Digni

NOT WITHOUT US

How can people on the receiving end of Norwegian aid influence our development policies?

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How can stakeholders in the South influence Norwegian development policies?

In Norway, we have an informed and open debate about development politics, where relevant stakeholders can participate in hearings and otherwise influence on the decision making. But there is a notable exception: The most relevant stakeholders – the partners and recipients in the South – are not part of our debate. The views of recipient countries may be heard in global forums such as the OECD development conferences or the UN (the sustainable development goals), but they are seldom invited to give feedback on specific donor country priorities and policies.

It is a paradox that the people that our development interventions and policies are aimed at have such limited possibilities to influence the principles and objectives of our development policies. In spite of the rhetoric emphasis on aid as a development cooperation and local ownership, Norwegian development policies is generally formed by Norwegian decision makers, leaning on Norwegian/international expert views. Why is this so? What can be done about it?

Developing countries have influenced the formulation of the sustainable development goals, but stakeholders in the South can rarely influence donor country policies. Photo: UN Photo/Cia Pak, Creative Commons 2.0-license (http://bit.ly/1qXYdwl).

It is Digni's view that partners in the South must be heard on all issues that concerns them. Therefore we initiated a round of interviews in 2015 among selected respondents in our South network, to gather views on current issues being discussed in the Norwegian debate about aid and development.

What is our cooperating partners' view on issues such as concentration, aid effectiveness and the measuring of results in development? How do they assess the cooperation between North and South? How do they assess the quality of development assistance provided through multilateral organizations, bilateral cooperation and the civil society? Which values are putting a strain on the relationship between donors and recipients? What can and should be improved?

In this report we present the feedback from respondents in the South about these questions and more. We hope it can spark a new debate about how we can involve stakeholders in the South in the shaping of Norwegian development policies.

Method

In 2015 Digni conducted a series of interviews among respondents from our partners and other civil society stakeholders in the South, to ask their opinion on current issues in the Norwegian debate about aid and development. It is important, however, to underline that the data collected during this hearing, and which informs this report, has clear limitations.

- Firstly, the hearing was conducted by Digni itself. The project has therefore not been extensive – as this would require time and resources not available to us. Also, it entails a certain risk of bias, either in the way the questions have been asked or how the respondents have replied (answering what they think we would like to hear rather than expressing their true opinion). Clarifying roles and expectations in connection with the interviews have been a challenge.

- Secondly, the respondents represent churches and faith-based entities in Africa exclusively, whereby some are cooperating partners of Digni members

Digni's communication officer conducted in-depth interviews with the respondents. In the illustration photo Marit Breen (NMS) and Sigbjørn Kiserud (Digni) interview Jeritu Berhanu. This picture was not taken in connection with the hearing interviews. Photo: Kåre Eriksen/Digni.

and others are not. From Digni's perspective it has been important to lift up voices from some of the most influential civil society institutions, namely the churches, as they carry considerable legitimacy and unofficial power on the grassroots.

- 13 respondents have been heard, through semi-structured in depth interviews. The challenge has been to find a representative selection of sources; representing different churches, representing both leadership and operational levels in the churches and their development programs, representing different countries and regions and both genders.

In the interviews we have focused on four main headlines: Experience with providing feedback to donor country policies, aid effectiveness, development assistance channels and value issues. These headlines informs the structure of the following report. In addition, we have included numerous direct quotations from the respondents.

EXPERIENCE WITH HEARINGS

11 of 13 respondents claim they have never been invited to provide feedback on donor country policies, whether as persons or churches/organizations (the exceptions are one person who has been involved in various multilateral institutions and one person who is the leader of an international body of a global church). Mostly, the respondents appeared surprised and confused when asked about their experiences providing feedback to donor country policies. There is none or little expectancy of being able to influence.

Summary of answers:

- Unless one is participating in global forums, there are few or no possibilities of influencing donor countries' development policies, especially as representatives of the civil society sector.

- All respondents are critical that the people on the receiving end of aid and development assistance are not listened to. Several claim that it is arrogant

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Norwegian embassies should establish regular listening meetings with local civil society organizations, where this is practically achievable.
- Norwegian organizations can do more to inform South partners about domestic debates about aid and development and invite their feedback.

