

The Politics of Development: Perspectives from an IGO

Kevin Kettle

Abstract

Priorities and politics, insights and actual involvement are not easy bedfellows or easily reconciled. This is particularly true for an IGO whose agenda can become blurred whilst trying to maintain the 'balancing act' to adequately satisfy all the stakeholders that the IGO has a duty to oblige. For a regional IGO, the number of regional players that constitute that very IGO magnify the problems encountered in equal measure. IGOs are meant to be non-political but actually their very existence is to some extent political in origin, and thus they do not operate in a totally politically-free environment.

This paper will explore the consequences of these problems, and illustrate through examples. It is, however, not meant to be an entirely negative exploration but an attempt to promote understanding of the boundaries within which an IGO has to work. In doing this, perhaps the key players involved in development will come to realise further the necessity of acceptable compromise. IGOs can no longer be constrained by unrealistic demands often imposed by donors, or likewise, by governmental bureaucracy and vested interest. The paper will examine what constitutes acceptable compromise in the quest to strengthen the effectiveness of the work undertaken by IGOs - work that must not compromise on principles.

Introduction: What is SEAMEO?

Before examining the paper topic, the politics of development vis-à-vis an IGO, it is necessary to explain what SEAMEO and SPAFA are. It is also pertinent to provide information on their funding status as this directly relates to the 'politics' referred to.

SEAMEO, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation, was established in 1965. Today, SEAMEO comprises 10 Member Countries and has 15 Centres in 8 countries: Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam. The 2 Member Countries without a Centre are Cambodia and Laos. SEAMEO's Associate Member Countries are Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Netherlands and New Zealand.

SEAMEO's mission

The mission statement of SEAMEO clearly states its aim "to enhance regional understanding and co-operation and unity of purpose among Member Countries and to achieve a better quality of life through the establishment of networks and partnerships; the provision of an intellectual forum for policy makers and experts; and the development of Regional

Centres of Excellence for the promotion of sustainable human resource development". (SEAMEO Annual Report 1997-8, p.3)

Funding of SEAMEO

SEAMEO is an international non-profit organisation. Each Centre is described as an IGO or an inter-governmental organisation because the host government of each Centre provides financial support. Since its establishment, SEAMEO's very existence has thus relied heavily on government and donor support, particularly from the Associate Member Countries. SEAMEO's position may have appeared as fairly unassailable prior to the 1997 Asian financial crisis. However, in today's current economic climate funding has now moved away from donations towards partnerships where the donor (be that a government, an international agency, a particular institution, etc..) seeks mutual benefits through collaboration on projects. The donors are now active stakeholders in any project undertaken and as such SEAMEO has had to transform itself from a being a passive recipient of aid to becoming an active bidder for projects. Furthermore, in most areas of its expertise, SEAMEO

has well-known competitors and they are often vying for the same funds.

Government funding of Centres is no longer secure either. Following the regional economic crisis of 1997, a stringent examination of government spending has appropriately taken place. More than ever before, SEAMEO has to justify its use of government resources. Not only does SEAMEO have to convince governments in the region that continued financial support is necessary, it also has to demonstrate *why*, by being thoroughly accountable. Projects undertaken have to clearly benefit the region and satisfy all stakeholders, which includes the governments hosting the Centres. It is relevant to note this as it relates directly to the issue of 'acceptable compromise' and how one can develop strategies to strengthen capacity whilst limiting the extent to which one sacrifices principles in exchange for cash.

Introduction of SPAFA

SPAFA, the Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts, based in Bangkok, Thailand, has been in existence since 1985. SPAFA is dedicated to reviving the "Quality of Life" concept in Southeast Asia by engaging the human hearts and minds that produce art and culture in the pursuit of an equitable social and intellectual environment. SPAFA's vision is to instil pride in Southeast Asian Heritage to enable the careful management of it, and its promotion through sustainable development programmes that directly benefit communities and thus improve people's lives. SPAFA began as a discipline-based Centre, those disciplines being archaeology and fine arts, but its mandate now is much more encompassing, and focuses on community development issues.

