

GEG Memo

Busan: a Ceremony to Define the Future Role of the OECD

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Post Busan

International conferences are not only about big declarations and new targets. They are also about offering places of socialization in a given field, consolidating the legitimacy of the actors who organize and attend them. This was partially acknowledged by the participants in the High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness themselves.

On day 2, the US secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged that targets and goals are important but mostly “inspirational”. In informal conversations, some participants regretted that discourses are emptied of political content to facilitate consensus, and that repeated negotiations downgrade commitments to the minimal common denominator. Some underlined that these commitments are either too weak or they contend the risk of not being followed and implemented fully, especially in the absence of clear implementation mechanisms. Others criticize the beauty contest dimension in the venue - with all actors trying to promote their agendas and put forward their own contribution to development effectiveness in an increasingly crowded and competitive aid community – or the big gap between the conference venue and the living conditions of the world’s poorest populations that international aid is trying to help. On their way back home – a two-day plane trip with stops at Shanghai, Seoul, London, Paris or Dubai - some delegates of African countries ironically commented that the “high mass” was over.

But while it is legitimate to be disappointed and critical as citizens or activists, it is not necessarily relevant for the analyst to distinguish between “the surface” vs “reality”, “technical” debates vs “high politics”, the scene and what’s behind, explicit and hidden agendas. Approaching HLF4 as a bazaar¹ enables us to refocus on products other than the much-expected outcome document, which is only one of the conference’s outputs. In the bazaar, old players comfort their position; new ones enter the game and learn its rules. Participants exchange ideas, draft documents and business cards; they create contacts, build networks or coalitions. They adapt their behaviours, learn to speak the international aid language and to present themselves in ways compatible with the agreed format. These

¹ Dr Thomas Fouquet used this phrase in reference to the World Social Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in February 2011, during a brainstorming session of the research team working on international activists coordinated by Prof. Johanna Siméant (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne).

elements, in turn, fuel the development “myth”², ensure its reproduction as well as the institutionalization of truly global norms, practices and attitudes. If Busan is no exception, then the ceremony held in Busan certainly contributed to the reinforcement of the “aid community”.

As an institutional and political performance, it was also an attempt to better define the future role of the OECD in this community. Indeed, the organization is at a crossroad. Both formally and historically, its members are developed countries only, and the organisation’s core expertise and work is dedicated to provide policy analysis and recommendations made to governments in “rich” countries.

But with the Paris agenda³, the OECD has consolidated its key role in the aid industry at a time - the late nineties - when the World Bank was prominent in framing a “post-Washington consensus” and a new “partnership” able to restore the legitimacy and efficiency of international development assistance after the mitigated results of previous structural adjustment programs. The Working Party on Aid Effectiveness itself⁴ is supposed to disintegrate after Busan. But it is highly improbable that the organization will throw aside the dynamics, expertise and institutional capital gathered through the Paris agenda.

The Fourth High Level Forum held offered the occasion for the OECD to present a draft of its Development Strategy, a key element in drawing directions for the organisation’s way forward. Consultations were organized in Busan, where the OECD secretary-general and DAC-chair asked developing countries to give their input and feedback on the draft development strategy, i.e. tell them how they think the organization can better help and serve them in the future.

On the one hand, the representative of Nicaragua seized the opportunity to offer a critical reading of the international aid community, stating that his country has lost the support of some donors after disagreements on the country’s development strategy in the past years. He highlighted that good results were reached and questioned the notion of “ownership” - and donors’ will to embrace it. He suggested the OECD could play a broker role in solving such conflicts. The institution’s staff replied that the Paris declaration was partially aimed at improving donor-recipient relationships, and recalled that because the OECD is not an aid agency so to speak, it cannot impose rules about aid allocation to its member-States or multilateral agencies/banks.

² This word is borrowed from Rist, Gilbert. *The History of Development: from Western origins to global faith*. Zed Books, 2002.

³ Here we mean the process, commitments, surveys, meetings that followed the adoption of the Paris declaration in 2005.

⁴ The Working Party on Aid Effectiveness (WP-EFF) was created in 2003 and “has evolved into the international partnership for aid effectiveness with 80 participants including bilateral and multilateral donors, aid recipients, emerging providers of development assistance, civil society organisations, global programmes, the private sector and parliaments”: http://www.oecd.org/document/35/0,3343,en_2649_3236398_43382307_1_1_1_1,00.html

On the other hand, it may well be uneasy for developing countries to answer the “what is the way forward?” question. There are, in my opinion, two main reasons for this. First, the role of the OECD is harder to grasp from a Southern perspective precisely because it is not an aid agency. The organization only has immaterial resources and power and cannot provide financing for development – which, to a certain extent, makes it less attractive – while its “added-value” lies in expertise, recommendations and the production of “best practices”. On the other hand, governments in developing countries don’t know the OECD very well. Contrary to donor agencies, the OECD does not have country representation in developing countries. As a consequence, it’s not part of daily aid negotiations and “policy dialogue” on development strategies at the country level. When developing countries have engaged with the organization in the aftermath of the Paris declaration (for surveys, evaluation and others), it was in interaction with its Development Assistance Committee – the political organ where member-States are represented – or its Secretariat (also called Development Cooperation Directorate). If the Working Party takes an end and the Secretariat under its current form disappears, then what will be the platform for discussing aid issues and associating developing countries? Development and cooperation issues are not the core of the business of the OECD as a whole.

It will be interesting to follow how the OECD will shape this new Development Strategy and, in the words of the OECD secretary-general and DAC chair, proceed to “mainstream” development within the organisation while affirming its role in the broader aid community. How this will be done in practice remains an open question. But the challenge ahead consists of nothing less than compiling diverging expectations with the possibilities and constraints created by the OECD’s mandate, institutional culture, bureaucratic tools and political structure.