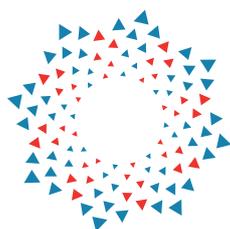


IVCO 2021 THINK PIECE

Reciprocity & the Sharing of Knowledge as a Gift

Jan Olav Baarøy,

Director General of the Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation (Norec)



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Have you ever received a gift which comes with a demand? For example, "Dear, this is for you! But please use it correctly, if not, you must return it".

For more than 50 years, gifts in the form of financial assistance from countries in the Global North to countries in the Global South have been given with a degree of demands to either show results or return the funds. Donors have often had high expectations about the impact of the gift, without knowing enough about the context in which the gift was given.

But it is not in the nature of the gift to come with requirements. If so, it isn't a gift. It is in the nature of the gift that the one receiving it should be able to give something back. A gift is reciprocal in its nature — it can and should be reciprocated.

In the 20th century, the French philosopher Marcel Mauss studied a large amount of anthropological material from around the world with a focus on one thing — the sharing of gifts. One of the common denominators of the gift, says Mauss, is that it must be reciprocated, otherwise the recipient will be in a shameful and unworthy position vis-à-vis the donor. It doesn't have to be immediately reciprocated. On the contrary, having outstanding exchanges of gifts binds people and society closer together.

So how do the recipients of development assistance, which year after year of experience receiving gifts where the only chance to reciprocate is to implement the requirements that came with the gift, reciprocate? Many of development aid's shortcomings are linked to the absence of reciprocity. The Norwegian anthropologist Hylland Eriksen has said that it is a fundamental anthropological insight that reciprocity is something that makes life meaningful, and one can ask how meaningful it is for people and society to receive aid without being able to give anything back, and engage in a true partnership for development.

In 1999, the Norwegian Peace Corps was closed down because it had a one-side focus from North to South. The volunteer service re-emerged in 2001 following a decision by the Parliament with an aim of facilitating mutual exchange of personnel between Norway and countries in the South- where a company in Norway wishes to send employees to countries in the South, they must also receive personnel from companies in the South to their workplace in Norway.

Since 2001, we have facilitated more than 10,000 young professionals to cross national borders between countries in the Global South, and between countries in the Global South to Norway. Reciprocal exchange has become a fundamental principle in their partnerships, and the objectives of the exchange are defined by those who send and receive the assistance together. Those who receive a gift can give one back. Skills are shared, knowledge is acquired, and new competencies contribute to organisational development, be it in the Global South or in Norway. The Exchange of personnel is to be able to reciprocate — to give something equally back.

In 2018 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs changed our name to Norec — Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation, which expresses exactly what we do: facilitate the exchange of personnel between organisations across borders. Reciprocity in practice and a meaningful sharing of true gifts.

Sources:

Eriksen, TH, Gaven, Cappelen, Oslo, 1995 [Norwegian translation of Mauss' The Gift [1925]].