



DECENTRALISED AID MANAGEMENT TODAY: PERSPECTIVES ON AN EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

The paper considers different possibilities for an evaluation of Danish aid management by outlining major changes of international and Danish development co-operation over the last 20 years. It involves the discussion of aid management in general and in relation to pragmatic co-operation approaches in particular, as well as the investigation of particular elements of the management of Danish development co-operation. It concludes that Danish and international development co-operation has changed significantly, due partly to aid management being assessed differently today compared to 10-15 years ago. Notably, the Danish development co-operation has required new aid management approaches, as it changed its focus from relatively stable poor countries to a diversity of countries including many fragile situations. Thus, an evaluation of Danish aid management and of the current status of the significant decentralisation of aid management to the Danish embassies in the early 2000s can no longer be usefully undertaken based only on the principles of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness from 2005, but needs to include other evaluation criteria as well.

INTRODUCTION

The Office for Evaluation, Learning and Quality Assurance in the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has recently initiated an evaluation of aid management in Danish official development assistance. The present study was elaborated to identify important themes and possible approaches for organising such an evaluation and has a particular focus on the Danish experience with decentralised aid management. The study is based on relevant literature specifically on aid management and generally on the context and changes of development co-operation since the early 2000s. Moreover, it draws on discussions within a reference group. It does not, however, embark on an analysis of specific elements of Danish aid management as it is assumed that the evaluation will do so.

The decentralisation of the management of Danish bilateral aid to embassies in selected partner countries in 2003 included: programme formulation and implementation authority within approved country strategies and budget frames; strengthened reporting responsibilities to headquarters and the Danish political system; administrative responsibilities related to the running of the embassies; supply of headquarter technical support and quality assurance; and strengthened training of all staff (MFA, 2009). The decision to decentralise authority to embassies in countries with substantial Danish development co-operation was undertaken in a period with a significant focus on professional capacity development in the MFA. A set of Aid Management Guidelines had been developed for the first time, demands for professional competences in Danish NGOs receiving public funds had been increased, and a competence development centre was set up within the ministry. Moreover, the ministry had for some years worked on moving Danish Official Development Assistance (ODA) from a project to a programme approach. One ambition with the new programme approach was to create better links to the policies of partner countries, and the same ambition characterised the decentralisation of aid management. Embassies were seen as better placed to support nationally developed sector policies and programmes and thereby to strengthen partner country ownership.

In 2009, an evaluation of the decentralisation was published. It focussed on the process of decentralisation to the embassies, the adequacy of authorities and tools, the quality controls and accountability mechanisms, and the human resources at the embassies (MFA, 2009). As there was no baseline to compare with, the evaluation defined quality of aid management in relation to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and tried to assess whether the decentralisation had contributed to alignment and harmonisation, in particular. This raises the important question of what a new evaluation of decentralised aid management should assess. Is it still relevant and worth exploring how current aid management fares with respect to alignment and harmonisation? Methodologically, the evaluation in 2009 was organised around a review of literature and documentation; case studies of five countries (Burkina Faso, Benin, Ghana, Uganda and Zambia); a management questionnaire for certain ambassadors and deputy heads; an online survey of posted and local embassy staff; and interviews with senior management in Copenhagen. Whether such a methodological

approach will be reasonably relevant again depends of course on the specific evaluation questions to be explored. The new evaluation may again take up the issues of authority and tools, quality controls and accountability mechanisms, and human resources to investigate how these have developed since the former evaluation. The obvious advantage of such an approach would be to have a relatively firm basis for assessing how well decentralised aid management has worked since 2009. The central disadvantage would be that the evaluation would take place in a kind of bubble ignoring the substantial changes of Danish development policies, of the organisational and material conditions of the MFA, and of international understandings of development co-operation the last 10-15 years.

Overall, this paper concludes that a straightforward update of the 2009 evaluation would provide few lessons learned that can be used in today's Danish development co-operation as this is a substantially different endeavour much more focussed on Danish political interests than on recipient ownership and responsiveness to changing circumstances. The paper also concludes that there is still an interest among like-minded donors in decentralised aid management and a reasonably vivid international discussion of adaptive management in relation to effective development co-operation. Accordingly, an obvious question is where to locate an evaluation of aid management between Danish political interests and ownership-focussed, responsive co-operation.

In order to produce different alternative suggestions for what an evaluation of aid management could focus on and how these alternatives can be evaluated, this paper starts out by discussing the changes of international development co-operation in general and of Danish development policies in particular over the last 20 years. These contextual and policy changes constitute a decisive framework for donor management of aid at the country level (this is what I mean with aid or development management in the following) and how to assess it. The paper then goes on to consider international discussions of aid management as well as the pragmatic management approach often employed in Danish development co-operation and emphasised by the recently adopted Doing Development Differently (DDD) approach. The subsequent section highlights different aspects of the decentralisation of Danish aid management, notably the relationship between embassies and headquarters. Finally, different possible alternatives for organising the evaluation are put forward.

