

I. Introduction: Development Cooperation –Waste or Necessity?

11 pages



*Knowledge Transfer – The core activity of development
cooperation*

Writing this book was prompted by comments from many younger colleagues, and later on by my students. They suggested that I should write up my experience of working for 30 years with the United Nations in the field of development cooperation. When young staff joined us or classes began, my younger colleagues and students knew close to nothing about the complexities of the UN system and the excitement to work for the UN. They had an idea about the Security Council and the peace operations, but everything else was shrouded in mystery. They also were always curious to learn, in particular my female colleagues and students, how I had combined my international nomadic life with the demands of family and personal relationships. Although I shall focus my attention on the professional aspects, I shall give glimpses of how a modern nomad combines professional and personal life. In particular, I shall show how the world shrinks when one lives and works internationally. While there were moments of loneliness and alienation, anxiety and self doubt, they probably were not more frequent than had I led a more conventional life. On the whole – when I look back – life was very fulfilling.

This book is thus intended to inform and to encourage those young readers who are toying with the idea of working internationally to go ahead and to seek the adventure. I also hope that I can convey the special professional demands which a life-long career in an international organization and in the field of development cooperation make. Many of my compatriots know the places I worked and lived in from touristic travels. They often conclude that working in Africa, New York and China is a constant holiday. As my readers will see, life in those duty stations was and is far from a permanent vacation. Long hours of sometimes grueling work, exceptional managerial challenges, tropical disease, civil strife and other adverse local circumstances made every day a special experience. But in spite of the hardships there were many rewards: the meeting of wonderful people, the opportunity to become familiar with the cultures of other countries, and certainly the occasional sense that our efforts did make a difference to a number of people and for them the world a better place.

Before I begin to tell my personal and professional experiences, I would like to briefly describe my view of development cooperation. After all, I devoted most of my professional life to this field of activities which was little known to me before I entered it and it is in fact little known beyond those who are engaged in it.

What is development cooperation?

Most people in OECD countries consider it a waste of time and resources, yet many people living in abject poverty in developing countries are thankful that they receive some help and support to lift themselves out of their miserable living conditions. Some, in particular government officials and politicians, are resentful of the *meddling* attitude of development experts, program staff and managers who insist on personal integrity, transparency of systems and observance of human rights. Steering a constructive course between these three perceptions and staying faithful to the principles of the UN Charter or in the case of bilateral donors to their countries' constitutions and policies is a constant challenge. Keeping a critical distance to specific economic and political interests and avoiding high-handedness is another constant concern to all professionals conducting development cooperation. Last but not least, maintaining credibility by responding, yet with a critical mind and eye, to demands of recipient governments or partners is an ongoing concern.

Development cooperation is a tricky business. By definition it has to be open to put in question the status quo. It has to be grounded in the national society – both in the donor as well as in the recipient country. It has to set in motion a self-sustaining process of change and improvements in working style and practices, and it has to result in better living conditions at least for the vast majority of the population. It has to open greater opportunities for everyone to participate in the development process. All this needs to be done with scarce financial resources and often a lack of relevant knowledge, creativity and the willingness for change by those who take decisions. Development cooperation is a constant learning process. Its origin is the desire to assist newly independent countries in their nation-building efforts, and to enable these countries to participate as equals, economically and politically, in the international community of nations. It is a combination of altruistic benevolence and the demands for hard-nosed economic and social policies and their implementation. An ever more sophisticated set of management rules and practices is to be applied in order to setting standards and rules which apply to all those who work in the field of development cooperation.

Is development cooperation a good thing?

