INTERNATIONAL ACTORS AND NATIONAL SOCIAL POLICY: 'new' policies and 'old' modalities?

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Talking Notes for Panel 'The Role of International Organisations in Global Social Policy'

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1. I want to thank the organisers for inviting me to this important conference and for, what seems to me, to be a very favourable 'trade-off' expecting only a 10 minute intervention in return for this wonderful hospitality. I do think that the conference presentations, papers and discussions represent an extraordinarily important step forward in seeking, and here I quote from the conference concept note, „a more holistic approach to social policy in development contexts (which) … would seek to promote policies, institutions and programmes that balance a concern for equity and social justice with the concern for economic growth". I do see this in a context of growing international concern with these themes which a range of global agencies, commissions and conferences have expanded and elaborated on in the last ten years (Copenhagen (and plus 10), the UN and its agencies, UNRISD, ILO, UNDP and the MDGs, etc).

2. I want to articulate, hopefully coherently, three concerns – the first is the problems which occur when international organisations (a complex array of transnational, international, regional and global actors) are not integrated sufficiently into the analytical frameworks being presented. A rich tradition of work both analytical and prescriptive regarding the effects of an architecture of global social governance; the international division of labour between different actors; their mandates, niches and comparative advantages, is needed to deepen our understanding of the complexities of the issues. Re-iterating some of Bob Deacon's comments, the problems here relate to the 'gap' between 'legitimacy' and 'resources' or, in other words, the danger of the World Bank, in particular, being a complex multi-mandated, actor.

3. Secondly, and I realise this intervention falls prey to the same trap – there is a complex linkage, or, more appropriately 'Chinese whispers' going on in which Aid rubs against/blurs with Development, in turn with Social development; in turn with Social protection; in turn with Poverty Reduction and with Social Policy. The problem, of course, is that these are contested terms, discourses, frames which are continually being re-developed and re-contested within and between institutions, organisational cultures, and so on.

4. Thirdly, and I think this is my key point adopting a socio-anthropological perspective, I want to question whether the modalities of 'development assistance' - as a set of complex social practices, institutions, interactions, flows, actors, markets and arenas – is capable of delivering desired outcomes or whether, in fact, the gap between 'intentions' and 'results' is very large.

5. I want to spend most of my time and energy commenting on this table which I reproduce from a paper written by Debbie Warrener of ODI, in November 2004, reflecting and amplyfing DFID's concern with 'Drivers of Change' meant to enable donors to „be better able to choose interventions that will shift trends to bring about more pro-poor outcomes" (Warrener 2004). I do think that, analytically, the 'Drivers of Change' approach, focusing on the interactions between agents, institutions and structures, in the context of the consequences of the actions of donors and other international agencies, is extraordinarily useful. My concern is with the argument that there has been a gradually 'upstream evolution' of explanations for aid failure and the focus of aid, from Project aid in the 1950s and 1960s; through Sector-focused programes in the 1960s and 1970s, Structural adjustment in the 1980s, to TA for institutional building and governance reforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to Support for PRSPs via SWAps and budgetary support from the late 1990s to date. She traces a shifting aid focus, over time, then, from projects to programmes to policy, to institutions and now (presumably not finally) to politics.

TABLE: Upstream evolution of explanations for aid failure (Warrener, 2004; 3)

	Prevailing explanation of aid failure	Predominant form of aid	Aid focus
1950s – 1960s	Within project problems (e.g. poor management)	Project aid	Project
1960s – 1970s	Projects as 'islands' of improvement	Sector-focused programmes	Programme
1980s	Dysfunctional policy environment	Structural adjustment	Policy
Late 1980s – early 1990s	Poor public institutions and governance	Technical assistance for institution building and governance reforms	Institutions
Late 1990s – date	Political processes (e.g. incentive structures in formal and informal institutions)	Support to PRSPs via SWAps and budget support + political analysis (e.g. DoC)	Politics

6. In fairness, I should note that the author recognises that the table is 'necessarily simplified and highly stylised'. However, let me raise a few simple questions about it:

- Is the author correct that 'projects', to all intents and purposes ended in the 1960s and, indeed 'programmes' in the 1970s? Perhaps it is because most of my work has been in post-communist, transition, and post-conflict societies, but I would continue to argue that the 'projectisation' of aid and development is still with us, perhaps less dominant than it was five years ago but still important.

