Development Cooperation at Cross roads – Some Thoughts

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Thank you, Isaac, for your storyful introduction.

Ladies and gentlemen, complexity must be in your genes. When invited to this conference I was asked to sketch some major trends in development; to be provocative; to dig into complexity of change processes and the importance for evaluation practice. I was challenged to inspire, be innovative, show quality. I just wanted you all to know this. Because the aspirations and ambitions expressed in these questions have made this speech into a complexity issue, I can tell you. I look at all these questions and challenges as objectives for my intervention. Since this conference is about revisiting evaluation, I asked myself: how to measure impact of my intervention? In the best tradition of evaluation let me start by identifying possible results to be achieved:

- A shared understanding of my vision of future trends in development processes
- A verifiable statement by me how complexity of change processes will be part of these trends
- At least one innovative idea with respect to evaluation practices to capture these complex change processes
- A spark of recognition and excitement by you in response to my talk

To assess my impact it is necessary for us to establish our baseline, to make my theory of change explicit and to establish a control group. I can already tell you now that I will not reach the objectives. First of all, you are more knowledgeable of the subject than I am. So I don not dare to set the baseline, I am in your hands on this point. Second, the control group will be the ones outside of this room and not entering during the speech. Now I hope that not too many of you have gone out to get a cup of coffee next door, but they are the ones you will need to asses the counterfactual. Third, my theory of change will be sketchy at best as I cannot predict what the future holds. More than an honest opinion is

not possible. It is modesty that must prevail, ladies and gentlemen, especially when facing hugely complex change processes. I consider my role here more as absorber of knowledge than as sharer of knowledge. I hope you will inspire me as I consider the questions of this conference as highly complex.

In the Netherlands we are currently conducting an intensive debate about the role, future and prospects for development cooperation. I will not bother you with the details of Dutch development cooperation, even though that would be a much easier subject. Elements of the debate however bear particular relevance for the questions about the nature, depth and likelihood of future developments and change processes. The Scientific Council on Government Policy, and independent advisor to the Netherlands government, has recently published a report under the title: *Less pretention, more ambition – towards a development cooperation that will matter*. The report brings out a number of trends that are of particular importance towards development processes. I will mention three of those trends that I feel are likely to evolve. A trend of increasing uncertainty, a trend of increasing interconnectivity and a trend of moving towards a 2.0 society.

Uncertainty

The world has become a bigger and a smaller place at the same time. This is a confusing concept. Whereas on the one hand, people have started to connect much easier, travel longer distances, shorten lines of communications and have thus brought a bigger world into their own practical world, problems/ developments/ events/ solutions/ opportunities/ threats that have never been experiences before are now on the doorstep and need to be dealt with. International crime, insecurity, financial instability, climate change, energy scarcity, China, Brazil, volcano outbursts. All of these events cannot be avoided and have increased complexity of everyday life. Getting accommodated to what used to be considered as alien into the realm of everyday life has made the world to become a smaller place, but the complexity and unexpected events that emerge have made it bigger. This is true in the Netherlands, but also in Guinea, India, Guatemala and Iceland. People need to come to terms with this confusion that brings a state of uncertainty. Uncertainty at an ever quicker pace. Uncertainty that is influencing complex change processes.

Interconnectivity

Scarcities, whether at global, regional, national or local level, need to be dealt with in every process of development. Access to resources, access to knowledge and to technology is crucial for any process of social formation, of growing capacity and of economic prosperity. Likewise is sharing of resources, sharing of knowledge and of technology crucial. A willingness to do so cannot be taken for granted. When scarcities start to interconnect more with each other, gaining access and willingness to share become particularly important. That is the second important trend that I would like to bring forward: growing interconnectivity requires new institutional arrangements. Growing interconnectivity will lead to increased complexities of development processes. Water scarcity is connected to climate change. Food production is connected to availability of water. Education is connected to productivity and government capacity is important for delivery of educational services. It is just as complex as that.