Doubts over whether development cooperation is a good or a wasteful use of public funds are periodically recurring. But overall, I would agree with a retiring German official who stated at his farewell party sometime in the 1990s that the 20th century was a century of many wars, disasters and catastrophes, but that later generations might look upon this period and think that development

cooperation was one of the few positive features of this century. Indeed many professionals I met and with whom I worked closely together were devoted to giving countries a helping hand on their way to a better future.¹ The leaders of the developing countries had not chosen either goals or means on the basis of the dynamics of their own societies, but rather as part of a colonial past or in an effort to compete with the rich countries of this world in order to emulate their successful economies. When they adopted the practices and rules of more advanced countries, they had nevertheless to modify them to suit their own needs, culture and conditions. Very often, development cooperation serves as the vehicle that such modifications respond to the immediate demands of the powers that are in place in the developing countries, but also to the demands of a long-term process of sustainable social and economic development. While politicians and senior civil servants can by now articulate this demand quite well, there is still a huge gap between this articulation and the implementation of such concepts. Development cooperation is called upon to fill the gap in developing countries which represent the majority of the world's population. Filling this gap despite often limited resources is still an inspiring ambition.

Development programs and projects are driven mostly by altruistic motives. Even though there are political pressures on those selecting programs and projects, once these programs and projects are up and running, technical and professional considerations take over and neutralize such political pressures from either the donor's or the recipient's side. But projects can be poorly designed and waste scarce and valuable funds. On a few occasions, I had to stop ill-designed projects. On many other occasions, I had to correct the course of programs and projects. From time to time, there were moments of self doubt and unanswered questions to myself whether our programs were achieving the high goals which we had set for them. Yet, only remaining in motion and trying again was the appropriate answer to these doubts.

¹ Often the motivation of development professionals is called into question. Many outsiders believe that it is the high salaries which attract them to this type of work. It is correct, that in particular in the early years of development cooperation during the 1960s/70s, salaries for experts serving overseas were generous. But it is equally correct that many serve as volunteers and receive a salary which allows them to live comfortably in their country of assignment, but does not permit big savings for the time after their return. In any event in the vast majority of cases, people chose this professional life because they wanted to see other countries and experience other ways of life, and apply their professional knowledge and skills in other social and cultural settings. For most, it became only known that they received salaries and bonuses which they would not have received at home, after they had signed up. Besides, those with families and children of school age also had higher expenses. Overall, it is safe to say that all things considered those working in or for publicly funded development cooperation programs are not better paid than their counterparts back home.

Prerequisites and the rationale for development cooperation

Technical development assistance and/or cooperation is in essence a combination of excellent professional knowledge and skills in a given field combined with a high degree of understanding for the political realities, both in the funding country/organization as well as the receiving country or institution. The needed funding is provided in most cases on a grant basis. This aspect of not having to repay the related costs is often critically discussed in political circles. Those who argue against continuing this practice say that freebies have little or no value to those receiving it. Those who argue for grant funding say that otherwise many changes would never be initiated. I belong to the latter group of people; but I also subscribe to the notion that approving grant assistance and designing programs and projects for such funding need to meet the highest professional standards.

The original rationale for technical assistance was to help newly independent countries and their governments to run their affairs in an internationally acceptable manner. But the cold war rivalry, which started about the same time as decolonization, made the international basis for what was acceptable an ever moving target. Many times a dictator was kept in power and his government was supported, because Western and sometimes Eastern donors wanted to keep a foot in that country. Many fledgling democracies were abandoned, because they chose economic policies which were considered unsustainable or hostile to one of the two cold war camps. Of course, there also was the darling of development assistance, socialistic, grassroots-oriented Tanzania. Under President Nyerere, the government succeeded to satisfy both camps and reap the benefits accordingly. Over decades, Tanzania was the country which received the highest per capita development assistance in the world, the volume of such aid per capita was many times larger than the country's per capita GNP.

