Report of the 23rd Käte Hamburger Lecture

Applied History: Still Learning from 60 years of Development Co-Operation

with Professor J. Brian Atwood

17th May 2017, Duisburg
The 23rd Käte Hamburger Lecture approached the topic of ‘Applied History: Still Learning from 60 years of Development Co-Operation’, with Professor J. Brian Atwood, Former Chair of OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and Former Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The lecture was organized by Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research (KHK / GCR21) and took place on 17th May 2017.

In his opening statement Markus Böckenförde, Executive Director and Senior Researcher at KHK/GCR21, underlined the importance of the lecture’s topic in the current stage of a changing world order. The Centre, he emphasized, intends to provide a space for co-operative thinking about challenges of this changing order. Therefore, the topic does not only contribute to a highly up-to-date issue but deepens the Centre’s work. The lecture was moderated by Alexandra Trzeciack-Duval, Former World Bank DAC Delegate and Head of the Policy Division of (Development Co-operation Directorate) of OECD.

Lecture

Atwood began his lecture referring to Käte Hamburger by assuming that, if she were alive today, she would help us to reflect on a Europe and a Germany, which have benefitted from development and integration and which have lived in peace for two generations. But this Europe is facing challenging times, as there are nationalist and populist forces on the rise. They are promoting an irredentist anti-globalization agenda that also can be found in the US under the label ‘America First’. This is the context, Atwood stated, within which the historical and the future role of the DAC have to be discussed.

Furthermore, he explained that the DAC’s contribution to the development community has been greater than anyone would have expected in the beginning. As an intellectual hub, it has measured and defined development co-operation and increased accountability and effectiveness. However, this is not the time to celebrate the DAC’s achievements, but rather to discuss the viability of the institution as well as its mission. ODA continues to be a key strategic tool of development co-operation, Atwood argued, and it should be increased if we are to successfully implement global initiatives like the SDGs. Yet, the US is threatening to reduce or even leave the development mission. Atwood raised the question how the DAC can recreate its successful past in this troubling environment in order to continue to play a leading role in the international development community.

One answer to this question can be found in the promotion of development work in political terms as a response to the contemporary global challenges. Unfortunately, the work of development is complex and somewhat bureaucratic.
and this limits public understanding of its importance. Linked to this challenge, Atwood advocated the need to infuse the DAC’s work with enthusiasm in order to prevent its members to become what Max Weber called “specialists without passion”. To him, accepting the challenges of development means to make use of new methods, new ideas and new technologies, to make the world a better place and to fulfil the expectations of all citizens.

Atwood argued that development progress is perceived by the leaders of the new wave of illiberal and authoritarian regimes, as a threat – a fact that makes the global project more difficult. The DAC, he suggested, has the standing to oppose those retrenching tendencies by using its research and advocacy as an antidote. To exemplify his thesis, Atwood referred to his time at USAID in the 1990s. At that time, USAID dealt with severe budget reductions, due to the fact that the Congress no longer favoured foreign aid as politically valuable. In the US, Atwood recalled, he first fought a lonely battle, until he found support at DAC high-level meetings. In this regard, the DAC decided to draft a political statement that became the first attempt to establish global goals for development and finally, ended up as a major contribution to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The identification of development successes and the formulation of common goals led to a 50% increase in ODA over the next decade and created a system of accountability. Atwood underscored the role of the MDGs in creating a set of indicators and data points that fuelled the development mission but also presented evidence of its effectiveness. Referring to the SDGs as the successor to the MDGs, Atwood raised the question as to whether and how traditional donors can rationalize investing in the developing world if their own economies are under stress. His answer was: “They not only can, but they have to” as our own economies are linked to those of the developing world.

Atwood discussed the role of the DAC and its more recent contributions to the development community. The DAC played a key role in the encouragement of new South-South donors to adhere to solid principles of development co-operation. He used the Busan Forum as an example to characterize a new era of more inclusive development co-operation. He referred to the Global Partnership created at Busan and expressed concern that this potentially useful institution was not being given appropriate support. Hence, Atwood questioned what can be done to revive this Global Partnership. To this question he gave three answers:

First, the DAC Steering Committee has to be empowered as it needs stronger leadership by the stakeholders of development co-operation. Furthermore, its
members should be elected for multiple-year terms and meet in person several times a year.

Second, the UN and the DAC need to provide a more proactive secretariat since it is less likely that the Steering Committee in its current formation will be able to devise the necessary agendas. Atwood underlined the aspect of promotion of this institution as he claimed that the forum should be attractive enough to encourage political leaders to line up to be part of the Committee.

Third, the Partnership should address the issue of legitimacy and the OECD should be willing to step back behind the UN if it means that the institution will be seen as more legitimate and accepted by developing nations.

Atwood elaborated why he believes that the DAC will continue to play a vital role in the development community. It is an inclusive institution that has been creative in the past in organizing networks and facing current issues; but much more can be done. To achieve its own goals, it needs to be more flexible and to include new actors in order to achieve real impact. Yet, Atwood explained, some member states of the DAC are hesitating and want to keep it exclusive. In his opinion, no one should be excluded from membership as long as prospective members agree to the working methods such as transparency and accountability.

Atwood concluded his lecture urging that the world is facing a tipping point. Global crises like climate change, disease, terrorism or nuclear proliferation are accumulating faster than governments and international organizations can handle them. At the same time ODA is at risk, due to the fact that Western nations too often fail to connect their own well-being to the rest of the world. He concluded by stating that the DAC is well positioned to confront these negative tendencies. But it needs to see itself as an integral part of the development community and to become a servant leader for the development community writ large – not simply an appendage of the OECD.

Discussion

In his comments, Liam Swiss, Senior Fellow at KHK/GCR21 and Associate Professor at Memorial University, St. John’s, Canada, accentuated three aspects of J. Brian Atwood’s lecture. First of all, he mentioned once more the role of the DAC as a lonesome hero in global politics. He described it as an intellectual home, which is not known by most of the people outside of the development community. In addition to the first aspect, he highlighted the DAC’s potential to shape norms and described it as an ability that cannot be discounted. Finally, he
stressed that the **DAC has to look beyond itself** in order to reach its aims and it has to include new partners like emerging powers.

**Alexandra Trzeciack-Duval** also commented the aspect of inclusiveness and emphasized the necessity to reach out not only to a new audience but also to new partners. Otherwise, the DAC will not be able to continue further. She linked this aspect to the need for enthusiasm, as mentioned by Atwood within his lecture, and claimed that new partners would make the DAC much more attractive to others. Furthermore, she addressed the withdrawal of the US by bringing the EU or Macron up as possible alternatives in the leadership of the development mission. Relating to the dimension of government, she emphasized that it is necessary to talk to partners across different governments, thus the DAC needs to reach out to the level of governments and function as an intellectual hub at the same time.

In the **Q&A session**, discussion revolved around the possibility to bring up development successes to the public, south-south co-operation and the DAC’s reflection on critique of development co-operation.

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Report written by Till Christofzik