

Minutes from the Minister for Development Cooperation and Global Climate Policy's meeting with the Council for Development Policy on 22 November 2023

- Members: Professor Anne Mette Kjær, University of Aarhus (Chair)
Deputy CEO and International Director Jarl Krausing, CONCITO (Deputy Chair)
Director for Global Development and Sustainability Marie Gad Hansen, Confederation of Danish Industries (DI)
Director for Nutrition Line Damsgaard, The Danish Agriculture & Food Council
Secretary General Charlotte Slente, Danish Refugee Council (DFC)
Director Charlotte Flindt Pedersen, Danish Foreign Policy Society
Chief Advisor Mattias Söderberg, DanChurchAid
Head of Secretariat Lone Ilum Christiansen, The Danish Trade Union Development Agency (DTDA)
- MFA: Minister for Development Cooperation and Global Climate Policy Dan Jørgensen
State Secretary for Development Policy Lotte Machon
Under-Secretary for Development Policy Ole Thonke
Head of Department Ketil Karlsen, Department for Africa, Policy and Development, APD
Head of Department Tove Degnbol, Department for Evaluation, Learning and Quality, ELK
Special Advisor to the Minister for Development Cooperation and Global Climate Policy Thomas Schjødt, Ministers' and Executive Secretariat, MLS
Ministerial Secretary Lukas Beyer, Ministers' and Executive Secretariat, MLS
Head of Section Caroline Busk Ullerup, Department for Evaluation, Learning and Quality, ELK

Discussion on equal partnerships with the Minister for Development Cooperation and Global Climate Policy

The Chair of the Council for Development Policy welcomed the Minister for Development Cooperation and Global Climate Policy to the meeting and briefly noted that the Council would be particularly interested in the Minister's views on how development policy could best promote equal partnerships and the upcoming plan for Denmark's engagement with Africa. She emphasised that the members of the Council for Development Policy had much to bring to the table in the drafting process.

The Minister opened his introduction by expressing gratitude to the Council for their important role in assuring the quality of Danish development cooperation.

Regarding equal partnerships, the Minister confirmed that the government was dedicated to further a better balance between Denmark and its partners in development cooperation from the Global South. He noted that at first glance, it could seem like an obvious and simple issue but that in reality, it could be quite a complex matter.

The notion of equal partnerships could be difficult in countries and with partners whose values were very different from those predominant in Denmark. The challenge was to find a balance between standing firmly with Danish values and listening to and respecting other opinions.

It was first and foremost a matter of what Denmark did in the specific interactions on the ground but also communication in the form of quotes to Danish media, contributions in international meetings, informal encounters – in all these arenas and in many more, the way equal partnerships were discussed were of great importance.

In the Minister's opinion, there were several ways of ensuring equal partnerships, many of which Denmark was already engaged in. Localisation, for example, was of key importance, and the Minister appreciated the Council's role in ensuring that localisation was prioritised in new programmes and organisation strategies. It was also essential to remain agile and to be willing and able to alter programmes when necessary. Furthermore, it was important to consider how much of Danish development cooperation should be bilateral versus multilateral. Bilateral cooperation made it easier for Denmark to have a direct dialogue with partners, and sometimes the wish for a Danish embassy was a higher priority for partners than getting large grants. The recent decision not to close the embassy in Tanzania responded to the strong wish by the government of Tanzania to continue a close partnership. In other situations, multilateral cooperation offered more efficient assistance and could bring in relevant international expertise.

During the Minister's recent travels, he had seen several examples of projects that were implemented through truly equal partnerships, such as the strategic sector cooperation on water and wastewater between the municipality of Tema in Ghana and the Danish municipality of Aarhus. The energy cooperation in Ethiopia and in China were other examples of equal partnerships built on trust and mutual respect among those involved.

One way to ensure more equal partnerships would be to increase the number of secondments to other countries or international organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU).

When engaging with partners, it was important that Denmark did not overly flag its own interests, including private sector interests, but adopted an open and listening approach with a view to understanding the needs of the partners. Danish interests should not be seen as the key priorities but could sometimes materialise as a derived impact of the jointly agreed activities.

The Council appreciated the Minister's introduction, which covered several important issues related to equal partnerships, including human rights, the balance between multilateral and bilateral development cooperation, and working in fragile contexts. They also appreciated the Minister's emphasis on the fact that what Denmark *did* mattered more than what was *said*.

