



Influencing policy in a pro-poor manner: Markus Baechler, Sri Lanka

1. Involvement in promoting a pro-poor agenda in policy dialogue

I will start by saying a few things about the context: Sri Lanka has been suffering for over 20 years from a conflict between the government forces and the Tamil rebels in the North East. The conflict has caused about 65'000 deaths. A cease-fire was signed in 2003, which significantly reduced the level of daily violence. A tsunami struck Sri Lanka on 26 December 2004, killing more than 35'000 people and rendering another half a million homeless. In 2005 the country was heavily engaged in overcoming the effects of the tsunami, and at first it was believed that the disaster would bring the parties closer together. Following the presidential elections in November 2005, a sharp increase of violations of the Cease Fire Agreement occurred, and an undeclared war eventually resumed in 2006. Since then, the army has captured territories formerly held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The war is fought brutally with many violations of the Geneva Conventions by both sides, in parallel with a significant increase in human rights violations. Freedom of the press is also at stake.

The relationship between the government and the donor community has changed since the outbreak of the war. Some donors are becoming increasingly critical towards the Sri Lankan authorities and the government in turn has been very critical with regard to aid implementation. It argues that much aid is not properly coordinated and many resources are wasted. Aid efficiency is certainly a topic to address, as coordination remains a constant challenge. In this environment there is not much space for a proper Paris Declaration Process, even though Sri Lanka is a signatory.

In early 2006, the government started a process of coordination by defining sectors for cooperation. Seven sectors were defined including health, natural resources and tsunami reconstruction to mention a few. The original idea was that for each sector, the government would identify a lead line agency, and the donors would propose a lead agency, e.g. GTZ (German agency for technical cooperation) took the lead for "post tsunami rehabilitation".

By the middle of the year, the security situation worsened, and the focus shifted from development to

humanitarian assistance. In reaction, in October 2006 the government suddenly proposed the holding of a National Development Forum in January 2007. At the same time, a draft of a National Development Strategy was proposed to the donor community. I believe this was discussed in advance with the major donors, notably the banks – WB and ADB - and probably also with the major partners such as India, Japan and USA. To the other donors it came rather as a surprise, as there has been no inclusive consultation with the donor community.

The Development Strategy is entitled Mahinda Chintana – Mahinda's Vision – and is in fact a continuation of the President's [Mahinda Rajapaksa] election platform. It is a vision for Sri Lanka over the period 2006 – 2016, aiming to reach an annual growth rate of over 8% (it currently stands at 6%). The paper includes a pro-poor growth approach, heavily emphasising rural development, which is somehow a poverty reduction strategy. It is noteworthy that the vision perceives itself as a pro-poor approach, which can be explained by the fact that 20% of the Sri Lankan population is living in extreme poverty (less than US\$ 1 per day), with 20% of the overall population malnourished, particularly children.

The Swiss position regarding the proposed Development Forum was clearly shared with the other bilateral donors. We welcomed the government's intention to discuss development, but insisted that it had to be linked to the worsening humanitarian and **human rights** situation related to the renewed conflict. We were not ready to discuss development as a separate, individual topic. After some debate, the donors eventually agreed to participate to the Forum, once the agenda had been modified to include the humanitarian issue, the conflict, and the human rights situation. The government accepted this, and the Forum took place in January 2007. All donors were very vocal that peace is needed first, and development can only come afterwards.

2. Whose policy

We mainly try to influence the policy of the national government regarding peace, and respect for **human rights**. Since the resumption of hostilities in August 2006, SDC has concentrated on **humanitarian assistance**, but also increasingly on access to the victims - because as the conflict escalated, this issue became more and more critical, even for the UN (United

Nations) and the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross). In collaboration with other like-minded donors, notably the British High Commission and the Swedish Embassy, we proposed carrying out field missions at the Ambassador/High Commissioner level. The aim of these visits was to monitor the work of the aid agencies, to get first hand information on the situation on the ground, and to support activities where access to the victims had become difficult.

Representatives from Australia, Canada, European Union, Italy, Netherlands, USA, participated in subsequent field trips to areas where the conflict had resumed. These were organised in the framework of the Bilateral Donor Groups. After each field trip, a report was written and a summary with specific recommendations was shared with the parties to the conflict. The international community was also briefed through the Head of Missions in a meeting where recommendations were presented.