2.0 Society

Institutional fabrics in societies are changing rapidly. New technologies – mobile phones, computers, internet, Facebook – have led to strong groups in society that work in a 2.0 mode. Hierarchy has become less imported and less respected as a result, merit is becoming increasingly important. Communication becomes interactive and no longer one sided and top down. Low barriers to access, more cooperation and less competitiveness are important features of this modernisation of societies that is taking place. Old institutions will fade away; new and different ones will come up. This all brings new boundaries between the individual and the collective; between public and private; between government and civil society; between public sector driven change and civic driven change. That is a trend that will continue with strong implications for how we do business. For us, here in the Netherlands, but also for others elsewhere in the world.

More trends can be discerned, but let me stick to these three trends. Each of them will lead to profound changes in how we practice development cooperation, argues the Scientific Council. True. More importantly, each of those trends will impact on development processes themselves. I therefore may hope that the practice of

development cooperation will follow suit. If not, the practice will become outdated, irrelevant and out of business. Some may applaud that, others don't. I do not, because it is precisely through development cooperation that we can inspire ourselves to deal with the changes that are coming up, to connect in such a way that problems can be tackled in a more integrated manner, that opportunities are recognized and made into benefit. Development cooperation holds valuable lessons to us all, as working in this field requires absorption of different cultures, different values and adapted behaviour. It requires us to be able to look form outside inwards, reflect upon ourselves from an outsider's perspective. Development cooperation holds the promise of a truly global perspective.

I mentioned a trend towards increased uncertainty as one of the trends we have to deal with. That will bring out a quest for stability. Political stability, safety, economic stability. Predictability and understanding are services that will become more in demand than currently provided for. This conference is about the impact of the recognition of increased complexity of change processes. Yes, indeed, we need to recognize the issue of complexity much better; we need also to understand what the complexity is. In responding to uncertainty, people will build up new arrangements, institutions and capacities. Not as a provision of a service from outside, but as an emerging property from within. Assisting from outside in such processes will require a very detailed understanding of what is happening at field level, in local communities. What are the local dynamics in place? To understand that, development workers need to acquaint themselves with these local practices. They need to understand what insecurity is bringing about. They will discover that in dealing with insecurity often solutions cannot be found inside that same local community. That national, regional and international arrangements are sometimes needed. Often in combination. Thus an open mind is needed, a capacity to look beyond the locality or community at stake. To explore in the immediate and more distant environment what connections can be made, what opportunities are at hand and what threats need to be dealt with. For evaluators, this will require a capacity to look from the outside inwards. Take the local perspective as starting point and reflect back on what an intervention has brought about, how it was planned for and what institutional features have dictated its success or failure.

Uncertainty and unpredictability go hand in hand. People can deal with unpredictability but in doing so, an analytical model that itself is a symbol of 'created' predictability becomes less relevant. Current evaluation methodologies do start form assumptions of predictability. Logical frameworks, applied widely in development cooperation, are a way of bringing predictability, assumed causalities and measurability at the table while developments and interventions that are subject to evaluation have not been predictable, causal and measurable. Does this mean that methods need to change? Perhaps. Do we have new methods at hand? Not yet, but I am open for suggestions. To me the answer is in applying multiple sources and methods, better checks and balances, looking outside in, more real time evaluation and most of all: **stop believing uncritically the plan that is the basis of the interventions**. Become distrustful to the plan as soon as the ink is dry. Question its relevance continuously and adapt to new insights and circumstances. That can be done with existing methods. I know that in this hall many of you feel that new methods are needed. I invite you to prove to me you are right. To develop methods that are feasible. At the same time, linear thinking and logical frameworks can be made more flexible, assumptions can be adapted and time lags can be solved. Current practices and methods are not redundant yet. As a manager in a development organisation I still attach great value to existing methods even though I am open to renewal and innovation. A step-by-step process of renewal seems the most promising to me.