Civil society organizations in the North can do more to invite feedback from South partners in domestic debates about aid and developement, e.g. in connection with visits. The illustration photo shows Digni member organization PYM receiving a visit from partners in DR Congo. Photo: Sigbjørn Kiserud/Digni.

and humiliating that policies aimed at the South is formed by experts in the North.

- All respondents stress that Western governments need to listen to civil society partners in the South, as these can provide a valuable grassroots corrective to official accounts.
- The respondents and the bodies they represent would like to be heard on issues related to the formation of development policies in the North if it can be arranged practically.

“Normally, we are just being told when policies have changed”

“You know, to marginalize someone is the worst thing you can do to a person in our culture”

“Ask me: what do you need? This question the West has never bothered to ask. It reduces us to nothing but beggars.”

“We think it is important partners sit down and plan together, rather than just one partner thinking”

AID AND DEVELOPMENT EFFECTIVENESS

There is an ongoing discussion in Norway and internationally about how we can make aid more effective. We first asked the respondents an open question about what they regard as critical factors for effective development, before inviting their view on particular issues that are being discussed in the domestic development debate, such as geographic and thematic concentration, more emphasis on measuring results and stricter requirements with regard to the added value of North partners.

With regard to development effectiveness, the respondents highlight several different factors. This is not an expression of disagreement, but rather a reflection of the complexity of the question. The following factors were pointed out:

- Local ownership: The local stakeholders must be involved in the planning, design and implementation of development efforts, from start to finish. Most respondents also point out the need to involve and work directly with the grassroots.

- Careful planning: It is crucial to clarify expectations and roles and ensure

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Development should be aimed at the poorest and most marginalized groups/countries.
- Donor countries should consider more direct support to civil society organizations in the South.
- Donor countries should do more to harmonize their application and reporting standards, to reduce the administrational burden on South partners.
- Donors should consider focusing their efforts in country clusters, which includes stronger economies. For example, at the Horn of Africa, several point out the importance of working with Kenya as the economical powerhouse in the region, while still facing numerous issues domestically (poverty, land distribution, terrorism etc.).

It is crucial to involve the grassroots, according to the respondents. Illustration photo: Sigbjørn Kiserud/ Digni

ownership and a clear understanding of the objectives of the interventions in the local societies before implementation. Several also highlight the need for clear exit strategies, which stresses an expectancy towards local sustainability after the intervention/project has ended.

- Capacity building, also at the grassroots level: It requires organizational skills and knowledge, and a solid administration, to handle project funds and to establish sustainable structures that can carry on when projects are phased out.
- A focus on the root causes of poverty, whether they are structural (inequality, land distribution etc.) or cultural (harmful tradition, nepotism, greed – also within the civil society sector).

Asked about concentration as a means for more effective development, the answers are more varied and contradictory. Most respondents would like to carry on with "business as usual" asking for "more of everything", whereas some claim that there is a need to rethink development.

Education must be a priority, says the interviewees. Illustration photo: Kåre Eriksen/Digni.

About concentration, the answers can be summarized as follows:

- Geographic concentration: The most important issue is to avoid duplication and amassing of organizations in some countries, and to prioritize the most marginalized groups. Capacity is seen as the key question, not concentration as such.

- Thematic concentration: Everything is connected, but the respondents agree with the Norwegian government that education and health should be a priority – in addition to agriculture. Several points out that bilateral cooperation should focus more on infrastructure. At the same time, the respondents ask donors to show more respect for local priorities.

With regard to measuring results, administration and stricter enforcement of added value, the answers may be summarized as follows:

- The respondents generally agree that more can and should be done to measure results, especially at outcome and impact levels. At the same time they have some reservations

> The respondents agree with the Norwegian government that education and health should be a priority - in addition to agriculture

- Changes take time. Measuring results during a project cycle does not necessarily tell us whether lasting results have been achieved.

- The most important results are difficult to measure, such as changes in mentality, attitudes and tradition. Much development work is actually about these kinds of cultural changes.

- The respondents accept that writing different applications and reports for different donors is part of the work, but the added burden of following up the different standards set forth by the various donors is frustrating and inefficient.