CHANGES OF INTERNATIONAL AND DANISH DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION

When the Millennium Declaration was adopted in 2000, something of an international consensus about development co-operation had emerged. Firstly, the overall goal was to reduce, if not eradicate, poverty. While some were concerned with income (World Bank, 1990) and others introduced social measures (UNDP,

1990), most agreed that the ultimate goal was not to develop economies or societies, but to provide better opportunities for individual human beings. Secondly, macroeconomic stability was seen as essential although its specific ingredients were discussed (Rodrik, 2006) and the imposition of Structural Adjustment Programmes on low-income countries had been questioned. Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) had become a pivotal tool in the co-operation between donor institutions and recipient governments, i.e. to ensure macroeconomic stability (Craig and Porter, 2003). Thirdly, institutional reform was the name of the day to make public institutions more effective and responsive and to create an enabling environment for the private sector (Therkildsen, 2000; Andrews, 2013). Sector-wide approaches (SWAPs) were sometimes used to underpin these reforms (Brown et al., 2001). Lastly, liberal democracy based on a constitution, regularly organised elections, and a separation of powers between a legislature, an executive and a judiciary was regarded as the only accepted national political organisation in international development co-operation (McFaul, 2004). This was accompanied by a focus on good governance and the rule of law in foreign aid (Michel, 2013).

At the time, international development co-operation was firmly based in a relationship between rich donor countries, a set of international organisations and poor recipient countries. Acknowledging the fragmentation (Acharya et al., 2006) and the limited influence of recipient countries (OECD, 2003) characterising the co-operation, the consensus enabled a move towards common rules of the game in order to increase effectiveness and avoid overlap of aid-supported activities. Thus, with the adoption of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005 (OECD, 2005) international development co-operation was for a short period in reasonable agreement about the goal, the major economic and political themes, and the practical organisation of the co-operation. Since then, however, the agreement has faded away as the attempts to implement the declaration soon petered out (OECD, 2011; Lundsgaarde and Engberg-Pedersen, 2019; Keijzer and Black, 2020) and the consensus regarding the major goal and themes of development co-operation was challenged by numerous contextual changes of which I will concentrate on five.

First, with varying intensity at different moments in time a number of global challenges have come onto the agenda with much more force than at the adoption of the Millennium Declaration. These include terrorism, climate change, financial and economic crises, migration and pandemics. Notably, these challenges do not only affect low-income countries and sometimes they cause greater concern in rich societies than in poor ones. As the major issues attracting attention in international development co-operation are predominantly framed in rich countries, it is no wonder that global challenges have been able to push the goal and the themes of the consensus of 2000 aside to different degrees. No one would argue against the importance of poverty reduction, macroeconomic stability, institutional reform and democracy, but other concerns have clearly become increasingly significant. In the case of the so-called irregular migration, the substantially different views and interests in poor and rich countries undermine a common understanding of what development and development co-operation should be about. Similarly, an energy transition towards renewables may not be felt as acutely in countries with

gas and oil reserves, but lacking electricity as it is in countries exporting renewable energy technology (Pedersen et al., 2021). The financial crisis, likewise, stimulated an interest among donor countries in mobilising private capital for development purposes (Mawdsley et al., 2014) – something which may suit high- and middle-income countries, but does not necessarily cater to the needs of poor countries. Evidently, such diverse views challenge the ideas of alignment and ownership underlying the Paris Declaration.

Secondly, countries receiving aid have become more diverse. The number of low-income countries fell from 65 in 2001 to 34 in 2013 (Khan, 2015) and the growth of many emerging economies has substantially reduced poverty in many countries. At the same time, the concept of fragility has been invented in this millennium. Since 2004 the World Bank has used four different ways of categorising conflict-affected and fragile situations (World Bank, 2022), making it difficult to compare the number of such situations across time. While some countries and territories permanently on the lists were in dire situations long before 2000 (West Bank, Gaza, Somalia, Central African Republic, Afghanistan, etc.), other countries have fortunately been taken off the lists (Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cambodia, Côte d'Ivoire, etc.). Yet, a number of countries being relatively stable in the 1990s have experienced significant challenges in terms of violent conflicts and deteriorating governance the last couple of decades (Syria, Libya, Lebanon, Mali, Burkina Faso, Yemen, etc.). Moreover, the relative strong political move towards democracy in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s has been challenged by increasingly authoritarian tendencies in some countries (Heyl and Llanos, 2022) and support for military coups in others (García-Rivero, 2022). This makes it increasingly difficult for donor countries and institutions to have if not a blueprint approach, then a general strategy towards development co-operation. Recipient countries face very diverse political, economic and social development problems rendering a context-specific approach necessary, which does not necessarily match the consensus of 2000 or the aid effectiveness principles.

Thirdly, the aid donor landscape and the sources of funds being channelled towards developing countries have changed. One difference is that many emerging economies now use substantial resources for development purposes abroad making South-South co-operation a well-established phenomenon (Mawdsley, 2019). Another is that remittances to low- and middle-income countries have grown from a level equivalent to Official Development Assistance (ODA) in the late 1990s to more than three times as much as ODA today (World Bank, 2021). Remittances tend to be relatively stable and counter-cyclical which make them an important source of finance for people in many countries although differences between countries and groups are significant also in this field. Foreign direct investments in low- and middle-income countries have also grown and clearly outpaced ODA since the early 1990s, but they tend to fluctuate much more and to focus on market opportunities in emerging economies. Nevertheless, they may also influence the political and economic context for development programmes in low-income countries if the economy is heavily skewed by investments in a particular sector. In any case, aid from rich countries has been dwarfed by other financial flows in many poor countries and it has been

challenged by South-South co-operation organised around different goals and principles.

Fourthly, the international normative environment for development co-operation has evolved in different ways. One of these is the move from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The changes in terms of what development is about and who it involves are significant partly because the themes included in the SDGs are much broader than those covered by the MDGs, partly because the distinction between developed and developing countries has been dissolved. The integration of development and climate concerns in the same set of goals puts demands on all countries, be they rich or poor. Formally, this new normative framework for development co-operation does not question the need for or the obligation of rich countries to provide foreign aid, but by identifying development problems in all countries in the world, the SDGs may unintentionally reduce political perceptions in rich countries that they should have a particular responsibility for engaging in development co-operation with poor countries. Moreover, the SDGs can be used to argue that other issues, notably climate issues, are as important as poverty reduction. Again, this puts international development co-operation in a quite different context compared to the early 2000s.