How about the evaluation methods and practices with respect to the other two trends I have mentioned? Increasing interconnectivity and interdependence between scarcities will lead to more complex processes of change. No doubt. Single objective interventions will become less and less effective and relevant. Indicators will become composite of nature and measurability will decrease as a result. Multidimensionality needs to be captured and quantitative methods are not always well suited to do so. But solutions seem to become multidimensional in methods s well. Story telling, in depth qualitative research, participatory approaches and probably other, new, methods not yet in my textbook can be deployed to understand the multidimensionality and multilayered processes that result from the interdependencies mentioned. I can see in the guidelines of the Network of Networks of Impact Evaluation, NONIE, still a strong belief in quantitative methods is expressed. At the same time, NONIE recognizes complexity, the

need for combination of proven methods and combining more rigorously quantitative and qualitative research. Equally important will be the application of multidimensional knowledge and expertise. Not only in conducting interventions, but also in evaluating them. It is the growing complexity and interconnectivity of scarcities that will trigger a chance in intervention practice away from a sector bias and towards a chain approach. Chains of problems intrinsically connected and recognised as a system in it self will lead to interventions that will combine multidimensional expertise, address problems from different perspectives and that will thus require teamwork. The evaluation practice will have to follow suit.

And what about the changing patterns of communication, the emerging of a 2.0 society? How will that impact on development processes and on evaluation processes? New ways of communication will facilitate much quicker adoption of technologies, of ideas. Much wider groups of persons, stakeholders and resources will become available for solving problems at local level. Application will be done more directly between provider and consumer without longer routes of provision, planning and accountability often through representative bodies like governments. In this world of rapid change, interventions will change in nature: more multi actor, quicker, fit to scale. Accountability arrangements will change and become less hierarchical, more on demand and therefore more real time. A focus on factual information and data may result that allows monitoring and evaluation to partly overlap. Monitoring and evaluation practice could thus grow towards each other and may even merge. The tension between the accountability and the learning function of evaluations may grow. The demand for accountability will become more time pressured, less focused on impacts, more on outputs and outcomes. Single loop learning, corrections and adaptations on the spot and managing those processes well will become practice of the day. At the same time, demand for results will increase. This is a quest for the counterfactual. Complexities can be approached from many more sources as direct, merit based contributions can be called in at short time due to ever increasing communication capacity. People will want to see whether their contributions have made a difference. Knowing that processes were conducted well will not suffice and increasingly become irrelevant. Accountability itself is part and parcel of a hierarchical system of provider of resources that want feed back on performance by implementers and users that operate at a distance. But that very distance will become

less, in time, in geography and in communication. In the end, the more important contribution of impact evaluations will become learning. Learning by comparing the factual with the counterfactual. Understanding the real nature of developments, understanding contexts much better and facilitate the relevance of choice in planning and implementation. That is what impact evaluations will need to deliver. Learning and accountability are now firmly connected, but I feel that the two purposes show a tendency to grow apart. And so will evaluation practices with possibly a sole purpose of impact evaluations to be learning and understanding, whereas other forms of evaluations may serve the purpose of accountability. Single loop learning and accountability may well go hand in hand, but double loop learning and accountability may be at loggerheads. That will require a clearer distinction between purposes of an evaluation to guide the methods to be applied.

These are some thoughts from an outsider. In development work context specificity will become much more important. Time horizons will become shorter. Number of actors will increase. Problems will become more connected. Change processes more complex. My call is for flexibility and reflection. My call is to NOT BELIEVE the plans we draw up ourselves. To be cautious, distrustful and ready to adapt. But to keep on striving for disentangling complexity. To break it down, try to understand it with proven methods, be creative in combining methods and adding value from different perspectives and than bring the element together again in a quest for understanding more than for accountability.

It is not much I bring to the table, I am sorry. I was bound to fail, as I said at the start. I am curious about your remarks and questions. I stand to be corrected and to be informed by your expertise during this morning session.

Thank you.