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Turning Aid into Effective Cooperation:
Connecting Local to Global

A Polis Publication by Balder Hageraats and Isadora Loreto

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Abstract

Instruments based on traditional development aid-thinking suffer from inherent flaw: their focus on governments and institutions rather than people. This leads to unsatisfactory outcomes. International cooperation is supposed to be about local actors and global actors coming together to achieve a common goal, typically improving the lives of people. In reality, the development sector is often too inward looking, institutionalised and unilateral to create such cooperative relations between global and local actors. In this essay we propose a model in which there exists direct and true cooperation between donors and local actors. It considers any further institutional or NGO support as service providers within that cooperative alliance between funders and populations. This has the additional advantage of avoiding the principal-agent issues that are so prevalent in traditional development initiatives. Our model involves a very simple and outcome focussed human infrastructure, which puts locals at the centre of decision making at every step of the way. It is local led in the truest sense of the word, and is about human connections rather than institutional empowerment. This essay is not about providing developmental answers, it is about making local individuals and communities do that for themselves, in their own way. All that is needed is connectivity between these communities and the already available resources that exist globally.



Turning aid into effective cooperation

The question of what development assistance should look like, or what "the donor aid system" should look like, continues on a path that is already trodden and repeatedly shown to lead to dead ends. Aid, or so the thinking goes, fails because of flaws in the system, rather than the system itself. And yet, if aid is ever to be effective it will need to stop being aid, and become true cooperation between the two principle parties: funders and the people whose lives are supposed to be improved. Aid is not development. Aid is institutional. Development is about human beings.

Cooperation between two or more actors is typically one in which they agree a plan of action, are mutually involved in its execution in some way, and in which both stand to lose or benefit depending on the outcome. This is already distinct from the concept of aid, which is only a tool within development cooperation. How odd that a whole sector that carries the word "cooperation" in its own name does not follow this commonly accept pattern: international development cooperation (IDC) is typically not one in which the two parties come together, nor in which they are both involved in its execution, nor do they both depend on its outcomes in any balanced manner. IDC is a sector that carries an uncomfortable gene pool which includes a dogmatic belief in its own charitable nature- which the word "aid" emphasises-, a culture of introspection rather than outcome focus, and one that is global led



rather than local led. Most importantly, however, it is a sector centred on governments and other institutions, rather than people.

With the current debate on the post-2015 agenda heating up, most focus has been on improving intergovernmental and interinstitutional relations (Keijzer, 2014). Sight is often lost of the fact that these relations are simply a bridge to accomplish

something else: effective results at a local¹, human level. Sometimes governmental agencies and development actors are useful or even essential in accomplishing such results, sometimes they are a hindrance. In any case, institutional creep has spread into IDC and aid thinking in such ways that the true essence of what the sector is supposed to be has been lost.

In order for international cooperation to be truly effective- with instruments that satisfy the ambitions on both ends of its human relationships-, incentives need to be refocused on its essence: what connection is most effective in ensuring satisfactory outcomes between global funders and local populations? These two, funders and local people, are the ones that need to lead the dynamics if IDC is ever to achieve the results it claims to chase. Cooperation can take many forms, but in this particular case it does not need to be that different from cooperation between producers and end-users in other industries. In the second part of this essay, we propose a practical, market-based approach to achieve this. First, however, we analyse the problem.

¹ The word local is used in this paper as a catch-all phrase to indicate relatively small-scale, grassroots level actors and activities which have no global presence yet.



The problem: a disconnect between funders and end-users

For the past decade or so, the international development and aid sector has been dislodged from its foundations by an unending barrage of criticism, budget cuts and overall lack of direction. Its detractors have had plenty of ammunition: an inward looking culture more concerned with administrative results rather than true human outcomes, questionable effectiveness, neo-colonial superiority and guilt complexes, the politicisation of supposedly humanitarian work. The list is long and in many cases legitimate, but criticism that leads to paralysis rather than change is without merit.

