

COOPERATION AND COMPLEMENTARITY AMONG EUROPEAN AGENCIES*

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Abstract

The importance of NGOs and their accomplishments to have influence over the state and the market are applaudable. Despite this, poverty exists. The new liberal developmental model has succeeded to reach only a certain section of the society at the cost of the poor. Michael Edward and David Hulme point out that "one of the most important factors for this is the failure of NGOs to make right linkages between their work at micro level and wider systems and structures of which they form a small part."

The background of the context of co-operation among European agencies raises the following questions: How to reach the poorest?; How could NGO interventions protect the poor in the light of Macro Economic policy shifts?; How could NGO intervention have a greater impact?; How could NGO initiative become sustainable?; Are NGO's really cost effective?; How to arrive at synergy from all the actors working for poverty alleviation?; These are some of the challenges that provide the background to the context of co-operation among European agencies which has been discussed in depth in this article.

The theme, 'Development Co-operation and Complementarity among European Agencies' could be debated in a metaphysical frame or it could be

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analysed in an administrative frame, but both would reflect extreme positions. Therefore, one needs to first identify the context and frame reference in which co-operation and complementarity could be explored.

The Context

The document, 'Discerning the Way Together' acknowledges the NGO accomplishments; "success at a local level, for example in reaching the poor, empowering marginal groups by enabling them to form pressure groups, questioning the actions of governments and providing emergency assistance." "NGOs are seen as playing a vital role in building up 'civil society' - the range of independent institutions and organisations that can serve to expand the influence of poor people over both the state and the market."¹ Despite the achievements made by the NGOs, poverty is on the increase - "the problem of scale (only a small portion of the poor are reached by NGOs), the difficulty of challenging power structures and practical problems of implementation of programmes"², too are growing in complexity.

The neo-liberal development model gives greater power to the multilateral financial institutions who are setting priorities for the developing countries and the globalisation process increasingly governs their economy. Structural Adjustment Programmes and liberalisation processes have far reaching implications on the poor. Superordination of market economy and the macro economic policies are drastically reorganising the economic and political relations within the developing countries. The benefits arising out of these shifts go only to certain sections of the society at the cost of the poor and assetless.

One of the key issues in development is that NGO interventions are too localised covering very small fraction of people with very narrow objectives. In this rapidly changing scenario, the NGO intervention leaves only a marginal impact and the changes brought about by them appear to be unsustainable. Michael Edward and David Hulme point out that "one of the most important factors underlying this situation is the failure of NGOs to make right linkages between their work at micro level and wider systems and structures of which they form a small part."³

It is important here to refer to the research study carried out by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) sponsored by ODA in UK, on NGO effectiveness,

which brings forth this aspect distinctively. Out of the 16 projects studied in Asia, Africa and Latin America, 12 projects have broadly achieved their objectives and had a positive impact on alleviating poverty, while two failed to meet the objectives and two other projects accomplished a part of the objectives. This finding correlates positively with several other studies which show that three quarter of the NGOs' projects are by and large successful and have an impact in alleviating poverty. But when it comes to specifics, there are some critical questions. "1. But their performance was much less consistent when it came to more specific criteria of impact and effectiveness. Even if one had an appreciable impact in improving the economic status of the poor, many of the projects failed to reach the poorest and were of relatively marginal benefit to women. 2. In only a minority of the projects, the benefits significantly outweigh the cost of the intervention. 3. On the question of sustainability, relatively few of the projects demonstrated the potential to continue once the NGO cease operating in the area."⁴

In this context it is pertinent to raise the following questions:

- How to reach the poorest ?
- How can NGO interventions protect the poor in the light of macro economic policy shifts ?
- How can NGO interventions have greater impact ?
- How can NGO initiatives become sustainable ?
- Are NGOs really cost effective ?
- How to arrive at synergy from all the actors working for 'poverty alleviation'?

