

A critical view on development cooperation

Report of the Dutch Platform Sport & Development, October 13, 2009

In short

Opening by Jan Rijpstra, Chairman of the Dutch Platform Sport & Development

Main aim of the meeting: the value of development cooperation recently is being discussed and criticized after negative publicity from a wide range of sources. It is important for members of the Dutch Platform for Sport & Development to be aware of critique and to search for new routes for development cooperation in this turbulent field.

News NCDO programme Sport & Development, Helga van Kampen

At the moment, NCDO is repositioning its mission and programs as a result of the decisions taken by the minister of Development Cooperation. NCDO's budget is reduced by 2/3. The future of the activities of NCDO Sport & Development is not yet clear. Members of the Platform will be informed when decisions have been taken.

Movie: Enjoy Poverty (Renzo Martens)

Renzo Martens investigates the emotional and economic value of Africa's most significant export product: filmed poverty. The film reveals that the suppliers of poverty, that is, the poor being filmed and photographed, hardly profit at all from the huge amounts of money made from their imagery.

Reflection and lessons learned: What is the message of 'Enjoy poverty'?

After reflection in small groups, professor Louk de la Rive Box facilitated the plenary discussion which focused on questions:

- Is aid mainly self-serving?
- Is it true that many aid efforts are useless and that efforts to change are hopeless?
- Is colonialism still present, in disguise?
- Should poverty be accepted?

Interpretation of Enjoy Poverty by professor Louk de la Rive Box

The movie is not a documentary but a piece of art, communicating an ambivalent message. Western media profit from negativeness and portraying misery and violence. Another strong message is: if you can not change your situation, accept it. This can be seen as a religious message from catholic submission: accept your suffering. The movie warns us for 'logofilia', exploitation of misery, fake relations with unrealistic expectations and lack of learning. Louk de la Rive Box challenged the audience to apply lessons learned and to change in-effective practices. The recent publication of NCDO highlights these lessons: start small; involve beneficiaries; use experience from other organisations and local expertise be very careful with your public communications and take your time: social change is a long time affair.

Final conclusion and word of thanks

Jan Rijpstra stressed the importance of sharing expertise and lessons learned. Organisations in the field have to live up to their promises and be cautious to raise realistic expectations. Be aware of the pitfalls and be open to adapt and innovate. Jan Rijpstra, the NCDO and the audience thanked Louk de la Rive Box for outstanding facilitation and reflection on Enjoy Poverty.

Opening by Jan Rijpstra, Chairman of the Dutch Platform Sport & Development

Main aim of the meeting

Jan Rijpstra welcomed the participants to this confronting meeting of the Dutch Platform Sport & Development. He explained the aim and program. The meeting focused on the meaning and messages of the movie *Enjoy Poverty* from Dutch artist Renzo Martens. Reason NCDO chose this theme, is that the value of development cooperation recently is being discussed and criticized after negative publicity from a wide range of sources. It is important for members of the Dutch Platform for Sport & Development to be aware of critique and to search for new routes for development cooperation in this turbulent field. Business as usual seems not to be an option. That is why after watching the movie, participants discussed in groups and reflected on the implications for their own practices.

Introduction of professor Louk de La Rive Box

Jan Rijpstra was honoured to introduce the main facilitator of the meeting: dr. Louk de la Rive Box, professor International cooperation of the Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam. Louk brought two assistant facilitators to support him: Sophie Conin (France) & Sergio Ferra (Uruguay, both are students from ISS with a focus on sport for development). Furthermore, the Sport & Development team from NCDO was present to facilitate the groups' discussions: Helga van Kampen, Tessa Kocken, Edwin van Timmeren en Marieke Timmer.

Jan Rijpstra stressed the importance of exchanging knowledge and experience. Budgets for development cooperation in general and sport for development specifically are under pressure. Therefore it is essential that organisations active in the field operate professionally and evidence based. Monitoring & evaluation remains a key point to improve. We all know the potential of sport for development, we all know it works in practice. But only when we can provide 'hard' evidence effectively, we can move forward and progress.

News on government policy and NCDO program sport and development

Helga van Kampen highlighted news on government policy and the NCDO program Sport & Development. NOC*NSF proposed programs for each country. On the website <http://www.nocnsf.nl/nocnsf.nl/over-nocnsf/sport-en-maatschappij/sport-en-ontwikkelingssamenwerking/concept-programmas/programmas> you will find information on the proposed programs. At present, organisations are handing in their formal subsidy proposals to VWS. Hopefully, implementation of these programs will start soon. Also, several embassies are supporting programs at present. The sports program of NCDO will update the network as soon as there is more specific information available from the programs.