Without analysing this debate as a whole, this essay contends that the main problem- and its subsequent solution- lies in (flawed) connections between involved parties. On the one hand, there is a lack of connection between funders (donors) and local populations, and on the other a distorted connection between local populations and the development sector. In theory, funders and local populations are the ones engaged in cooperation. They join forces to pursue common interests. In practice, direct contact between funders and local actors hardly ever occurs: NGOs and other development sector actors stand in between that relationship.

This leads to the second problem, the flawed nature of the connection between the development sector and local populations. Rather than being positioned as the client to whom certain services are rendered,



local populations are typically considered to be recipients of charity. This means that they lack control or often even any significant influence over dynamics that supposedly exist for them. This is exacerbated by the emphasis on aid to governments and institutional results rather than small-scale local outcomes. The result is ineffective objective formulation and execution within the development sector. In order for IDC to overcome such a fundamental flaw, it needs to let go of its charitable attitudes and see itself for what it really is: service providers to an alliance between two types of clients, funders and local populations. Only then can effective development cooperation truly flourish, and achieve its fundamental goal, namely improving the lives and livelihoods of people in economically disadvantaged communities and societies.

Fortunately, new initiatives have sprung up, providing innovative instruments that avoid the traditional traps of the aid culture of old, and that use the riches that new technologies and globalisation have to offer. On the one hand, the more traditional development sector is adapting, making better use of information coming from grassroots dynamics as well as an increased focus on tangible outcomes. Unfortunately, such attempts at overcoming bad habits still tend to start from the same assumption base that is keeping the sector back: the focus on assistance and aid rather than effective development. As many (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Mansuri and Rao, 2012) have pointed out, the establishment of local committees often reinforce existing power imbalances, rather than eliminating them. Other examples involve more direct cash-transfers and financial flows that avoid some of the old habits (Hanlon et al., 2010).



On the other hand, new types of development actors have entered the scene. Ranging from crowdsourcing² to private sector approaches, they inject new blood into an otherwise tired development world. By not starting at the same point, without attempting to create "aid relationships" but rather work together to create real change, new initiatives circumvent the systemic flaws described above. They offer practical solutions that are already available in economically developed parts of the world, so why not also in developing countries? This outcome focused approach is starting to pay off, with an inflow of new actors involved. Globally, organisations not previously involved in development are starting to take an interest. They are joined by individuals who feel they can affect change through direct peer-to-peer contact rather than simply donating to faceless donors or NGOs. Locally, actors are seeing their scope for action broadened through a greater diversity of actors and resources that do not have long-established agendas and methods, and are not dependent on traditional development pillars. What they all have in common is that they show no interest in institutions, and rather focus on people.

What is still often lacking, unfortunately, is full recognition of what cooperation entails: a balance of interests and power between the two end parties, and effective connections between them to attain mutually satisfactory results. Even a quick glance at typical vocabulary shows this. Aid-focussed documents and strategies are rife with words such as

²Kiva, through crowdfunding, connects social entrepreneurs sociallyconsciouscitizens: <http://www.kiva.org/>; Crowdrise and Start Some Good both use crowdfunding to work on global challenges: <http://startsomegood.com/> & <https://www.crowdrise.com/> ; Elvamaps local needsthrough simple and innovativemethods: <http://www.elva.org/welcome/>



"recipients" and "donors". The more progressive authors tend to use "beneficiaries" for the former, and "funders" for the latter. Does that

mean that in this cooperative relationship, only one end benefits? Is the other end, the "donor", pursuing a selfless agenda? The answer is of course a resounding "no". Individuals work in the sector for a wide variety of self-interested reasons. Organisations exist for the benefit of their employees, as well as specific non-universal ideological agendas.

