CLIMATE CHANGE AND REGIONAL STUDIES

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In the Shadow of Everyday’s Uncertainties: The Search for Sustainable Development Solutions With and Without Regional Partners

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Things happen and life is full of uncertainties. True as these two statements are, development doesn’t happen by chance. Even if something happens seemingly by chance, it is usually possible to trace back the reasons for that development. In turn, a forward-looking and objective-driven approach requires either strategic planning or at least an enabling environment for a coordinated development. What does this mean for development cooperation in a world where actions at the local, national and international levels are increasingly interrelated and interdependent?

The Member States of the United Nations agreed in 2000 on eight ‘Millennium Development Goals’ (MDG), which range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education, all by the target date of 2015. Major progress has been achieved around the world and expectations are high that commitments are maintained beyond 2015. Development partners are aware that the tasks are challenging. Current goals need to be accorded with other needs to find sustainable development solutions for the entire world and this is to be done in a complex environment providing many opportunities but also uncertainties and risks.

This article takes a look at top-down and bottom-up coordination of development cooperation by pointing to two terms and how they are interrelated: ‘uncertainties’ and ‘regions’. The first one is not used very often although, or even because, uncertainties are almost omnipresent in complex development settings. The second one is used very often but different actors mean something completely different by the word ‘region’. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how much we are accustomed to life with terminological and other uncertainties and how this seemingly pragmatic approach hinders a better coordination of development and development cooperation.

The Well in the Village and How a Seemingly Pragmatic Approach Can Mess Up Development

There is an old story about development policies and their implementation: Once upon a time, the head of government of one of the poorest countries of the world – let’s assume it’s the prime minister of an African country – decided that he needs to do something for the women in his country. He convened a meeting with governmental officials and national experts. At this meeting, he launched a programme to improve the situation of women. Following the meeting, a commission was set up and members were sent out to the cities and villages of the country to search for project ideas. The head of government didn’t put too many restrictions on the commission. He just noted that funds would be provided for selected projects but it would be mandatory that all projects produce tangible outputs and results, and women must be the beneficiaries. Instructed accordingly, the commission started its journey across the country.

One day, the commission saw a group of women carrying clay jugs full of water from a distant river to their village. It became immediately clear to the commission that they could demonstrate the effectiveness of the prime minister’s programme in this village; it just needed a well! The well would provide the village with all the water necessary and the women would no longer have to walk for hours. The output would be visible, tangible and the women would be the beneficiaries! Satisfied with their finding, the commission returned home, informed the prime minister and he approved the project. Shortly afterwards, a company was commissioned to dig the well. Within a few weeks the project was finished and the people of the village joyfully celebrated the new well.

Unfortunately, this is not the end of the story. One month after the celebration, the commission passed the village again and what they saw was striking. Although the well was still functioning, the women had returned to walk daily to the river and return hours later with heavy jugs. What had gone wrong? The commission investigated and found out that the walk to the river was for the women the only time during the day when they were without husbands and kids. While on their way, they could share their problems and could encourage each other. The well took away not only the weight from their shoulders but the women also lost a precious opportunity to socialise among each other. That’s why they preferred to keep walking instead of using the well.

I heard the story first in the 1980’s, but when I tell it today at seminars in Africa or New York it still generates the same lively discussion, and this not only because of the related gender issue. More than that, it is the classic situation of development processes which is enshrined in this simple story. Actors in the story are the same actors as in most development situations: Politicians, expert commissions, companies and citizens. The organisational structure behind the story is not described in detail but the prime minister apparently has administrative support from governmental institutions to launch national programmes, send out commissions and contract companies. The rights and duties of citizens are also not clear but obviously the women hadn’t been consulted before the well was finished. To be fair towards the commission, it needs to be mentioned...
that the villagers (including the women) apparently also didn’t approach, inquire or inform the commission on their needs.

