

Viewpoint

Aid effectiveness from Rome to Busan: some progress but lacking bottom-up approaches or behaviour changes

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Abstract

The Busan partnership adopted at the 4th High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness at the end of last year is a significant step forward towards the improvement of aid quality and the promotion of development. In particular, the inclusiveness achieved in Busan and the shift in discourse from 'aid effectiveness' to 'development effectiveness' are emblematic. However, key challenges still remain. Firstly, decision-making should be more bottom-up, finding ways to take into account the populations' needs and experiences and to enhance self-learning dynamics during the policy process. Today, it is particularly necessary to define what 'development' means at country level, according to the aspirations of particular categories of people and meeting operational and local expectations. Secondly, changes in language should be followed by a real change in mindset. Development stakeholders should further adapt their procedures to the reality of complex systems in which development interventions are being dealt with.

keywords development, health policies, bottom-up approaches, behaviour change, aid effectiveness

How to ensure development and improve aid and development effectiveness? This question has long been debated, especially after the 1980s and the so-called 'lost decade for development', when the adverse effects caused to social sectors by traditional aid modalities such as projects and structural programs became evident in many developing countries (Commission Sud 1990). Since then, new modalities of aid have been promoted such as sector-wide approaches and budget support, and several commitments have been taken by donors and governments to favour aid effectiveness. However, the topic is still pertinent and key challenges remain.

Donors and partner countries have been gathering in a series of High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness during the last decade: firstly in Rome in 2003, then in Paris in 2005, and in Accra, Ghana in 2008; more recently from the 29th of November to the 1st of December 2011 in Busan, South Korea. Since the first forum, significant steps towards improving aid quality and fostering development have been achieved.

The Rome Declaration on Harmonisation adopted in 2003 engaged merely Development Assistance Committee

(DAC)'s donors to better harmonise their interventions (OECD 2003). By comparison, the 'inclusiveness' achieved in Busan is emblematic per se. For the first time, civil society organisations were not mere observers, but official participants involved in drafting the outcome document. Moreover, the Busan statement acknowledges the complementary roles of civil society organisations, private stakeholders, parliaments and local governments, and even that of women, in a context where aid is recognised as being only one of the multiple sources of funding and development. Above all, the statement endorsement by 'non-traditional donors', such as China, Brazil and India, is also very important, as the debate and commitments on aid effectiveness have been so far limited to DAC donors.

Furthermore, the five principles agreed upon in the Paris Declaration (OECD 2005) and reconfirmed in the Accra Agenda for Action (OECD 2008) have been maintained. The Busan statement recognises the importance of country ownership, donor alignment, harmonisation, managing for results and mutual accountability, with a significant focus on transparency and the use of country systems (OECD 2011). However, contrary to the 12 targets and specific

indicators established by the Paris Declaration, the Busan partnership contains only a few time-bound commitments; rather, it defines adaptive and flexible mechanisms for fragile states, and for South–South partners that are engaged on a voluntary basis. Some observers have criticised this choice, speaking of ‘an outcome long on principles and short on commitments, high on rhetoric and low on accountability’ (de Renzio 2011). To us, one of the weaknesses of the Paris Declaration was rightly the monitoring of ambitious targets and of indicators hardly comparable across countries and over time, demanding time and money from governments and donors (Martini et al. 2011). We prefer to consider Busan as the starting point for a global dynamic in favour of shared principles.

Last but not least, in Busan, the debate has moved from ‘aid effectiveness’ to ‘development effectiveness’. If this shift is probably more a matter of rhetoric than of real practice, nevertheless it does have the merit of placing aid in a wider context and of better linking it to other policy areas, such as social, environmental, market and economic ones.

Despite all this progress, two crucial aspects need to be considered if we really want to improve the development effectiveness in partner countries and to support current commitments. Unfortunately, both aspects have been little discussed or implemented so far. They should now be better integrated in the post-Busan agenda and debate.

Firstly, decision-making should be more bottom-up, finding ways to take into account the populations’ needs, perceptions and experiences, rather than sticking to state officials’ views and choices. So far, there has been a missing link between policy decisions taken at (inter)national level and the real concerns of field actors and populations (Paul et al. 2010). Although the results of the Paris Declaration were essentially expected at the decentralised level, the debate on aid effectiveness has been highly technical and mainly limited to government representatives, neglecting local practitioners at operational level. For instance, health professionals from districts have rarely heard about Paris commitments, and they generally ignore its content or implications. Today, the Busan partnership offers a good opportunity to broaden the debate to new stakeholders and ‘development’ issues. However, ‘development’ may have different meanings to different stakeholders (Rist 2007). Therefore, it is necessary to define what ‘development’ means at country level, according to the needs and aspirations of particular categories of people and meeting operational and local expectations. Policy-making and implementation should also be further organised through self-learning mechanisms, taking into account the local experience and evidence.

Secondly, changes in language should be followed by a real change in mindset. In this regard, the implementation of the Paris Declaration proved how difficult it is for stakeholders to change their behaviour (Paul 2011) and how uneven progress has been (Wood et al. 2011). For instance, the implementation of comprehensive interventions has been undermined by the persistent demand made by some donors to attribute short-term results to their specific interventions, rather than considering their support as contributing to or being part of a comprehensive national policy. Results inevitably take time in complex systems, and any attempt to attribute results to particular interventions contravenes the spirit of the Paris Declaration and is no longer appropriate. In the health sector for example, the requirement of short-term results has often contributed to the further disintegration of health systems. Likewise, we have regretted the preference given by the Paris Declaration to independent monitoring of ambitious targets and quantitative indicators, rather than monitoring processes and changes in behaviour through national information systems, joint country-led mechanisms and more qualitative research (Martini et al. 2011; Paul et al. 2011). Although acknowledging the difficulties in building reliable country-led monitoring mechanisms in the context of weak management and endemic corruption, we assume it is possible to work towards strong check and balance mechanisms within the national systems.

To conclude, the Busan partnership is highly relevant. However, the real challenge is now to go beyond government representatives and to reach field actors and populations. At stake are actually the needs of the latter, their perceptions and the context they work and live in. Decision-making should be based more on bottom-up approaches, such as country-led mechanisms of planning, implementation and evaluation, taking stock of and scaling up local experiences. Development stakeholders should also further change their behaviour. These two aspects are not independent of each other: the organisation of a policy process is interlinked with stakeholders’ mindsets, but at the same time, it highly influences stakeholders’ behaviour. In our perspective, a real shift in mindset is needed, where development is better linked to its complex environment and finally considered ‘as a lengthy and open-ended process that can take many paths’ (Rihani 2002). The self-learning dynamics of a bottom-up approach can be successful in promoting this shift, raising stakeholders’ awareness, ownership and new behaviour better suited to the reality of complex systems in which development interventions are being dealt with.

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