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The Mexico High Level Meeting on Effective Cooperation: Prelude or Swan Song?

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The Mexico High Level Meeting on Effective Cooperation: Prelude or Swan Song?

Bonn, 14 April 2014. The world of development cooperation is no stranger to big meetings, but this week's example deserves special attention. During the first High-Level Meeting of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation in Mexico City, over 1,300 delegates will reflect on progress made in increasing the effectiveness of development cooperation. The meeting represents the first high-level event of an inclusive platform for advancing standards of best practice that are reflected in the 'Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation' that was adopted in 2011.

Busan was the latest in a series of meetings in which the means of implementation of development cooperation became a standalone topic for international summiting, which began in Rome in 2003. Ongoing discussions have raised doubts whether such an exclusive focus on implementation still makes sense today, a reflection partly fed by disappointing performance in furthering accepted cooperation standards. Current efforts to expand the agenda have made the partnership neither convincing on the 'how', nor on the 'what' of cooperation. Instead of seeking to connect to new trends and post-2015 discussions, delegates to the Mexico meeting need to concentrate on how the global partnership can best enable effective cooperation on the ground.

The post-Busan dialogue on effective development cooperation is commendable given its emphasis on 'recipient' ownership as well as the progress made in increasing the transparency of resource flows from a much wider range of actors. The headline of the Busan agreement was captured in a desired shift from 'aid effectiveness' to 'development effectiveness'. The more inclusive approach has encouraged some actors to engage more actively in global discussions to promote complementary action. As an example, the philanthropic sector was minimally present in Busan, but numerous private foundations have since contributed to the development of Guidelines for Effective Philanthropic Engagement to facilitate collaboration between foundations and bilateral and multilateral actors. Compared with previous events in this series, however, the amount of political energy invested in the wider Global Partnership has declined substantially.

The core challenge limiting the potential of the Global Partnership as a dialogue platform is reflected in the tension between the search for relevance beyond a narrowly defined field of development cooperation and the added value of the platform in pro-

moting improvements in aid quality. The platform currently confuses the need for engagement on optimal cooperation processes (e.g. division of labour, use of new instruments) with the need for actors to pursue a common agenda in terms of the substance of that cooperation (e.g. taxation, knowledge sharing). As highlighted in the draft Communiqué, Mexico City delegates are expected to discuss how to link the partnership to the still undetermined post-2015 agenda signalling support for agreement on future funding priorities. An emphasis on fostering a 'catalytic' role for development cooperation similarly implies a search for a shared vision of what purposes these external inputs should serve. The engagement on substance represents a strong shift from the earlier Paris Declaration process that focused purely on how to best manage development cooperation and refrained from engaging in the 'what' of cooperation.

The efforts to link actors' commitments to improve how they engage globally to a shared understanding of content-related priorities contradicts the spirit of Busan, which highlighted the importance of adapting approaches to locally-specific needs and promoted a 'global-light and country-heavy' approach to governing development cooperation. This approach was seen as better suited to respect the diversity of country-specific development challenges and the varied actor constellations engaged in addressing them. Despite efforts by some actors to decentralise operations and empower their field representations, development cooperation still remains highly centralised, challenging cooperation providers to make a 'leap of faith' in empowering country-led cooperation frameworks. The Busan outcome document failed to make a definite decision to foster this and instead struck a compromise between the promotion of local relevance and the need for an internationally binding code of conduct that creates a basis for accountability.

Regardless of the outcome of the post-2015 discussions, for which Mexico City provides an important 'warm up' exercise, it is likely that actors will continue to pursue their own individual interests across different country contexts. The principal question therefore is to what extent a global dialogue is needed to advance effective cooperation on the ground. Raising this question in Mexico is key to determining the value added of this process in relation to others, and ultimately to rediscovering its purpose to foster enabling conditions for effective country-led cooperation.