Discussions about the story first focus on what seems to be obvious deficits and mistakes: the ad-hoc approach of the prime minister who sets up new commissions instead of relying on existing structures and procedures, the commission which has chosen a too simplistic methodology to select projects, the company which doesn’t look beyond the scope of their contract and the citizens who haven’t learnt to speak up and get engaged. In a public debate, this easily can turn into a blame game but in a seminar situation it’s easier to give to the discussion an interesting twist by asking: Do you think that all these actors make all these mistakes on purpose, and, if not, why do you think these mistakes happen nonetheless? Of course, often discussants suspect that some actors are just ignorant or have mean intentions, but to explain the chain of deficits and mistakes by referring to unwillingness and mean intentions on all sides doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. Usually, prime ministers want to be acknowledged as good leaders who take the right decisions, commissions and its individual members want to be successful and develop their own good reputation and citizens have an interest in improving their wellbeing and are aware that governmental commissions and projects can impact on that in one way or another. Therefore, the exchange of information, mutual consultations and – where appropriate – joint decision-making should be in the interest of all. Nonetheless, it didn’t happen in the given example and it doesn’t happen in many real life situations.

This is where discussions in seminars get really interesting because the lack of attention by the various actors cannot be explained by the story alone. Instead, the context of institutions and individuals involved has to be considered to better understand what kept the actors from giving proper attention to the planned project and its objective: The prime minister may have been in the midst of a national election campaign, commission members may have served at the same time in other committees and the villagers may have been faced by an existential threat for which water provision just wasn’t relevant. Another reason may have been that a more thorough planning of the project (requiring more time and effort) was considered as too costly. Whatever caused the failure in the given case, the example tells us that it can be risky and costly to simplify the design of a development process by not considering the wider context. Worse still: If a failure due to uncertainties can happen in one country and one village it may happen also elsewhere. If one accumulates now the uncertainties in development processes everywhere, one gets already a good impression of the challenge of coordinating development across the multi-level system of our modern world.

Another uncertainty: ‘Regions’ don’t equal ‘Regions’!

When regional researchers, planners and managers e.g. in Europe refer to ‘regions’, they may have different concepts about regions but they usually refer to geographic entities at a sub-national level. In contrast to these are those experts who work on global development issues like the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). In this context, the terms ‘regions’ and ‘regional cooperation’ refer generally to world regions like Africa or Europe and their joint institutions like African Union (AU) and European Union (EU).² International organisations usually have no mandate to propose or even decide on regional entities and networks within member states because this would be against the principle of sovereignty. This doesn’t exclude an UN agency cooperating with local or regional authorities within member states, but it has to be done in agreement with the member states of the organization. In practice, the direct engagement of sub-national regions at the international level is less relevant than the engagement of trans-national regions. Thus ‘regions’ equals ‘world regions’ in the international dialogue on development cooperation.

Following this understanding of regions, it is only consequent that a ‘sub-regional office’ is nothing local but an entity in charge of collaboration with a number of countries, e.g. the Sub-Regional Office for Eastern Africa of the UN’s Economic Commission for Africa. This doesn’t mean at all that what happens at the sub-national level is considered irrelevant. The opposite is true but it is either called ‘local’ or ‘decentralised’ – the sub-national regional dimension just doesn’t show up on the screen.

The distinction between the ‘regions’ in a sub-national and a trans-national context seems to be the pragmatic acceptance of an uncertain terminology and it is accepted because it doesn’t seem to generate major problems – as long as actors from the sub-national and those from the trans-national regions don’t cooperate intensively. In addition, those persons at the national level in charge of internal development in ministries of the interior, planning, development etc are usually different from those in charge of international cooperation in ministries of foreign affairs, international cooperation etc. So, why bother instead of accepting this uncertainty?
The development pillar as a multi-level system to coordinate development policies and management

The term ‘development pillar’ encompasses all mandates and activities of the UN’s work to promote development. Due to the existing cooperation between the System of the UN, Member States and other public and private development partners, the development pillar can be understood also as a policy field of development cooperation in the world which stretches across all policy and management levels. What is agreed at the international level is intended to have a positive impact on the local level and to achieve this, decision-makers at the international level need to know the local situation and needs. Of course, this requires also good cooperation and functioning governance mechanisms across policy levels and between sector policies.

