



## SID-NL Lecture Series 2014-2015 'New Spaces for International Engagement'

### **BEN RAMALINGAM - 'Aid on the Edge of Chaos'**

**D**evelopment aid is a controversial issue. What is the exact impact? Does it even work? Why do we stubbornly cling to the old ways of 'doing aid'? The development industry is anchored in a system based on dated assumptions and desperately in need of change.

**Ben Ramalingam** author of the renowned book 'Aid on the Edge of Chaos' gave the inaugural speech for the SID Lecture series 2014-2015.



As the audience hurried inside the spacious auditorium, the former recipient of aid and development researcher immediately clarified that he is not interested in aid bashing but rather in providing constructive criticism.

**'My first experience with aid was as a recipient in Sri Lanka. My grandmother's life was saved by the Red Cross and my aunt stayed in a refugee camp'**

Currently the aid industry is underpinned by flawed assumptions which continue to exert huge influence on how we report on, write about and perform aid. This model infers that economic systems are

closed and orderly, social relationships are uncomplicated, human behaviour are merely a set of rational calculations and the world itself can be reduced to simple math: Aid (A) + Community (B) = Development (C). Ramalingam argues that aid still works but despite this rather than because of it and to increase its effectiveness, the complexity of development needs to be acknowledged.

#### **The smallpox myth**

**R**amalingam described how the current narrative of the effectiveness of standardized operations in aid is self-sustaining. For example the eradication of smallpox went down in the history books as a triumph of a mass vaccination campaign. It turns out that vaccination was not the

**'In aid it's better to fail conventionally than to succeed unconventionally.'**

most important factor, surveillance and containment was. This story of an evolutionary learning process that eradicated the disease goes untold. It simply

does not fit in the aid industry narrative.

#### **Beyond mechanical thinking**

**B**en Ramalingam plead for a more adaptive, Darwinian approach in aid. Treating complex systems like simple machines is ineffective, especially in a world where the necessity for upfront mechanic solutions is dying out. The reality of development involves many agents and organization of agents, designs and strategies that evolve over time and social change that emerges from human behaviour.

**'Aid can lead to remarkable successes but only when we break the rules.'**

This exact approach of identification and capacity building was used in Vietnam in 1990 to combat child malnutrition. Two cash-strapped aid workers in a dusty village, without the means to inject outside solutions, turned to the community and asked them to think of solutions. The mothers of the few healthy kids in the community were questioned and it was discovered they were fed shrimp, crabs and sweet-potato greens which was unusual. This small easily implemented native solution had a huge impact on a large-scale problem.

**'This isn't about survival of the fittest, it's about survival with the fittest'**

#### **Restrictive policies and politics**

**E**very generation has it's aid critics so why does the inadequacy of the industry persist? According to Ramalingam aid can only be as good as the politics around it

**We need to be a bit less Dodo-like, trying to use techniques that should be extinct and shape ourselves after the Chameleon, adaptive to change.**

allow it to be. Good agencies can navigate the structure of the sector and bypass bureaucracies, restrictive domestic policies and focus on their objective. Ben Ramalingam really got fired up during the discussion when the talks turned to the ineffectiveness of the European Union. Strategy and plans are so rigid, they become irrelevant as soon as

**'Aid agencies want to turn developing countries into Denmark. A fish does not turn into a tree frog without adjacent steps.'**

they are put in writing. '95% of those reports are drivel, so what is it?' asked Ramalingam; 'a sort of ritual or just a means to cover or backs?' Many policy makers want to be effective but the EU is

maladapted for so many different activities.

The 'relevance gap' dictates that the EU increasingly addresses new challenges despite being ill-equipped to do so effectively. It's a challenging process and only looking at formal relationships will hide more than it reveals. He refers to the use of network analysis to determine how information sharing and change can happen. Who do you talk to and who is really important to do your job? Ramalingam wants to make the development sector more democratic. The standard response of aid agencies is we've got the right answers when instead it should be we've got the right questions.

**Development should be less about being an architect of change and more about being a gardener planting the seeds for change.**

Written by Stella Roos Peters



The next SID Lecture Series will be with

**Siemon T. Wezeman**

on **21 OCTOBER** the connections between development, conflict and international arms trade will be discussed in

**'Weapons make the World go Round?'**

Wars are no longer just for soldiers fighting battles. How are European countries involved in the conflicts of Syria, Afghanistan, Egypt or anywhere else fighting a battle? How do we as citizens and professionals respond to conflict and think about security? Do our development funds end up financing these wars?

Register before 20 October via [registration@sidnl.org](mailto:registration@sidnl.org)

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