- Some express that it may be time to channel more support directly to civil society organizations in the South, bypassing the traditional chain via Norwegian civil society organizations. This would reduce the administrational costs.

“We are not doing enough to document results. For some reason we tend to be stuck on the inputs and outputs, not the outcomes and impacts. Why? I think it is down to the charitable past of much development, which never asked any questions. Maybe it was too intimidating?”

“If the objective is Western presence and influence, then spread out in as many countries as possible. If the objective is to impact on communities, then concentrate.”

“When you are dealing with human beings there are no shortcuts”

“I can see where you are going with your questions about measuring results. This is a result of development organizations and politicians being caught up in the mode of instant results. Let me tell you, when you are dealing with human beings, there are no shortcuts.”

“In the North, results tend to focus on specific, measurable targets, but in my view the most important results involved with development aren’t easily measured, as it involves issues of changing perceptions, social roles and human behavior.”

“Civil society organizations are catalysts for change. The question we must ask ourselves is not how we should concentrate our geographic or thematic involvement, but how we can best make use of the catalyst potential.”

CHANNELS

An important development debate concerns the efficiency and effectiveness of the different channels aid is provided through. Roughly, there are three different categories: Multilateral support (more than half of Norways aid budget is provided through this channel), bilateral support and support through civil society (see facts on page 23).

Unsurprisingly, our respondents, which represents the civil society, underlines the importance of working through civil society organizations. At the same time, they appear to be surprisingly uninformed about other forms of development cooperation, most notably the efforts of multilateral institutions. For this reason, most did not want to comment on the effectiveness of multilateral support. With regard to bilateral support, the comments were mainly about the trust or lack of trust towards their own governments' handling of aid funds.

The respondents' assessment of the various channels may be summarized as follows:

FACTS ABOUT AID CHANNELS

Multilateral support

Development assistance channeled through multilateral organizations such as the UN, World Bank, and regional development banks. The purpose is to contribute towards the financing of global committments. Through multilateral support, Norway contributes to development efforts in nearly all developing countries, including countries where Norway does not have bilateral agreements.

Bilateral support

Usually refers to state-to-state development cooperation. This include budget support, the transfer of goods and equipment, as well as expertise.

Civil society support

Development funds are provided through NGOs/CSOs in order to reach particular groups. The organizations are involved in various tasks, such as humanitarian aid, entrepreneurship and infrastructure, political activism, information, service delivery and the strengthening of civil society.

Source: Norad/bistandsWIKI

Norway contributes substantial funding to multilateral organizations like the UN, but how effective are they? The photo shows a UN car on mission in Juba, South Sudan. Photo: UN Photo/JC McIlwaine, under Creative Commons 2.0-license (http://bit.ly/1Upv6wv).

- The various channels should have complimentary roles. Especially, it was pointed out that bilateral support can be utilized for large scale tasks, such as infrastructure.

- All respondents emphasize that development work which is not connected to the grassroots will inevitably fail. Civil society organizations are working with the grassroots and can bring the perspectives of the grassroots to the table in the wider context. - Who can hold governments and global organizations accountable if the civil society is excluded from the development cooperation?

- The respondents trust in their own governments vary from country to country, but mostly the authorities are regarded with much skepticism. Most interviewees would not advise granting substantial bilateral support, unless there are plans to monitor the effects in local communities. However, some argue that bilateral support has the potential to be flexible, effective and ensure local ownership

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support through civil society should be strenthened, not weakened, as seems to be the trend in many donor countries.

- The Norwegian government should seek more information about how development efforts are working in local communities, and make sure that the people at the grassroots are involved in the development cooperation.

- There is much potential in working with churches or other religious bodies that are anchored in local communities. The churches are present even in the most remote and marginalized areas, earning legitimacy with the people. The churches are able to mobilize, especially in emergency situations, and they have much experience offering services within health and education. Is it time to challenge the paradigm that health and education always should be the government's task?

- Few respondents have first-hand experience with multilateral development cooperation, but those who have some knowledge are surprisingly damning in their verdict. Multilateral institutions are categorically described as ineffective and expensive, and their added value and ability to achieve results are unclear.