At the moment, NCDO is repositioning its mission and programs as a result of the decisions taken by the minister of Development Cooperation. NCDO's budget is reduced by 2/3. The future of the activities of NCDO Sport & Development is not yet clear. Because the meetings of the Platform do not have the desired involvement of the members, in 2010 a new formula will be used. Activities after 2010 remain unsure. Members of the Platform will be informed when decisions have been taken.

Movie: Enjoy Poverty (Renzo Martens)

The provoking opening documentary of the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam 2008 takes a critical view on development cooperation. Summary by the producer:

In Episode 3 - 'Enjoy Poverty' by Dutch artist Renzo Martens. Martens investigates the emotional and economic value of Africa's most significant export product: filmed poverty. The film reveals that, as

with other raw materials such as cocoa and gold, the suppliers of poverty, that is, the poor being filmed and photographed, hardly profit at all from the huge amounts of money made from their imagery. In response, the filmmaker launches an emancipation programme in which he makes Congo's poor aware of their primary capital resource.

First reflection: What is the message of 'Enjoy poverty'?

Main facilitator: professor Louk de la Rive Box, professor International cooperation of the Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam

The movie was intense and confronting to watch. After the end, the audience remained silent for a while and reflected before taking the challenge of discussing its meaning and implications.

The movie provoked strong first reactions: *"shocking, painful; confronting; confusing; bizarre; hopeless; courageous"*. Louk de la Rive Box distilled four main themes & questions from group's discussions:

Is aid mainly self-serving?

The movie illustrates that a large portion of aid funding is spent on the 'aid industry': salary for employees of NGOs and UN organisations, offices, food, travel, facilities, etc. This is being questioned by confronting the viewer: for instance, why are local photographers not hired to photograph the misery used for stories in magazines and newspapers in developed countries? An employee of MSF in the movie explains, when confronted with local photographers trained by Renzo to visualize poverty and misery: *"It is not about photos; it is about communication. Photos of Western photographers are published in renowned magazines such as The New York Times and support the PR of NGOs, photos of local photographers will probably not be published and are therefore worthless for drawing attention and funds."*

The question posed, is complex and remained unanswered, leaving an uncomfortable feeling: most participants work for NGOs (*"we are part of the system"*). Members of the Platform do use the stories and images of projects to generate resources and their organisations and employees are dependent on these funds. It is essential for the development field to be conscious of these processes, reflect on them and search for an effective and ethical balance .

Hopelessness

The movie gives the impression that all aid efforts are useless. Funds go to the wrong parties, decisions on who will receive aid and who won't are arbitrary and opportunistic, local communities don't benefit from aid –effects are often even detrimental. Some participants question their *"right to exist as organisation"* after watching the seemingly hopeless situation in the Congo as portrayed by artist Renzo Martens.

However, opinions about the potential of development differ: some participants state that the movies mainly shows *"wrong development efforts"*.

What Western organisations value is different than what communities and target groups in developing countries value. This implies that projects need to be developed with the beneficiaries, not for. Indicators of success should be defined by target groups and not by donors. And effects should be estimated by beneficiaries and internal stake-holders, not by external Western experts. If these conditions are taken into account, development programs can be effective according to part of the group.

Colonialism

Colonialism is the building and maintaining of colonies in one territory by people from another territory. Social structure, government and economics within the territory of the colony are changed by the colonists. (Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

The movie reminds of colonialism because NGOs, UN organisations, aid workers, journalists and the companies supplying transport, food, logistics, shelter and construction, create a new reality in the regions they enter. Their own goals, aims and rules of operation influence social, political and economic structures and dominate local situations. 'Profits' from program implementation flow to the Western parties involved; locals hardly benefit. The question is posed how much we have learned from past mistakes. Enjoy Poverty gives its audience the impression that nothing has changed since 'white man' first set foot on 'black mans' territory'. Poverty can be seen as Africa's most valuable natural resource which is exploited by Western aid industry.

Should poverty be accepted?

One of the messages of the movie is: *"There was always poverty in the past, there is poverty in the present and there will always be poverty in the future."*

Renzo confronts local communities with this message. If one realises this truth from Renzo's perspective, it can lead to acceptance. Trying to escape poverty as a lifelong mission leads to misery because it is futile. Acceptance opens the door to lead a happy life as a poor man. This message confuses the audience and conflicts with central values of development organisations: the ambition to improve and lift people from poverty to welfare.