SPAFA Funding

SPAFA receives support from the Royal Thai Government. In addition to this, SPAFA is proactive in bidding for funding to enable it to implement various projects. An example is this *International Conference on Issues of Culture, Context, & Choice in Development*. The main source of financial support that made this conference a reality came from the Japan Asia Foundation, after successful approval of the proposal submitted by SPAFA. As well as applying for funding to implement projects, SPAFA is able to increase the scope and extent of its work by capitalising on its strong partnerships with various agencies and organisations on collaborative projects. SPAFA does not accept funding at 'any price'-pursuance of some projects has been dropped if

the funding source has made unrealistic demands contingent on the funding being made available. It is a challenge to increase financial security without losing sight of the Centre's mission but it is a challenge that has to be met. If a donor's motives are detrimental to the organisation, the offer of support may have to be declined. Examples are given later where donor political dictates in one case, and in another, donor directed imposition on a particular project's implementation were deemed unacceptable and thus refused.

The Politics of Development

As a co-organiser of this conference, this paper was written fairly last-minute especially since whenever I tried to collect my thoughts I seemed to be blocked by negativity. Re-reading the abstract, which sounds quite upbeat and indicates that a very balanced paper will be presented that advocates acceptable compromise as a solution to IGO problems only served to deter me even further. Why? I then came to realise that the almost exclusive and intensive work devoted to this Conference was clouding my very own perceptions. On reflection, I realised it was simply a case of dealing with all the frustrations that had arisen 'in one go' because, indeed, there are many positive aspects to focus on as a result of holding this conference.

One of the most encouraging things is the participation of the corporate sector. For example, we have the Shell Foundation here despite a rather acrimonious beginning that was entirely my fault. Having listened to Shell advertisements portraying Shell as 'your partner in sustainable development', I decided to contact Shell challenging them to prove this as I did not believe it. I did not examine my own negativity on this issue by researching what Shell actually does; I simply and blindly followed my own assumptions. I've been proved wrong. Not all companies are willing to take part in this debate on development though. A large European recruitment company – who one could assume that developing work skills was of a priority interest – failed to respond at all, even in the negative.

As for the NGO sector, many self-started initiatives by individuals here in Thailand- all aimed at improving community life standards – are included. Investigating how many NGOs there are was a complete revelation. Many of these, I was to discover, were constrained through affiliation to various government agencies that lend their support. And indeed they face the very same funding dilemmas as

an IGO. There is a definite similarity in that the majority of NGOs and IGOs seek self-reliance and seek partners who share the same goals as themselves. A minority is still reliant solely on grants and donations but if this works for them, that really is fine. There is no blue print for an IGO or NGO to follow, and most seem to have to juggle with determining what is an appropriate mix of funding options to pursue. The question of funding brings us squarely to the issue of politics.

Politics at the Macro Level

At the macro level, IGOs' experiences are no different from NGOs' or other agencies', it would appear. In the realm of the donor-initiated context, demands are often politicised. One of SPAFA's experiences with a certain country, which shall remain unidentified, led to the abandonment of the proposed development project because funding was conditional on tying the project to promoting a favourable spin on that country's foreign policies. The project came to nothing in the end. SPAFA is in essence non-political but in any case, why bother with this? It is certainly recognised that all donors have their own agenda, but usually only to a certain extent. The donor's agenda alone can not be spearheading the development project otherwise what this amounts to is simply taking the money no matter what! – No matter whatever the stipulations made by the donor country may be.

The key point to be emphasised here is that the end result of any development project must primarily benefit the recipients of it. Of course, ideally all stakeholders benefit, and this is the goal of the majority of those of us working in development. But projects conceived with the fundamental objective of promoting the donor's agenda only become an 'intervention' directed by that benefactor. This, more often than not, is a waste of money, time, and effort but worse still, it could well have a negative impact or result on the recipients of such 'one-sided' *generosity* that has not been devised through the spirit of mutual co-operation and collaboration.

If donor-inspired political or indeed economic goals become the major objective of the development project, this top-down ethnocentric approach only serves to perpetuate the colonial legacy of Western powers in Asia.

