

Developmental Leadership Program Meeting

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I attended the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) meeting in Kloster Arnsburg near Frankfurt, Germany, on March 10 and 11, 2011. Starting from the premise that politics is central to development, DLP aims to produce pragmatic policy proposals for bilateral and multilateral donors based on case studies of many countries. The following is what I learned from the DLP meeting from my own research interest.

1. About DLP

The Developmental Leadership Program (www.dlprog.org) is a policy-oriented project. The Director is Mr Chris Wheeler, based in AusAID in Canberra. The Director of Research is Dr Adrian Leftwich, a professor of development politics at the University of York. It is largely funded by AusAID and its partner organizations include German GIZ, Oxfam Australia, The Asia Foundation, the Pacific Leadership Program and Transparency International. The meeting was also attended by representatives from DFID, World Bank and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, as well as some Dutch NGOs. These organizations actively contribute their ideas on the direction of research and applicability to international cooperation activities.

DLP was formerly called the Leaders, Elites and Coalitions Research Programme (LECRP, started in late 2007). Despite the name change, DLP inherits all the substance and activities of LECRP. LECRP should be regarded as the first phase of DLP in which background papers, literature reviews and case country studies were prepared. Countries of case studies included South Africa, Botswana, Mauritius, Yemen, Zimbabwe, Egypt, Jordan, China, India and Indonesia. I also contributed a paper, co-authored with Prof. Emeritus Junji Banno of the University of Tokyo, on the flexible structure of politics of Meiji Japan (English translation of ch.1 of our Japanese commercial publication). These works study coalition dynamics at the levels of nation, issues/sectors or individual players. The papers are uploaded to the DLP website as they become available.

DLP starts with the fact that the good governance drive of the World Bank and others has failed to produce any results in promoting developmental states in the developing world. This drive, which approached development politics from such technical angles as administrative capacity, business climate and transparency, was too naïve in ignoring local contexts of individual societies and realities of low-income countries and turning a blind eye to the impact of foreign action and pressure on the domestic politics of developing countries. The focus of the LDP is on how to facilitate, support and encourage the emergence and success of *developmental leaderships and coalitions* that can promote institutional innovation and reform for sustainable growth, political stability and inclusive social development. Its focus is on agential factors (individuals, organizations and coalitions) in

different institutional and structural contexts.

DLP proposes that donors and international NGOs need to learn how to “work politically” to promote the emergence and success of developmental leaderships and coalitions. This does not mean conspiring to topple a dictatorial regime or imposing Western style democracy on latecomers. Rather, it argues that no international cooperation can remain neutral to the domestic politics of developing countries, and foreign action will inevitably favor one group over others. In full recognition of this influence, donors should behave consciously and strategically and at the same time subtly and quietly in the execution of their projects and programs. Among all “political” objectives of donors, the most important should be the provision of forum, logic, finance and technology for the expansion of developmental agenda and players and the elimination of predatory ones.

Politics as defined by DLP is not necessary national politics involving presidents, election and political regime. It encompasses a broader scope which includes all types of coalition making—gathering supporters, cooperation and compromise with others under certain conditions, etc—because one group alone cannot realize its goal of mobilizing resources for a certain cause. Such coalition dynamics is seen in every organization including central and local governments, regions and ethnic groups, villages, political parties, labor unions, universities and research institutions, NGOs, etc. DLP gives working definitions of politics, developmental leadership, elites and coalitions which are the key concepts for its research program.

2. Purpose of the Research and Policy Workshop

The meeting last week in Germany, with about 30 participants from sponsor organizations and commissioned researchers, discussed the way to move DLP forward in policy research and contribution now that sufficient case studies were collected in its first phase. It was not just a research workshop but a strategic meeting for future steps. DLP is required to produce concrete and pragmatic proposals on how bilateral and multilateral donors could and should “engage politically” in executing their cooperation programs. This may even be one of the conditions for the availability of funding for the second phase. The proposal paper for this meeting states as follows.