Fifthly, globalisation and international co-operation in general have been challenged by tendencies towards nationalism and populism in recent years (Milner, 2019). Likewise, the growth of emerging economies, notably China, creates geopolitical changes that may question a liberal world order built around ideas and values central to the consensus of 2000. Development cooperation may be sufficiently institutionalised to be unaffected by these tendencies in the short run, but if nationalism gains further political strength, foreign aid is likely to lose public support. Even if this does not take place, a development co-operation where human rights, democracy, gender equality etc. are downplayed because of geopolitical competition may very well attract little public support. Either way ideas about harmonisation, alignment and ownership are difficult to entertain, as has been amply demonstrated (Lundsgaarde and Engberg-Pedersen, 2019).

The context of international development co-operation has changed significantly over the last 20-25 years. The consensus of 2000 and the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness no longer constitute the framework shaping foreign aid. Though some would argue that the SDGs have been the decisive framework for all development activities since 2015, the political reality seems to indicate that there is less agreement about the goals and the practices of development co-operation nowadays. It has been argued that the Busan High Level Forum in 2012 reflected 'a paradigm change in aid and development norms' with 'a much stronger focus on economic development and development investment [...] rather than poverty reduction per se, or a rights-based approach to development' (Mawdsley et al., 2014: 35). In any case, the move from aid effectiveness to development effectiveness at Busan, seeking not least to integrate emerging economies into global aid governance, was accompanied by such weak follow-up measures that, in reality, the organisation of development co-operation is no longer discussed

internationally (Taggert, 2022). This provides more freedom to individual donor countries and institutions to organise their activities as they please.

Danish development co-operation

Turning to Danish foreign aid and its development since 2000, political changes have thoroughly influenced its goals, themes and organisation. These changes interact with the five issues mentioned above but play out in the specific Danish context to produce a particular framework for aid management. I will focus on four policy changes (Engberg-Pedersen and Fejerskov, 2021). First, with the war on terror and the Danish military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 2000s, Denmark's foreign policy took a turn from 'soft' to 'hard' measures. The dissemination of liberal values through dialogue and co-operation was no longer in vogue meaning that the political interest in development co-operation declined significantly. The extent to which foreign aid attracted political attention depended on its support of deployed soldiers, thereby supposedly 'winning hearts and minds' through infrastructure investments and the like. While most Danish aid resources continued to focus on poverty reduction, partnerships, democratisation, environment and gender equality, as highlighted in a development strategy from 2000, an increasing share of the budget was allocated towards security concerns (Stepputat et al., 2012). The point here is, however, that 'conventional' development co-operation was much less the object of political attention during the 2000s than during the 1990s.

Secondly, Danish foreign aid has been cut from approximately 1% of GNI plus funds for environment, peace and stabilisation initiatives in 2000 to 0.7% of GNI in 2015. This reflects the declining political interest in development co-operation. Moreover, the number of staff in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been reduced by 21% from 2003 to 2016 in terms of full-time jobs in Copenhagen and by 35% in terms of deployed full-time jobs. Simultaneously, the number of locally staffed full-time jobs at embassies has been increased by 37% (Engberg-Pedersen, 2020). The same ministry has cut down on the number of sector specialists and competence development activities while prioritising generalists when new recruitment opportunities have emerged. These changes have facilitated a focus on managing funds in relation to policy priorities rather than on analysing development problems in recipient countries. A Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Peer Review notes that 'recent budget cuts have heavily affected organisational capacity, putting Denmark's highly decentralised business model for development co-operation at risk' (DAC, 2016: 36).

Thirdly, development strategies published in 2010, 2012 and 2017 document an increased use of foreign aid in domestic politics in the sense that the two first strategies were used to promote particular political ideologies (freedom and human rights, respectively) by different development ministers while the last responded to the arrival of large numbers of Syrian refugees in Denmark in 2015-16. Interviews conducted in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirms this tendency as staff members regard domestic political priorities and the visibility of the development minister as increasingly important for aid initiatives and

development programmes (Engberg-Pedersen, 2020). The most recent DAC Peer Review observes that 'Denmark's policy of reducing irregular migration has shaped ODA allocations' and that the 'approach to poverty reduction and the "leave no one behind" principle is less clearly articulated than it was in the past' (DAC, 2021: 8-9). As domestic policy priorities may change relatively quickly and do not necessarily relate to development problems in poor countries, this trend risks decoupling Danish aid from the concerns of recipient actors and the efforts needed for long-term poverty reduction.

Fourthly, the Danish political interest in security, anti-radicalisation and the prevention of migrants and refugees from coming to Europe has paved the way for a radical change in the geographical focus of ODA allocations. While Danish foreign aid concentrated on stable countries in different continents around 2000, it is now channelled towards fragile situations in the Sahel, the Middle East, and countries neighbouring the EU. In agreement with this focus, a concomitant change from sector programme support to a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach is taking place (Engberg-Pedersen and Fejerskov, 2021). Given that fragile situations often require substantially different kinds of intervention, it has become a central issue to integrate these, partly to cater for the various needs and partly to ensure that the interventions contribute to each other or at least do not undermine each other, given the standard lack of coordination and co-operation across humanitarian relief, development activities and peace building. Furthermore, fragility in terms of violent conflicts and weak institutions is rarely a temporary phenomenon but requires long-term investments to establish new opportunities for displaced people and to avoid further spreading of conflicts. While a focus on fragile situations does not render decentralised aid management superfluous, it does create challenges with respect to security, approach and staff competencies.

