, they tend to *anti-politicize* things. Poverty alleviation, Koponen writes, is the goal of the rich. If fewer children die of malnutrition and more of them can go to school, our consciences will be eased. But what about the poor themselves? Of course they want safe drinking water, a full stomach and access to health care, but what they really want, Koponen says, is a transformation of their societies. This requires a totally political endeavour.

Implicitly supported by other academics in this debate, Koponen’s message to Koenders and his fellow politicians seems to be the following. Bring in the political dimension? Sure. But be prepared to cut to the chase. Poverty is about inequality, social exclusion and human insecurity. None of these can be dealt with in a neat, technical way.

Personal political capabilities

Nor can they be dealt with without including the poor as political actors in their own right, argues Jean-Luc Dubois, director of the French Institute of Research for Development (IRD). In the new aid approach, development and poverty reduction have become a macro-level business: negotiations take place at the level of donor and recipient governments. Although included in theory, Pratt argues, inputs from civil society organizations are minimal, so perhaps Koonings is not critical enough. The Poverty Reduction Strategy approach – which Koonings describes as ‘political in its very nature’ – has shown

few actual positive results for the poor and its implementation is often hardly democratic. So what is done, in practice, with the importance attributed to the empowerment of individual men and women, including farmers, rickshaw drivers and small traders, and their organizations? Was it not agreed that being poor means not being able to exercise meaningful citizenship?

This is why Dubois, and Zupi and Buhl too, stress the importance of policies aimed at both strengthening people’s personal political capabilities – including negotiating, political speaking and decision-making skills – as well as promoting their right to assemble and to belong to a political group. Amartya Sen first published his ideas on entitlements and human capabilities in *Poverty and Famines* in 1981. Since then, as Dubois and others are pleased to note, his work has become part of mainstream academic development thinking. But the extent to which it has also truly become part of development practice is debatable. Solveig Buhl, an anthropologist and policy administrator at the OECD in Paris, emphasizes that ‘political capabilities’ are central to the DAC Guidelines on Poverty Reduction, and that tools such as the *ex-ante* poverty impact assessment (PIA) have been a long time in the making. 📖 Yet Dubois suggests that there is still work to do in developing and applying appropriate tools for measuring people’s political capabilities. This is one crucial step towards realizing that, in the long-term, ‘the poor’ may become an effective political constituency whose agenda could influence political power holders.

Towards an integrated framework

The politics of poverty are manifest at the individual, societal, national and global levels – and all of these intersect. Molenaers and Boesen note that there are surprisingly few formats and tools for ‘sound and frank’ political analysis that could help donors work with constantly changing political realities. The challenge is therefore to translate the academic insights and the knowledge gained through decades of development practice into a framework that does not limit itself to only one aspect. Only a framework that integrates the different levels of politics – and thus reflects that poverty, as Rosalind Eyben notes, does not begin or end at national borders – will offer the instruments necessary to make specific and up-to-date policy choices.

The question now is who will take up the challenge of designing this integrated framework? ■

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- Effectiveness and Quality Department (DEK) (2007) *A Rich Menu for the Poor: Food for Thought on Effective Aid Policies*, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
 - J. Ferguson (1994) *The Anti-politics Machine: ‘Development’, Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, 2nd edn, University of Minnesota Press.
 - OECD/DAC (2001) *DAC Guidelines on Poverty Reduction*, OECD Development Assistance Committee.

📖 To read all the contributions to the debate on politics and poverty, visit www.thebrokeronline.eu/en/debate/politics_and_poverty