Conceptual Framework for Co-operation

By co-operation among European Agencies if one may refer to reducing workload, simplifying procedures, involving common reporting systems, etc. Although these are very essential, this locates co-operation in a 'project-mode' and the vision is rather shortsighted. It is essential to go a little deeper into this aspect, for it provides the current frame work for co-operation.

Projects at the Centre

Development co-operation is predominantly conceived in operational terms as funding 'projects' in the South. In this frame, the Northern agencies are organised around the concept of 'project funding' and their mechanisms are basically to receive applications, process applications and fund those

applications approved and (supposedly) monitor the performance of the projects. Some of them also carry the burden of raising their own funds and therefore, part of their mechanism is oriented towards fund raising. In this frame, the project is put at the centre. Therefore, under the existing framework, co-operation and complementarity may automatically refer to strengthening co-operation within this frame work.

Projects v Organisations

It is in this context that we need to question ourselves whether we are prepared to have a shift in our perspective. To begin with, the term 'project' itself is a misnomer. What we are referring to here by 'project' is, an autonomous, independent organisation, carrying out certain activities and processes that they believe in. Funding from the Northern NGOs to the activities of the organisation which also invariably include funding the administrative cost of the organisation too, from a donor's perspective, is only a project. It is important to make a difference between a project and an organisation. While projects are temporary and refer only to the activities, organisations are complex and have a longer life-cycle. While I do not want to go into the details of distinguishing between a project and an organisation, I want to bring home the point that from a Northern perspective, development interventions are perceived as *ad hoc* support to 'programmers' through funds.

Can *ad hoc* Measures Create Impact?

It would be unfair if we had gone on with this mechanism from the past two decades in funding bits and pieces and suddenly wake up one morning and ask the question as to what the impact of our work is.

To be honest, we need to ask ourselves these questions at the very outset. Did we set any impact indicators? Did we have any overall framework to assess the impact created over the years? Did we have such policies that could have led to an impact and lastly what were our organisational aspects that could have negatively affected this impact? This analysis takes us to the next question as Northern agencies: What are our strategies? Do we have any? What are the underlying analysis of these strategies? Have we stated our goals in measurable and tangible terms? What are our anticipated outcomes in a ten year frame? What do our organisational mission statements reflect?

Development Financing v Development Cooperation

A simple exercise of looking at the policy statements of each of the European agencies would present us the picture as to how broadly we have stated our

goals, how simple our analyses are, how quickly we take shelter from broad theological statements. This process of critically reviewing our mission should indicate what kind of an organisation we are, what our identity is, whether we are development financial institutions, or the development wing of the church meant to promote development cooperation. It is far too easy to function as financial institutions financing projects but it is far too difficult to function as an organisation to accomplish certain concrete development goals.

Partnership

This brings us to the crucial issue in our framework, since the action in the South is only another theological euphemism. Therefore, the agencies in the North need to accept organisations in South and their leadership. It is their commitment to the vision, dedication to lay their lives for the cause of the poor, and their involvement in the struggles against vested interest groups which make development action possible. It is these organisations in the South that the Northern agencies are able to support through funds and it is these complex set of relationships that we call partnership.

There is tremendous stress in these relationships. Particularly when Southern Organisations discredit the Christian concept of 'stewardship' and function irresponsibly with the 'funds' meant for 'alleviating poverty', the entire concept of partnership is put to test. We need to be concerned about this in the context of 'Cooperation among European Agencies', for this phenomenon is on the increase. Maybe the Northern Agencies are becoming efficient in management. Today the European Agencies are taking a much more pragmatic approach to development. This is evident in the DWT document - 'We could only contribute to poverty alleviation and not poverty eradication'⁵. Gone are the days when Northern Agencies were led to believe by Southern NGO's that they are creating a 'casteless and classless society'.

It is important to highlight here that the 'Northern Agencies are divided on the issue of partnership' and DWT document refers to this as 'Northern report is by necessity a compromise document.'⁶

Organisational Pluralism

By cooperation among agencies, we are not suggesting in the context of Europeanisation that one should form a common monolithic structure.

