

‘Shaping A New Africa’

Final Report: Public Debate on New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad) in ‘De Balie’ on 24 February 2003

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Background:

The National Committee for International Cooperation and Sustainable Development (NCDO) in cooperation with the Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa (NiZA), Sahan Consultancy and De Balie has organised a public debate on the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad) on 24 February. This is the first public debate in a series of five interlocking public discussions focusing on important issues, ideas and initiatives currently shaping the continent that will be held during this year. The public debates is organised under the programme theme entitled: ‘Shaping A New Africa’. The public debates would lead to a conference on Africa in the spring of 2004. The main objective of the series of debates is to gain knowledge and also stimulate a discussion among the Dutch public about the new Africa which is emerging so as to contribute constructively to the formulation of the Dutch governmental and non-governmental policy strategies towards Africa. There was a good spirit of cooperation among the four agencies organised the public debate.

The panel members of the Nepad public debate were: Viriato Tamele (Executive Director of Economic Justice Coalition in Mozambique), Greyson Koyi (civil society activist and Zambian Trade Union representative), Venetia Govender (National Director for the Human Rights Committee in South Africa), Gerda Dommerholt (adviser on capacity building at the Sub-Saharan Department in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with a particular focus on themes like the Global Coalition for Africa, HIV/AIDS and migration). The chairperson for the public debate was Jan Pronk, the former Minister for Development Cooperation.

The public debate was well attended. It attracted a large number of African Diaspora in the Netherlands, parliamentarians, government policy makers, media, trade union representatives, practitioners from development agencies and the Dutch-African business community. The meeting was fully booked as the tickets were all sold out. As a result, over 60 people who were on the waiting list could not get tickets and they were turned away. The high attendance in this public debate and others before it is a clear indication that there is a broad public interest in gaining knowledge about the current development in Africa in the Netherlands. The discussion was lively and there was an intense participation of members of the audience in the debate. The public and the panel had the opportunity to engage with each other in the discussion. This has generated a lot of different ideas and opposing positions. Below these different positions are summarised.

Position of the civil society:

The civil society representatives from Africa in the panel were not optimistic about the current economic development in the continent. According to them, the existing development models that have guided economic development in Africa over the past 50 years have been wrongly applied. This has eventually resulted in the failure of the political economy of aid in Africa. For example, the damage that Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) has already done in destroying the welfare system of the poor people has left a painful memory which inhibits the ordinary public to embrace the Nepad plan. Furthermore, Nepad plan is not different from other earlier development projects that already failed. The only difference is the name and the way it is repackaged. In this sense, Nepad is not framed to change the existing power and economic relations between Africa and the rich world. Nepad plan maintains the status quo as it is not challenging rules regulating the unequal economic relations. For instance, Nepad does not campaign debt cancellation, reducing subsidies for the farms in the West, trade, GAT agreements and health matters namely HIV/AIDS. In this respect, Nepad is not

really a new thing since it is a neo-liberal initiative which is coming from outside. Nepad is a top-down and most of civil societies in different countries in Africa are not really well aware of what Nepad is all about.

The rich West does not want Nepad to be a success since it does not want the existing economic relations to be changed. However it is the existing economic relations which will not allow Nepad to be a success as other economic programmes before it such the Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa have already met. Furthermore, Nepad plan wants to privatise everything even basic necessities such as water and electricity which is gravely harming the standard of living for the ordinary people. In addition to this, most of the states in Africa are already very weak yet Nepad wants more less state, leaving everything for the market. While at this moment, Africa needs strong and socially responsive state that is committed to the social welfare of the people in the continent. But what is now happening is that Nepad has signed a contract not with the people in Africa but with external forces. That makes Nepad plan an external rather than an internal oriented programme of action. Perhaps, it is now time to examine the reasons of why past initiatives have failed and what makes Nepad in this respect different. Nepad is already accepted as a framework by the outside world. This questions the issue of ownership. Who owns Nepad? Civil society entities in Africa are now discussing alternative framework to that of Nepad. A development programme with different priorities that signs a social contract with the people in the continent. Unless we set the fundamentals right, economic success will not achieved in Africa. The experience informed this analysis is largely drawn from South Africa, Mozambique and Zambia which the three panel members have represented.

Position of the Diaspora:

In the discussion around Nepad, the Diasporas were not negative compared to the representatives of civil society organisations from the continent. The position of the Diaspora is that Nepad plan is a challenge and we should dismiss it at all but we should give it a trail. We should not totally negate but we should collectively nurture and make it something worthwhile. An important observation about this Nepad public debate is the position that the Diasporas have taken. Usually Diasporas are very critical to the initiatives initiated by African government leaders but on Nepad plan they are less critical compared with the civil society actors inside the continent. This is a remarkable change of mind. The Diasporas are optimistic with Nepad plan for three reasons. First, Nepad is initiated at a time when the Cold War political imperatives are no longer impinging on Africa's political dynamics. The disengagement of the external political actors in the African domestic affairs brings about a respite in which economic development programme could be experimented. Second, there is a political will from the African government leaders which was not the case of other earlier development initiatives. Third, there is sufficient past experiences and capacities that could be deployed for the implementation of the plan.

Position of the African diplomatic community:

- Nepad plan is promoted to engage in with dominant economic forces. It is mechanism devised to put pressure and influence on the external economic forces which negatively impacting on the developments in the continent. Nepad is therefore a framework and not an implementing agency. It is a voluntary mechanism where countries can join if they are desired to so. So far twelve African countries have accepted the Nepad framework and agreed to submit to its self-monitoring tool, the African Peer Review Mechanism.

Position of Western government decision-makers:

- Their position is mixed. It is largely a wait and see attitude. Nepad is still new as it is now two years old. Therefore, its impact on the already existing bilateral and multilateral programmes and project remains a minimum. In this respect, their commitment is not yet a full-fledged one. In the Dutch government, there is however an enthusiasm about the Nepad plan. As a result, a coherence unit has been developed which now focuses on two issues: First, is the situation on the agriculture in the continent and how it can be improved. Second, there is an attempt to harmonise and lower the transaction costs of the goods exported from the EU to Africa.

Position of donor NGO's:

- Donor NGO's are now in search of the most effective way that they can be of help to the activities of the civil society organisations and the emerging social movements. In the debate it has been suggested that donor civil societies can play an important role in the following areas:
- Lobbying within each EU member country as well at the level of the EU on issues relating to debt cancellation, free and fair trade, GAT agreements and health matters namely HIV/AIDS etc.
- Playing a pressure group with the aim to influence the policy decision in the EU member countries with respect to Africa on matters relating to development priorities. The priorities of the aid recipients must clearly heard.
- Organising regular expert meeting between development practitioners, resources persons from Africa and the African Diasporas to debate important policy issues and policy decisions make at state or at the EU level regarding Africa

Lessons Learned

All the panel members were from the civil society organisation and the made the discussion a one sided affairs that we need to avoid in the following public debates

Conclusion:

Jan Pronk, the moderator of the public debate has closed the discussion with a wise remark. According to Pronk Nepad plan is the only game in the town now and we should give it the benefit of the doubt. We should all take it as a challenge and make it work. He then took an example from the EU experience. According to Pronk EU was initiated from the beginning by few government officials and at that time not every stakeholder was on board. We have to start from somewhere and along the way we have to build up alliances.