Isn't it about time to recognise this in our daily language? Recognising such a self-evident truth makes it much easier to understand internal dynamics, the navel staring and ever-expanding bureaucracy which the sector is prone to. The executive side of the sector- NGOs, government departments, fundraisers, analysts- are supposed to be instruments to link the two ends. IDC professionals are essentially workers in a service sector, offering products to its customers: funders and local populations. In practice, funders would do well to take a step back here, and let local actors be the spokespersons for their common cooperative alliance. In the end, unless ideological motivation plays a large part in the funder's agenda, eventual success or failure of cooperation depends on local satisfaction. Being a silent partner in such a relationship- and letting locals be in charge of practical dynamics- is the smart thing to do.

It is curious that most of the thinking, most of the instruments, most of the actions are focussed on interactions between institutions: intergovernmental, transnational vs. local government, NGO vs. donor. Financial support is typically for (local) governments. Strengthening the institutional capacity of recipient governments is omnipresent in policy



making as well as literature (De Renzio et al, 2008; Booth, 2011). These large-scale actors can be useful, or even essential, intermediaries, but still are an instrument by themselves, and are not the end-user.

Therefore, the sector is guilty of confusing means and ends, and institutional focus encourages global rather than local thinking. Dialogue starts and ends in Western office spaces. Needless to say, any dialogue about local outcomes should start and end in, well, local office spaces. Or even better: local living rooms. Governments are seen as the beneficiaries, rather than the populations they are supposed to serve. The action of a donor giving aid to a government does not have any developmental value in itself. Only if the government then effectively uses that money to serve the local populations it represents are any of the supposed outcomes achieved. This is a big if, and one that is all too often conveniently forgotten.

There are often diverging views on what money should be spent on between those who fund and those who receive (Banerjee and Duflo, 2011). If funders continue to push for what they perceive to be the priority then that is their privilege, but it can hardly be called "cooperation". Rather, it is the traditional "aid" mentality, with the poor not knowing what is best for them: benefactors and beneficiaries, donors and recipients. Flawed and ineffective.

The current situation is one in which actors within the sector are confused about their role and purpose. This needs to be clarified. It also is one in which institutions rule the roost, and governments are confused as end-users. This needs to be rectified. Finally, it is one in which cooperation is



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not cooperation, but a perverse relationship in which supposed beneficiaries are too often simple onlookers of projects they have no real need for, have no say in, and are not involved in. This needs to stop. The only way for aid to be effective is for it to stop being aid.

For any effective implementation that leads to real and positive local outcomes, projects need to be local led. This is an obvious statement every reader will agree with, but one that curiously gets lost in translation somewhere between various head offices. Local led does not mean local-consulted. It does not mean local-participation. Nor does it mean local-executed. It means that the local population is in charge. They are the consumers of the services provided, they must have the ability to accept or reject further action. Rather than adapting to funder agendas- something which a lot of local populations have become very adept at, knowing exactly which global buttons to push to get financial support- funders need to adapt to local ambitions, local demands. If their agenda is supporting the wellbeing of local populations, funders need to connect their agendas to that of locals, and vice versa. In such a relationship, the executive branch of NGOs, experts and companies have no role to play beyond being mere facilitators.

Currently, development departments and organisations plan, execute, evaluate and everything in between. Besides execution, this makes no sense. They should come in later, when they- executive specialists-are needed. Funder and local end-users lead. The sector executes.



The solution: connecting funders and end-users

Remedies and alternatives to ineffective and even harmful development approaches - in the sense of amplifying already disturbed North-South relations and distrust going back to neo-colonial suspicions- have sprung up recently. They can be divided into exactly those two categories: remedies and alternatives. The former attempt to remedy perceived flaws from within the established development model, whereas the latter typically come from those on the outside, from actors who often do not even regard themselves as part of the same sector.

