

Intercultural Dialogue as a Tool of Development Policy

by Manuel Junck

The lectures and topics discussed at this year's Intercultural Summer School in Berlin centered for a large part on questions of migration and the problems that migrants face in their host societies. The various reasons that cause people to migrate into other countries (meaning the US, Canada, Europe, Australia, etc.) were almost as frequently referred to as was the need to further the intercultural dialogue between migrants and their host societies. For a number of obvious reasons, which need not be stated here again, it is desirable to create such an intercultural dialogue within the target countries of international migration.

The point that I would like to make in this paper is that apart from furthering peaceful coexistence, cultural enrichment and other benefits for the host countries of migrants, instruments of intercultural dialogue may serve another end within the policy field of international relations.

International Development in Public Discourse

The most significant obstacle to economic progress within the third world obviously rests in the international terms of trade, as Hans Singer and Raúl Prebisch were already able to show in the late 1940s.¹ Since then there has been a recurrent international policy debate over the feasibility of development aid under the persistent condition of deteriorating terms of trade.² This has included severe criticism directed at the system within which international aid has been dished out³ up to calls for actually abolishing aid altogether.⁴

Few people would dispute the fact that the plight of developing countries does not feature among mainstream policy discourses within the developed world. This similarly accounts for complex disputes over the terms of trade as it does for (seemingly) more tangible issues such as food aid provision. Although the international community's efforts to alleviate the humanitarian impacts of natural disasters, famines and armed conflicts at times feature prominently in the media, these hardly matter in election debates.

However, in order to improve the economic well-being of "third world" societies, "first world" governments are impelled to convince their electorates of the imperative to make financial contributions to poorer countries. They have to find support for allocating funds to such an end, instead of withholding the same funds to the benefit of their own population. In other words: In order to improve the current situation in the countries of the South, taxpayers and voters in the North somehow have to be convinced that "their" money is well spent on making significant financial contributions to the South.

Such a case already has to be made now, if governments are to deliver on their pledge of raising national tax base quotas of official development assistance (ODA), as the OECD countries have recently committed themselves to. But to a much larger extent this would apply when eventually forgoing agricultural subsidies and tariffs, which are of course mostly to blame for the current distortion of competition within the terms of trade. Recent developments such as the passing of the new United States farm bill and the repeated failing of the Doha trade talks despite current favorable conditions of high food prices do not promise much hope on this front.

¹ Singer, Hans 1950: "The Distribution of Gains between Investing and Borrowing Countries", *American Economic Review* XI(2); Prebisch, Raul 1950: "The Economic Development of Latin America and its Principal Problems", New York: United Nations

² For some of the most recent contributions see for example: Joseph E. Stiglitz & Andrew Charlton 2007: "Fair Trade for All: How Trade Can Promote Development", Oxford University Press; Jeffrey Sachs 2008: "Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet", B&T

³ William Easterly 2007: "The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good", Oxford University Press

⁴ James Shikwati 2007: Interview with *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: „Entwicklungspolitik: 'Wer Afrika helfen will, darf kein Geld geben'" 04.04.2007, No. 80 / 13; see also online version: www.faz.net

As the Willy Brandt Commission already suggested almost 30 years ago, such sweeping political decisions will be impossible “without a global consensus on the moral plane that the basis of any world or national order must be people and respect for their essential rights, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Only if these ideas are sincerely accepted by governments, and especially by individuals, will the political decisions be possible and viable. This requires an intensive process of education to bring home to public opinion in every country the vital need to defend the values without which there will be no true economic development and, above all, no justice, freedom or peace.”⁵ Obviously such a global consensus does include the North as well as the South. So what would this mean for the measures that have to be taken in order to approach such a consensus among taxpayers and voters in the North?

Building a Consensus

The point I would like to make in this paper is that apart from promulgating the moral imperative of aiding people in need and safety-related necessity to keep third world governments stable, additional strategies to engage public opinion on the subject may be taken into consideration.

Whenever disaster strikes in the South, the media will for a while indulge in the familiar pictures of toddlers with bloated bellies, parched landscapes, carcasses of emaciated livestock, child soldiers, crying mothers, irate fathers and angry youth brandishing Kalashnikovs or machetes alternatively. Reports on these crises abound, on and off they may still cause some misgivings and sighs and might at times even cause dismay that outlasts the evening news. But people in the North have long gotten used to these images of horror and desperation. It is the kind of publicity, which has been filling the coffers of aid agencies and has been essential for alleviating imminent crisis all over the world for decades. But this form of the South’s dependence to grasp the alms of the North as its benefactor of last resort is nowhere near a global consensus for the imperative of true economic development in the South. Seen from an individual perspective, making arbitrary commitments depending on the current state of one’s own perceived current economic wellbeing might relieve one’s own conscience in the North, but will be of no avail for sustaining economic progress on the part of the recipient in the South. Of course academic debate and professional development policies have long transcended their sole reliance on this last resort of international aid policy. But the majority of people in the North who remain outside of this debate, still associate negative images with third world poverty such as the most familiar ones outlined above. Can this image problem be overcome by a change in the public perception within the North? What are the chances for initiating in the North, what Brandt called a “process of education to bring home to public opinion in every country”? How can a general knowledge about what lies at the core of problems in the South accumulate within public opinion?

