

Conference
ARE WE ON THE RIGHT TRACK?
PARADIGM REVIEW BY CSOs AS
DEVELOPMENT ACTORS

Prague, Czech Republic, 14th – 16th May 2008

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Introduction

by **Šimon Pánek, Chairman of the Czech NGDO platform FoRS**

Good afternoon!

I would like to thank all co-organizers of this conference, namely TRIALOG, the Ecumenical Academy Prague and CONCORD. It is a pleasure and honor to have such a conference here in Prague. Let us see if we can leave Prague wiser or closer to new thinking about development. Personally, I do not believe much into common positions and a common way of doing everything. The NGO community is very diverse. I want to say that I do not represent the new EU member states, because I cannot – we do not have any platform. So please take, what I say here, as my personal remarks.

At the beginning, we should say something about development NGOs in the new member states. We are meeting here with more experienced colleagues and I would like to mention, that our situation is much different. We are trying to get onto a train which has been running already for 30-40 years. We are trying to learn things, at the same time we are trying to improve awareness not only of the society but also of the politicians in the new member states, because a few years ago there were only few people in the new member states who understood the difference between humanitarian help and development, the theory of development and so on.

On the other hand, we cannot look only at the differences between the old and new member states. There are also differences between the bigger and smaller NGOs. The really large NGOs are (and because of their size have to be) organized like companies; the small ones are driven more by ideas and enthusiasm. The tensions between the big and small NGOs are sometimes even bigger than between the NGOs in Western and Central/Eastern Europe. One should keep in mind that it is dangerous to generalize.

Still, there are some - sometimes outspoken, but often hidden - tensions or misunderstandings between new member states and old member states development NGOs (NGDOs). One of the discussions which I met a few times was around a “division of labour” between old and new member states NGDOs suggesting that NGDOs from old member states should continue to work in the global South, and NGDOs from new member states should not interfere into this work, because they are not experienced enough - due to the 40 years of communism and lack of experience outside the Soviet block; they should rather work in the post-Soviet countries. Of course, this is absurd, because the new generation in the new member states has nothing to do with the past and doesn't want to be pushed into the frames of “post-communist

countries”. Young people are very similar to young people in the old member states and are mainly interested in the poorest countries in the world, mainly in Africa. We have to reject strongly this “division of labor”, although it is true that we have some comparative advantages for a work in the post-Soviet countries – for example a lot of people here still speak Russian or other useful languages in the former Soviet area - but the main interest here is the same as in Western Europe – to work in the least developed countries, namely Africa, but also Latin America and Asia.

The discussion is connected to the growing competition over the funds, for example the EU funding. It is true that the competition increased through the new member states joining the EU, but the new member states contribute to the EU budget as well and it’s our fault that we are not able to negotiate with the EC an increase of the development or non state actors budget and the pool is basically the same or similar as in the past. But with the full membership, the NGOs from new member states have and should have the full right to compete for funds – under the same conditions as others – I do not agree with the idea, that the new member states should have softened conditions.

There are also differences in the approach of NGDOs from the old and NGDOs from the new member states. I sometimes have the feeling that our respected colleagues from the West are very much in a kind of “scheme of guilt and responsibility” coming from the colonial past, which leads to an extra political correctness and basically to being afraid to speak openly about partnerships and about problems of implementing aid to local partners in the South. The NGOs from the new member states are maybe more open in this way, less afraid of the political correctness and more in favor of direct implementation and delivery of help.

NGDOs from Central and Eastern Europe are maybe more aware of the necessity of democracy for long term development. Every investment into development can be easily destroyed by dictatorship (for example in Zimbabwe).

The accountability and quality of our work can be measured by many monitoring and evaluation instruments, but in fact it is sometimes very difficult to influence the outputs, the long term results and changes. The only advice is to get out of our boxes, out of the project cycle management. A private funding allows us to be less dependent on donors. We should maybe return to times when we were dependent only on public support, not on big institutions. This is crucial, because some of the NGOs almost turned into big companies, driven by donors. Their legitimacy and freedom to follow own policies is of course much lower than if you are independent because of a good portion of private public support.

I wish this conference to be as practical as possible. We can’t avoid discussing the questions of increasing global competition – China in Africa etc. – and all other aspects which are making the future probably less favorable for the development work than it was in the past. But we are maybe also more ready to live in this situation and to get politicians back to the development agenda – that is maybe one of the key messages. Thank you.

Minutes: Jana Krajčírřiková, Ecumenical Academy Prague