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VARIABLE GEOMETRY IN DEVELOPMENT POLICY: TOWARDS A FACILITATOR ROLE FOR THE EU

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Abstract

With discussions on variable geometry or differentiated integration gaining ground in discussions on post-Brexit European integration, we argue that also in its development policy the EU should focus more on flexible cooperation between small groups of member state donors, instead of engaging in grand top-down schemes such as Joint Programming and Trust Funds.

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These findings are based on our study on European coordination in fragile states, involving a literature study, interviews at European headquarters, and case studies in the DRC, Haiti, Palestine and Niger.¹ Our findings reveal a near-consensus among researchers, policy-makers at headquarters level and practitioners in the field that European coordination is needed all the more in fragile contexts. Yet there is also much ambiguity over exactly what the EU can and should do.

While our study confirms the multiple constraints for European coordination that have been highlighted in existing literature, we also discern some enabling factors. The most promising cases are those that have emerged bottom-up within a small group of 4-5 agencies that embody a critical mass in terms of budget and expertise. These cases are characterized by their combination of various forms of soft and hard joint implementation, their committed efforts to align with the partner government, their institutional flexibility, and political backing from headquarters. Under these conditions, cooperation clusters can generate a dynamic that attracts more donors to join.

Interestingly, the EU does not figure prominently in the foreground. Grand schemes designed by EU institutions have not fulfilled their promise to foster European coordination. First, Joint Programming has not been the panacea that some had hoped for. It is still in an experimental phase and will at best generate synergies between European donors in the long run. Where JP appears relatively successful, it

¹ "Exploring the potential for improving the existing European coordination mechanisms in fragile states". See synthesis at <https://www.afd.fr/sites/afd/files/2017-11/rapport-improving-european-coordination-in-fragile-states.pdf> and a video streaming at https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/news-and-events/improving-european-coordination-fragile-states_en.

builds on pre-existing collaborations between donors. However, in some countries (specifically, the DRC and Niger), our interviewees question whether the EU Delegation is genuinely committed to prioritizing Joint Programming and moving forward with it. Even in Palestine, where the EU and some observers have evaluated Joint Programming relatively successfully, practitioners are adopting a *'wait-and-see attitude'* about its promised benefits. Meanwhile, they continue with their daily struggle to achieve development in an environment where aid coordination is extremely challenging.

Second, the mushrooming Trust Funds are not living up to their potential to become a stepping-stone for coordination. Specifically, the EU Emergency Trust for Africa has been strongly criticized at field level for lacking transparency, bypassing ownership, and thwarting existing aid programmes. As one practitioner in Niger stated, *"The Trust Fund boosted competition instead of coordination between the agencies."* Human rights NGOs have lamented the EU's overly restrictive approach to migration in Africa; what makes the picture even darker is that, *even if* the funded projects appear to be development-friendly, they eventually fail as they do not address – and may even aggravate – the key problem of aid fragmentation. The Migration Trust Fund risks reversing more than a decade of international donor commitments on aid effectiveness principles.

Instead, the EU has the potential to play a modest but crucial facilitator role. Essentially, this would require the EU to foster the above-mentioned factors that enable existing coordination between small groups of agencies, providing common goods and services without engaging in top-down (micro) management. We found embryonic examples of this in the most promising coordination practices, where the EU (in) directly fostered small-group donor cooperation. This can be seen as implementing variable geometry in the practice of development cooperation. However, these are limited exceptions. There is much low-hanging fruit – but it is not being picked at present.

What, then, are the common goods and services that the EU can provide as a facilitator of coordination in fragile states?

- First, it can support joint studies that benefit existing coordination practices. In addition to making use of the general analyses drafted in Brussels, practitioners would benefit from studies on specific topics (e.g. mapping). Moreover, given that many studies and audits are currently not available to the public or other donors, the EU could promote an open information culture on developmental research funded from the public purse (in line with Horizon 2020 requirements).
- Second, the EU can facilitate joint communication on existing coordination schemes – even those in which it is not involved itself – thereby fostering much-needed visibility and public support for development policy. Rare and recent examples from our research are the joint videos promoted by the EU Office in Palestine on cooperation in the education and water sectors.
- Third, joint missions organized by the EU and involving practitioners are scarce and should be promoted at several stages of the project cycle. Fourth, interviewees recognize that there is scope for improvement by sharing logistics and infrastructure. In none of the country studies could we find evidence of this already happening. Fifth, joint-training events would greatly benefit information exchange, avoid duplication and foster common approaches. Our research shows that information about joint training organized by the EU institutions rarely reaches practitioners outside the ‘Brussels bubble’. Training sessions in Brussels (e.g. at the European Security and Defence College) should be promoted Europe-wide and involve officials and practitioners working in third countries.

Conceptually, facilitation embodies the EU’s other roles in development: as donor (the 1990s project, when the EU became a fully-fledged donor), as harmonizer (the



2000s project, when the EU opted to focus less on giving and more on coordinating) and as a political force (the project undertaken since 2010 to achieve foreign policy coherence). While the new European Consensus on Development reads like an inventory of ideas and has sparked little enthusiasm amongst our interviewees, the facilitator role may be a more appealing narrative for EU development in the coming decades.

Such a role is desirable because it stimulates those factors that support successful coordination. It is also feasible because it does not require large budgets or high-level foreign policy tools. Instead of taking the long and difficult road from Joint Programming through Joint Strategies to Joint Implementation, a bottom-up focus on coordination initiatives that already exist and need more support may be a more promising avenue. It is also in line with existing pleas for variable geometry in European integration, but then applied to the practice of development implementation. This does not mean that the EU becomes less powerful; it would simply be more relevant by doing less.