

Development researchers meet in Geneva

# Earthland

In June, 450 development researchers met in Geneva at the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI) conference entitled 'Global governance for sustainable development: the need for policy coherence and new partnerships'.

**A**n international conference that brings together development academics from all areas of the social sciences is especially interesting for the trends and general tenor it brings to the surface. Researchers from dozens of countries, including a fair share from the South, attended the 12th EADI General Conference. Apart from the occasional jewels – innovative perspectives and exciting research projects that pop up in its more than 50 workshops – the EADI conference is first and foremost a measure of what European development research institutes consider most relevant today. Its theme is chosen from topical matters in international political and policy circles, so it was no surprise that this year's theme – in the sun-drenched Swiss city of Geneva – was 'sustainable development'.

EADI conferences take place every three years. In 2005, the theme was 'insecurity and development'. The war on terror was at its peak, and Western concern with security issues was projected onto development thinking. Rather than national security and geopolitics, the many aspects of security for people in developing countries were studied in depth. Now that climate change is a fast climber on the international agenda, security is again looked upon differently. Although until recently Western observers viewed the Middle East mainly from a religious and cultural angle, the focus is now back on the long-standing geopolitics surrounding oil. The rising price of oil – and the controversies surrounding biofuels – and the related international food crisis are making the front pages. Together with concern over the environment, these subjects are changing the agenda. Add to this the rise of 'new actors' such as China, India, Pakistan and Brazil and the outlines of a new international picture are appearing.

By **Ellen Lammers**, a researcher and writer based in Amsterdam, and **Frans Bieckmann**, Editor in Chief of *The Broker*.



But it is still a general sketch, of course, and one that does not tell us much about what the future policy and research priorities will be. The analyses presented by a selection of special guests during the plenary sessions of the EADI conference were therefore interesting, not only for their content and message, but equally for the institutes that the speakers represented.

Kemal Dervis, head of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), drew attention to 'growth acceleration in the world economy'. Contrary to short-term fluctuations and supposed economic setbacks, an underlying trend towards further economic growth is evident. Dervis gave three explanations for this: technological progress, the further integration of the world economy and unprecedented investment rates in East Asia. 'China and India now invest around 40% of their gross domestic product (GDP), and there are signs that oil exporting economies will invest even more'. This growth may look good in terms of economic development, but from the standpoint of the global climate and environment, it could bring enormous problems. 'We're facing a shift. The binding constraint is no longer labour; the real issues are atmospheric and energy constraints'.

### Global governance

Another important topic at the EADI conference – announced in its title – was 'global governance'. However important and obvious a global perspective may seem, many development academics and policy makers still focus on the bilateral level. Even multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are looked upon as international executors of policies aimed at enhancing the development of nations. Negotiations and arrangements on a global level are often seen as something external, something for diplomats and not development workers to engage in; something for the academic study of international relations, but not for development researchers.

Because of this, quite a few conference participants were pleasantly surprised by the keynote speaker, Tariq Banuri, director of the Future Sustainability Programme of the Stockholm Environment Institute, who challenged his audience to think outside the box. His speech, 'Earthland: Six billion characters in search of an author', depicted the world as one country – Earthland – with 6.5 billion people. According to Banuri, Earthland is a very dualistic, semi-feudal, unequal, weakly governed and corrupt country that fails to act collectively even in the face of danger. 'It looks like Ethiopia, or Sudan, with rival warlords controlling territories', he said. Banuri's remark that Earthland is much less equal than any of the 207 'real' countries it consists of stirred the audience.

Given the transnational nature of many of today's challenges, global governance is a must. According to Dervis, 'We need global coordination for handling global goods. Food prices can be managed a lot better. The current food crisis sets us back several years in reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), especially MDG 1. And there is no telling how food prices will evolve. It is quite clear that we cannot handle global warming without the cooperation of emerging economies. But rich countries are still the biggest polluters. In absolute terms China now

equals the US in terms of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. But there is still a crucial difference: the US emits 20 tonnes per capita, while Europe emits 9 and China 5'. Stressing that there is a dramatic need for global governance 'and mechanisms for distributional impact', Dervis called these essentially 'political problems'. In other words, more than anything, they are a matter of power and interests. 'We agree', one member of the audience responded, 'but let us now call the culprits by name. Who are the people and institutions that must change their politics or be held accountable for failing to act'?

### Democratizing the core

Ngairé Woods of the University of Oxford pointed to the absolute need to democratize global economic decision-making processes. At present a limited group of countries lays down the law. At the same time the financial credit crisis is exploding within that very unstable, insecure core. One may wonder whether developing countries are still willing to choose this path. According to Woods, 'The core is losing its place. Not only in terms of legitimacy, but also because of the power shift to emerging markets: in trade, global reserves, investments, energy resources. Forty years ago the US was the largest creditor; now it is the largest debtor. Decisions are no longer made in Washington but in Beijing and the Gulf'. Woods posed the big question: what impact will this have on institutions like the World Bank and the IMF? 'The emerging countries do not regard these institutions as impartial. Why should they engage with them as their own? It is fundamental that we force this situation open and grant the new economic powers their due. How else can we possibly persuade those countries to join us at the discussion tables where we hope to solve global problems'?

The problems may be political, but the solutions will not come from politicians, said Juan Somavia, director-general of the International Labour Organization (ILO). He believes intellectuals should take the lead. He urged the hundreds of academics present to take responsibility. 'We need change. For change you need new ideas and visions. The impetus comes from proper and detailed analysis'.

For Somavia it is 'pretty obvious' what needs to be done. The dominant liberal discourse of the last 20 years is no longer defensible and must be amended by the developing narrative on sustainable development. We need fair globalization. Transforming this new thinking into a truly dominant paradigm and concrete policies will require political leadership. 'We don't have that', says Somavia. 'Politics is still national, promoting national interests. So we need a movement, such as the environmental movement, to pressure our political leaders. Research can convince people that all of this is man-made'. He directly appealed to those present in the university auditorium: 'This is about power and social struggle; we are not going to get ahead softly. We need a movement of movements, inspired by intellectual leadership from people like you'. ■

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□ For more information and working papers visit <http://eadi.org/gc2008>.