Arturo Escobar, the Colombian anthropologist, comments that development was supposed to be about people; the concerns of people are, however, excluded because 'prepackaged' solutions ignore the fact that

change is "...a process rooted in the interpretation of each society's history and cultural tradition". (1)

Rightly so there can not be any 'prepackaged' solution because there is no simple formula for development that can apply to all nations or ethnic groups within single nation states. Neo-colonialism as practised by some Western nations and development agencies has major negative implications on development *per se*, namely, adversely affecting the struggle to build independent sources of intellectual power that serve indigenous needs allowing for originality and self respect.

James D. Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, in his article 'Fight Terrorism and Poverty', which examines the challenges facing development in the wake of September 11th, 2001, concludes that developing countries must be in the 'driving seat', "...designing their own programs and making their own choices" (2).

All well and good, one might think. Or is it just a case of being rhetorically correct?

Joseph Stiglitz, former Chief Economist at the World Bank and winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2001, has this to say on Wolfensohn's comment: "Even so, many critics say this process has not gone far enough and that the Bank still expects to remain in control. They worry that the country may be in the driver's seat of a dual-control car, in which the controls are really in the hands of the instructor." (3).

A change process will always take time and during this time we need to know how to gauge what constitutes responsible negotiation leading to reasonable/acceptable compromise. The bottom line rests with the end- beneficiaries. The effects and outcomes on them should be the determining factor. In considering one's options, one has to run the whole gamut of feelings. Decisions made have to be tempered by one's own personal reactions that could range from 'accept anything' whatever the consequences to complete antipathy. One's personal feelings can not be allowed to detract from the realities in which one has to negotiate - remembering that one is negotiating on behalf of a group of people, and not for oneself.

Another recent example of government dictates concerned a development proposal SPAFA was seeking funding for. The success of this particular proposal would rest firmly in the conduct of the training being carried out by indigenous peoples for indigenous peoples. The country concerned insisted

on their own nationals conducting the training. Apart from the impracticality of this suggestion from a language barrier point of view, the project would be doomed primarily to failure as culturally, in the widest sense of the word, there was no understanding of the community involved. As a consequence, that project was also shelved.

Some people argue that globalisation equals monotony and monoculture, others the reverse. Economist Alan Shipman and author Mario Vargas Llosa are advocates in the latter group. On the expansion of network technology, Shipman comments that "This not only quickens escape from the tyranny of localisation, but could also be the basis for a growth that trades abundance of material for a broadening of the mind" (4). Vargas Llosa argues that even though folkloric and ethnological variety will lessen with more modernisation, the allegations against globalisation in favour of cultural identity are groundless because they are based on a static conception of culture. This has no historical basis as cultures are continuously evolving. He says: "The notion of cultural identity is dangerous. From a social point of view, it represents merely a doubtful, artificial concept, but from a political perspective it threatens humanity's most precious achievement: freedom" (5).

These perspectives are mentioned, as it is important to note that SPAFA's decisions on project implementations are aligned to considerations of all the varying views expressed. SPAFA is not focused purely on preservation. We are not the guardians of any cultural identity only. Our prime objective is that the grassroots stakeholders of development projects are accorded the foremost priority. The benefits for them have to be tangible and most importantly the outcomes have to be wanted and not imposed.

Macro Politics - Regionally

Specifically for SPAFA as a regional IGO, juggling demands from Member States can be difficult. There can be a conflict of interest, the countries are in different stages of development with distinct cultures, and have very different types of government. All this has to be factored in when trying to align various needs with demands. Regional training that is not site-specific, for example, can be ineffective and inefficient. There is an obligation to be 'regional' but in particular, with regards to training programmes, vested interests can dilute the value of such courses. To alleviate the problem, one must be strong in stipulating the necessary requirements of the trainees, and by sticking to them. We can all learn

from each other, so the conduct of regional workshops and training are not a completely negative experience but SPAFA's experience has shown that customised trainings are the most valuable, and as such they should be strongly advocated.

