

Sustainable Support – Sustainable Development

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Sustainability and sustainable are probably the most abused terms in development work. Everybody uses them and nobody knows or dares to ask what they mean – really. Let me have a try at defining the objective: Development activities are oriented to get people in a better situation which should then stay at that level without further external support. Now, this holds true for only a minimal part of development activities. Most of them are continuous. It means that in reality it is not the newly reached situation that is sustainable but the support. Although most External Support Agencies (ESAs) would cry out that this is not what they want. They are terribly afraid of getting stuck with poor people over a longer period of time. We are not engaged in welfare, they would say.

On the contrary, I dare to say, development work *is* welfare, a special type of welfare: *global welfare*. To explain my point, let me start at the level of an individual person. There is quite a difference if we help a person needing our support or if we develop a persons resources or capacities. Among the people who need our support are the children, the sick or handicapped and the elderly. What is common to them is the fact, that they lack the resources to get along on their own. Support is unlimited. You cannot say to a disabled or an elderly person: I shall assist you a while and then you are supposed to get along on your own. Development on the other hand is a limited support where you expect a person to reach a condition where s/he can manage independently.

To my understanding there are at least four steps between a disabled and an able person. And each level requires a different kind of support.

	Level	Characteristics	Kind of support
A disabled person	I	Receives support to be able to survive	Lasting
↑ ↓	II	Manages just to survive	Lasting
	III	Learns and develops herself/himself	Limited
An able person	IV	Manages decently his/her livelihood	No

If a person wants to learn and to develop him/herself, s/he needs some extra resources either own resources or resources from the parents, from the community, its compatriots or from the global public. And of course there could be ample discussion what is meant by a “decent” livelihood. With your permission, I won’t dwell on this aspect but lead you on to another conclusion.

What is valid for an individual applies also to a whole country. There is an UN classifying of the wealth of all nations. If we take the Niger case, it is 172nd among 173 nations. It means that it is a very poor country with little resources, a country that needs support at an universal level. All rich countries have mechanisms established to balance financial power between regions with better or worse conditions. It means that the richer regions support the poorer ones and they do this in a lasting way (regulations and budgets are discussed and adapted regularly). It is straightforward given money and never in the form of credit. They wouldn’t tell them: “Okay, we shall support you during the next three years and then we expect you to manage on your own!” As it is common World Bank behaviour.

The amount of support could be modified only if an important shift in income should happen.

A government has certain duties with the citizens as the parents have with their children. It bears a responsibility. Among these responsibilities I should mention:

- to guarantee a basic formation
- to make a certain infrastructure available (roads, water supply etc.)
- to offer a health service
- to make sure that legal regulations are installed
- to guarantee the security of the citizens
- to inform the population
- etc.

Taking again the example of Niger and looking at the programmes Swiss Development Co-operation (SDC) is implementing, I observe that most activities replace the governments responsibility. SDC is building roads, schoolhouses, dispensaries, dams, it sinks wells and installs water supplies and it informs and teaches farmers and nomads. It means that SDC does in Niger what the Swiss Government is doing at a national level. It balances the resources between richer and poorer areas at the global level.

Lets take the case of a water supply. Its construction is part of the government's responsibility. Government at any level, central, regional or municipal. If the local government doesn't have the means to take on the responsibility, a global actor steps in, but they cannot demand that this action will become sustainable. On the other hand, the same actor may train the local population to take care of the installations, to operate and to maintain them. This part of the activities is at level III, where people learn and where they can reach a level of managing on their own. This means a limited support is indicated.

Now coming to the conclusion I promised above. Within a (rich) country nobody talks about financial sustainability of the poorer regions. They need and get support, *as long as they need it*. The same should be valid at a global level. If External Support Agencies substitute a local government in its basic obligations,

as it is the case of Niger i.e., *they cannot expect their actions to be sustainable and they should rather engage in a lasting support*. This lasting support or engagement would help local planners to count upon somebody as a reliable partner – if partnership is a desirable condition.

Even accepting this conclusion as a valuable policy, there are still a couple of open questions:

- What is the real potential of a country?
- Towards whom should the support be directed; the central, the district or the municipal government (public)?
- Who is going to control the correct use of the funds?
- Who is going to co-ordinate the external contributions so they make sense in the national context?
- Most interventions constitute a mix of lasting support (e.g. contribution to public water supply or road system) and timely limited support (training of local people). How is this mix to be taken apart?

Somebody once told me that it is asking good questions that take us forward. Well, I'm curious if the implicit and explicit questions mentioned are attractive enough to invite other people to look for helpful answers.