

editorial

Rooting INGOs in their home soil


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I recently chaired a forum that discussed whether a new paradigm has emerged in the field of development cooperation, and if so, what does it consist of. A great deal of time at these kinds of debates is spent exploring definitions and their usefulness. Is it really a new paradigm, or a new narrative or something less consequential? In the end, it does not really matter what we choose to call it. What does matter is that we are facing new circumstances that will fundamentally alter the way we design development policies, whether they be bilateral, multilateral or non-governmental.

This special report asks whether international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) need to adapt to these new circumstances, and if so, how should they go about it. The same question was asked in an online debate hosted by *The Broker* called 'Future Calling'. It elicited many responses representing a variety of viewpoints. However, only a handful of people reflected on how the world has changed in recent decades, a time during which NGOs matured.

Interdependence, here to stay

The most conspicuous feature of these recent changes is that the world we live in is becoming increasingly multipolar. This will certainly alter the way traditional geopolitics are played out and fundamentally challenge the omnipotence of the West and its ability to control and steer the world.

Another striking feature of these changes is the revolutionary use of new media, such as the internet and social media, which is putting governments all over the world under unprecedented pressure to be more open and transparent. It has also paved the way for democratic and other popular uprisings, the end of which is not yet in sight. However important these social media are for the lives of many millions in developing countries and elsewhere, though, in the end they are merely new tools.

The most fundamental repercussion of the changes that have taken place in recent decades is what several contributors to *The Broker* debate referred to as global interdependence. This may seem self-evident because of all the talk about globalization in the past decade, but the consequences of the fact that global interdependence is here to stay have not completely sunk in yet. We still think we are living on isolated islands called states – but that time is definitely behind us. Interdependence has manifested itself in the context of a growing scarcity of resources, which has resulted in a massive challenge of redistribution. Addressing global inequality will be central to this challenge.

We – people from countries across the globe – rely on each other like never before. We will have to solve our current and

future problems collectively, whether we like it or not. But that is only one element of the transition we are experiencing. The other element is much more political. We need to stop looking at the world as being vertically divided by borders separating national states and realize that it is horizontally divided: globally connected elites and middle classes are taking a larger and larger portion of the pie, leaving the poor (in South *and* North) with nothing more than crumbs.

This means rethinking the traditional aim of development policies – poverty reduction. This special report covers several challenges such as how to respond to the fact that most poor people now live in middle-income countries – the same emerging powers that are reshaping the multipolar global landscape and which have experienced a meteoric rise in GNP in the past decade.

Countries such as India and China still have enormous numbers of poor, but their economies are growing and they are home to increasing numbers of relatively rich and very wealthy people. Those Western donors who want to help the poor in India, China and elsewhere, however, may find that these countries' governments no longer welcome their aid – or even allow it. Indeed, these countries have started to take on the role of donors themselves.

It is not so much aid money or development projects that are needed, but effective political pressure on the elites in government and business in the North and South to redistribute the fruits of economic growth. This pressure will have to be exerted by local social movements, with foreign donors and INGOs accepting a facilitating, supporting or financial role in the process.

This also means hard times on the horizon for bilateral donors. Aid has traditionally been neutral or technical, but as soon as it becomes politicized, bilateral donors will effectively be interfering in other countries' national affairs.

Therefore the main challenge for bilateral donors – or for the departments of 'international cooperation' or 'global justice' yet to be established – will be to work at a *supranational* level. They will have to handle the non-national aspects of international challenges and find solutions at a global level for the systemic problems that have caused the recent financial, climate, food and resource scarcity crises. Therefore, they will have to find new ways of governing and managing global public goods.

NGOs as watchdogs

But this special report is not about bilateral donors – it is about non-governmental organizations. Their role in this new set-up is to act as national and global watchdogs. They have to ensure that



the way global public goods are handled is not at the expense of the poor and powerless, but that it benefits them.

Some INGOs have already assumed this role by critically lobbying national governments and stating their case at international negotiations and summits. However, they are being increasingly co-opted in a bureaucratic circus of negotiations. They have become part of the multilateral processes that have freed themselves from national realities and which have gotten bogged down by a lack of political will and public urgency.

To counter this increasing alienation, which is inherent in abstract global processes, INGOs have to be much more rooted in local societies. They have to connect local struggles to global challenges, thus pushing for solutions at the local and the global levels. INGOs are in a much better position than governments to

ally with local and national social movements and organizations promoting equality or other social values.

If international cooperation is to become a political project instead of the technical endeavour it is now, it should redirect its focus to internationalism and solidarity with the world's marginalized: the poor, but also the oppressed in authoritarian countries and minorities everywhere. International NGOs are in the best position, and should equip themselves accordingly, to become the architects and co-implementers of this political project.

States mainly have the power to obstruct. They are the problem, not the answer, as Rob Annandale, journalist and founder of the blog 'Beyond Aid', stated in his contribution to *The Broker* online discussion, 'The thing that feeds the other ills'. Bound as states are to serve their own populations (and in many cases only a small portion of them) they will, in a time of growing scarcity, increase competition over resources, which will lead to geopolitical tensions and conflict. Moreover, the inevitable and necessary struggle to regain some democratic national control over the global economy, which has been relinquished to multinational companies during 30 years of neoliberal rule, might also result in dangerous political and cultural nationalism.

If states are not the answer to development problems, this will place a great responsibility on international NGOs. Most international development NGOs are facing a dilemma: contrary to other social organizations, such as trade unions, consumer organizations and religious communities, they are based in one place (usually a rich Western country) – yet their mandate is to serve the needs of people somewhere far away. Traditional social movements, on the other hand, always serve the interests of people in their immediate vicinity.

Most international development NGOs were totally silent when the Occupy movement started to gain momentum, just as they were silent ten years ago when the alter-globalist movement started making waves. The Arab Spring took them by surprise, and they looked foolishly on as hundreds of thousands of young *Indignados* took to the streets in Spain and other Southern European countries, unable to understand that these people are fighting a similar struggle to the poor in 'developing' countries.

International NGOs can only really become agents of structural change if they are also rooted in their respective societies. They will have to engage the challenges that Western societies are facing and worrying about. And, again, they must address the common international and global systemic causes behind these challenges. This is the only way that they can create sufficient critical mass – political power – to help solve those problems. ■