What we have then is a wide range of new theory, as well as a rapidly increasing body of practical experience, to shape our thinking and application. New actors who have embraced different types of thinking about this relationship are becoming increasingly visible and popular. Their success is attracting an audience no longer willing to hear about moral concerns, and desperately wanting to move on to effective solutions: "[We are] convinced that the future of every community lies in capturing the passion, intelligence, imagination and resources of its people (...)"³ and "our strategy is to listen to and enable the voices of thousands of grassroots groups and the hundreds of thousands of people who run them and benefit from them to be heard"⁴. Similarly, network and communities of organisations, which share the same vision of a need for new approaches, have emerged. Doing Development Differently (DDD)⁵ is a community of development researchers and practitioners brought together in an effort to understand better flexible and locally led approaches to governance issues in developing

³Sirolli Institute website: <http://sirolli.com/sirolli-institute/>

⁴Community Development Foundation website: <http://cdf.org.uk/content/about-cdf/a-community-strategy-2#sthash.ZN5lpNh8.dpuf>

⁵ Doing Development Differently <http://doingdevelopmentdifferently.com/>



countries. Local First⁶ is “an approach to international development that prioritises the views and leadership of people and organisations in the countries affected, over those of outsiders from the international community”.

What this essay does is combine some of these new elements, and offers a simple and direct method of approaching the issue of cooperation between funders and local populations. This method goes back to the core of what this is all about: true cooperation. There is no need to come up with all kinds of brilliant ideas in donor countries. Both the seeds and flowers of brilliance already exist on the ground- among the grassroots if you will- among their partners in development, namely local individuals and communities. Funders have the money. Let local populations do the thinking and the work. Activate locally, but generate and collect the necessary resources globally.

This approach connects local ambitions and needs with global opportunities and resources by combining the best of both worlds: a global reality with virtually limitless possibilities, and a local reality with endless drive and creativity. In other words, local populations must define their agenda according to their needs and priorities, and find a funding partner with similar interests. Then let the developmental actor take a role in service of that, rather than one of imposition. To go even further: let the developmental actor, be it NGO or other service provider, compete for the favour of their end-user, the local population.

How does cooperation between two actors generally, in the non-IDC world, work? Well, it involves commonalities in agendas, and differences

⁶ Local First <http://actlocalfirst.org/>



in capabilities. The two actors then come together and agree to combine their strengths in some way to harness mutual potential. So let's do that in IDC as well: identify where the agenda between the local actor and the global actor meet. Then find a mechanism to agree terms, and finally execute the joint operation that connects the local needs and ambitions with global resources and opportunities.

The different strengths of the two ends that can be combined and harnessed are also clear. One has the financial clout; the other has local knowledge and creativity. It is probably a good idea for both to keep that distinction clear, and stay modest in stepping on the other's turf. This means, for example, that funders need to listen to local wants and perspectives, rather than decide what needs to be done. It also means that local populations need to take responsibility for their part of the cooperative alliance: spend the finances well. Fortunately, as long as local communities and individuals are in charge, development projects such as microcredits and crowdsourcing have shown surprisingly high returns on money invested.

New technologies and specifically the fact that "the costs associated with the relevant technology have declined dramatically"(Flint and Meyer, 2014: 7) have made important changes to the position of groups. Crowdsourcing is "spreading across the developed world and is now attracting considerable interest in the developing world as well"(infoDev, 2013: 8). A significant example is how the Ushahidi platform made the Haiti mapping project possible and thereby exemplified the power of those not directly involved in the sector.



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A local led approach which allows local population to be the owners of their development is essential for IDC efficiency and effectiveness. It is an approach in which, through direct connections, all actors listen to the needs expressed by local populations. Who if not local populations are the ones that know better their needs? Their ambitions? Their hopes? "The priority is the thoughts and dreams of the community itself. What the people themselves believe should be the focus."⁷Local populations must define their needs and priorities.

Hence we insist on a local led approach in our model. If cooperation between funders and local people is to be effective, then the funders better let locals lead. This means offering financial support, while accepting the local community's mandate to make executive decisions. Who will be contracted to build the local school? The pupils' parents decide. Which expert will be chosen to give advice on new farming techniques? The local farmers pick. Who will decide on which gender rights programme from eager NGOs should be implemented? The women and men who will benefit.

