

GEG Memo

From Aspiration to Experimentation: A Way Forward

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“We are united by a new partnership that is broader and more inclusive than ever before, founded on shared principles, common goals and differential commitments for effective international development.” I quote from the outcome document of HLF4 on Aid Effectiveness.

Forging a more inclusive global development partnership was the key message in the closing ceremony. During the Busan conference, each participant could get a sense of such “inclusiveness” by constantly making a hard choice among various programmes that took place at the same time.

Busan was a multi-actor and multi-issue event. It gave a more open and inclusive space for diverse actors (representatives of developing and developed countries, of civil society, private, parliamentary, local and regional organizations, of multilateral and aid organizations) and various issues (climate finance, fragile states, disaster resilience, etc.).

The world has changed towards a more diversified landscape of development cooperation in an age of scarcity and uncertainty. Moving forward in a collaborative way entails the spirit of tolerance and mutual understanding.

Too often we witness resolute shifts based on aspirational principles in the field of international development. While these principles have merits in their own right, they are often framed in a black-and-white dichotomy. Adherents of their respective principles often implicitly indicate any deviation is undesirable. “Transparency” has become such an aspirational term, and “catalytic aid for economic transformation” is another example.

In principle, transparency and accountability should go hand in hand. With the initiation of the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), we might see a trend towards using aid data as a commodity for various purposes. It may enable a burgeoning industry. Then it raises the question of how to manage these data in a responsible way and how we can learn from other fields to avoid unintended

counterproductive consequences. To tackle these questions, we need to move beyond aspirations to allow room for experimentation. It would refocus our attention on the enabling environment where concrete policies are not based on good-intentioned principles but context-specific evidence.

By the same token, “catalytic aid for economic transformation” is another aspirational principle to call for self-reliant development through transformative aid. Such a principle often links itself with certain aid instruments and modalities. It has been put forward to redress the limitation of single-minded pursuit of basic-needs approach to poverty reduction. However, if we go to extremes to seek a resolute shift to a catalytic aid allocation principle, we may fall into the trap of fashionable trends. One way out of this dilemma is to open up space for innovative experimentation of how to achieve synergies between public and private financial resources. The answer is not ready made. Thus, it is not enough and even undesirable to come up with a blueprint with clear indicators to urge an agenda shift.

We all come with shared aspiration for a better world in the shared planet. For this to happen, it is insufficient and even counterproductive to merely base our action on good-intentioned principles. What we truly need is the space for mutual recognition and innovative experimentation to get rid of development orthodox.

So when we left Busan, we should not only ask ourselves whether one particular principle is unfulfilled or not but also whether we genuinely engage and understand positions of others that differ from ours. Moving forward, we hope to see a dynamic momentum for experimentation on the country level rather than a set of straight-jacket standards that stifle alternative viable paths to effective development cooperation.