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Interview

RENSKE STEENBERGEN

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1 How do you view the “southern learning process” and ii) associated international platforms and actors?

Renske Steenbergen: I am not a voice from the South, so I might look at this question from a different angle. My own view is that I think it is very important to highlight the need for equal partnerships in general. I am not entirely sure that we necessarily need to create more attention for South-South Cooperation, because in my view it is not necessarily representing a different or better way of cooperating than North-South or triangular cooperation could represent. There is a tendency in the international community to highlight South-South Cooperation or Middle-Income Countries Cooperation. But I do think in general, that the

role that we have as an international association is to make information available about the different forms of cooperation, the forms of cooperation that have proven effective, that have proven to be useful. Of course we have different types of actors that wish to exchange amongst themselves: I understand that some might want to exchange among only Southern partners or they might want to exchange amongst Northern partners. What I think is very important though is that we focus more on what can be an equal partnership, what it should be, what it should look like, and when a partnership becomes mutually beneficial.

Within VNG International, we have worked with South-South and triangular cooperation in our programmes. That was not necessarily a success. For me, we should not conclude too easily that South-South cooperation can work better, it always depends on the form and the methodology that you use in any kind of learning and cooperation.

2 Do we need to formalize a specific platform of south-south cooperation? If so, how would this be best organized

at city, regional and international levels? ii) How can UCLG best help in this?

Renske Steenbergen: I think it would depend a lot on what the roles such a platform would be. I would find it very interesting if we could enable such a discussion within the CIB Working Group, as a place where these types of exchanges take place. That concerns the organizational structure, but if I leave that aspect aside, I guess the most important thing is if there is that request from members; I would avoid creating too much division within the network. Besides, I am not sure what the exact definition is of ‘South-South’. I think the most important thing is if there really is a need to create that platform and what is the signal that UCLG gives if you make such a separation? That I am not sure about.

In terms of organizing such a platform, it would be best organized at the international level. It would be useful if it were integrated or aligned with the already existing networks within UCLG. What I generally see is that it depends a lot on the capacity that cities already have. For the countries where

there is still a weak level of local governments or Local Government Associations, we notice that they are not always very aware of their weaknesses and needs. That makes it sometimes difficult to know what their demand is. In those cases it is very important that those needs can be assessed, but also to identify what they can already do themselves to face those needs as sometimes they already have a lot of capacity. They have perhaps capacity in one area that they don't have in another. I could imagine that UCLG has a role to play in helping to identify what exactly the 'ask' is from the members.

We see that a lot of difficulties arise when a donor comes with an already pre-designed programme or project where the donor already knows what they are going to do and then the cities or local government associations just accept without stepping back to reflect on what their actual needs are as a city. This is an area where UCLG could play a role. It's not plausible the UCLG does that for every city in the world, but perhaps UCLG can identify tools or instruments that can help identify those needs.

There are other cities that know very well what they are good at, and they like to position themselves, and have the capacity to do so. Amongst the emerging actors, such as Mexico or the city of Medellín, they already know very well what they want to promote internationally and they try to combine the cooperation side with the promotion side. So they reach out to other cities, not only to learn from them, but also to promote their own expertise and solutions. This also relates back to the question how you define South-South cooperation.

In some cases, traditional development cooperation differs very much from the cooperation where you are also very much looking out for opportunities for your own city, which is more the mutually beneficial model that I was referring to.

3 **How do you think the learning and cooperation process can be tuned or calibrated to best benefit developing countries?**

Renske Steenbergen: When you look at South-South cooperation, I think it is very important to look at the lessons learned from the traditional North-South cooperation evolution process because it has evolved for quite some time and there are a lot of lessons learned from how not to do it. So it is not about imposing, it is really important to make sure it is demand driven and very bottom up with local traction. I think those words are very important. It is also essential that the political will is truly there at the local level, and to make sure the processes can be continued. We see in many of the projects and programmes that it is very difficult if there are changes on the political side. If there isn't sufficient local traction, then those processes get interrupted. And last but not least: it is about effective project management, to keep track of progress and results.