SDC and the Swiss Political Division IV (PDIV) have been active in supporting enhanced coordination mechanisms. This includes advocacy for the respect of the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (HR). Whereas SDC promotes IHL as often as it can, the representatives of the PDIV are focussing more on the **human rights** issues. With the worsening of the situation, SDC has concentrated even more on humanitarian issues.

Regarding Swiss partners, we have monthly updates with our NGOs active in Sri Lanka – notably Helvetas, Swisscontact, CARITAS, Terre des Hommes, the Swiss Red Cross, FSD (Swiss Foundation for Mine Action) and HEKS (Swiss Interchurch Aid), with a specific focus on humanitarian concerns and development issues.

3. Choice of policy or policy issues

The Swiss objective is outlined in the Swiss Medium Term Plan for Human Security in Sri Lanka (2007-2009), and is a joint SDC and PD IV strategy. The strategy places emphasis on the enhancement of human security. It supports an inclusive political solution, the promotion of humanitarian law and **human rights**, and support to the victims of the armed conflict, thus defining the intervention areas. It gives highest priority to conflict transformation; poverty alleviation is not a goal as such. The joint approach by SDC and PDIV is rather innovative, and it follows the successful **example of Nepal**.

Unfortunately, Sri Lanka currently seems to be sliding back into civil war rather than progressing forwards, so we are constantly having to adapt to a worsening situation, meaning that the focus of the country programme is the conflict and associated special needs.

4. Knowing that an approach will be pro-poor

In the current situation, it is difficult to pick out a pro-poor element as such, although there is one group, the **Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)** whom I would

single out as in need of special attention. Since April 2006, their number has grown to over 200,000. Our work with the IDPs is partially through direct actions, but also with the WFP (World Food Programme) and UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) – with funding and secondments and through advocacy.

It has to be underlined that the goal of the programme is not poverty alleviation as such, but to contribute to conflict transformation. There is of course an exception for humanitarian aid that addresses needs of the victims of conflict or natural disaster.

5. The approach in bringing in a pro-poor agenda

We do not have a pro-poor agenda as such. The main focus of the programme is to contribute to human security in Sri Lanka by supporting conflict transformation.

Our programme is driven by the history of the SDC activities in the previous years. The tsunami in December 2004 was the biggest disaster Sri Lanka ever experienced. Currently we are terminating programmes in construction that were designed in the aftermath of the tsunami.

6. Collaboration with other donors on policy issues

I have already mentioned that we collaborate with other donors. There are a number of donor fora usually held on a monthly basis in which we participate regularly:

- Development partners meeting (including the UN)
- Bilateral donors meeting
- Donor Peace Support Group

We use the donor fora to discuss issues of particular concern for donors. The preparation for the National Development Forum is a good example of a successful joint approach. During the Development Forum there was a unanimous message to the government of Sri Lanka; “the conflict cannot be solved by military means and peace is a precondition to development” which was repeated by all donors (including Switzerland) and the banks (World Bank and ADB).

We are currently engaged with like-minded donors, who also participated in the field visits, in putting guiding principles into operation. Here again, **Nepal serves as an example**, where basic operational guidelines were issued and worked out, and became an important tool for more efficient cooperation among agencies and donors.

7. Tangible outcomes in promoting a pro-poor approach

One experience already mentioned is the field trips, which we have organised jointly with the other donors. Not only did they bring the needs of the most needy into the minds of the international community; in addition,

they resulted in improved assistance by the respective agencies.

8. Main challenges and main lessons

The major challenge in Sri Lanka is the disparity of perceptions and agenda among the international community. A stronger involvement of the international community could help to bring the conflict to an end. As long there is no "common doctrine" among the donors, the impact of the donor community will be limited, especially with regard to peace building.

Lessons learned:

- Talk to the like-minded first, but engage further in dialogue with the partners with a different perception
- Learn from comparable other examples; there is a lot that we can learn from the **experiences made in Nepal**, notably in the
 - establishment of basic operational guidelines
 - way the High Commission for Human Rights has been brought in
 - way SDC and PDIV have worked together.

Interview with: Jane Carter
Maintali, Nepal, March 2007

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