

Short report of DSA-GADPP Study Group/IGS Workshop, Tues June 2nd 2015

Is there still space for gender equality in current narratives of development? Rethinking gender work in the shifting spaces of development policy and practice

Presentations:

- Kanwal Ahluwalia, Plan UK - ***The corporate influence in NGO work - drawing from Plan UK experience***
- Saranel Benjamin, War on Want – ***Changing narratives of gender in NGOs***
- Fenella Porter, Birkbeck College/Ruskin College and IGS@LMH- ***Instrumentalised narratives of gender in PPPs focused on health***
- Tina Wallace, IGS@LMH - ***Framing ideas for the future within the post-2015 emerging narratives: looking back and looking forward***
- Nikki van der Gaag - Chair

This was a second presentation of papers delivered in a January workshop run for the DSA, for which there is a report on the DSA website:

http://www.devstud.org.uk/studygroups/gender_policy_and_development-33.html

This session was attended by a wide range of students from the Women in Politics group at Oxford University, which changed the dynamics and the questions asked and it was a lively and engaging afternoon. Practitioners and academics were among the audience and the room was full. A new paper was added from Saranel Benjamin who is currently with War on Want but spoke from her position as a woman from South Africa and reflected on how the changes and initiatives being discussed by others impact on work and thinking in the south. Increasingly their voices are not being heard and they are not being invited to share in development strategy, planning and setting the parameters for assessing what success looks like. Agendas are imposed and contracts tight, conditions set far away with little room for negotiation.

Presenters each outlined some of the real issues and tensions for development organisations of working alongside and with the private sector, particularly addressing their huge influence in shaping funding patterns and increasingly accessing development funds through large contracts, often worth multi-millions of pounds, from their own perspective. There is an increasing alignment between corporate funders and the language and practice of the private sector and institutional donors such as DFID and Comic Relief, which have adopted the approaches of the private sector (value for money, results frameworks, quantitative metrics, payment by results, tight contracts and short time lines). While well suited to much private sector activity where the bottom lines are clear and known these methods and concepts are proving very tricky to implement well in the context of dynamic, complex and fast changing arenas of poverty, exclusion and inequality.

Each speaker spoke of some benefits of working with the private sector (which was recognised as being very diverse and bringing different issues to the table) or concepts drawn from them but the dangers were more on their mind. The presentations were all drawn from first hand experience and raised many challenges for the NGO sector that often appears to be adopting these new approaches without question and with a focus on compliance with the new rules and requirements.

As well as the language of corporates creeping in and being promoted the private sector organisations are increasingly moving into providing development, through managing large contracts, evaluating development work and becoming providers of health, education, water and policy frameworks to the UK and other Governments. This shift continues, with NGOs often having to grow significantly in order to compete effectively alongside the consultancy firms and private service providers, while the needs, voices and concerns of those receiving these funds and services are marginalised. There has been a significant shift of power away from the State and citizens towards those with the funding and language to access the large amounts of money and influence now going through Overseas Development Assistance.

The impact goes way beyond the funding environment for NGOs. There are major implications for the work that is done with women, and the relationships that are built with partner organisations. Supporting women's organisations in the global South, and facilitating their voices and accessing the voices of women themselves is becoming increasingly rare; narratives of gender are changing away from an analysis of why women are marginalised and often poor to a focus on 'quick wins' for women and girls. The moves are away away from targeting the structural causes of their inequality:

'Building democracy doesn't make good photos ... and so doesn't get funded' (Saranel Benjamin, presenter)

The impact of results, indicators and having to prove impact often mean that women's realities are increasingly absent from development planning and resource allocation, and there is a real squeeze on activist organisations. One paper presented in January had shifted from an optimistic look at the future focusing on the issues of democracy, ownership and a recognition that the MDGs had not promoted these or accountable aid. The new SDGs stress the need for the poor including women to be part of agenda setting and calling aid agencies to account and this was positive. But the debates rising now around the financing of aid to be discussed soon in Addis Ababa show that ODA will increasingly be used to facilitate the role of the private sector in investment, running projects, managing development. Many have pointed out the core focus on profit and meeting the needs of the poor make very uneasy bedfellows much of the time but this trend is likely to accelerate fast with major implications for UK and global NGOs.

The small group discussions were rich and many issues were fed back. The main elements of the discussions focused on the enormous influence of the private sector now in development, and how this dominance is forcing NGOs to work in different ways that conform to the norms of business and the market. This increasingly puts distance between NGOs and the people they work with in communities on the ground, and undermines much of the real knowledge and experience that exists within NGOs and their partners.

One of the issues that came out very clearly was how the dominance of market-led norms has led to an increasing demand for particular kinds of 'evidence', especially quantitative evidence that can show that development work is reaching large numbers of people. There is a real need to reflect on how best to deliver and communicate evidence in development work. Whilst both quantitative and qualitative evidence are important, there are often problems with *how* this is produced (the skills needed to do this effectively and whether the data that is collected is meaningful). What counts as evidence? What are the meaningful indicators to be used for the work? Can there still be a role for the 'thoughtful practitioner' in collecting 'evidence'?

Another issue that came out strongly was the competitive effect of private sector norms, and how this is undermining solidarity between NGOs. Many people within development NGOs are trying to work together and 'do the right thing', and personal relationships are still hugely important, but it is becoming increasingly difficult as organisations are forced to compete against each other – as well as against corporate actors who are also bidding for development contracts now. The development sector has become highly professionalised and less value driven, and staff turnover is high making relationships hard to sustain between north and south; these are having a very detrimental impact on how NGOs are able to work together, and work with their partners.

Overall, there was agreement amongst all participants that the reality for development work is now hugely influenced by the private sector, and that in many ways this is contributing to a fundamental re-shaping of the norms and values that have existed and which many still hold dear. The implications of these shifts are not really being identified or addressed as yet and yet are having a significant impact on issues such as accountable aid, democratic ways of working, partnerships between north and south, and the very nature of development work being provided.

Fenella Porter and Tina Wallace

IGS and DSA

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