Lessons and implications

Next assignment for the groups was to discuss which lessons can be drawn from Enjoy Poverty. The following questions guided the discussion:

- Which lessons can be drawn from Enjoy Poverty?
- How can the 'mistakes' of the field – as highlighted by Enjoy Poverty - be avoided?
- Which recommendations could be given to development NGOs? Which conclusions are valuable for your organisation?
- If you would be in charge of a new development NGO, what would you do different?
- Which recommendations could be given to development NGOs? How can the 'mistakes' of the field highlighted by Enjoy Poverty be avoided?

The groups discussions were presented plenary and Louk de la Rive Box gave each group a title which reflected their conclusions:

Black & white

This group concluded that the movie draws a 'black and white picture' of the situation. White Western man use aid and peace keepers to protect companies which exploit natural resources and take capital out of the country. The local black population is taken advantage of and left empty handed. The film maker draws this conclusion, but reality is more complex and multi faceted. In other words, the situation in Congo is not as black and white as pictured. There is a lot of diversity, not one reality. It is crucial that NGOs feel what is needed in a specific context before any action is undertaken.

The main value of the movie is that it confronts and forces the audience to think about their own position; to step out of the comfort zone. It highly depends on the region and situation which activities are likely to be successful. The group concluded that one always has to think before acting, consciously choose a position; not take 'the way things go' for granted and be aware of known

pitfalls.

Knowledge transfer

Main conclusion of this group is that development efforts should focus on the transfer of knowledge instead of on the transfer of funds. The transfer of funds has many unwanted and unforeseen detrimental side effect. It can be effective to transfer the skills how to organise a football club if the local situation is right.

Furthermore a long term commitment is important: *“take your time, real improvement can not be accomplished in a period of 2-4 years, the average length of most contracts in the field.”*

Communities need to be involved from the start; not only in the implementing phase of programmes and projects, but also in the designing phase. What is the ambition, what are development targets? Teach the community during development processes to prevent dependency on development workers.

Another essential conclusion is that development NGOs should stay away from politics and work with a clear mandate. Be aware of the risk to become one of the parties in local conflicts of interest; refrain from choosing sites.

Enjoy & move

First of all the movie shows that development initiatives in a conflict situation requires a different approach than in a political stable community. One should always be aware of the context one is operating in.

Central conclusion of this group was that efforts the field of sport and development have one common ground: *“everybody in this world needs to move and play.”* Sport and development programmes should be less ambitious. If you set expectations to high, failure will be the result.

Another important point the movie made is: *“no matter how good your intentions, your activities might have negative consequences you have not foreseen.”* Being conscious of this fact is key.

Yes we can

This group firstly discussed of the central statements of Enjoy Poverty:

- Poverty is a natural resource which is exploited by white aid industry using colonial methods.
- Poverty should be accepted as a fact that can not be changed.

Even though the movie is perceived as an eye opener, it is also perceived as too critical. The group opposes the idea that all development efforts are futile. Even though frustration is shared that despite good intentions a complex system has grown of development organisations, donors and beneficiaries, this does not imply that positive change is impossible.

The group concluded that using a step by step approach, taking into account pitfalls and success factors, developmental processes can be supported.

Bottom up

The movie shows some crucial characteristics of aid and development system. The group concludes that an institutional approach should be avoided. NGOs are part of the system when an institutional approach is applied; the complex of events is reinforced by participating.

Solution proposed to cut this vicious circle is start all change bottom up. Don't start with preconceptions about reality based on Western models and current practices in 'the system'. Follow a community based approach instead of an institutional approach.

Interpretation of Enjoy Poverty by Louk de la Rive Box

Louk de la Rive Box closed the discussion on the meaning of Enjoy Poverty by giving his own interpretation which was valued highly by the participants.

This is not a documentary

His first conclusion was that Enjoy Poverty is not a documentary but a piece of art. Renzo Martens is firstly an artist, secondly a film maker. Every part of the movie is constructed to convey the artist's message. The movie reminds De la Rive Box of the book 'Heart of Darkness' by Joseph Conrad (1902) which also takes the perspective of white man on 'the dark continent' and contains similar elements of colonial exploitation. Other parallels are the boat journey on Congo River and overwhelming dark elements (filming during night time, attention for the dark water in Congo River) in the second half of the movie.

Heart of Darkness is a novella written by Joseph Conrad. Before its 1902 publication, it appeared as a three-part series (1899) in Blackwood's Magazine. It is widely regarded as a significant work of English literature and part of the Western canon.

The story details an incident when Marlow, an Englishman, took a foreign assignment from a Belgian trading company as a ferry-boat captain in Africa. Although Conrad does not specify the name of the river, at this time Congo Free State, the location of the large and important Congo River, was a private colony of Belgium's King Leopold II. Marlow is employed to transport ivory downriver; however, his more pressing assignment is to return Kurtz, another ivory trader, to civilization in a cover up. Kurtz has a reputation throughout the region.