Trailblazer for globalization

By now we can look back on 40 –50 years of development assistance/cooperation. We can see more clearly than in the past that development cooperation is in many instances the trailblazer for globalization. It is intended to create an international playing field for economic activities across national boundaries, and to contribute to an ever higher degree of commercialization of all aspects of life. Most development professionals no longer ask

whether such commercialization is desirable. They know it is necessary to overcome poverty and to secure the survival of a nation, a community, or an individual in the rat race for economic growth, political power and personal success. Development professionals tend to be very observant on cultural differences and mindful of not imposing the cultural standards from the aid giving country on the recipient society. For lack of better knowledge and creative ideas, lack of funds and lack of time, they often are pushed by these constraints to promote uncritically foreign experiences. A modernization of traditional values, customs and practices is too often given short shrift. In countries where a lively dialogue is guaranteed around these issues, e.g. in China, the results and impact of development assistance can be phenomenal. In other countries, like in Africa and the Arab world, where such dialogues are much less intense, results of development cooperation are less beneficial to those in need of assistance. In the years which I spent in Africa, I was often confronted with the situation that national decision-makers would agree to proposals made by donors, but with little real consent. Consequently, programs and projects got either diverted from their intended goals, or they were languishing. Occasionally, if they hit the right note, they were hijacked by particular interests of individual politicians or officials. But there are ways to respond appropriately to such corruptive practices as well, and to make projects catalysts for the intended and needed social, economic and cultural changes.

Sources of development cooperation

Over the decades, the financial sources of development assistance/cooperation diversified. This happened partly as a means to address the complex issues of peaceful development from various angles, partly to reduce the predominance of publicly funded aid programs with government institutions. Today, sources range from former colonial governments' and OECD countries' ODA budgets to churches, foundations and NGOs. Increasingly, corporate funding under the corporate social responsibility concept of a private company is added to the list of donors. Multilateral organizations like the EU, the World Bank and the UN system, while depending on funding from member governments, are increasingly cooperating with civil society organizations as partners.

All these donor agencies develop their body of professionals, sometimes exchanging their experts, managers and staff. But on the whole, most professionals tend to stay with one organization or at least one sub-family of organizations.

To an outsider this plethora of donors may appear as wasteful and duplicative. Yet, to a seasoned development professional this multitude of agencies can be the instrument to playing a wonderfully productive concert of development initiatives. Regrettably, such a concert does not occur in all situations and then results in a painful cacophony. Therefore, a high amount of time and energy by donor agencies is invested in better coordination and aid effectiveness. Yet, there is also a certain rationale behind all of this proliferation of the same basic concept, namely that the better-off and the ones who know more should help those who need knowledge and additional resources. In the early years of development assistance, the rationale was that the former colonial powers would better understand the challenges of their former colonies, and that socialist countries would be able to better assist like-minded countries. Multilateral assistance was meant to break the dependence on too much colonial or socialist influence and support. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, set up in the context of the Marshall Plan and later on known as the World Bank, was to “globalize” the positive experience of the reconstruction of post-war Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Church-based organizations, foundations and NGOs, many of whom became active in the late 1970s and especially after 1989, were to deliver programs which would create a level playing field among all nations with regard to their civil society, and to become stakeholders in the programs funded by governments and multilateral organizations. They were welcomed as agents for greater diversity, tolerance and understanding of cultural differences and the interests and needs of the common men and women. Especially in countries with dictatorial regimes or in need of humanitarian assistance after a natural or man-made disaster, these organizations have had difficult times and many of their professionals suffered personally or even lost their lives. They, together with colleagues from organizations like UNHCR or WFP and UNICEF, are the unsung heroes of international development cooperation.

The special features of the UN development cooperation system

Is there a special role and purpose of development assistance to be delivered through the UN system? Yes, there is. Setting a process of development in motion and not being locked into narrowly defined national interests, but serving a broader concept of promoting human well-being is not always and in all countries possible for bilateral donors. Therefore, the UN development system is treading where no one else dares to tread – as a colleague from another aid

organization once remarked to me. These cases gave the biggest headache, but also were the most rewarding experiences of my professional life.