Means of Intercultural Dialogue

There are two ways by which the image of the South features in the public perception. One is the image of disaster and hopelessness mentioned above. The other is travel accounts from those countries within the South, which are stable enough to support a tourist industry. While the latter at least transcends the boundary of media footage and reporting, neither will be able to effectively contribute to a deeper understanding of third world societies within the general public in the first world. And it is needless to say that tourists never truly leave the so called beaten track. Even worse, spatially sheltered off from the realities of their host

⁵ Willy Brandt 1980: North-South: a programme for survival: report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues. Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, p. 268

countries tourists may even return home with a varnished image of the predominant livelihoods among people resident at their travel destinations.

Apart from new forms of communication such as the internet, which creates additional opportunities and problems I shall not elaborate on in this paper, mainstream media streams are generally absorbed only in a one way direction. While images are continuously exchanged between the North and South they are processed in isolated discourses on either side but hardly shared.

In short intercultural dialogue may take place both in the media and in tourism but does so in a skewed or even one-way direction (in which case it would be actually more appropriate to speak of an intercultural 'monologue' taking place). Thus some other form of encounter between the North and the South needs to be advanced, in order to raise the public concern in the North for the true problems which lie at the core of the predicaments in the South.

The first international initiatives for the advancement of intercultural exchange date back to as early as 1918. After the end of World War One the first pioneer non-governmental organizations (NGOs) emerged in the field such as the American Field Service (AFS) and Service Civil International (SCI). They were founded by contemporary witnesses of what was perceived by most people that had been involved in the conflict as the greatest catastrophe as yet in human history. Similar to the founding of the League of Nations the main intention behind these exchanges was building new foundations for international understanding (*Völkerverständigung*) to never allow such atrocities as were committed during the war to happen again.

Focused on rebuilding intra-European and transatlantic relations exchange programs were resumed with increased effort after World War Two, focusing first on exchanges between working professionals, high school and college students. International volunteer programs, focusing on work in the welfare work sector formed a later development in a process which would eventually include partnership programs often times conducted in cooperation by NGOs in the North and the South. Prior to this similar programs had of course long been coordinated by religious networks all over the world. But because their primary focus was usually inspired by religious altruism rather than intercultural dialogue and often included proselytization, reference to their work shall be omitted here.

working out weltwärts⁶

International exchange programs in Germany, which were in principle run by NGOs eventually found direct government support. One of the forerunners in Germany was the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ), which recognized the exercise of international volunteer services by young men as a substitute for military duty in 1970. In 1983 the German Parliament initiated the Parliamentary-Partnership-Program, doling out scholarships for high school student exchange programs between Germany and the US. In 2005 the European Commission and again the BMFSFJ came out with two separate first-time financially funded volunteer exchange programs including full and respectively partial scholarships. Called European Voluntary Service (EVS) and *Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr* (FSJ) respectively, both programs were established and have since been run in close cooperation with NGOs that already had years of experience in the sector.

Similar to these approaches, but on a much larger scale as far as financial contribution and the number of volunteer placements go, a new intercultural exchange program called *weltwärts* was launched in Germany at the beginning of 2008 by the Federal Department of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). While existing volunteer programs and other cultural exchange schemes already provide for several thousands placements a year,

⁶ "weltwärts" = "world-wards"; for more information visit www.weltwaerts.de

weltwärts is applied to eventually become the world's largest volunteer program with 10.000 placements each year. All men and women between the age of 18 and 28 are eligible participants of the program, which may last individually between 6-24 months. The main content of the program is also individually defined by the German NGO and its partners in the hosting countries, with the BMZ only setting the outer perimeters of the program. The latter include that all projects must be situated in a developing country (as defined by OECD/DAC⁷) and the respective volunteer will have to work in a project that could be broadly defined as belonging to the development field. While there has to be a clearly stated demand for the volunteer, his or her position is not to substitute for any jobs that could be taken by local workers but is generally meant to have more of an accompanying function for the work of local professionals in the field. All sending NGOs are required to provide each volunteer with an extensive pedagogical program, amounting to at least 25 days of seminars for preparation, mid-stay and subsequent evaluation, which must include detailed matters of development policy, diversity and intercultural competency training.