This very symbolic story is actually a story within a story, or frame narrative. It follows Marlow as he recounts, from dusk through to late night, to a group of men aboard a ship anchored in the Thames Estuary, his Congolese adventure. The passage of time, and the darkening sky, during the fictive narrative parallels the atmosphere of the story. It should be noted from a structuralist point of view that Marlow is also the name of a town situated on the Thames further upstream from London.

Source: Wikipedia

Another association of Enjoy Poverty is with the right panel of the painting 'The Garden of Delights'. This panel is a hellscape and portrays the torments of damnation; the horrors of hell. And this is exactly what Enjoy Poverty does: it displays all horrors of aid and development efforts in Africa.

Ambivalent message

Second conclusion is that the movie communicates an ambivalent message. On the one hand, it shows Western parties enjoying Southern poverty: the scarcity value of 'rape, stealing and killing' is revealed. 80% of the news on Africa is negative. Western media profit from negativity and portraying misery and violence. In Enjoy Poverty, Renzo Martens for instance gets an offer to deliver film on violence. Value: three hundred dollars for one and a half minute.

On the other hand, the efforts of film maker Renzo Martens to reverse roles hopelessly fails. He convinces local photographers to abandon the market for wedding pictures and trains them to take their share of the profitable 'misery pictures market'. Unfortunately, the employee of MSF turned down their pictures because they lack relations with Western media. Without these relations, their work has no value for public relations. The local photographers end this project in despair. Renzo Martens first raised high expectations, they and up disappointed and frustrated.

Another element which makes the movie ambivalent is the message communicated in the final

chapters. The story takes a moral turn: if you can not change your situation, accept it. This can be seen as a religious message from catholic submission: accept your suffering.

Real but constructed

All is real what the movie portrays – the Western mining companies, UN forces, local misery, violence and malnutrition, colonial attitudes – but at the same time the image we see is constructed. It is not a lie but an involved and strengthened image of reality from the artist's point of view. However, we can learn a great deal from his perspective by reflecting what it means for the Sport for Development community.

Logofilia

Renzo shows that all aid efforts are branded. Everything has a logo of the involved NGO: cars, offices, tents, materials, uniforms, etc. The logo says: "this was paid for by". The only material with no logo where protection sheets financed by local government. 'Logofilia' is just as strong among S&D NGOs as among other NGOs and corporate brands. Resistance grows. Naomi Klein gave word to the growing irritation of public for the omnipresent dominant of brands with the book 'No logo', published already in 2000 (*"There's a bad mood rising against the corporate brands. No Logo is the warning on the label."*)

Lesson for NGOs: be careful to use your logo in communities. Do not impose yourself. Beware to not spread the message: "Strong rich white man gives help to weak poor black man."

Exploitation of misery

The movie shows that for many NGOs a valid perspective is: photo's and stories about misery = communication = advertisement = raising money for our cause. Be careful with this strategy. This type of communication can backfire. Organisations that depend on it for resources, are not sustainable. People get sick and tired of it.

Fake relations

Don't develop fake relations in projects which will not last. Renzo involves local photographers in his venture, raising high expectations of future sustainable benefits. They are left in despair when reality proves different and ambitions can not be met. Beware to promise change out of reach of the project. Be realistic, transparent and fair.

Lack of learning

From the movie we can conclude that Western organisations show lack of learning from mistakes in the past. There are many enthusiastic and highly competent development workers but monitoring and evaluation is often disregarded. No feedback means no learning.

Louk de la Rive Box concludes by challenging the audience to apply lessons learned and to change in-effective practices. The recent publication of NCDO highlights these lessons:

- Start with humility, start small.
- Involve beneficiaries, stakeholders and local communities from the start.
- Use experience from other organisations, local expertise but also bring your own competence: stay involved.
- Be very careful with your public communications. There are many potential sensitive points you might overlook and which might offend the public or stakeholders.
- Take your time: it's a long time affair. If limited to a period of two to four years, projects create more havoc than good. If you can not stay involved for ten to fifteen years, don't do it! Sustainable social change will not be the result.

Final conclusion and word of thanks

Jan Rijpstra stressed the importance of sharing expertise and lessons learned. Organisations in the field have to live up to their promises and be cautious to raise realistic expectations. Be aware of the pitfalls and be open to adapt and innovate in this changing world, in a sector under pressure.

Jan Rijpstra, the NCDO and the audience thank Louk de la Rive Box for outstanding facilitation and reflection on Enjoy Poverty.