In general, multilateral programs serve as agents for opening new avenues for development cooperation. Often the breaking down of walls and the prying open of doors to the outside world is done discreetly without much fanfare and public attention. For instance, some newly independent governments were resentful and did not trust their former colonial masters. In such instances, the UN served as a neutral alternative or go-between. In fact, it was this mistrust which created the technical assistance programs of the UN and ultimately UNDP in 1966.²

Developing countries who were socialist in outlook did not want to be locked into dependence on the exclusive assistance from other socialist countries. The UN could and would open the doors to relevant experience and partners in non-socialist countries and it would give access to countries where bilateral relationships failed. Countries that were members of the non-alignment movement were in particular interested in development cooperation through the UN system and other multilateral organizations. They wanted to choose for themselves which experience of Western and Eastern countries was most relevant to them. The UN may not always have succeeded in bringing the best expertise to these countries. There were many restrictions for experts from Western countries to work in socialist countries and for those from socialist countries to work in countries aligned with the West. But at least the UN programs were a means to this end.

Development cooperation after 1989

With the changes in the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the facts previously described, the role of the UN development system changed dramatically and so did development cooperation overall. From being primarily a partner to developing countries and a bridge over the East/West divide, the UN development system became the focus of assistance to all member states in matters of international development. Of course, there would be no programs and projects in OECD countries funded through the UN system, but there would be many debates and partnerships with organizations from OECD countries. There would be an increasing number of programs dealing with aspects which

² See Craig N. Murphy, *The United Nations Development Program – A Better Way?* Cambridge 2006

applied to all countries. While funding would be made available to developing countries, preferably to LDCs, OECD countries participated with their own resources. All became members in international networks and partnerships.

What are UNDP (the United Nations Development Program) and the UN development system?

UNDP, the organization I worked in for over 28 years, was created in the mid-1960s to be the central funding and coordinating body of the UN development system at country level. In reality, it neither was the sole funding source for the UN system nor did UNDP always succeed in coordinating all UN system development activities in a given country. Nevertheless, a good faith effort was always made, and the UN resident coordinator system was formally established in the early 1990s and managed by UNDP.

The UN Resident Coordinator system greatly strengthened the performance and presence of the whole UN system at country level, way beyond the importance of its financial resources. On the average, the UN system funds about 3-4 percent of incoming aid to a country. But in terms of political influence, the UN system has a much greater impact. Recipient governments know that UN staff is to be impartial and guided by UN resolutions and decisions taken by all member states – including them. Even bilateral donors often solicit the interventions of UN staff on issues, where they cannot reach the developing country's authorities. They regard the UN as recipients of their government's funding, and consider that UN officials have an obligation to help them in having their programs and policies accepted. Faced with these pushes and pulls, the best UN officials will seek to extend a helpful hand to all parties while keeping a critical distance to them all, and intervening only if and when it furthers the implementation of UN conventions, especially the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the two Covenants on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights and on Political and Civil Rights respectively.

There have been many changes over the period of these 30 years in the way development cooperation in general, and UNDP and UN system development programs in particular, are managed. It would go beyond the scope of this introduction and even these memoirs to elaborate this topic. Very little historical and analytical work by academic researchers has been undertaken so far.³ But there is one

³ Fortunately, some historical studies are beginning to appear. There is Craig Murphy's book "The UNDP. A Better Way?" published in 2006, and the

constant feature clearly distinguishable. Whether bilateral or multilateral, whether governmental or non-governmental in funding and outlook, development cooperation has been pursuing peaceful change and development as opposed to military interventions. Not always has such civilian and peace-oriented cooperation worked out. In some instances, through an unfortunate combination of factors, development cooperation may even have contributed towards an erosion of a weak state and unwillingly reinforced the slide into a failed state, e.g. Somalia. Nevertheless, is doing too little worse than doing nothing? I don't think so. Development cooperation is one of the few stepping stones to a world of equal citizens, irrespective of the countries they live in.

