

**The awkward squad – why development depends on dialogue and dissent**  
**Ben Phillips, Campaigns and Policy Director, ActionAid International, and ISS 1999-2000**

*Opinion - Other donors should do the same as Minister Ploumen has done in the policy framework 'Dialogue and dissent'. Tackling inequality and ensuring more inclusive growth is dependent on vibrant, brave/fearless citizenry and civil society. This is what Ben Phillips, Campaign & Policy director of ActionAid International, and ISS 1999-2000, writes in this opinion piece, published here in English and in Vice-Versa magazine in Dutch <http://viceversaonline.nl/2016/05/awkward-squad-waarom-ontwikkeling-afhankelijk-is-samenspraak-en-tegenspraak/>.*

Hundreds of thousands of children who can now go to school in Kenya; millions of people with HIV in South Africa who now have access to life-saving medicines; hundreds of millions of people in rural India who now have access to a hundred days of paid manual work to protect them from hunger; billions of women around the world who can now vote. What do all these advances have in common? All of them were secured by citizens standing up for their rights and holding governments to account. All faced push back from those in power. All involved both dialogue and dissent. It is the grit in the oyster that makes the pearl. But the ability of people to dissent is becoming harder across the world as more and more governments clamp down on civil society.

#### Accused

Donors who support civil society in questioning power can get accused of supporting instability by host governments and of getting in the way of commercial opportunities by multinational corporations. It can seem so much easier to avoid controversy and stay away from anyone who challenges unaccountable power. But it is those very questioners on whom development depends. Too many of my conversations with development agencies on this involve reactions that range from “what?” to “sure but we can’t”. I was impressed, therefore, on my recent visit to the Netherlands, by the Dutch government for standing out among bilateral donors for having an approach to development includes a stream on “Dialogue and Dissent”. In part this flows from a long Dutch tradition – for hundreds of years Holland has been a place where writers and thinkers have found refuge and freedom to speak. But it flows too from a recognition that active citizenship and healthy debate are not just nice-to-haves but are essential for effective development.

#### Rebel with a cause

This is not about being a Rebel Without A Cause. ActionAid and partners, for example, work from the inside as well as outside. They work to support governments in fulfilling their responsibilities by supporting capacity development, sharing evidence and experience and helping connect those making decisions with those affected by them. They work too to help advise business on best practice and on ensuring workers, communities and companies prosper together. They are often sought out for their advice and support.

#### Results

When I met last year with the government on the island of Zanzibar in Tanzania they told me that the work of ActionAid and partners in helping schools to fight child marriage was a crucial support to the government’s strategy. But ActionAid and partners also speak out when the actions of governments or corporations violate people’s rights and when people are set to be pushed into great hardship. Last year on that same visit I also met on the Tanzanian mainland with people whose land and homes were threatened a landgrab by a Swedish company. We faced a lot of heat for speaking out in support of the community – and the community faced even greater heat. Even some donor governments questioned whether such an approach might be counter-productive. But shortly afterwards the principal funder of the landgrab pulled out, problems were recognized, the deal was put on hold, the

people's issues started to be heard and community members felt secure enough to start putting up permanent structures to support their farming again as productive citizens.

Likewise, across the world, we have challenged corporations who have not paid their fair share of tax and the systems of tax breaks which deny the resources needed for health and education: when we and others first started raising this issue we were seen as part of an awkward squad, but now international institutions say that it is their top priority and leading companies say they back the call for fair taxation.

## Results

The Dutch development minister Liliane Ploumen was right to highlight inequality as “the mother of all crises”, threatening to “unravel the very fabric of our societies”. Today's extreme inequality is leading to an excessive and mutually reinforcing concentration of power and the wealth in an ever smaller number of hands, posing huge dangers to us all. It is in this context that what is in recent decades an unprecedented international clamp down on civil society is taking place in an attempt by those at the top to silence those who question their power by exposing corruption, exploitation, environmental damage and the violation of people's rights.

Yet it is upon a vibrant, fearless citizenry and civil society that efforts to confront inequality and ensure inclusive prosperity are realized. The Dutch are right to support those working for more equal societies where no one has impunity, where all can be questioned, and where everyone counts. Other donors need to do the same.