- The respondents are very clear that there is much room for improvement also within the civil society sector (keywords: effectiveness, scale, increased focus on structural problems) Nevertheless, they argue that the civil society should be given a more prominent role in development cooperation based on the following observations:

  - Documentation of results. No other channel exercises better control with funds and no other sector can document results more accurately than the civil society sector.

  - The right partners: Civil society organizations are working directly with the poorest people, at the grassroots level. They are in touch with the realities which they seek to change.

The churches are ready for bigger tasks, according to the respondents. Illustration photo: Sigbjørn Kiserud/Digni.

- Accountability: A strong civil society is needed to strengthen democracy and empower people to hold their own authorities accountable. Several respondents are concerned that civil society actors are facing a difficult future, with political and financial constraints being enforced to limit their ability to operate in most contexts.

- Civil society organizations have a role to play in key services such as health and education (traditionally the responsibility of the government). The churches' strong track record within service delivery is emphasized by several.

- The respondents would welcome an attempt to compare the results and cost-benefit ratio of large scale interventions to what civil society organizations achieve much with less resources. Scaling up may be efficient, but not necessarily effective. We should focus on achieving more with less.

“The little civil society is contributing is overshadowed by ineffective big aid.”

“Norway should still support [our] government, but they need to follow up what goes on at the grassroots level.”

“Bilateral support has the potential to be more spontaneous.”

“Any effort that is not linking up with the grassroots, I am sorry to say, I don’t trust it”

“If you are going to the governments to talk about rights, you are starting in the wrong direction. You should empower the people to ask these questions from their own government.”

“Even the government expects the church to take charge.”

“Any effort that is not linking up with the grassroots, I am sorry to say, I don’t trust it. Aid needs to be bottom-up, not top-down.”

“With regard to multilateral institutions, they are fraught with cultures of inefficiency and bureaucracy. We still struggle to see the impact.”

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Too much pressure from the donors’ side may lead to a breakdown of trust and relations

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VALUES

Development assistance is not culturally neutral. Funding is often tied to values. Several of these (individual rights, gender equality etc.) are grounded in the «universal» declaration of human rights. In reality, however, there is no universal consensus on for example women’s rights. The last few years, powerful stakeholders have lobbied the UN to promote a message of «family values», as an alternative to liberal, Western values. The issue of sexual minorities’ rights have proven particularly contentious in recent years, putting a strain on the cooperation between partners in the North and in the South.

The human rights and the values that undergird these are contested, but they nevertheless constitute the foundation and conditions for Norwegian development cooperation. How is this received by cooperating partners in the South? Are we seeing a clash of values between the North and the South? We asked the respondents to share their experiences and views on value conflicts in the development cooperation with Norway.

The findings may be summarized as follows:

Gay rights is a very sensitive issue with many cooperating partners in the South. In the picture we see Frank Mugisha, leader of Sexual Minorities Uganda, participating in the Norad conference in 2014. Photo: Fredrik Naumann/Norad, used under Creative Commons 2.0-license (http://bit.ly/1THO3Iw).

- Even if there are tensions involved regarding opposing values in the development cooperation, most respondents choose to downplay this. Most (not all!) do not see value conflicts as a big problem – mainly the pressure and influence with regard to changing values stem from the media, especially in the age of globalization.

- Many point out that the most immediate value conflict concerns the relation between donors and recipients, and even more clearly in cases where Western experts/expats are working together with locals: On the one hand the arrogance of the foreign helper, on the other hand the helplessness of the local recipient.

- Most respondents agree that foreign stakeholders, including Norwegians, have pressed some issues too strongly – for example the case of women's rights. Yet, several (again, not all!) believe that the pressure to a large extent can be justified, as it has contributed to change. However, too much pressure from the donors' side may lead to a breakdown of trust and relations.

Some respondents blame the Beijing UN Women's conference for disrupting traditional family values. Illustration photo: Kåre Eriksen/Digni.

- Western partners are generally ignorant about local culture, whether it has to do with social codes, the political situation – or the importance of faith and religion. There is too little effort to understand the partners in the South, and as a consequence relations can suffer.