It is quite clear from the above outline of the last 20 years of international and Danish development co-operation that aid management exists in a completely different context today. The overall goal of the co-operation is unclear, several new themes have been added to the agenda, and there is no international agreed understanding of how development co-operation should be organised and practiced. Earlier well-established ideas about long-term co-operation, partnership and ownership, focus on poverty reduction and essential conditions for it, and a concern for how development affects the individual have been abandoned as a unifying framework for development co-operation. This is a challenge to aid management in general, and it makes it difficult to assess decentralised aid management because there are only diffuse ideas against which one can evaluate it. The 2009 evaluation used the Paris principles of harmonisation and alignment as a kind of baseline, but this can easily be criticised as irrelevant or out-of-date today.

In a Danish context the recently adopted strategy for development co-operation, *The World We Share* (MFA, 2021), constitutes the most legitimate description of what Danish foreign aid should address although it does not contain a definition of good aid management. Another challenge is that the strategy, as any good

strategy, is sufficiently broad to allow for very diverse initiatives making it difficult to deduce any clear ambitions regarding aid management. With the reservation that almost everything is mentioned in the strategy and, accordingly, nothing can be excluded, the strategy has often been presented as having a foundation in democracy and human rights with two pillars: one focusing on poverty, inequality, displacement, and irregular migration and the other on climate change and the environment. Thus, an aid management that makes use of dialogue and co-operation and respects the individual while pursuing the objectives of the two pillars, could be said to constitute 'good' aid management. However, this is still a very broad framework which, moreover, is only being implemented now. Since the 2009 evaluation of the decentralised aid management, four different strategies for development co-operation have been put in place, and a new evaluation will have to have something to refer to across these strategies if it should assess the quality of the management. Before returning to this question, the following section takes up the issue of aid management in more detail by looking at relevant literature and at the Danish experience.

AID MANAGEMENT IN INTERNATIONAL AND DANISH PERSPECTIVES

A rapid literature survey suggests that recent international discussions of aid management could be organised around seven issues:

1. Marketisation of aid delivery models
2. Institutional structures of aid delivery
3. Thematic approaches
4. Busan principles
5. Principal-agent issues
6. Development management principles
7. Adaptive approaches

The marketisation of aid delivery models is a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the use of for-profit actors in development co-operation given the increased focus on mobilising private capital for development (Brunt and Casey, 2022; Banks and Hulme, 2014; OECD, 2016). It has been put into a context of 'New Public Management' vs 'New Public Service' approaches and the advantages of private and public provision of goods and services (Brunt and Casey, 2022; Denhardt and Denhardt, 2015). The reflections on the institutional structures of aid delivery concentrate on the implications of global crises for aid agencies and their organisation (Gulrajani, 2015; Gulrajani and Calleja, 2021; Lundsgaarde and Fejerskov, 2018). Among other issues, it analyses comparative advantages of centralised aid agencies vs. development co-operation by line ministries. Several more thematic approaches to aid management have been published mainly by OECD, and they include, e.g. aid for trade (OECD, 2013), fragile situations (OECD,

2012) and humanitarian relief (Scott, 2014). This variety of issues indicates that aid management has become as fragmented as development co-operation.

Of particular importance to the present study are the last four of the above issues. Even though the Busan High Level Meeting in 2011 did not produce vigorous attempts to organise international development co-operation, a multi-stakeholder institution, the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC), was created and has published a few monitoring reports since then. Based on the four Busan principles of (i) country ownership, (ii) focus on results, (iii) inclusive development partnerships, and (iv) transparency and accountability, the most recent report clearly concludes that development partners decreasingly align to country priorities, use strengthened public financial management systems, or demonstrate long-term plans and commitments at country level (OECD/UNDP, 2019). A study of the EU development co-operation uses the GPEDC report to address issues like the use of partner country objectives and results frameworks, short- and medium-term predictability, the use of public financial management and procurement systems, getting aid on partner country budgets, untying aid and transparency (BKP Development, 2020). The EU and its member states do not fare well on any of these issues, but as the European Commission has commissioned the study (although I fail to identify it on the Commission's homepage), a certain interest in the Busan principles seems to exist at this level when development co-operation is evaluated.

While one may question whether the 'principal-agent problem' is an accurate way of analysing the relationship between aid-providing and aid-executing institutions, it has recently been used to discuss the attempts to control aid practitioners and street-level bureaucrats in development co-operation (Honig, 2018). The 'problem' arises when the agent works on behalf of the principal who knows less about the conditions 'on the ground' and cannot completely observe what the agent is doing. In such situations, the agent may not do their best to fulfil the interests of the principal according to the theory. This kind of thinking has led to an excessive top-down control with development activities through performance-monitoring based on quantitative indicators and management practices unfit for local conditions, Honig argues. Breaking down development co-operation into three categories – service delivery, institution building and policy reform – Andrew Natsios emphasises that the last two are long-term endeavours difficult to measure and then hammers home the point by noting that 'a central principle of development theory [is] that those development programs that are most precisely and easily measured are the least transformational, and those programs that are most transformational are the least measurable' (Natsios, 2010: 3). The problem is that top-down control and monitoring of indicators produce sub-optimal results when the knowledge of the principal is insufficient. This indicates that aid management should be adapted to the activities undertaken and the situations in which they take place allowing for more 'navigation by judgement' when relevant measurement of the work is difficult to establish from the outset. One may consider a two-by-two matrix with high versus low environmental predictability and high versus low project verifiability (Honig, 2018: 8). Road construction in China tends towards high on both dimensions while

health systems strengthening in Papua New Guinea tends towards low on the dimensions. In this light, decentralised aid management appears to be more important if the objectives of development co-operation relate to long-term, transformational change of country institutions and policies.