“The central point here is that the politics that shapes development outcomes depends largely on how actors—individuals and organizations—use their influence and power (formally or informally) to advance or hinder positive reform at all levels and in all sectors, but within very different structural and institutional contexts. In short, our analytical and policy concerns need to be refocused to include far greater attention to the role of ‘agency’ in politics of development, as well as structure...”

“But if politics is indeed central, one challenging question always crops up: “So what?” Behind this challenge lie a number of related questions. What, if anything, can be done to promote the developmental leadership and political agency that will build the institutions that promote growth, stability and inclusion? Can and how does the

development aid community ‘work politically’ to support the processes that shape the emergence of developmental leaderships, coalitions and institutions? Can the official international development community and donors do any of this work? Or do the operational practices of the prevailing development aid paradigm require a profound rethink of strategy and approach which would include a greater role and involvement of non-public and non-traditional aid partners?”

For DLP, it is not enough to survey and report how actors operate in each country. From the outset the organizers insisted that the “so what question” be the central theme of the meeting, and discussion should always come back to this issue. It is critical that DLP should produce operational guidelines which will be useful for the design and implementation of aid projects and programs and can even convince the World Bank and the UN organizations. I was pleasantly surprised at this practical focus of DLP which contrasted sharply with the insistence of many of the “leaders” surrounding GRIPS that universities and researchers should do teaching and research only and not “social contributions.”

3. Selected arguments

Given this objective, I do not know what the organizers and members of DLP got out of this meeting. As for myself, I learned much from this two-day gathering for deepening my thought on the proper method and content of policy learning that must be done by the 21st century latecomer countries to catch up with advanced ones. I will list several issues raised and discussed in the sessions. They include interventions of others as well as mine.

- All aid is political. The argument that international cooperation can be conducted neutrally to the politics of developing countries hardly stands. Donors should clearly recognize this fact, and consciously take its position regarding what to support and with whom to work.

- Thorough knowledge of local (country, sector) context is required to work politically. Foreigners should become enabling agents equipped with full knowledge of local context. Starting from existing political landscape and structure, they should intervene consciously but subtly and softly. However, there may be instances where loud voice may be appropriate to declare what they support.

- Working politically means facilitating and brokering the relationship among leaders, elites and other stakeholders in a developing country through execution of an aid program – whether it is gender, macroeconomy or environment. It is not about holding international conferences, setting global targets and deadlines, and monitoring progress as done in the aid effectiveness debate.

- The “political objectives” of donors need not – and should not – be uniform. There should be multiple causes and entry points from which each donor should select according to its preferences. We do not want a “one-size-fits-all” solution to the political engagement of donors.

- Japan is already working politically in the DLP sense. It is normal for Japan to carefully select and continue to review aid objectives, concrete projects and counterparts in light of capabilities and relations among leaders, ministries, businesses and research institutes in developing countries. Our policy dialogue and kaizen project in Ethiopia is a case in point. We internally discuss our positioning via TV conference and emails at all times between Tokyo and Addis Ababa. Other Japanese projects are basically the same. This may be more sophisticated and sensitive than crude approaches taken by the World Bank or Nordic countries. But we never broadcast what we internally discuss. Some documentation of this may prove useful, however.

- Given the very limited knowledge and skills of donors regarding development politics, we should not attempt to influence politics of very difficult countries – Yemen, Zimbabwe and other non-developmental dictatorships. They belong to the works of NATO, CIA and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, not donor agencies. Aid organizations should concentrate their efforts on “easier” countries where stability and developmental orientation are well established.

The meeting also heard many country studies. While highly informative, they are omitted from my report since they did not directly address the “so what question.”

I would like to thank Professor Leftwich for commenting and correcting the draft of this report. I am sure his suggestions made it factually more accurate.

<References>

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DLP website: www.dlprog.org