- Seondly, it is noticeable how the explanations of aid failure in the last three rows (in terms of policy, institutions, and politics) seem to be entirely focused on the recipient country context. Only within the era of 'projects' and 'programmes' is there any attention to donor and implementer management processes.

- Thirdly, and here I step into very controversial ground, 'structural adjustment' in the form of neo-liberalism and the Washington consensus needs to be treated rather differently from the other forms of aid. I would want to distiguish here between globalization in general - the complex of new alignments of places, people and power in a series of flows, connections and disjunctions (to mis quote Appadurai) and the neo-liberal project of globalization. I would want to stress the uneveness of neo-liberalisms; their contestation and resistance, whilst arguing that it was, in many ways, the last 'totalizing paradigm' traces of which remain in its alternatives or refinements.

7. In part at least, I am suggesting that this table is rather silent about the modalities of development which I would suggest, change more slowly or are perhaps more securely institutionalised, than the discourses or meta-level approaches. I first rehearsed this argument in my text 'International Non-State Actors and Social Development Policy', published in Global Social Policy at the end of 2003 (Stubbs, 2003). In it, I argued that some of the recent focus on poverty reduction, in the context of new public management, sub-contracting and rule-based competitive tendering, may actually reinforce tendencies towards oligopolisation amongst a group of large INGOs and, perhaps even more importantly, an emerging set of International Consultancy Companies about which we know very little. Part of my argument struck a chord with Timo Voipio at the time who, in his response to my text, stated:

> „New Public Management is the little brother of the neo-liberal economic ideology, originating from the same intellectual and ideological roots, and the author would, perhaps, be surprised to see how strong a grip it has on the Finnish aid administration today, as far as the administrative culture and procedural correctness is concerned" (Voipio, 2003; 360).

The argument here is not, at all, conspiratorial – rather it suggests that the NPM framework makes it more difficult to rethink and enact a concern with equity and social justice.

8. The table, then, simplifies the complexities of what I would now term development policy assemblages which are not one-dimensional, nor is there a clear

fit between forms and focus of development and outcomes. In the context of PRSPs, I would argue that the development arena, or market-place, is still chaotic, multi-mandated, sub-contracted, intermediary- or broker-driven, with complex chains of funding, regulation, and implementation. Real co-ordination and co-operation, in this context, is extraordinarily difficult to achieve, although not impossible. Add to this the delays between assesssments and implementation, the assymetries of power between 'international' and 'domestic' actors, the tensions between 'traditional' organisations and new 'agencies' or 'flexi-organisations', then I am, certainly arguing against simple, or one-dimensional solutions.

9. Two final thoughts, one analytical, and one descriptive. Analytically, deepening the 'drivers of change' approach does offer a way forward, combining an understanding of agents and agency; institutions, structures, and the role of international organizations. In terms of institutions, David Dollar's recent statement that «We do not know much about institutional change, so it is more useful to promote community learning than to push particular institutional models» seems to me to be an important corrective to some of the 'social engineering' approaches which are re-appearing in a search for 'incentives'.

10. In terms of international organizations and social policy, just a couple of thoughts which may offer some way forward:

1. International organizations should seek to integrate social policy concerns into all aspects of their assessments, interventions and evaluations.

2. There is a need to support and build long-term local, national and regional social policy competences and to develop modalities which harness, rather than exploit, this expertise.

3. There is a need to promote multi-stakeholder dialogue which addresses visions, choices, ambitions and good practice in the social policy arena, including poor people's organizations and groups of service users as active subjects.

11. In the end, I am simply offering my agreement and support for the proposed Second Phase of the work programme which «will consist of drawing out operational lessons from the conference papers and discussions to inform the policies and operational instruments that donor agencies typically use to assist partner countries». We may need, though, more innovative modalities, and a better understanding of international organizations, as part of a move from 'conditionality' to 'ownership' and from 'social engineering' to 'community learning'. Thank you.

References

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