Some authors have tried to define development management as a discipline. The idea is to identify core elements of aid or development management partly independently of the policies that it is supposed to execute. Four dimensions have been suggested (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2010): (i) A set of values including self-determination, empowerment, an equitable distribution of development benefits, responsiveness, social feasibility, etc., (ii) a strong focus on process where the objective does not trump the means, (iii) a range of management and analytical tools adapted from social science disciplines, and (iv) a means to support international development co-operation. Everyday life development management is often characterised by contradictions between the first two dimensions and the last, suggesting that it may not be so easy to distinguish the discipline. Moreover, it has been strongly criticised for being managerial and a tool to promote elite interests and subordinate the poor (Cooke and Dar, 2008). In an attempt to rescue the discipline certain principles have been suggested: (i) Reduce the physical and psychological distance between aid practitioners and those who are supposed to benefit from the activities, (ii) move away from top-down, blueprint approaches in favour of 'an improvised, flexible, contingent, intuitive and sensitive practice', and (iii) stimulate a reflective, self-critical approach of aid practitioners so that they continuously assess 'their own problematic position within the development endeavour' (Gulrajani, 2010: 143). However, such principles are often circumscribed by political agendas and bureaucratic politics in donor countries for which reason some have called for 'development managers to "speak truth to power" in ways that affirm [the] values dimension' of development management (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2010: 111). While much needed and very idealistic, one may wonder whether it is possible to establish development management as a legitimate and reasonably strong basis for 'speaking truth to power'. Nevertheless, in relation to an evaluation of decentralised aid management the discussion of development management provides certain points – e.g. Gulrajani's first and second point mentioned above – that may be used when assessing Danish development co-operation.

In line with this, different adaptive approaches have been proposed. One is 'working with the grain' according to which development activities and institution building should support positive change already taking place (Booth, 2011). Another is the Thinking and Working Politically community of practice formed in 2013 which concentrates on (i) political insight and understanding, (ii) responsiveness to domestic environment, and (iii) flexibility and adaptability in design and implementation (see Teskey, 2022). A third is the so-called Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (Andrews et al., 2013) which is organised around four elements: (i) solving specific problems identified by local actors rather than selling 'best practice' solutions, (ii) creating a decision-making environment supportive of experimentation, positive deviance and gradual 'muddling through', (iii) establishing active, ongoing learning that focuses on changing actions and

approach to better solve the problems at hand, and (iv) involving many, diverse stakeholders to make solutions politically feasible and practically implementable. These ideas led to a Doing Development Differently Manifesto according to which successful development initiatives reflect certain principles:

- ‘They focus on solving local problems that are debated, defined and refined by local people in an ongoing process.
- They are legitimised at all levels (political, managerial and social), building ownership and momentum throughout the process to be ‘locally owned’ in reality (not just on paper).
- They work through local conveners who mobilise all those with a stake in progress (in both formal and informal coalitions and teams) to tackle common problems and introduce relevant change.
- They blend design and implementation through rapid cycles of planning, action, reflection and revision (drawing on local knowledge, feedback and energy) to foster learning from both success and failure.
- They manage risks by making ‘small bets’: pursuing activities with promise and dropping others.
- They foster real results – real solutions to real problems that have real impact: they build trust, empower people and promote sustainability’ (DDD Manifesto, 2014).

Much can be said about these principles—who would not like to ‘foster real results’? what do you do in the face of adamant political opposition? does radical institutional change always produce failure?—but the ideas have come to influence parts of international development co-operation.

Cutting across the different ideas and discussions of aid management outlined above is a strong emphasis on local ownership, navigation by judgement in complex situations, continuous learning and adaptation and, accordingly, a strong criticism of top-down, blueprint and indicator-based approaches if the activities or the context are slightly complex. However, this view builds on the assumption that aid management should lead to development in the sense of improved living conditions of poor and marginalised people. If it is accepted, as argued here, that there is no longer a shared normative framework directing international development co-operation towards poverty reduction, the aid management reflections may exist in an elusive bubble outside the political realities of international co-operation. Thus, principles and central ideas of aid and development management cannot be taken as an unproblematised point of departure for evaluating decentralised aid management.

Danish pragmatic aid

Regarding Danish aid management, for many years it has been characterised by a pragmatic and flexible approach in the sense that development support was adapted to the specific conditions of recipient countries. The 1994 and 2000 strategies for Danish development co-operation (MFA, 1994; 2000) emphasised partnerships as the way through which to organise the co-operation recognising the needs and interests of recipient countries as well as the necessity to adapt the

support to changes taking place over time. While definitely shaped by Danish values and pursuing strategic objectives, concrete development activities in the 1990s and 2000s were influenced to a large degree by sector and country specialists and development experts inside and outside the ministry seeking to make the co-operation as relevant as possible within the given country contexts. Although a new development strategy in 2010 caused the 2011 DAC peer review to note: 'Denmark is urged to be pragmatic and flexible in pursuing its objectives in diverse and sensitive contexts, respecting local needs and contexts' (DAC, 2011: 33), the subsequent review observed that 'detailed risk assessments and budgetary flexibility within the results framework give embassies the capacity to adjust as contexts change, and seize opportunities as they arise' (DAC, 2016: 46). Moreover, Denmark demonstrates 'strong accountability towards governments and partners' (ibid.: 49). The new DDD-inspired approach to strengthen adaptability and coherence is positively received in the latest peer review stating that the 'approach is well designed and holds significant potential for Denmark to increase its effectiveness' (DAC, 2021: 9). However, a theme characterising all these peer reviews is whether the MFA has the appropriate and sufficient number of staff to carry out a pragmatic and flexible approach to aid management.