When I joined the UN in 2008, it didn't take me long to pick up the UN terminology, including the different use of the term ‘region’, but it was only in 2012 when the discussion about the Post 2015 Development Agenda was launched by the UN that I started wondering if the different use of the term ‘region’ is more than an uncertainty in terminology. Instead it may be an indicator for a dysfunction in multi-level development co-operation. I argued above that the different use of the term ‘region’ seems to be not a problem for actors at the sub- and trans-national level because they don’t collaborate much in any way. Well, if this is true it means, in turn, that there is, on the one hand, an entire group of researchers, planners and managers at the sub-national level whose expertise until today is not (fully) integrated in the discussion and implementation of the development agenda. On the other hand, it also indicates that those actors at the sub-national level may talk a lot about integration and globalization but in reality it is still something distant and less relevant. Considering all open questions and challenges in development management, this separation is not an economic way of using available capacities – provided that the engagement of regional experts from a sub-national level indeed can generate added value at a higher level.

The case of Europe: Engaging regional partners in policy formulation and implementation while betting on innovative development through calls for proposals

How relevant the engagement of regional experts from the sub-national level is for cooperation at higher levels can be observed at least in one of the world regions: Europe. European integration after signing the Treaty of Rome in 1957 first focussed on selected policy fields, and what is now the European Union (EU) was from 1957 until 1993 just the European Economic Community (ECEC). Only gradually had member states agreed that a common regional and cohesion policy was needed to improve the economic well-being of regions in the EU, to avoid regional disparities and to promote sustainable solutions. In 1994, the Committee of the Regions6 was established as the EU’s Assembly of Regional and Local Representatives. Thanks to the Cohesion and Structural Funds7 and here especially the European Regional Development Funds (ERDF)8, the EU has powerful financial incentives to stimulate development. Objectives for the current period 2007-2013 are: convergence, regional competitiveness and employment, and European territorial cooperation. The funding for the regional and cohesion policy in 2007-13 amounts to EUR 347 billion, i.e. 35.7% of the total EU budget. For the period 2014-2020 the European Commission intends to allocate EUR 376 billion aimed at contributing to smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

However, how does the European Commission in Brussels know what is the right thing to be done considering all the diversity existing across the 27 Member States? Well, it doesn’t know and doesn’t have to because Member States traditionally have a strong voice and contribute.

They not only formulate framework policies but practically draft and propose individual programmes. This partnership was expanded in the late 1990’s by including regional and local authorities, economic and social partners and other competent bodies and by involving the partners at all stages, starting with approval of the development plan.

Within the ERDF, a specific part of the budget is dedicated to an objective called European Territorial Cooperation (ETR). Under this objective, 53 cross-border, 13 transnational and 3 interregional co-operation programmes are financed. In each of these programmes, the European Commission, groups of Member States and regional authorities share the programming and management, including project selection. What goes beyond most other Structural Funds interventions is that projects are developed by a wide range of public and private institutions and selected through open calls for proposals. This provides even to outsiders and newcomers the opportunity to develop new ideas, receive funding and thus gain impact on policy achievement. EUR 7.8 billion is the amount available between 2007 and 2013 for these programmes and the Commission proposes to increase the amount for the period 2014-2020 to EUR 11.7 billion.

While Member States generally agree on the added value of the Funds and an increase in the budget available, there is an ongoing discussion about how big is the added value and how to measure it. Monitoring and evaluation tools are constantly revised and improved but some indicators are still missing to better assess e.g. the appropriateness of funds invested in relation to cooperation objectives. Another challenge is given by the fact that there are other factors and actors besides the EU. This makes it even more
difficult to trace back to what extent
developments are due to interventions of
the EU. Reports on progress towards
economic, social and territorial cohesion
are regularly published by the Commis-
sion. In spite of uncertainties in evalu-
atation of the achievements, the European
trend is to invest even more funds and to
engage even more partners at all stages.