The local led approach goes beyond traditional participatory and community driven methods. Typically, locals are not the ones in charge of their development; international involvement always lurks behind the corner, even if locals are consulted at every step of the way. A local led approach means that local populations are the shapers and deciders of their own development, their own future.

If recipient governments are involved in development cooperation, then that only makes sense as one that strengthens the model. This means that it will typically be in those cases that involve national services or

⁷ Christian CommunityDevelopment Association website:
<https://www.cdda.org/about/ccd-philosophy/listening-to-the-community>



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political facilitation that goes beyond mere approval. Again, true development cooperation is between two parties: funders and end-users, i.e. local populations. Specialised service providers such as experts, NGOs, local administrations or private enterprise are charged with performing certain tasks within that cooperative vision. They facilitate the execution of cooperation, which then results in the common goal of the funder and the local population, namely improving local people's livelihoods. In the end, it is about funders and local populations achieving mutually satisfactory results. To that extent, the cooperation agenda between the different actors needs to be designed through communication between the two ends of the developmental relationship, and employ rather than embrace the actor in the middle, the service provider.

So where does this leave the middleman-the facilitating NGO or governmental agency-who in the traditional model stands in between the funder and local population? That means that they compete for the favours of their client, local people. If funders do devolve powers to locals as their joint representatives, then market mechanisms need to apply to these facilitators. In the case of governments this can obviously get tricky, but in the case of the multi-billion non-governmental development industry this is much easier to imagine. A local actor, backed up by global funders, has a specific ambition or, more accurately, demand. They have money to spend on solutions. So let NGOs and other potential contractors bid on the project. Effective organisations, with satisfied local customers, would flourish in this model. Others would disappear. Just like any other competitive sector.



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There are two fundamental differences compared to the traditional development sector in such a market-based method. Firstly, rather than circumventing local populations during the decision making process by lobbying funders/donors, NGOs need to vie for local actors' interest and approval. This fundamentally changes the subsequent processes by removing administrative pressures and increasing the importance of actual outcomes. Measurable results? Constant contracting of external evaluators? Long logical frameworks? No need; local satisfaction combined with market pressures will take care of that. Secondly, the connection between target populations and sector is no longer one of charitable acts, but rather one in which local actors have the upper hand and decide. This removes many of the ills haunting current IDC dynamics.

Of course all of this means that the current development sector, including funders, will need to cede a large chunk of their control on content and procedure. Ideological choices based on democracy, human rights or political choices might become harder to impose. But that is exactly the point. By circumventing that kind of dynamic all together, the new alternatives that have become so successful lately show that it is time to forget about ideological control. The only effective ideology is support for human wellbeing as defined by local people. Not governments, not funders, not NGOs, but the people who are labelled "beneficiaries" or "recipients" in the first place.

Summarising, a local led approach based on direct connections means that funders negotiate terms directly with local populations, thereby fundamentally changing the links between all parties involved. They then take a step back; their half of the cooperative relations- the donation of



money- has been fulfilled. If the end results turn out to be unsatisfactory, they can move on at any time. The locals then use those funds to contract service providers- be it experts, NGOs or private enterprise- to carry out the specific project at hand.

How does it work? A practical example

In order to put the above into a feasible and practical framework- one that develops the local led approach and permits the match of global resources and local needs- there is a clear challenge to overcome: creating a mechanism that allows the actors to behave and communicate accordingly. The funder needs to communicate with the local population to establish the common goal, typically improving people's livelihoods, entrepreneurship or social cohesion. The local population then has to decide on, and communicate with, the service provider of their choice. What is needed for them to connect through such a local led approach?

These dynamics require, for all intents and purposes, an intermediary. In order to avoid falling in the traditional trap of global selection rather than local leadership, this bridge needs to connect local and global without being part of the service industry itself. As such, it is an instrument that provides the local population with facilitators and service providers from the global community.