Organisational pluralism is a great strength and an essential ingredient of democracy. But we need to ask ourselves whether we are governed by corporate management value of having a 'competitive edge' or do we inherit a theological value as the gospel of John states in Chapter 12, verse 24, 'a grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces many grains and accordingly we should be prepared to supplement our organisational identity for the common vision that we would pursue together. Is that vision shared by all of us? The DWT document refers to plural visions and this takes us to the crucial question as to whose vision it is any way⁷. Is it the vision of the North for the South? Or is it the vision of the church for the non-church people?

Alternative Framework for Development Cooperation

Therefore, it would be absolutely pertinent to review our conceptual framework of development cooperation; to define development goals; to arrive at development strategies and then we could envisage roles for the European agencies that would converge and complement: 'functions' and Roles that would pull together all our efforts in producing synergic impact in the lives of the poor. Therefore, in this context, one needs to look at the policies, strategies and the personnel, and evolve alternative framework for development cooperation.

Cooperation and Complementarity within Organisations

In order to look at the theme of cooperation and complementarity among the European Agencies, it is essential to look at the other side of the coin also i.e., conflicts and competition. It would be rather ironical if we only look at complementarity among European Agencies without reviewing whether there is complementarity within each of these agencies, between departments and country desks, and carrying this one step further, to critically review whether there is complementarity within desks. It is therefore vital to recognise that there is a lack of cooperation or inadequate cooperation within desks and within an agency. Under the existing frames, development cooperation is being internalised and carried out, where project becomes the 'be all and end all' rather than focussing on the impact generated by the organisation in the South in changing the conditions of the marginalised people in a given sector or area. Therefore, the system does not provide a perspective on 'end results' and 'overall impact' towards which all the agencies are working and

the means become the end in itself. Therefore, cooperation and complementarity within agencies should recognise this ground reality in operational terms.

It is important to recognise the existing tension within each of the agencies, between some of these desks and it is most appropriate to refer here to the theme of the consultation, namely, decompartmentalisation. Under the present structures in each of the agencies, the flow between departments is rather limited and sometimes even bordering on antagonism. Therefore, one needs to also strengthen the flow within the agency and have a matrix system where the interaction between the layers take place and there is an exchange and learning between the various functionaries. A brief evaluation of the DWT provide us with a valuable feedback. The DWT document, in its final draft raises this question when it refers to "but how much of the process has been owned by the staff of the Northern Agencies."⁸

Issues in Cooperation among European Agencies

The extent of possessiveness of each of the agencies of their constituency is clearly seen in the South when each agency brings together their partners for the donors meeting and some even go to the extent of calling it as their network. This anomaly is further accentuated by the NGO in the operational level. NGO working areas are often bifurcated as areas belonging to the respective agency, if the NGO is receiving funds from more than one agency. About five years ago when I was on a field visit to an NGO in Tamil Nadu, in the morning I came across a very interesting approach to sharing of the water in some villages where an NGO was working. In the afternoon when I was covering some other villages of the same agency, I found a similar water problem existing there. I enquired as to why they did not adopt the experiment of water sharing in this area also. Prompt came the answer that those areas were MISEREOR villages and these were Christian Aid programmes. Often we come across NGOs literally naming villages as ICCO villages, EZE villages and Christian Aid villages, etc. It is very interesting to observe that often the donor representatives visit only their villages and they also know the technique of avoiding NGOs when the other representative is visiting. These limitations are partly removed through the concept of a lead-agency. However, one needs to critically review this concept.

Synergy is the Key Word

Complementarity has to be seen from a development perspective in terms of sum total of all efforts from the agencies in Europe, from the agencies in the South - various actors putting together their efforts in bringing improvements

in the livelihood of the poor. It is important to raise questions as to the impact of all the efforts put together. Are the results sustainable? Can the outcomes of the processes initiated withstand macro changes brought about by dominant neo-liberal model of development and how can we produce a synergic effect of our acts put together?