- The UN Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995 (The Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace) is singled out by some respondents as a particularly important, but also disruptive event, in that it brought about changes in how women perceive themselves in relation to work and family.

> African society is moving away from a communal mindset to an individualistic culture

From «we» to «I»?

Asked what part of local culture donors don't understand, most respondents emphasized the communal way of life in Africa, where relations and family is more important than individual rights and ambitions. But not everyone agree. A number of respondents contest the idea of African communality, pointing out that the culture is changing rapidly («we are right in the midst of our own individual turn»). Behind these answers we can sense a clash of cultures, in which society is moving from a communal way of thinking to an individualistic culture. How much aid and development assistance is contributing to this shift is difficult to say, but there is no doubt that development cooperation currently takes place within and must be interpreted in the light of these changes.

“It’s not about volumes, but the nature of our relationships.”

“Really what we need to do is to appreciate the culture of discipline, integrity and honesty that many of our Northern partners actually stands for.”

“With regard to the issue of the supposedly communal way of life in Africa, well we are clinging to an illusion. People keep saying this, but we are right in the midst of our own individual turn. There is no doubt about that.”

“We hold morals over rights”

**“Yes, you have pushed some subjects.
And please don’t stop doing it!”**

**“On some issues, you have been too pushy.
Take for example the case of gender equality - and
I know this is not a popular stance with donors
- but girls are just becoming way too selfish and
disregarding of family life in my opinion.
That started with the Beijing conference. All of
a sudden every one became individualistically
minded. Yes, there should be gender equality, yes,
women should have an opportunity to pursue a
career. But not at the expense of family values,
like we are seeing nowadays.”**

**“Gender equality? That is good!
Really what we need!”**

**“It is ok to challenge culture,
but not to look down on culture.”**

CONCLUSIONS

It is impossible to draw any conclusions from these interviews, given the limited scope of the project. At the same time, the feedback we have received is consistent with previous findings (see especially Mary Anderson et al (2012). *Time to Listen: Hearing people on the receiving end of international aid*, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects). The observations in this report also echoes the experiences that Digni and Digni's member organizations have made over the years. There are few surprises in the report. We already know a great deal about what our partners in the South are thinking: They want to be included and consulted. They want to make their own priorities. They are tired of donor-driven aid, constant policy changes and an administrational work load threatening to spiral out of control.

This is discouraging. If we know so much about what the recipients want, why is so little done to accomodate their views?

We believe it is time to make an effort to involve partners in the South in the strategic discussions about development policies and priorities in donor countries. Based on our feedback, the following recommendations may be singled out (overleaf):

Development is debated in the South too, but does it impact on the debate in the North? Illustration photo: Kåre Eriksen/Digni

> If we know so much about what the recipients want, why is so little done to accomodate their wishes?

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

1 **Hearings:**
The embassies are Norway's listening stations in foreign countries. However, to the best of our knowledge, no systematic effort is done to collect feedback on development policies from the local civil society. Norwegian NGOs and foreign personnel, on the other hand, are often invited to the embassies to speak on behalf of their partners in the South. We recommend that the embassies facilitate local forums/ panels in which representatives of the local civil society can meet directly with the embassies on a regular basis, to share information and provide feedback to policy proposals. This applies in particular to the so-called focus countries in Norway's development policy.

2 **Direct support to civil society organizations in the South:**
A strong civil society is needed to keep local authorities accountable. To improve the efficiency of civil society aid, Norway should experiment with more direct support to partners in the South.

3 **Give the churches a more prominent role in providing health and education services, in collaboration with local authorities:**
The churches often have the necessary infrastructure. They are also locally rooted and present also in the most remote areas.

4 **Better coordination of reporting standards in donor countries:**
Recipients spend much time on writing tailored reports for different donors. Donor countries should do more to harmonize and standardize their application and reporting templates. We also suggest developing a certification standard to account for the capacity and quality control of local organizations, where pre-approved organizations may use simplified templates for reports on results and applications.

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You know, to marginalize someone is the worst thing you can do to a person in our culture

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Cover: *Partners in the South are ready to team up with us. Are we ready to team up with them?* (Illustration photo: Kåre Eriksen/Digni

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