



**SID**

Society for International Development

To the members of SID

Dear friends,

We are heading towards our Washington Conference. Our colleagues in the Washington Chapter of our Society, together with the SID staff in Rome, have done a tremendous job preparing the conference. We are looking forward to an interesting program and good debates. We are grateful for the financial and logistical support we have received from various sources.

We should also look beyond the Conference. We will have ample opportunity to do so, not only in the corridors, but also on the third day of the conference, where we will have to take a number of decisions concerning SID. The Council has prepared some proposals in the form of amendments to our constitution. These proposals have been made in order to increase the efficiency and to lower the costs of our operations.

We should use this opportunity to discuss the future of SID in general. We would like to invite all members to participate in such a discussion, not only at the conference itself, but also in writing. It is important that we reach some understanding about the present situation and about the options before us. In order to stimulate such a discussion I would like to present some ideas that go beyond the official proposals which are on the Conference agenda.

### **The world of development has changed.**

To begin with: since SID was established the world has changed. Development has changed as well: development processes and policies, the context within development took place and the very concept of development itself. These changes continue. If there ever was a reason to establish a global think tank to reflect on all this, and a global forum to exchange ideas, it is now.

Reflection and discussion are taking place. However, together with the changes indicated above, the channels of global communication have changed as well. The possibilities for world citizens to communicate with each other, to get access to information, to share information and views with other people, wherever they live, are widespread. This has consequences for SID.

### **The value added of SID.**

SID International is an international network of people committed to development, based on some shared values. Our network does consist of development thinkers, development practitioners and development administrators and policy makers. Many of them belong to more than one of these three categories. Many of them also change positions in the course of the years. They meet each other often in various capacities and on many occasions. Globalization and communication have made those contacts even more frequent than during the first decades of existence of SID. People will only stay interested in SID International if our network would offer them information, views, contacts and communication that they would not easily find elsewhere.

In my view this value added should imply:

1. Contacts with people (thinkers, practitioners and policy makers) abroad.

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2. Contacts with people belonging to different generations, the old guard as well as the young.
3. Relevant actual information and views, concerning recent developments.
4. Challenging views, quality proof (different from the mainstream, alternative, but not ideologically unfounded), based on a confrontation between theory and practice, internationally as well as nationally, taking into account development experience of people at the grassroots.
5. Communication possibilities with other people: exchange of views, sharing experience, debate.

SID International has two categories of members: members in countries with a chapter and individual members. Both categories should get value added from SID International. The value of SID International to its members should be felt by them as an addition to the value they already get by participating in activities organized by a national chapter. It should also add to the value they get by surfing the Internet, where so much information concerning national and international development is freely available and where so many informal networks are already functioning. Students of development have access to many other forums and communication channels, at low cost

Do we offer enough value added to our members? We should admit that we have grown old. We do not attract many new young practitioners, thinkers and policy makers.

During the last couple of years SID has improved the website, both in terms of quality and substance. Through the SID Forum we have introduced on line communication possibilities. The Journal *Development* presently is published on line as well. Its quality is high. In doing all this we have been able to keep pace with others. However, as a network we are no longer a unique.

There are other ways to communicate, in addition to on line communication. Students of development and development practitioners can meet each other in seminars and conferences. Here meetings take place in person, eye to eye. SID chapters have continued to organize such meetings, some rather frequently and well attended. However, a world organization such as SID should, in addition to facilitating virtual world communication, also be able to organize regular world meetings. We have not been able to do so.

This is to a great extent due to a lack of resources. More seminars and symposia would require more finance. This is the main reason why we have not yet been able to organize a new series of international Round Tables, as we had planned to do. The Round Tables of the past were relevant event, where influential policy makers came together, and sharing challenging ideas. Our relevance has diminished, however.

### **Financial resources**

It is a chicken and egg situation. If we do not have the resources, we will not become more relevant. On the other hand, if we are not relevant, challenging and dynamic, we will not be attractive to the young generation and we will not be able to attract new financial resources.

This brings me to a third point. Continuing SID's traditional work program and enabling more and n better communication amongst our members implies rising costs. At the same time our income is decreasing structurally. Not many new and young students of development are applying for SID

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membership. To them SID may still seem to be an attractive forum, but not as a member. They easily find other channels of communication, without committing themselves to membership. This is a structural phenomenon for all national and international NGO's.

Moreover, while governments are still interested in financing projects of nongovernmental organizations, they are no longer willing to finance NGO structures, including overhead. This is partly due to the present financial problems of governments all over the world. However, it is also due to a change in the mindset of public authorities. The times that SID could count on substantial financial contributions from benevolent governments are behind us. It is still possible to get finance from the private sector – which has been the case preparing the Washington conference – but such finance always will be on a project by project basis.

So, SID's structural financial position will remain very difficult. We have taken some decisions to cope with the present financial problems. We have cut costs, in particular travel costs, for instance by cancelling Council meetings. We had to close our Headquarter office in Rome. We had to reduce our staff, which of course had consequences for our work program. Moreover, we have not been able to meet staff salary commitments in full.

