NORTH-SOUTH RELATIONS

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Political Conditions attached to Development Aid for Africa

A new catch-phrase in development policy, “political conditionality”, has rapidly established itself in recent times. Increasing numbers of Western politicians now seek to attach strings to development aid by requiring recipient countries to comply with certain political conditions. These intentions are predominantly voiced with respect to African countries. This article asks what justification there is for this expanded version of conditionality, and whether it represents a new form of interference or the legitimate support of budding democratic tendencies.

The concept of policy dialogue which came into common use in the early 1980s was originally primarily geared to the discussion between donor countries or institutions and the governments of developing countries concerning general economic and development policy operating conditions regarded by the donors as essential prerequisites for the success of whatever development aid measures were being contemplated. If at all, any questions regarding the underlying state of the political system, how democratic it was or whether human rights were respected would only be touched upon in passing, and indeed these would usually be excluded from consideration. The foremost maxim was that development aid was to be provided without regard to the political nature or orientation of the recipient countries, and only the level of need and the expected benefits were to be considered. In contrast to this, “economic conditionality” was to develop during the 1980s to become one of development policy’s key concepts of the decade. The IMF’s and the World Bank’s structural adjustment programmes, in particular, which were oriented towards macroeconomic and sectoral policies, made the approval of loans conditional upon the fulfilment of concrete economic policy targets. By their nature, individual bilateral projects did not readily permit such conditions to be imposed, but even so, bilateral donors increasingly began to try, precisely by means of the policy dialogue mentioned above, to tie individual projects and programmes to demands for an improvement in the overall economic policy environment. Until recently, at any rate, the formulation of specific requirements in connection with development aid (conditionality) was confined to matters of economic and financial policy and more or less excluded political issues in a stricter sense. Something which was all too easily overlooked in this process was that far-reaching changes in economic policy can naturally also have considerable consequences for political power structures.

Since 1989/90, however, the picture has suddenly been thoroughly changed. The diplomatic acquiescence towards foreign governments which used to be commonplace has now given way to the tendency to really quite candidly impose political conditions before further development aid is granted. Both the fear and the anger among recipient countries’ governments with regard to this new form of external interference are now clearly perceptible, for they believe it threatens to reach way beyond the economic policy intervention previously experienced. This change of stance by Western development aid donors raises a number of key questions: what discernible reasons have prompted it, is this a legitimate form of behaviour in view of the developing countries’ own sovereignty, what objectives are the donors pursuing, and finally, what criteria would need to be applied for such an approach to be put into practical operational use? In a general sense, the debate involves all developing countries, yet the line taken does appear to apply especially to the predominantly authoritarian political regimes in Africa.

There can be no doubt that this new dimension in discussions regarding development policy owes much to

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the complete change in the international situation as the East-West conflict, which also had a decisive influence on the interest positions involved in relations with Third World countries, has virtually dissolved. All of a sudden, it is no longer a vital concern to provide development aid primarily to pro-Western countries irrespective of their domestic political circumstances. This has opened up new channels for the grave discomfort which has long been felt about the lack of success of development aid as it has been practised in the past, coupled with the awareness of the behaviour of national governing élites which both inhibit development and are frequently also parasitic. Another factor which has encouraged the application of new political yardsticks is that there are now hopeful signs that demands for political change are being raised almost everywhere in Africa, triggered off both by the dissatisfaction and rage of the public at the authoritarian political and crisis-ridden economic circumstances in which they have to live which had been bottled up for so long, and by the example of the rapid collapse of similarly structured regimes in Eastern Europe, which were ultimately unable to assert themselves any longer against these popular uprisings.

Yet another important aspect is the part played by the changes in policy set in motion by the structural adjustments which were more or less forced upon governments by external aid agencies, since economic liberalization and the reduction of the state’s share in the economy naturally also substantially reduce politicians’ scope for manipulating who occupies positions which bestow influence or allow profits to be extracted from the system, thus also curtailing their own practical power positions. These societal consequences of the structural adjustment programmes which have frequently been so vehemently criticized have not yet remotely been given the attention they deserve.

Pressure on Governments

Naturally enough, opinions on the questions brought to the surface by “political conditionality” are totally different, depending on the perspective of the observer: Western development aid donors, official government representatives of African countries, or opposition groupings struggling to unseat established élites in these countries all have their own special view of things. A sea change was apparent when the World Bank, which is pledged to remain politically neutral by virtue of its own status and structure, in November 1989 presented a study on the long-term outlook for Africa, and broke with all previous conventions to state that a different form of political “governance” was a vital precondition for a positive development perspective in Africa. At the traditional Franco-African summit conference in June 1990, President Mitterand spoke of henceforth linking development aid, in marked contrast to previous practice, with the willingness to carry out political reforms. The British Foreign Minister Hurd has been still more outspoken on a number of occasions, voicing the expectation that all of the main development aid donors would join in a concerted approach towards demanding greater accountability, political pluralism and more open forms of government in recipient countries. Similar remarks have also been expressed by the USA, and indeed by the Scandinavian countries, which have traditionally been especially generous to developing countries; this trend was also reflected in Germany’s position as stated by former Development Minister Warnke and his parliamentary state secretary Repnik. In its “Basic Principles for Development Cooperation in the 1990s”, the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation’s scientific consultative committee for the first time made explicit reference to the necessary political conditions on an equal footing with aspects of the economic system and of macro-economic policy.

The general intention is clear: by imposing conditions on the development aid which the vast majority of African countries are unable to do without, donors wish to exert heavy pressure on leaderships to allow more political pluralism and genuine democracy. However, what is considerably less clear from the mainly very sweeping statements made by politicians is whether adequate account has been taken of the specific socio-cultural and historical conditions on which political change would need to be based; blanket demands for the rapid introduction of multi-party systems along Western lines surely do not always do justice to the complexity of the situation. Another point which does not normally emerge sufficiently clearly is whether more democracy is being demanded in the Third World because this is a universal value in its own right, or whether it is regarded in more functional terms as a (newly discovered) prerequisite for achieving better development results on the socio-economic front. In the light of the many years of substantial development support given to many authoritarian regimes, during which their system of rule was accepted more or less uncritically, one cannot escape the impression that Western governments

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2 Remarks to this effect were recorded in the periodical “Crossbow”, which is the publication of the Conservative “Bow Group”; cf. Financial Times, 1st October 1990.