

Towards a global development strategy

The debate on *The Broker* website on how to shape a global development strategy is starting to take off. Both the lengthier and shorter contributions explore several aspects of the discussion that was presented in our last special report, dated April 2010. The editorial team at *The Broker* has also uploaded reports from other debates, including extensive summaries of a debate at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a seminar at the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs. And to top it off, there is also a long interview with former Minister for Development Cooperation, Bert Koenders.

Jan Pronk, former Dutch development and environment minister and UN diplomat, recently reviewed the report *Less Pretension, More Ambition* by the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR). Contrary to many other commentators, Pronk raises several objections about the report's core analysis. In the discussion on *The Broker* website, called 'Getting the basics right' about the fundamental principles of a global development strategy, he calls the analysis in the WRR report 'disputable'. He criticizes its 'apolitical character', which according to Pronk is the consequence of the Council's definition of development as 'accelerated modernization' along Western lines.

Pronk says that 'there are essentially three ways of looking at development processes in societies. The first is the one the WRR uses: from the vantage point of a national society. This view focuses primarily on change, growth, a higher standard of living and, if you will, modernization. But development processes can also be looked at from the vantage point of the global system. This view highlights the balance of power, inequality and dominant external influences, as a result of international capitalism, for example, or the geopolitics of superpowers.'

A third, more micro-level view is also mentioned. 'This view revolves around the position and role of people and communities, the opportunities they have to determine their own future and the consequences they have to bear from national and international factors that they have no influence over. You would have to use all three of these vantage points simultaneously to get to the bottom of a process because they complement each other. One view is not necessarily better than the other. The point is not to use a certain point of view and ignore the others. That is what happens in this report.

Globalization is mentioned, but only parts of it, not as a system that determines everything. And not a word is wasted on people. The entire report is about the needs of countries, not people. Unless, of course, the Council is assuming that they are parallel needs, or that everyone will ultimately benefit from growth and development. Apparently they are assuming the latter.'

Debating the interpretation of global analysis on one of the follow-up blogs about the WRR report on *The Broker* website, called 'Going global', David Sogge agrees that the global arena should be one of the basic analytical units. Yet he goes even further in an attempt to 'unpack' the term. He warns that it can be misused, citing as an example the action national politics has (not) taken to regulate international banking.

'National policy elites' Sogge says, 'can shrug their shoulders and tell us (after asserting their best intentions, deepest concerns and perhaps even moral outrage) that "there's nothing we can do either. It's all being played out at a global level and so it's beyond our power". Or they give the matter the silent treatment. To introduce the notion of 'global arena' in these ways can be a useful political dodge, a convenient frame for what British political economist David Chandler and others call a strategy of avoidance of political responsibility.'

Other interesting contributions are made by some (former) officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, such as Jeroen Rijniers and Paul Hassing. Rijniers states that although a new global development infrastructure should ideally follow a new strategy, there is a significant risk that things will not change at all since the 'current forms, structures and related networks and interest coalitions' are what define the policies and strategies. So, it might be useful to think in opposite terms.

‘Pure self-interest will not secure our place in the world.’

– Bert Koenders

The Broker spoke extensively with Bert Koenders, former Minister for Development Cooperation in the Netherlands, about how to further reform development policy in the near future. Koenders is in favour of devoting more attention to global issues, and believes they should be tackled not only in global forums, but also at the national level in both developed and developing countries.

He proposes creating a new ministerial position, with greater powers to deal with these issues. At the same time, the Dutch Labour Party politician is calling for increased focus on political dimensions, such as conflicts of interest and a more equal distribution of wealth. Not only in countries themselves, but also in the context of global themes like the environment, the financial and economic crisis, and security. In Koenders’s opinion, the best way to really address these issues is to form strategic coalitions. He also argues that civil society organizations should operate much more politically and strategically.

Here are some excerpts from the interview: ‘The relationship between the national and international levels is complex. I believe that you need to intervene at both levels. I support the analyses of sociologist Saskia Sassen, which place global developments at the centre. I also used to be a great fan of Immanuel Wallerstein’s World Systems theory. They both look at the global economic system, with all its contradictions and consequences – at a cultural level as well. Globalization, however, has a different effect on every state, and states are vulnerable in different ways. The states that win and lose are continually changing. You therefore need to work at the country level – partly because this is also where the democratic responsibility lies – and pursue a global strategy. Politicians operating at a national level should take much more account of international opportunities and threats, otherwise we will return to provincialism or elitist cosmopolitanism. This kind of global strategy has to start with the states and organizations that enter into alliances in the international arena.’

Koenders also stresses the importance of ‘transnational coalitions concerning key issues, for example sustainable energy in poor countries. New movements, companies and organizations have a role to play in these coalitions’.

Another important concept is “enlightened self-interest”. Increasingly, states are forced to seek solutions at a global level. The way I see it, political points of entry are located at the interface of the national and the global. The clearest example of this kind of global issue is the environment. And then, of course, there is the financial and economic crisis. And conflict and terror. For me, these are the three main priorities at the global level’.



Former Dutch minister Koenders speaking to a crowd at a peace rally in Gulu, northern Uganda, in 2007.

Koenders also stresses the need to give policy more space. ‘Countries must be given more space to manage their own economies and develop their own relative advantages. Of course, they still have to focus on international trade and open up their economies, but not too fast. More policy space has actually already been created, but not in a way that benefits poor countries. The Netherlands is supporting its banks, and other European countries are trying to keep their car industries afloat. But that is not possible in Africa. The rules are currently being redefined by the powerful countries.’

On the economic crisis, Koenders says that it ‘is currently impeding the environmental and sustainability agenda, while it should have pushed it forward. That’s because we have used too few instruments. The consequence of neoliberal ideology is that there are no specific possibilities to stimulate the economy, pursue an innovative policy or strengthen certain markets, such as those for sustainable goods. People are just pressing the big buttons’.

‘In my view, NGOs should do a lot more. Development cooperation is currently becoming much less political and more technocratic. There is no movement in the Netherlands that is taking advantage of this crisis to force through positive changes, such as a worldwide tax on financial transactions.’

Koenders also believes that ‘at an international level, we should think more in terms of power, and seek to form coalitions that enable us to better defend the interests of the poor and influence the global agenda. They can be coalitions of like-minded people, or coalitions with groups in other countries. Forming coalitions to increase your power is the only way to ensure that global public goods are managed fairly, so that developing countries also benefit.’ ■