Keeping the focus on human connections, this model then involves local as well as global representatives. The former is part of local society, and listens to ideas, initiatives, ambitions and needs. That person then



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communicates any feasible ideas into the global side of the equation, the people who look for global resources needed to make the local ambitions a reality. These global counterparts feed options back to the local community, thereby directly linking the demands rising up from the grassroots through the local representatives to the global solutions they find.

The local actors who defined the original objectives are in charge of the execution of the projects. These local actors will also evaluate-supported by their local representative- the outcomes of the service providers' work. This basic infrastructure, almost completely human in nature, has very low maintenance costs and would make significant chunks of current development bureaucracy redundant. Moreover, instruments currently developed at a global level because of the sector's non-local nature would in this model be a natural by-product of customer-supplier relations between local actors and global⁸ services.

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Consider the fictional case of João who is a local farmer in Bafatá, Guinea-Bissau. His local community has been frequented by NGOs in the past, with varying success. However, none was active in his professional field, and therefore unable to help him with his idea of setting-up a local crop distribution centre for small farmers like himself. This would allow coordinated harvesting and reduce transportation costs to local markets, but it requires basic technology and roll-out expertise unavailable in his rural area. Fortunately, he heard about a new initiative recently set-up in which a woman- Maria- in a town nearby listens to ideas like his, and helps to find the resources necessary to turn ambitions

⁸The word "global" does not necessarily imply non-local. With global we refer to resources that are potentially available to local actors. These could come from local society as well as from internationally oriented experts or organisations.



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into reality. After speaking to her, soon she finds financial support from Big Africa Foundation (BAF) in order to develop his project. With Maria by his side, João agrees a number of basic issues on what the project will look like with BAF, after which Maria contacts her global counterparts. They bring back a number of potential companies that are specialised in local agricultural coordination instruments, and João chooses the one that is most in line with his BAF agreement. After the distribution centre is set-up, BAF and João, both happy with the outcome, decide to roll-out this project in other parts of the country as well.

All that this model requires is independent local representatives who are connected to independent global representatives. It focuses on cooperation between those who the whole exercise is all about: funders and local populations. It still involves a sector of specialists in developmental challenges, but it turns them into market-based actors competing for local approval. It takes away their double- or triple even-monopoly as initiator, executive and evaluator of development activities. There is no reason why developmental organisations should not be forced to be effective and customer-oriented, and in this model it forces them to be exactly that, or disappear.

The power of connectivity

The above is an incredibly simple and obvious approach to development cooperation, and yet one that has not been fully implemented anywhere. More and more alternatives are coming close, but a structured approach to redefining development cooperation in this way does not exist. A multitude of local communities, groups and



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individuals could benefit: cultural initiatives, entrepreneurs, youth associations, women groups, and everyone else who has ideas in need of practical support. They can all be shapers and deciders of their own developmental path. This can only happen with the cooperation of funders, of course. Foundations, companies that engage in social corporate responsibility, and government aid agencies could all see their most basic objectives be realised in more effective and satisfactory ways than can currently be observed.

With development aid continuously challenged and the post-2015 world approaching, many actors will continue the debates on how to improve and reform traditional mechanisms, aid effectiveness, thinking big and global, thinking institutional and governmental. At the same time, local ideas and solutions exist already on a small, human scale. They are not about large sums of money but practical, daily challenges. All people need is access to resources and expertise- abundantly available in existing global markets-to turn their ideas into reality.

The model we propose is all about connecting such existing dynamics. It is about connecting local to global, people to resources, ideas to solutions. Once those connections are made, actors involved will take it from there. There is no need for complex structures, global debates or top-down approaches. Nor is there any need for a multi-billion development sector in the middle between question and answer; both questions and answers exist independently of such a sector. They just do not always know about each other. Connectivity solves that.



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