

Humanitarian Assistance Julian Gore-Booth

A girl drinks from a water system provided by Restless Development and their partner NGO Prayash.



Dead Or Live Aid?

The Gleneagles summit of 2005 now seems a world away. Those proud calls to Make Poverty History witnessed the United Kingdom at its best - the international community caught the mood and we were all aboard, bound for a better place.

bACK IN 2005 THERE WAS MONEY IN THE kitty. The G8 economies were feeling resilient, Bob Geldof and Bono were strutting their stuff, and world leaders wanted to get involved. As Europe and the United States now struggle with recession or, at best, weak recoveries, we are left with a much more difficult environment in which to make the case for aid.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development is focusing on the future of aid with its Fourth High Level Forum (HLF4) scheduled for Busan, Korea, at the end of November. There are many questions that should burn in official minds on the way to Busan. The first is: can we – the developed world – really afford to offer less? Less than the one percent of Gross National Income spent on overseas aid by Norway and other Scandinavian countries, less than the proposed 0.7 percent that was agreed as a target by donor nations in a UN General Assembly Resolution forty years ago (and which the UK has noisily agreed to honour), or less than the miserly 0.2 percent achieved by the US after upping its overseas aid budget?

Of the 120-150 billion dollars in annual global aid flows, can we still accept that twenty percent remains ‘tied aid’ – aid that requires recipients to buy goods and services provided by companies based in donor countries? Are we ashamed, or even worried, that not a single one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has been (or seemingly will be) achieved for the 1.5 billion people living in conflict affected countries? What more can we do to enhance the contribution of new donor countries in the G20 and the new private donors who together now give some thirty billion dollars each year to overseas aid?

There is a further vital issue which should be properly addressed in South Korea. The principle of “he who pays the piper...” is of course as applicable in international development contracts as it is in commercial contracts. And yet, although this may seem an entirely reasonable business requirement, it is time to re-consider the way in which power is shared if we are to see more meaningful progress in time to report on success in achieving the MDGs in 2015/16. It is here that even the smaller development organisations like the STARS Foundation might have something to offer.

Providing unrestricted funding to excellent local civil society organisations (CSOs) can often provide a better return on investment than the traditional North-South aid delivery models. The reasons for this are multiple but it is self-evident that given the choice over how to apply money, local

organisations feel a greater sense of responsibility than they do when fulfilling donor agendas and respond accordingly. They can be needs- rather than donor-led and therefore more accountable to the populations they serve.

This avoids the bizarre scenario that can arise when aid is politicised, for example in Palestine where local CSOs have had to invent activities in peace building and democracy to satisfy donor requirements rather than being able to respond to needs or consider the local reality. Furthermore, organisations who choose to invest in their own resilience – say through developing a fundraising capacity or through building up an endowment – will usually have a secondary impact that positively affects quality and/or quantity of programming. Likewise those that invest in media training and profiling will often see an increase in funding opportunities, networking, advocacy and influence.

Here in the UK the charitable sector would see unrestricted income as essential to survival, independence, responsiveness, and strategic planning. Indeed, it is critical to being able to remain, or become, a well-functioning organisation. In 2010, STARS asked 650 of its applicant organisations based in Africa, the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region whether they had any unrestricted funding and found that more than half had none at all.

Aid is not dead, but it is looking a bit tired. The Busan conference must consider new development models that empower the best local CSOs working in the world’s poorest countries, models which support justice and transparency and therefore allow for the growth of a healthy civil society. This is not to say that unrestricted funding can ever be the only way that aid is delivered, but it is worthy

of a place at the table and essential to discussion at Busan if we are to move beyond aid and reach that higher plateau that is genuine development.

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