In an evaluation study of Danish development co-operation with Bolivia, Mozambique, Nepal and Vietnam, it is noted both that the Danish side to the co-operation is rather dynamic with changing policies, ministers, priorities, etc. and that much country programming has been rather detailed upfront and expected to be unchanged for several years. This leads the study to make the following observation, which is very much in line with the international discussion of a more adaptive aid management:

'More flexible and adaptive country programming could combine the persistence of long-term commitment to a partner country through a multi-year financial envelope, with a greater flexibility and agency on the part of the local Danish embassy, in consultation with Copenhagen, to decide on specific interventions designed to support the achievement of strategically defined objectives. They would also have the space to change approaches and focus over time as the context and conditions changed. Such an approach from Copenhagen and the local Danish embassy could enable a more nuanced acknowledgement of the non-linearity of change, but it would require a strong embassy-level capacity to implement such an approach to programming' (Webster, et al. 2018: 49).

A study of aid management in fragile situations highlights the usefulness of a pragmatic approach (Bourgouin and Engberg-Pedersen, 2013). Based on an analysis of evaluations of development activities producing noteworthy results in fragile situations, including of some Danish supported development programmes, the study defines pragmatic aid management in terms of (i) policy liberty, (ii) flexibility, (iii) responsiveness, (iv) context dependence, and (v) political sensitivity. While flexibility and context dependence stand out, other factors, including headquarter support, staff and coordination with other development actors, have also played a contributing role.

Recently, the MFA has adopted a guidance note on adaptive management (MFA, 2020) inspired by the Doing Development Different discussions. Described as a response to the complexity, uncertainties and politics of development, the note focusses on five operational principles: (i) strategic level portfolio perspective, (ii) start where the partners and the partnerships are, (iii) focus on tangible results, (iv) explicit focus on learning, and (v) recognise dilemmas. An important point is that the staff capacity needs depend on the complexity of the programmes being implemented. This is in line with the above-mentioned two-by-two matrix of the degrees of environmental predictability and project verifiability, and it indicates that a decentralised aid management is more important in certain contexts and with respect to certain activities. An evaluation could address this.

DECENTRALISED AID MANAGEMENT

What is the status of the decentralisation of Danish aid management? Without attempting to paint a complete picture, some indications can be identified. First, there are Danish embassies or representations in charge of major development programmes including in neighbouring countries in Mali, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Ramallah and Lebanon. Bilateral aid activities are currently being phased out in Tanzania and Bangladesh. In 2003, aid management authority was decentralised to embassies in 14 countries (Bangladesh, Benin, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Nepal, Nicaragua, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Vietnam and Zambia) (MFA, 2009: 5), or twice as many as today. Secondly, the share of Danish bilateral ODA going to the top ten recipient countries has gone down from around 40% in 2004 to approximately 26% in 2014 (DAC, 2016: 30), and the review notes: 'In 2014, 43.7% of Denmark's bilateral ODA was programmed at partner country level [...]. This share was lower than the DAC country average (52.9%)' (ibid.: 29). This suggests a growing fragmentation of the bilateral aid. Moreover, increasing amounts of bilateral funds are channelled through regional funds or managed from the headquarters. Recently, the responsibility for managing a programme in countries with Danish embassies in charge of aid activities has been kept in Copenhagen. Thirdly, the share of Danish ODA being spent bilaterally has also declined significantly from approximately 40% in 2011 to some 27% in 2018 (Engberg-Pedersen and Fejerskov, 2021: 134) (an unpublished internal MFA document puts the share of ODA allocated for country programmes at 20% in 2018). Besides, an increasing amount of country programme budgets is channelled through multilateral institutions at the country level, the so-called multi-bi support (Mokoro, 2022). While country-specific knowledge is useful to identify multilateral partners at country level, once the contract has been signed implementation of the activities is delegated to the partners and requires less management compared to a co-operation between an embassy and national authorities or actors. All this suggests that the issue of decentralised aid management has become much less important compared to other forms of management of Danish development co-operation.

Moreover, it is important how the decentralised management authority itself has evolved the last 20 years. Without addressing this issue in a comprehensive way, it can be noted that in its recent discussions of *Doing Development Differently*, the MFA has emphasised two issues with implications for the role played by embassies (MFA, 2019). First, there is a need for a more comprehensive and strategic approach to all activities in a country. Sometimes embassies have not been sufficiently informed about all Danish-funded activities and this inhibits synergy and coordination. Thus, the ambition is to put embassies in a central position with respect to all Danish policies and programmes and all activities involving Danish actors, not only bilateral aid activities. Secondly, a new strategic framework will be developed for each country where Denmark is significantly engaged. The elaboration of this framework will be undertaken by a taskforce with members from different offices in Copenhagen and from the embassy in question. This points towards a stronger co-operation between the headquarters and embassies, but could also indicate a weakening of the delegated management authority.

