Private Initiatives – effective or not?

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Apart from being important to the poor in developing countries, the question on the effectiveness of development cooperation is also central to the public and political debate about development cooperation. Public support studies (EC 2005, NCDO 2009) show that European citizens combine an overall positive attitude towards the principle of aid with general scepticism towards its impact and effectiveness. Such studies also show that trust in the impact of aid depends on the aid channel. Interestingly, intergovernmental organisations (multilateral channel) are seen as more trustworthy than governmental ones (bilateral channel), while private initiatives (philantelorial channel) often score better than their bigger counterparts (civilateral or NGO channel). Put differently: trust in the effectiveness of aid channels depends on closeness and size with a preference for big and far away organisations or for small organisations close by.

Public support – and particularly trust – is not necessarily dependent on knowledge or on research into effectiveness as such, however. This certainly holds for Private Initiatives in the philantelorial channel for which studies have been few. This article provides the first-ever analyses of the potential effectiveness of Dutch PI’s active in Ghana and Malawi (Schulpen 2007). In analysing the potential effectiveness of PIs we use the idea of attributes (Riddell 2007). Notwithstanding the fact that the ‘development community has never been able to define what good development cooperation is’ (Develtere 2009: 3) and that the question of how to achieve the greatest impact on poverty in a cost-effective manner has not generated ‘a solid consensus’ (Edwards 1999: 361), we depart from the idea that lessons from sixty years of development cooperation provide some essential, and interrelated, attributes for effectiveness of development organisations – particularly those providing project-based assistance. Five of these are distinguished here: (1) planning and analysis; (2) partnership; (3) ownership; (4) sustainability; and (5) systemic learning.

The article shows that the trust of citizens in these PIs is somewhat premature and that wanting to ‘do good’ is not the same as indeed ‘doing good’. On all five attributes, PIs are in default. In many cases, these defaults are due to the specific nature and structure of PIs. This certainly holds for their close relationship with their Southern partners which are far more personal than those of other aid actors. Nevertheless, in general one can conclude that PIs are still in ‘phase of infancy’ making the same kind of mistakes as their bigger Northern counterparts did 20-30 years ago. There are no reasons that PIs might not catch up fast if they are willing to learn from their counterparts and from sixty years of experience in aid.

References

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