SID staff and Council members have worked very hard to raise money for this year. We have been modestly successful. One might say that SID has always had financial difficulties, which always were solved, and that this will also be the case in the future. This, however, is wishful thinking. The present financial situation is fundamentally different.

### **Options**

In order to meet these challenges, the new Council of SID, to be elected at the Washington Conference, should consider taking drastic steps. If not, we run the risk to become a Society mainly consisting of members in Western countries, all of them middle aged and older. This would be a prescription for irrelevance.

I see the following options.

*First:* further raising membership fees, beyond those which will be discussed in Washington. I am afraid that this is a non-starter. SID chapters have raised concerns. The Council has discussed the present proposals at length. We have consulted SID chapters and we have taken note of the concerns which were raised. The present proposals a modes raise and a differentiation of the fees, together with structural change in the subscription rates for the Journal. A further increase would run the risk that members, and those students who consider membership, would feel that SID does not offer them enough value for money.

*Second:* Raising resources by approaching governments. We will have to do so. However, I am afraid that this will not offer much help beyond maintaining the level of assistance we receive at present (thanks in particular to the Government of Italy). All governments are facing problems due to the present financial crisis. All of them are considering subsidy cuts, not only for financial reasons, but also because of changing views on using public finance as such.

*Third:* cutting expenditure. This is a must. We will have to discuss which activities are essential for a worldwide society. I venture that there are two crucial activities: the Journal and the website, annex the Forum. We may wish to conclude that in order to maintain these activities we do not need a

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Headquarter office building anymore. We may also conclude that we can reduce the costs involved in keeping a Council. We could do so, for instance, by reducing the number of Council members beyond the reduction which is presently being proposed. We can also do so by deciding not to reopen a Headquarters office building.

*Fourth:* broadening the membership of the national chapters. Some of our national chapters are very active. They get new members regularly, who are participating in meetings and events organized by these chapters. Other chapters are less active, some are sleeping. A national chapter can only survive if members within the country concerned are actively exchanging information, views and experiences, when they are actively participating in discussions, visiting lectures, and coordinating action in order to influence development policies. So, national chapters need a regular inflow of new and young members. Young students of development will be attracted by relevant and forward looking programs. To this end the chapters concerned may need capacity building or capacity support. It is within the mandate of SID International to provide such support. However, this would require funding.

*Fifth:* increasing the number of national chapters. New chapters will have to be established from within the country concerned. They cannot be created from outside. Otherwise they will not be sustainable. However, their establishment – like the revival of sleeping chapters – can be catalyzed from outside. This again would require funding. The lack of funds for such activities has led to a vicious circle: decreasing activities, fewer members, less funds, less activities.

*Sixth:* reforming the Constitution. Most members are active through their national chapters. Some members, living and working in countries where the chapter is more or less sleeping, are communicating with other SID members through SID's website and the Journal. The question could be asked whether the continuation of activities by SID International still requires an independent Council, directly elected by members. A Council consisting of representatives of national chapters, wholly financed by these chapters, would also be possible. This would not be ideal, but it would not have negative consequences for either the Journal or the website/Forum, or for the world conference. The organization of the world conference, each four years, could be left to national chapters, assisted by the international secretariat. This is more or less already the case. Other international meetings and seminars, like the round tables, could also be organized by national chapters, working together, again assisted by the secretariat.

*Seventh:* merging SID with another international organization, foundation or institute, dealing with a related agenda in the field of development, environment and/or peace.

*Finally, option number eight:* transforming SID International by making it an international organization, of which also governments could become a member, next to present institutional members, individual members and national chapters. This would make it possible for governments to pay a membership fee, and influence the agenda, rather than deciding about a subsidy for individual projects. Subsidies are subject to rules and regulations concerning tendering. SID is, however, not an organization dealing with individual research and consultancy projects, but a permanent platform for reflection and debate. This option would imply that participating governments would have a say in the matter, not a final or decisive say, but a substantial say. Why not? Individual members and national chapters, all belonging to the international civil society,



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should feel strong enough to enter into a debate with public authorities, beyond an academic exchange of views. Some other international bodies have benefited from such a structure.

Some of the above mentioned options can be combined with each other. There are other options as well. All options have advantages as well as disadvantages. There is still some time for discussion. If we wait too long, one option will prevail: SID consisting of a hand-full of well-functioning national SID chapters, without a meaningful SID International. But this would not be an attractive option for the national chapters as well.

### **The Washington Conference**

I am very much looking forward to the Washington Conference. Washington is the ideal venue. Our Washington chapter is one of the strongest and most active chapters of SID. Washington is a major centre of decision making concerning global issues. In Washington many people regularly meet each other, in order to discuss international strategies. SID should add its voice. Washington does provide a unique opportunity for SID to debate with a worldwide audience – the old guard and the young – the challenges for national and international development in the next decade. The upcoming conference can be path breaking, provided that we are willing to discuss the really relevant issues of these times, provided also that we are willing to listen to those young people in so many countries who are resisting present tendencies towards marginalization, exclusion and oppression. These people are the real agents of development today.

With best regards,

Jan Pronk

*President*