A rapid perusal of the most recent DAC peer reviews of the Netherlands (2017), France (2018), Norway (2019), Sweden (2019), United Kingdom (2020) and Germany (2021) indicates (i) that the reviews emphasise the importance of delegating authority to country offices to support recipient country ownership and aid responsiveness to changing conditions, (ii) that Sweden continues to decentralise its staff (up from 25% in 2013 to 38.5% in 2017) (DAC, 2019: 17) and the United Kingdom has a 'long-treasured and commended country-led model' with 'a fully delegated budget and well-staffed country offices' (DAC, 2020: 77), and (iii) that the other four countries could benefit from clarifying the role of embassies and country offices in their development co-operation as well as from delegating more programming competence to the country level. Some initiatives have been taken in Germany and France in that direction while it seems that the Dutch experience somewhat resembles the Danish. Overall, it seems that there is not a move away from decentralised aid management among these donors although some struggle with complicated institutional set-ups which do not make delegation of authority to the country level an easy endeavour.

As mentioned, the 2009 evaluation concentrated on four issues: the process of decentralisation, the adequacy of authorities and tools, the quality controls and accountability mechanisms, and the human resources at the embassies. Its main conclusions regarding the last three issues (the first being less relevant today) were (MFA, 2009): (i) The authority assigned and the tools made available to the embassies were generally sufficient to enable alignment and harmonisation. However, themes prioritised by headquarters as well as requirements regarding detailed programming were inhibiting the room-for-manoeuvre of the embassies. (ii) The quality control of embassy aid management was regarded as sometimes too rigid and too late (the HQ-led programme appraisals), sometimes arbitrary (the selection of programme performance indicators), and sometimes insufficiently adapted to the capacities of the individual embassy. (iii) Due to administrative cuts, the embassies were never staffed as intended. Moreover, non-sector-specific competences (e.g. skills in policy dialogue and institutional capacity assessment)

and embassy management capacity were regarded as insufficient despite the provision of training courses. (iv) The implications for the organisation of and work at the headquarters was not addressed as part of the decentralisation. Since staff in Copenhagen no longer worked with aid management, they did not get the necessary competencies to work at an embassy and – I would add – they reoriented their focus towards domestic politics in Denmark. While these issues have been addressed to different degrees by the ministry even before the publication of the 2009 evaluation, the early experience [with the decentralisation] may to some extent have corroborated the view that '[w]ithin agencies themselves, organisational disjuncture and social segregation limit the control and knowledge of upper over lower levels in the system, such that the shape of a project organisation can be imagined as an hour glass: a thin bottleneck limits the capacity for influence of policy directors and advisers over an operational core' (Mosse, 2005: 103).

Another analysis of the Danish experience with decentralised aid management (Engberg-Pedersen, 2014) largely supports the above conclusions. A significant issue is how to balance embassies' ability to act according to the needs, interests, and changes in poor countries with the needs of the headquarters and the political level in Denmark to establish and change priorities and document results. In several of the above-cited analyses the support from top-level political and administrative leaders for decentralised and adaptive management is seen as conditional for success. However, as Danish and international development co-operation increasingly pursue other goals than poverty reduction and assistance to recipient country ownership of development activities, such top-level support may become mediocre or intermittent. Moreover, there is general agreement that decentralised and adaptive aid management requires sufficient and experienced staff while both evaluations and peer reviews of Danish development co-operation consistently raise the concern that administrative cuts have undermined the capacity of the MFA to reach its goals.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Where does this leave an evaluation of Danish decentralised aid management? Evaluations can be backward-looking to assess whether a particular goal has been achieved effectively and efficiently. Accordingly, they are a tool of accountability towards stakeholders and the general public. They can also be forward-looking by learning important lessons that can be used in future development co-operation. Adopting the former perspective, an evaluation can be worthwhile given the importance of the issue as 'Denmark is known for its highly decentralised development co-operation, with management of – and responsibility for – individual development programmes placed with the Head of Mission in embassies' (DAC, 2016: 39). Adopting the latter perspective, it is less obvious that a narrow evaluation of the decentralisation of aid management to embassies can provide useful lessons given, among other things, that a decreasing share of

Danish ODA is channelled through embassies in charge of country programmes. The rest of this section discusses two questions: What should the focus of the evaluation be, and which criteria can be used when evaluating a particular focus?

Evaluations are often supposed to pursue both of the above objectives, and in that case, it may be useful to adopt a slightly different focus than the decentralisation of Danish aid management. Different possibilities could be:

- (i) Aid management in fragile situations. Danish ODA to these situations is increasingly important with respect to both political attention and allocated resources. The current strategy for development co-operation envisages a stronger Danish engagement in fragile situations which requires adaptive approaches given their politically and socially volatile nature. The Danish experience with decentralised aid management is likely to provide important lessons for adaptive aid management in general. Moreover, several embassies have been involved in aid activities in fragile situations. As the move of Danish ODA from stable countries to more fragile situations started in the mid-2000s, it is also relevant with respect to the first perspective of accountability to undertake an evaluation across different fragile situations of whether Danish aid management achieves the goals set. A way of delimiting such an evaluation could be to focus on one activity of relatively high project verifiability in Honig's terms and one of low in each of a limited set of fragile situations.
- (ii) Centralised vs. decentralised aid management. In the current changing and fragmented context of development co-operation, it is not obvious that all goals are best pursued through decentralised aid management in agreement with the consensus of 2000 and the Paris Declaration. New policy goals, such as the prevention of irregular migration, may require a different kind of aid management, and there is seemingly no overall strategy for whether a particular activity should be managed centrally or decentralised. In every concrete case, there are undoubtedly good reasons for the choices made, but do they add up to a coherent approach? Such an evaluation could strengthen the understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the two forms of aid management in the current era of multiple goals of development co-operation including the extent to which the decentralised aid management complicates work on new policy goals. It could also document to stakeholders the extent to which Danish ODA has contributed (and can contribute) to its new goals. A way of delimiting such an evaluation could be to look at central and decentralised management of selected activities aiming at, say, the prevention of irregular migration, support for refugees and host communities, and the Danish-Arab partnership.
- (iii) Adaptive aid management. As correctly stated in the recent guidance note (MFA, 2020), this kind of management is not a new topic in Danish development co-operation. A significant purpose of the decentralisation of aid management was to ensure greater flexibility