Cooperation at Country context and at International context

From such a perspective one needs to locate within each country a model of collaboration with all the actors put together. This would entail: (1) identifying priorities, (2) building perspectives, (3) formulating policies, (4) evolving systems, (5) developing strategies, and (6) working out mechanisms of cooperation. At the International level it may be in the context of advocacy roles where the European Agencies can come together to consolidate their power and strength in determining and resisting macro global policies that adversely affect the conditions of the poor in the South and the North. The DWT document brings out the different emphasis put by the agencies to different aspects of advocacy work.⁹

Converging Actions and Strategic Planning

It is in this context that development cooperation should focus on strategic planning by the European Agencies. Cooperation, therefore has to be visualised in terms of setting priorities, perspective building, formulating common policy and strategic planning that results in convergent action. If this becomes the context, the parameters of cooperation will be very different.

Areas in which Cooperation is Essential

Country Policy

The primary area should be to work together on policy with respect to countries, regions and sectors of intervention. The DWT document clearly identifies policies which need to be developed at a national level and according to the national context - cooperation should be in the realm of developing country papers.¹⁰ Here again experiences have taught us that within developing countries there are various constituent bodies with tremendous amount of diversity with regional

differences and differing cultures. Therefore, country papers need to further specify approaches to different regions within countries¹¹ (For more details in this regard, one may refer to the author's paper titled, 'NGOs - Hope of the Last Decade of this Century').

The objectives is to move towards convergent strategies and congruent policies among the European Agencies and Southern NGOs.

Impact Evaluation

Another key area for cooperation among the Northern Agencies is in relation to 'impact evaluation'. In this context, so far evaluations are viewed only in a project frame. An evaluation with reference to overall goals and priorities set by the agencies and coordination between the agencies would show where the strengths and limitations are in accomplishing the overall development goal - poverty alleviation in certain areas or within certain sections of population.¹²

Choice of Countries

As the DWT document points out, the European Agencies are spread too thinly and too widely across the world and the staff capacities within each of the agencies are inadequate and the resources of all the agencies put together may not be enough to tackle world poverty. Therefore, key decisions need to be taken at policy level among the European Agencies. A common intervention strategy of pockets where they could allocate responsibilities or arrive at complementary roles.

Negotiating Priority Belts within Countries

Within each country where the agencies are involved, the spread is too thin. As a result, one could seldom assess the impact created by the interventions of social development organisations. Here again, a policy guideline would enable a greater cooperation and complementarity.

Sectoral Competence and Expertise

The broad sectors identified by DWT document throw open challenges in each of the sectors. It is also increasingly recognised that these sectors require

subject matter specialists to guide the agencies and one needs to again, reflect whether it is necessary to develop specialists in subjects like health, education, environmental and ecological issues within each of the agency. This is another area where consensus could be developed as to the division of responsibilities and complementary roles.

Country - Desk Cooperation

It is essential that cooperation among European Agencies at the desk is actually located both at the respective country level and within the agency level in Europe. The focus of country level cooperation is to evolve and learn together with the partners, the priorities and strategies that are needed in that particular context.

Forms of Cooperation

This takes us to the next challenge as to how one develops appropriate mechanisms and instruments of cooperation and with what kind of processes and with what value systems. It is important to note that complementarity may also end up unwittingly in ushering in certain values which could prove negative and damaging ultimately:

- Evolving shared vision and values
- Complementary strategies to enhance the impact
- Evolving practices by which the organisational resources could be shared
- Evolving a common platform for advocacy work in the North
- Relating collectively as European Agencies with pro-poor multilateral agencies, e.g., UNICEF, etc.

Levels of Cooperation

It is important to recognise that cooperation and complementary could take place at four strategic levels:

- Coordination at the heads of the organisation level
- Cooperation between policy desks of the European Agencies
- Cooperation between desk officers of the respective countries
- Cooperation between desk officers and Southern partners of respective countries.