Members of the Council noted that one option in fragile contexts or in countries with values far from Danish values was to work with branches of the government that were mainly focused on technical matters such as e.g. regional or municipal institutions responsible for water supply. Members of the Council noted that it was not an option to stop working in fragile countries, which may evolve to become a threat to security. A policy of “stop and go” was expensive. When working in such contexts, it was important to remember partnerships with citizens whose primary need was to be lifted out of poverty.

When laying out a plan for Denmark’s engagement with Africa, it was of essence to consider that the African continent is comprised of countries with divergent needs. In some countries or regions, the primary need may be the influx of private capital or climate mitigation, while in other areas, securing the basic needs and security of citizens should be prioritised. It should also be noted that migration was not only a political matter in Denmark and Europe but just as much in African countries. Some countries were handling the presence of a large refugee population, and Denmark should consider how those countries could be supported.

Members of the Council noted that securing equal partnerships was more easily done in bilateral projects, and that it was risky to implement too much development cooperation through multilateral organisations. In other words, it was important to arrive at an appropriate balance between multi, multi-bi, and bilateral aid, and to have a knowledge-based discussion of how such a balance may look.

Regarding shared values, Members of the Council mentioned that not so long ago in Denmark, there had also been opposing opinions on human rights issues such as LGBTQ+ and that it was important to remain humble when discussing such issues with partners who had other views. Members of the Council also emphasised that for a human rights agenda to truly work, it had to be demand driven from local civil society.

Members of the Council also noted that it was important to take the point of departure in partner countries’ own plans for dealing with climate change and to respond to their worries about an increasing share of the support provided as loans. The Least Developed Countries (LDC’s) were getting a smaller share of the financing and had been asking for a definition of climate financing.

The question of EU regulations concerning the forestry area was raised, and Members of the Council pointed out that partners tended to perceive of this and other EU initiatives as trade barriers, which could work against the achievements of equal partnerships. At the same time, many Danish enterprises found it too cumbersome and risky to work in African countries. It would be important to help potential Danish private sector actors to get a more realistic understanding of the risks involved in investing in Africa.

The importance of communication was also emphasised by Members of the Council. Shared communication with partners about the results of Danish development cooperation should be prioritised more in MFA’s projects and programmes.

Finally, Members of the Council noted that local research should be given more priority, so that local needs could be uncovered by local researchers.

The Minister emphasised that equal partnerships only worked if both parties considered themselves equal. In international climate negotiations, for instance, the North-South divide was still very much present at conferences such as the Climate Summit and in the Conference of Parties (COP) meetings.

The Minister agreed that it was essential to support partner countries' own plans for climate adaptation and mitigation. Denmark would soon Chair the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) Partnership, which was a great tool for this purpose.

Experience from the NDC Partnership, the strategic sector cooperations, and other successful initiatives was actively shared with other developed countries. Denmark was a pioneer in thinking of development cooperation and climate policy as unequivocally tied together. It was important to get rid of silo thinking in international organisations and to deal with global issues in a holistic manner.

Concerning EU regulations in the forestry area, the Minister stressed the need to protect remaining forests. This was an area which Denmark could not influence much on a bilateral basis, and we therefore had to work through EU.

Regarding communication, the Minister noted that he and MFA staff spent a great deal of resources on communicating about the results and progress of Danish development cooperation, including to local press in partner countries, where he had experienced much interest in Danish-supported activities during his visits.

Research was indeed also an important matter when it came to equal partnerships. In addition to the research cooperation managed by Danida Fellowship Centre (DFC), the Minister highlighted the training courses and recently also the Master programme offered by DFC as great examples of demand-driven programmes which supported equal partnerships.

The Minister emphasised that equal partnerships concerned not only governments but also civil society organisations. Projects such as the Digital Democracy Initiative were vital in helping non-governmental organisations resist the control of authoritarian regimes.

Finally, the Minister noted that it was important to ensure that Denmark remained agile and flexible, so that support could be directed to countries and partners that could make the best use of them.

The Chair of the Council concluded the meeting by thanking the Minister for his time and reflections. She expressed the hope that the Council could be of help in the drafting of the coming plan for Denmark's engagement with Africa and was looking forward to the next dialogue with the Minister in the new year.