Micro Politics - At the Organisational Level

Now, I want to touch briefly on organisational politics concerning the two head offices or parent organisations, of this conference's organisers. SPAFA is under the aegis of SEAMEO with the HQ Secretariat office also based in Bangkok. IDP Thailand's head office is in Canberra, Australia. The SEAMEO Secretariat and IDP are differentiated by the fact that the former is a regionally constituted organisation, the latter an Australian national organisation. However, both SEAMEO and IDP are not-for profit organisations. IDP is an international development project and programme management company and is promoted as "Your First Choice Global Partner in Education & Development". SEAMEO is promoted as "Southeast Asia's largest and most dependable provider in human resource development", and in its mission statement are found the words co-operation, networks and partnerships. *(Please refer to the first page of this paper for complete mission statement).*

Considering this, it could be expected that SEAMEO and IDP are ideally placed to work closely together. This possibility, however, seems to be considerably negated because of bureaucracy and organisational structure and planning procedures. For example, head office integrated business or operational plans, usually devised over 3 or 5-year periods of time, can not factor in projects that a SEAMEO Centre or IDP office has been successful in securing. This quite simply is because we respond to current demands and project bids are on-going. We can not possibly know now what project may be undertaken in 3 years time and even though we would have a good idea of projects we would like to implement, we have no guarantee of their confirmation when the implementation is subject to approval of funding. It is this situation that prohibits a quick response from head offices to fully commit support to a project that suddenly appears as an addition to the 'master plan' of activities.

As well as these bureaucratic constraints, there is also a tendency, throughout the world in fact, for head offices to assert control to some extent and this can be manifested through a strong reaction against localisation combined with a determination to promote a uniform image or company/agency identity. This

impacts negatively on initiatives undertaken by local offices or centres, even if they function as autonomous bodies.

So, was full support for this conference forthcoming from SEAMEO Secretariat and IDP Canberra? Unfortunately, the answer is 'not really'. I believe that a constructive examination of why this was the case is the only way to try and ensure a more effective working partnership in the future. After all, both organisations share common goals and certainly have the ability to achieve them.

So what was the problem? How did initial endorsement and letters pledging full support in organising the conference become so diluted to result in token or in-kind support? Please read that as no finances were made available. Was it a question of ownership? A desire of Organisational Headquarters to be the implementers, to be in control? Or was it a lack of understanding of this conference concept - although that does not explain the initial support given to it. But more than likely it was the result of bureaucratic constraints. And as such we must work harder to overcome such constraints. This we can begin to do by engaging in constructive dialogue. This is the opportunity that can only have the benefit of strengthening our partnership and our organisational capacities.

In mentioning that the working relationship between IDP and SEAMEO could have been better, it is not my intention to be confrontational or antagonistic. It is my firm belief though that we can only move forward if we are honest, or as honest as we can be. If everything were perfect in the world of development, we would not be here today - as presumably there would be nothing to discuss. Working towards strengthening relations with the head offices is a pragmatic way forward. We must

focus on the positive whilst not allowing bureaucratic organisational negativity deter one's efforts.

Focus, for example, on the positive outcomes. From this conference alone, two training courses are being constructed, and this provides another opportunity for the HQ offices to capitalise on, and forge a stronger working relationship.

All in all, when dealing with any agency or organisation, a valuable lesson I learnt from our sister Centre, INNOTECH in Manila, was this - there's a limit as to how far one can go and try to get support from others. First try, then try again and after that, well ... move on! Time is short and so save your time and move on; there are so many other organisations and agencies to co-operate with.

Conclusion

We can not only decry misunderstandings; we must definitely try harder to recognise reality. Perhaps this is easier said than done but we have to try and see beyond our own concerns and limitations, and try to understand those of others. Only by doing this can we arrive at an acceptable compromise that does not invalidate our principles. Be a change agent and not just a complaining agent!

Author Ben Okri, in his novel, 'Astonishing the Gods', has a character state that "When you stop inventing reality, then you see things as they really are".

What we can learn from this is that we must always question our own perceptions. Consensus or responsible compromise can be attained if we have the ability to continuously question our motives, and ourselves, ridding ourselves of intolerant attitudes whilst trying to appreciate the perspectives of the other stakeholders one is working with. Because seldom is anything purely black or white, or so very clear-cut.

References

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Kevin Charles Kettle, Mr., a Project Development Specialist at SEAMEO-SPAFA, has been working in Southeast Asia for over 10 years. Previously, he worked for the SEAMEO Centre for Higher Education, and Chulalongkorn University in Thailand.