Coping with uncertainty of development processes: Engaging local and regional actors in discussing and formulating an agenda for sustainable development

The European approach for its own regional policy still has to prove that it outsmarts uncertainty and complexity by its multi-actor engagement and calls for proposals hoping that the funds and projects will stimulate innovation which governments otherwise cannot achieve. What is apparent already now is the innovative form to address complexity by a loose coupling of partners from different levels, public and private institutions, politics, research, planning and management in the context of multi-annual development programmes.

The African prime minister who launched his own development programme had more direct control over the projects of his programme than any manager or commissioner in Brussels. Nonetheless, he rather avoided complexity and selected a seemingly pragmatic approach full of uncertain elements. In both cases, uncertainty remains part of the development challenge but the European example has some distinct advantages: The joint programming and shared decision-making by the EU Commission, member states and sub-national authorities, the calls for proposals, the engagement of social and economic partners, mandatory communication strategies to assure outreach to the public are features which reduce the risk that objectives of programmes and interests of beneficiaries are missed. In addition, by giving each actor group a voice (although not necessarily always the same voice) in the process, these actors were empowered and engaged—an objective with which international development cooperation often still struggles. Europe’s regional policy is not suited as a blue print for global development cooperation but the way Europe mobilizes and engages its local and regional actors could be stimulating for global cooperation towards sustainable development.

In turn, regional researchers, planners and managers like those in Europe could widen their horizon through exchange and cooperation with other sub- and trans-national regions of the world. Even the example of the well in the African village is in the end not so different from similar situations in Europe or North America. The situation that governmental commissions come and propose initiatives without consultation of all stakeholders is not uncommon and therefore similar stories could be told with e.g. a European or North American context.

When regional planning and research emerged in Germany and other European countries about one hundred years ago, this was due to the challenges of industrialization and urbanization. Cities and national governments needed coordination at the regional level e.g. to assure water supply and transportation infrastructure for growing cities and industries. Today, those regions have lost many of their former industries. Employment moved abroad, imports and exports are becoming more relevant for old and new industries and services, and new Information and Communication Technologies challenge regional development and management globally while offering at the same time new opportunities. Regions are already globalizing. Its time now that more and more regional planners and managers check out how important global development cooperation is or will become for them and their own region.

External observers outside of the EU often point to the loss of national sovereignty as the price for integration. What they might overlook is how much strength the countries gained by mobilizing local and regional actors. Each country developed its own regulatory and institutional framework for regions and regional cooperation. European countries generated a diversity of regions and regional authorities which are now further developing in competition with each other. Again regions don’t equal regions. To develop so much diversity may seem to be not necessary or even in contradiction with the interest in reducing complexities. Yet who knows, may be the European laboratory of regions will one day serve as a kind of gene pool for innovation in governance in the world.

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Endnotes
* The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.
Climate change is de facto a global 'planetary' issue but one that is experienced locally and unevenly across regions and administrative boundaries. The regional dimension to climate change effects is the subject of this Regional Survey issue, addressing challenges of how climate science is communicated and visualised, and how policy and planning responses are able to implement the short and long term actions and decision-making required to both mitigate and adapt to climate change effects. These effects are experienced differently across demographic, regional and urban contexts, with clear lessons for urban planners and policy-makers in urban development and in the governance of difficult trade-offs. Our Guest Editor (Graeme Evans) draws together contributors who shed light on climate science and predictions including the scale at which these operate; the strategy for adaptation through managed realignment of flood risk zones; the need for integrated science-policy processes and decision-making; and reconciling the twin phenomena of a growing ageing population and climate change effects. An example of Bangkok’s most recent floods points to the failure of land use planning and city development, whilst the challenge for local and regional policy in tackling the management of a low carbon infrastructure and adapting to the realities of climate change, also raises the opportunity of developing regional economic competitive advantages, where the future may well be green.

Our Research Notes section also has an article on an environmental topic, that of the application of green technologies in the automotive industry.

Both our Comment and Debate and In Depth sections share the theme of attempts at poverty alleviation, specifically in Nigeria and more generally as a UN objective, respectively.