The agenda at each level may vary and the intensity of cooperation could also differ. But it is important to recognise that cooperation at all these levels is vital. If cooperation is missing at any level, it would break the chain.

Suggestions for Cooperation among Agency Staff

Some practical suggestions in this regard would include:

1. Joint or common training for staff of the European Agencies. It will lead to greater understanding of each other's organisational cultures and frames.
2. To build interpersonal relationship amongst the agency staff. It is needless to mention that wherever cooperation is taking place it has been on account of the positive interpersonal relationship that existed amongst the agency's personnel and not merely on account of organisational policy.
3. It may be little too soon to recommend inter-agency staff transfers so that a staff from ICCO serves in Christian Aid and vice versa for a specific period of time. However, this would facilitate a greater understanding among the agencies.
4. Studies, evaluations and policy formulations could be better realised if it is done jointly.
5. Further more, if partners of all the agencies from Europe with their representatives of specific regions come together on specific issues, it would further strengthen cooperation among agencies and reduce the project mode of functioning. e.g., ICCO initiatives related to 'Sustainable Agriculture'.¹³

Conclusion

One needs to identify that leaders in European agencies are becoming increasingly aware of their limitations in development cooperation. They are acknowledging their shortcomings in cooperation with partners in the South and are realising their inadequacy in terms of policies, systems, personnel and are exploring alternative ways of collaboration in the South. There is also a desperation in the air. It is needless to mention the influence of corporate management practices and consultancy syndrome having its impact on the agencies. Therefore, the chances are more that the agencies may be looking for administrative and procedural solutions with systems approach, whereas the workload of the staff, limited staff capacity, different work culture, vast

area under each project staff jurisdiction and an average desk staff being over-burdened with 60 to 80 projects which he/she can hardly visit, cause divisions between finance departments and programme departments. All these practical difficulties compel one to view complementarity by necessity within a frame of systems through which workload could be reduced. But unfortunately, if we take such an approach, we would be 'missing the wood for the forest'.

Therefore, cooperation only among the European Agencies, without taking the other half, namely the NGO partners into this cooperation, would be lopsided. Cooperation could be balanced only if partners from the South are involved in joint efforts.

Development cooperation should explore mechanisms by which partners from the South play a role in the organisational aspects of organisations in the North as much as the European agencies have played a role in the organisational life of organisations in the South - could we call this power sharing? Therefore, development cooperation among the European agencies should be contextualised by way of raising the fundamental question as to the reason for their existence. If they have come into existence for improving and strengthening the poor in developing countries, the goals of cooperation ought to be shared by everyone. And there is no question of asking how they could be complementary to each other. They cannot but be complementary. But as long as our framework remains 'project-centered', we will tend to look at cooperation and complementarity of roles only in an administrative sense of sending common reports to donors, sending single audited statement of accounts, coordinating project officers' visit to the projects, etc. To me, this is a very limited perspective of cooperation and complementarity. Therefore, the European Agencies need to manifest the political will to look at cooperation and complementarity in an entirely different framework, putting the poor first and the donors last, and that would make a difference.

** The article is the revised text of a speech delivered at the international conference on Churches and Church Agencies involvement in international cooperation, organised by ICCO at Woudschoten, Zeist, The Netherlands.*

Endnotes

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4. Ibid, p. 30; 'Evaluating the Impact of the NGO in Rural Poverty Alleviation: India: Country Side', ODI Working paper, p.49
5. Report of ICCO, 'Discerning the way Together: Final Report of a Study on the initiative of Christian Aid, Brot fur die Welt, EZE and ICCO: A background paper to the conference on Onschotting. Ook op kerkelijk erf noodzakelijk?' 8-10 December 1994
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7. Ibid, p.9
8. Ibid, p.5
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13. *Report of the Workshop on Sustainable Agriculture*, organised by ICCO, 1994