The future of development cooperation

Whether development cooperation has a future depends on many factors. Writing these memoirs, China is entering the scene in a big way followed by other emerging economies. Traditional donors are taken more seriously the goal of making 0.7 percent of their annual GNP available for international development cooperation by 2015. But most were not even reaching the half point mark in 2007. More importantly, there is a growing sense and a clearer philosophy that development cooperation has to follow a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, programs need to directly and immediately benefit the poorest segments of the population in developing countries. On the other hand, global threats and issues need to be addressed, such as HIV/AIDS, climate change, and a fairer trade and investment system in which all countries can participate. In addressing global issues at the national level, development cooperation has come full circle: many developing countries lack the expertise and institutional capacity to create favorable conditions for their national economies to participate in the globalization process or deal with international issues, such as climate change mitigation and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Therefore, many ODA funded programs and projects are needed to create the necessary capacity and skills. Not all recipient countries are former colonies, and today they do not need help to create a ministry of foreign affairs, finance etc. Today they need a food safety authority or an environmental protection agency/ministry to meet emerging global standards in their products and services and to protect their natural resource base. Countries demand of each other the observance of such standards, especially when they are members of WTO. Countries which do not comply will unwittingly opt out of the international interdependence. Development cooperation has to ensure that

publications of the UN Intellectual History project which is led by Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly and Thomas G. Weiss. Their first book entitled "Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Global Challenges" of 2001 is particularly enlightening.

countries or even regions do not drop out of the international system. They need to stimulate partnership and dialogue where it is difficult to occur on its own momentum. On the one hand, development cooperation will be in one regard pretty much the same as it was in the 1960s and 1970s, namely focused on national capacity building. But it will also see a growing demand of establishing and maintaining international institutional networks and partnerships among the fittest and the weakest in order to give sustainable global development a chance.

Development cooperation certainly is, in my view and according to my experience, more promising as any military intervention to bring about positive changes. It can engage a multitude of stakeholders, individuals, businesses, governments, politicians, scientists, civil society organizations, in a process of assessing and analyzing conflicts of interest. It can chart a way forward for solving conflicts in a non violent manner. Development cooperation in the future will also be called upon to identify the needs of those who are left behind by market forces and to help them back into the mainstream of global processes. There is most likely a growing and not a diminishing demand for global development cooperation.

Thinking development

Does development cooperation shape the outlook on life? It certainly does. A development professional is deeply convinced that – given the right knowledge and resources – any problem, in particular man-made problems, can be solved. He or she will be mindful that the way towards such solutions is obscured by a variety of interested parties. A good development professional will therefore always anticipate such conflicts and proceed cautiously. Keeping a free mind and spirit while being open to different views and even solutions is indispensable, listening and hearing what others say is a necessary tool to identify an optimal course of action. The certainty that one will learn something new every day is one of the greatest pleasures of this professional work.

My career with the UN system took me twice to Africa. I began in West Africa and served in Southern Africa. As a student I had spent 18 months doing research in East Africa. Altogether I spent nine years in countries of this wonderful continent. I also lived and worked for UNDP in China twice: the first time in the early 1980s during three years, and the second time from 1998 –2003. Undoubtedly these eight years were the highlight of my professional career. Quite exceptionally within the UNDP context, I was assigned twice to UNDP Headquarters in New York for altogether eleven

years. The first time (1983 –1987) I oversaw and backstopped our programs in Arab countries, the second time (1991 – 1998) I was assigned to our central administration, where my tasks were global in outlook and reach. In the course of my professional career I visited 120 countries in all corners of the globe, experiencing the diversity, but also the similarities in people's life. My career was concluded with a most interesting and challenging assignment at WHO in Geneva, where as Assistant Director-General I was in charge of health and environmental issues, and dealt with globally important issues even more than at UNDP Headquarters.

Although I never planned to take this professional career, I certainly have no regrets that my life did take this course. It was a rich experience, enlightening, exhilarating, frustrating, as Kofi Annan said when he left the office of UN Secretary-General. Working for the UN is always encouraging to keep going. Let me now tell you, what I experienced.