The government's official target for weltwärts is specified as follows: "The new volunteer service will make an effective contribution to development policy information and education work in terms of "global learning" and towards nurturing a new generation of development workers. It will enhance intercultural understanding and help increase awareness and acceptance within society of how development policy issues impact on our future. In addition to acquiring knowledge of foreign languages and of specialist development topics, the volunteers will also learn about intercultural communication, socio-cultural cooperation and social responsibility, all valuable skills in an increasingly globalized learning and working environment. The volunteer service will also help to reinforce civil society structures in the developing countries and in Germany."

Weltwärts is the first volunteer service in Germany that is entirely free for the participating volunteers, which will for the first time allow access to such programs for young people with financially weaker family backgrounds. However, NGOs conducting the program are expected to raise 25% of equity in addition to all federal funding they receive. This task may in parts be supported by fundraising on the part of the volunteer, although failure to raise the projected amount of money may not be a criterion for the exclusion of a volunteer by his or her respective sending NGO.

From the global via the local to the Individual: Personal experiences with weltwärts

Finally I want to outline briefly, where I see the strengths of the weltwärts program, initially as a tool of intercultural dialogue but ultimately as a development policy as well. After having worked for the weltwärts Program on two accounts, both for the BMZ and one of its cooperating NGOs I was able to receive an in-depth insight in the workings of the program.

Since late 2007 I have worked for AFS both in developing the NGOs own pedagogical concept approach to weltwärts according to its 12-days preparative seminar program mentioned above, as well as conducting the first seminars for the outbound volunteers as a training facilitator. My simultaneous internship with the BMZ running from April to August 2008 has provided me with an insight look on the work of all 200 NGOs that have so far enlisted in the program. I was assigned to consulting the responsible administrators at the ministry on the feasibility of granting federal funds to respective NGOs and their several project placements in the various developing countries. Having had personal contact on a daily basis to both leading federal administrators in the BMZ, staff members of AFS and

⁷ The Organization of Economic Co-Operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) is a forum for its member states to discuss issues surrounding development and poverty reduction in developing countries. There are currently 23 members of DAC, including the European Commission, which acts as a full member of the committee, although it is not a member state in the judicial meaning of the term. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations Development Program also participate as observers.

future volunteers within the program for several months, I have gained a deeper understanding from several angles of the underlying dynamics actuated by this program. Whichever meanings one might want to attach to civil society and however problematic the implicit understanding of government institutions to approach cooperating NGOs as “the” representatives of civil society, cooperation between both kinds of institutions is most likely to reach what Brandt has called a “global consensus”. Employing NGOs as agents for carrying out projects in the context of development aid have rightly been criticized in the past, because this approach may further complicate efforts to align socioeconomic instruments under one common strategy and many times overburdens the control functions of governments. But *weltwärts* uses an ideal approach for the inclusion of NGOs within development aid policy carried out not in developing countries but within Germany. Because NGOs often are so diverse both on the level of decentralized regional dispersion and in the form and content of their background agendas and goals, their influence feeds into many channels of the multilayered complexities of civil society. Among the 200 Sending NGOs that have entered the accreditation process for the program so far, there are environmental groups, pacifist groups, religious groups, parishes, schools, youth and sports clubs, tiny entities organized on a very local level and run by two or three people up to big entities that operate internationally such as AFS. Aspiring volunteers similarly will come from a diverse number of backgrounds. Some will choose their local parish as the point of entry into the program; others may associate themselves with the greater goals of highly ambitious NGOs such as Peace Brigades International.

But the broad effects *weltwärts* has good chances of triggering even go beyond reaching and building a “global consensus” among a much diversified group of young people and possible future policy makers in Germany. What is more likely to raise awareness and shaping a global consensus among voters and taxpayers in the North than first hand experiences of their children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren? What leaves a more powerful impression on first world societies than TV shows and travel anecdotes? It is first hand, long term, in-depth experiences by their kith and kin? Ideally the means of dialogue under these circumstances takes place in the most intimate sphere of dining room conversations, which most future volunteers will be most likely to address first when embarking on fundraising efforts for their program and where they will share their first hand experiences after their return from their host countries. Even though volunteer programs similar to *weltwärts* have existed before, the new program is likely to have broad effect on public opinion in the North of an unprecedented scale for two reasons: First it is the first German volunteer program that explicitly aims at promoting and shaping intercultural dialogue among civil society with special regard to development policy. Second other than earlier programs of similar scale such as the American Peace Corp⁸ *weltwärts* does not fancy itself as a direct project management tool in developing countries but aims first and foremost at effectively changing attitudes in the North.

If carried out in the intended manner, *weltwärts* might thus become a powerful instrument, emanating from within German society but building a global consensus for the needs of the South, by link decentralized networks of intercultural dialogue focused on North-South relations.

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⁸ Since 1960, more than 190,000 people have served as Peace Corps volunteers in 139 countries. Within the program there are currently 8,079 volunteers and trainees serving in developing countries all over the world (for more information visit www.peacecorps.gov).