It is very important to make sure on the forefront of such cooperation that you know very well where you are heading to because this is also very important in cooperation that you really know what you want to achieve, but that you really also make sure that that is embedded in the structure, not only in the administrative structure of the local government,

but also in the local society so that there is the demand to continue with it despite any political changes that might happen. This is how many of the CIB members work. Before, we noted there were a lot of ad hoc cooperation initiatives from cities around the world – some very well organized and sometimes less organized. What happened in The Netherlands was that at a certain moment the Dutch parliament wanted to know why Dutch local governments were putting money into development cooperation activities and why they thought it was their task to be involved. As association of local governments in The Netherlands were already supporting our Dutch local governments in their international cooperation activities. But gradually we have taken over the management role from them, by designing a programme managed by the us, but still with the involvement of the local governments on an expert basis. The good part of that was that it enabled more coordination but also more replicability. What is also important is to make sure the experiences you are working on are replicable and can be used in different municipalities. This is also preferably done by involving the Local Government Association in the developing country so they can have a role in terms of distributing knowledge and experience in that regard. I think that that can only happen if you make sure that the cooperation activities that you as a city or as a local government are going to implement is going to be connected with other initiatives, be it from other local governments throughout the world, or with the delegations from international donors, for example the European Union, or any other donor active in the country. I think it makes it much stronger if you make sure that you are always

around the development cooperation table with all parties to make sure there is coherence between initiatives and cooperation activities that take place.

4 **What can your city or association teach other cities? Where does your city or association need to learn most from other cities?**

Renske Steenbergen: Mainly technical assistance, peer-to-peer support, coaching and support in terms of local elected officials and officers on a whole variety of themes related to strengthening service delivery of local government. It can be focused on water and waste management, citizen engagement, in other cases it might be more in general supporting decentralization reform strategies or local tax reform strategies, which result in more revenue for local governments and thus better service delivery. I think there are many interesting modalities and tools developed by CIB members, for example on benchmarking and bench-learning, simulation games, or different tools to focus on particular themes, such as fighting climate change both here and there. I think in general that perhaps one of the biggest successes for the CIB Working Group is that it has triggered the attention of the UCLG network on the importance of international cooperation. I think that without the CIB Working Group, for example, the German association, which is nowadays rather actively involved in international development cooperation, would not have been that involved in international cooperation activities, but thanks to the various

exchanges and information exchanges, they felt an accompaniment from us. Other members to start up their own activities and the same also goes for South Africa and for the Czech Republic. So I think it has helped some of the members to really open up in terms of how to go about their cooperation activities.

5 **Do you have case studies or methodologies that demonstrate: i) processes that are effective; and ii) build capacity effectively?**

Renske Steenbergen: Currently the CIB is starting a process where we will compare monitoring and evaluation methodologies used by CIB members. Traditionally the logical framework is one of the most used methodology frameworks for development cooperation programmes, being a requirement from donors. I think in general what we would want to do is show why we believe that methodology alone is not sufficient to measure effects and impact for local governments. I think the outcomes of the research will be that a combination of tools is more effective and that we would also ask international donors that work with us to recognize that the programmes that we implement are generally

part of long-term processes. That is because local governments are about long term processes and sustainable processes for the future. So I think it is important that the donors also understand this when they work with us; that working from a programmatic or project-based approach can lead to increasing importantly the burden on local governments in terms of reporting, while they generally already have their own reporting mechanisms. So we want to make the case for that a little bit, to analyse what kind of methodologies are currently being used in development cooperation programmes by local authorities and to analyse that and state what we believe the best methodologies would be to work with. It is very important to take into account that we are talking about an entity that is not just another project implementing agency, which also may require different ways of working in terms of tracking the progress and impact.

