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Denmark needs to lead the way on international development

This summer, governments from across the globe met in New York to review progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Meanwhile, in Denmark, the government has published its proposed development policy. Both come at a time when the development landscape is changing dramatically, and in which Denmark – seen as a leader in international development – needs to find a role for itself. For me, this is no longer just a question about how much aid should be provided, or about what the rich world can do for the poor, but about our shared responsibility to achieve a more sustainable future for everyone. The world needs the Danish approach to, and knowledge of, cooperation and development. Not least in the area of civil society’s role in development. Now, more than ever, is the time to show a willingness to take part in this shared responsibility. And I hope Denmark will continue to lead, innovate and experiment in this arena in years to come.

Recognising that we won’t be able to achieve our ambitious new goals with a business as usual approach, the new Danish development policy is based on a willingness to take risks and to embrace a ‘paradigm shift’. In this, I find much cause for encouragement, as well as some cause for concern.

As we construct a new development landscape, our approach must be two-fold. On the one hand, we must seek to protect the core values that lie at the heart of the development project as a global public good. We must remain true to the essence of aid, maintaining the commitments we have made to a 0.7 per cent of GNI minimum for development spending and seeking to safeguard all that is good about the current system. No doubt a paradigm shift of sorts is taking place, but it doesn’t – or shouldn’t – involve losing sight of the foundational principles of development.

On the other hand, we must seek to dismantle what we might call the ‘development-industrial complex’ that has shaped and dominated our landscape for the last two decades. Gone are the days of aid being flown in to an impoverished global South by wealthy Northern governments and NGOs; gone are the days of rich countries bestowing their charity upon the poor. We are ushering in a new way of thinking about development, one that has nothing to do with charity and everything to do with solidarity, with shared responsibility, with partnerships and new, diverse flows of money.

Finding this middle ground between protecting what is good at the heart of our current system and branching out into new and uncharted territory won’t always be easy. The tensions are already clear to see. Increasingly voluble government rhetoric in the global North seeks to cast development priorities as synonymous with national interests. Indeed, the proposed Danish development policy is clearly integrated into Danish foreign policy and guided by ‘clear national interests’. Such a narrative is understandable; we’re talking about spending taxpayers’ money after all. But the national interest and global public good cannot always be served at the same time, or in the same way. As well as cutting their aid spending from 0.87 per cent of GNI in 2015 to 0.7 percent in 2016, the Danish government have reserved approximately 20 per cent of the total aid budget for expenses related to receiving refugees in Denmark. Whilst the instinct to protect our own populations from the negative impacts of global instabilities is entirely natural, dealing with the ongoing tide

of refugees must be as much about addressing the drivers of fragility, conflict and insecurity, as it can be about delivering refugee services on our own shores. Sometimes protecting our narrow, short-term self-interest can be a false economy.

I could say the same thing about the increasing corporatisation of development. More and more development dollars are being channeled through the private sector. Recent data from the US government shows that three quarters of development contracts now go to private sector actors and only one quarter to NGOs. And the Danish government has placed great emphasis on the importance of market-based solutions that prioritise the role of the private sector wherever possible. This kind of approach is fine as long as you see development as being about delivery alone. But development is about much more than efficient delivery; it's about empowerment, strengthening citizen voice and democratic institutions. Development is also a political project.

Reducing the commitment to civil society as a development actor worries me, since civil society is the only sector that can build lasting resilience in a country long after other aid actors have departed. In middle-income countries in particular, civil society often acts as the buffer that prevents the dismantling or unraveling of democracy. Last year, we recorded serious violations of civic space in 109 countries. Now is not the time to renege on our commitments to protect and strengthen the rights of civil society to mobilise for change.

In this, moving more money to civil society in the global South will be critical: not only through sub-granting or through chains of Northern-based fundermediaries, but through direct funding of the kind that has allowed civil society in the global North to establish itself. Of course, all of this raises pertinent questions regarding the continued role of northern civil society. Now that building capacity in the global South has become critical to achieving our development goals, many people are asking if the end is nigh for Northern NGOs. I don't believe it's the end; more like a return to the beginning. In many cases, Northern development NGOs, now massive, competitive organisations focused on service delivery, started out as social movements; increasingly, they are returning to these roots. NGOs like Oxfam are rediscovering their original identities as membership networks, families of people interested in development issues and powerful political voices for change.

Denmark, like other countries, needs more civil society organisations and movements like this: an agile civil society that is robust, engaged in development issues, a champion or critic of the government as circumstances require. The development work of the Danish government needs to be grounded in Danish civil society, not in a series of technical fundermediaries designed to deliver aid elsewhere and not in private sector organisations that deliver an efficient, but hollowed out version of development at a time when sustainability and inclusivity is key. As we operate on the development landscape, let's ensure that we keep people and principles – the lifeblood of our endeavours – at its heart.

Best regards,

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Secretary General

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