and responsiveness. The public could be interested in getting to know how this important element of the decentralisation of aid management, the partnership approach, and the engagement in fragile situations has fared, and there are important lessons to learn regarding how to balance Danish political interests and headquarter priorities with the ability of country-level entities to adapt activities to local concerns and changing circumstances. Moreover, such an evaluation will contribute to international discussions of Doing Development Differently and hopefully support the operationalisation of the guidance note. A way of delimiting such an evaluation could be to examine activities from all four boxes of Honig's two-by-two matrix and select only activities where the programme document refers to an adaptive approach according to the principles outlined in the guidance note. It is, however, important that the evaluation does not shy away from addressing the contradiction or dilemma between Danish political interests and adaptive aid management if the evaluation should prove to be interesting.

- (iv) If a strict focus on decentralised aid management is required: Decentralised management authority. One issue is whether 'the adequacy of authorities and tools' continues to be satisfactory in relation to attempts to harmonise and align development co-operation at the country level. Such a discussion would be a straightforward update of the 2009 evaluation which, however, did not address a couple of other issues that a new evaluation could take up. First, quality control and accountability are not just a matter of programme appraisals and performance indicators, but also of organisational culture. A new evaluation could examine to what extent the organisational culture across the different entities of the MFA both directs and supports decentralised management authority. Secondly, and as indicated above, decentralised management authority puts demands on the organisation and the practices at headquarters. A new evaluation could address the extent to which considerations regarding the decentralisation of aid management has influenced organisational changes in Copenhagen. The fundamental change of the balance between posted and local staff at the embassies could be another issue to study in relation to enabling decentralised management authority. Finally, it could be discussed what the decentralised management authority is used for in a situation where harmonisation and alignment are no longer at the top of the agenda. A way of delimiting such an evaluation could be to conduct an in-depth examination of a limited number of embassies in addition to the analysis of the organisational changes in Copenhagen.

Regardless of which focus is chosen to take up with the evaluation, it would strengthen its legitimacy if Southern perspectives were thoroughly analysed. The harmonisation principle of the Paris Declaration is an example of a standard that recipient countries may not have fully supported as it tends to establish a donor

bloc which can be difficult to handle (Andersen and Therkildsen, 2007). Likewise, governments in recipient countries may be critical of adaptive management practices that, in their perspective, may be difficult to govern and may, in reality, pursue goals that these governments find politically troublesome. More self-assertive governments undoubtedly prefer investments in, say, infrastructure with high 'project verifiability' and little need for any kind of donor management at the country level. If 'ownership' becomes an important element in the evaluation, it is obvious to ask whose ownership because the challenging political conditions in many recipient countries create very diverse views and preclude a straightforward democratic legitimacy of the government and official leaders.

In addition to the focus of the evaluation, it is a central question with which criteria the selected activities should be assessed. The 2009 evaluation chose to examine the decentralisation of aid management against the Paris Declaration principles of harmonisation and alignment. As mentioned in the introduction, doing the same in a new evaluation would not take the substantial changes of international development co-operation into account. A possibility is to take a point of departure in the Busan Partnership Agreement, if it is deemed to be relevant and important, and focus on a few of its indicators which include:

- Development partners' use of national development strategies and results frameworks.
- Annual predictability of development co-operation.
- Medium-term predictability of development co-operation.
- The extent to which development co-operation is included in budgets subject to parliamentary oversight.
- Development partners' use of public financial management systems.

These indicators are fairly precise, and an evaluation could look into the extent to which, how and why Danish decentralised aid management performs in relation to some of them. The indicator on the use of national development strategies and results frameworks is, moreover, the indicator of SDG 17, target 15 ('Respect each country's policy space and leadership to establish and implement policies for poverty eradication and sustainable development'). However, they are not necessarily relevant in relation to, e.g. adaptive aid management or to fragile situations. Thus, the choice of focus of the evaluation has implications for the criteria against which to assess the activities.

In particular with a focus on adaptive management or aid management in fragile situations, an evaluation could make use of the guidance note on adaptive management and assess two of its five principles, namely the extent to which aid management has started 'where the politics, partners and partnerships are' and whether an 'explicit focus on learning' has been established. These two principles are central in international discussions of Doing Development Differently and the various approaches proposed. They are also inherently difficult as they require analysis, awareness of politics, observation, contemplation and the like which are challenging activities in an organisation focused on execution and control. Moreover, one concern could be for how long these principles have been as clearly

formulated as they now are in the guidance note. While 'learning' has been an issue for quite some time, the specific phrasing of the two principles is recent.

Finally, an obvious and well-established criterion is creating results. 'Focus on tangible results' is a principle in the guidance note on adaptive management, and one of the Busan principles is to produce results in terms of eradicating poverty and inequality, creating sustainable development and building capacities. While fundamental, this criterion may also be somewhat distanced from the aid management process as many different factors are likely to influence the results of development activities. Moreover, in a fragmented international development co-operation results for some may not be perceived as results by others.

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