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Janne Nijman: 'Smart' development aid

February 01, 2010 - Janne Nijman

Janne Nijman, *senior lecturer and researcher, Department of International Law, Universiteit van Amsterdam.*

The need for a paradigm shift in the organization of development aid: from state-focus to a focus on global networks.

The WRR report is a welcome and valuable contribution to the Dutch debate on the future of development aid. A concise overview of the main issues and arguments has already been given on this site. I limit my contribution to one observation and a corresponding suggestion: focus less on states and more on (the potential of) global networks.

The WRR is right to emphasize the changing global context in which development aid takes place. We live in a 'new world order': a global society marked by its interdependency, a multiplicity of actors (both public and private), and in which global problems are local problems and vice versa. Sustainable globalization requires improved global governance.

The WRR report was written to advise the government on how to shape future development policy. This is, of course, what the WRR should do. However, while reading one gradually gets the impression that the initial analysis fades into the background and consequently fails to influence the actual conclusions of the report, or to shape its recommendations. There is a conceptual discrepancy between the initial analysis of a changing global context and the state-oriented policy recommendations that are put forward at the end. The increasingly modest role of the state – one actor among many – stimulates the emergence of global governance innovations. If we take these innovations seriously – as we should – our (policy) interventions in terms of development aid should become 'smarter', more refined. Global, or 'transnational,' networks constitute one of these global governance innovations. The report mentions the importance of global networks in today's world, yet without fully developing its potential for the restructuring of the Dutch development aid programme.

Without exploring the 'global network' dimension, an analysis of how our global society works and how its problems may be solved remains inadequate. In short, without its full exploration, 'global governance' becomes too poor a concept. Please note: I do not mean inter-state or inter-governmental networks, but non-governmental or hybrid global networks. These are networks in which different actors participate for the unique contribution they can make to an issue, or to (an aspect of) the protection of a global common good. Think, for instance, of a global network around sustainable energy in which energy (distribution) companies participate together with academics, NGOs, perhaps even international and state agencies.

The marginal role ascribed to global networks by the WRR seems to contribute to an important inconsistency of the report: in spite of its recognition of the new context, characterized by global interdependency and transnationalism, the WRR advises the

government to continue a country-specific approach (be it reduced to ten countries) at a time in which global networks are rapidly becoming one of the dominant forms of social and economical organization. Hence, global networks and states sometimes have to collaborate.

Why not break with the old, statist approach and examine the possibility of supporting global networks – in which different types of actors from both developing and developed countries participate – in their attempts to work together, to exchange expertise and best practices, and to contribute to global problem-solving. Networks of farmers' organizations from developing and developed countries, or cities cooperating in global networks on human rights issues or infrastructural projects (see *The Broker's* special report on global city networks); networks of judges (International Association of Judges) and prosecutors (International Association of Prosecutors) already exist.

Let's think out loud. These days, we are confronted with a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented magnitude. The earthquake in Haiti has been followed by an emergency services disaster; there is an urgent need for everything, including expertise on, and experience in, coordinating aid and rescue operations. One can imagine the emergence of a global network around this field of expertise and experience specifically: city disaster-management. It would be a global network in which a diversity of actors – local governments, NGOs, independent experts – participate, share best practices and, if disaster strikes, come to support local governments with post-disaster management by means of actually working together with local government officials, who are also victims. But one can also think of a global network in which construction companies (and their employees), as well as building material companies from both North and South, unite with an NGO like Habitat for Humanity to build solid houses quickly in areas that have to be rebuilt after a disaster, or to prevent new ones from happening. In a way, it would resemble another emerging network: the The Hague/VNG initiative on city diplomacy, which aims to create a local government network on conflict prevention and conflict management. Local governors are then able to contact colleagues around the globe and discuss their problems and seek advice from colleagues in similar circumstances. As the mayor of Kabul explained in the summer of 2008: money was not the problem, he was in need of expertise and experienced colleagues. He called on his colleague-mayors to help him in that way with, for example, efforts to (re)build infrastructure.

Another example, to which the WRR report also refers, are the networks of expertise. Let's stimulate the formation of global networks of both Northern and Southern universities which cooperate in the area of education and research (see also the proposals by Luc Soete and others). Universities of developed countries are united in all kinds of 'excellent' research alliances, but there is ample room for sharing expertise and experience with universities of developing countries. The emergence of these kinds of global networks is worth supporting.

The network approach also recognizes the important role of civil society, both here in the developed world and in the developing world. Civil society organizations may take up a role as 'network makers' around issues such as food safety, water shortage and clean energy. Often businesses are getting involved, they may see bottom-of the-pyramid opportunities where governmental and non-governmental organizations see merely shortages. This is not to argue in favour of a supply-driven spending of development aid; on the contrary, but merely to point at how these networks emerge and how development aid may be employed successfully. One can think of all kinds of subjects, problems and/or solutions around which one can form networks that can actually contribute to an aspect of development.

The Dutch government could take the lead in developing 'smart' development aid, which would be a refinement of the conventional state-based development aid programmes. It would aim to stimulate and contribute to the formation and development of those global networks that can make a difference. It would not be organized around aid and aid distribution, but around the big problems of our times (water, energy, food security), based on the reality of global interdependency. It would recognize the limited role of the state, the fact that aid cannot be more than a catalyst, as well as the importance of the multiplicity of factors and actors that play a role in a

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specific sector or issue area. In short, 'smart' aid would be better targeted and as such optimize its catalyst role. A paradigm shift from state-focused to network-focused development aid would be better suited for, and thus more effective in, the globally networked society in which we live today (and will live tomorrow). Recognition of the need for such a shift would have made the WRR report truly innovative. However, the report's claim that development aid has to adapt to the realities of our new world order may serve as a first basis for the government to explore the 'smart' aid option.

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