

Development Cooperation as an Arena for Discursive Clashes: The Case of Sida in Bolivia

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Introduction

In this paper, I use the concept of discourse to reflect upon how varying understandings of climate change permeate a certain political arena: international development cooperation. Starting off in the international political context, I move on to focus on Swedish development cooperation politics in the area of climate change, which I argue is much in line with the dominant international discourse. Swedish politicians also like to depict Sweden as an important actor and a forerunner on climate and development. In the final parts I outline the political context and climate discourses in Bolivia, one of Sweden's partner countries for development cooperation and a country which has lately kept a high profile in international politics of climate change. I sketch out how the climate discourse promoted by the Bolivian government differs radically from the one brought forward by the Swedish development cooperation agency, and argue for further research on these matters to understand how these discourses are formed and reproduced, and what may be the effects when they collide in the context of development cooperation.

1. A Larger Picture: International Climate Discourses

Drawing on the work of Foucault, Hajer and Versteeg define discourse as “an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices” (Hajer and Versteeg 2005:175). Discourses are formed and operate within certain contexts, defining the limits of what can be said or conceptualized within a particular field. However, discourses are not static or

unambiguous; they can be interpreted in multiple ways and are constantly negotiated, recreated and reformulated (Hajer 1995, Adger et al 2001). Several discourses on a certain issue may exist simultaneously, although with different grades of influence (Hajer 1995, Bradley 2009). A discourse can be considered dominant if it to a great extent determines what can be written, said and thought within a field and highly influences institutional arrangements (Hajer 1995, Adger et al 2001). However, this does not exclude the existence of other, alternative discourses. These can be characterized as counter discourses, that challenge dominant discourses, or parallel discourses, which do not directly oppose the dominant (or other) discourses, but exist in a subordinated position (Bradley 2009:23). I argue that the concept of discourse is useful for understanding politics of climate change. The following sections should be regarded as an incomplete attempt to outline the interplay of climate discourses in international politics. Far more comprehensive accounts can be found elsewhere (see e.g. Dryzek & Stevenson 2010).

Discourses around climate change need to be framed within a wider context of discourses in environmental politics. Hajer (1995) suggests that since the 1980s, a discourse that he terms ecological modernization has gained dominance in this field. Within the ecological modernization discourse environmental issues are perceived as global-level management problems that should be solved by governments and existing institutions. Economic development and solutions for environmental problems are reconciled, and the existing world order remains unthreatened. Thereby, Hajer argues, this discourse has managed to unite several groups of actors and become dominant in international environmental politics, providing the common language and key concepts for policymaking on international as well as national and local levels. The concept of *sustainable development*, which was spread to a wider audience by the Brundtland Commission's report *Our Common Future* in 1987, can be regarded as an embodiment of this discourse, in its unification of environmental and economic concerns (Ibid.). In line with Hajer, Adger et al (2001) argue that the field of international environmental politics is dominated by a focus on "issues defined as global environmental problems" (Adger et al 2001:681) that need global coordination to be solved. They term this dominant discourse the "managerialist discourse". However, they argue, this discourse is challenged by counter-discourses based on contrasting perceptions (Adger et al 2001).

Climate change has during the past decades emerged as an increasingly central issue on the agenda of international environmental politics. An ecological modernization or managerialist discourse is arguably dominant in this field. In this dominant discourse, climate change is framed as an apocalyptic threat to all of humanity. Climate change happens due to flaws in the current political and economic system, but should still be dealt with within this same system; through consensual and concerted global effort and large-scale management by states and international institutions, notably the UNFCCC, operating within the existing political/economic system and backed up by complex and specialized science. The proposed solutions are mainly technical and economical – it is about developing and spreading climate-friendly techniques and "getting the prices right" through market mechanisms such as carbon trading systems. Solving the problem of

climate change is thus perceived as compatible with a sustained, growth-oriented capitalist system (Ibid.).¹ Concerns have been raised about the limitations of this discourse when it comes to recognizing social dimensions of climate change, conflicting interests and weaknesses of the present political/economic system (Hajer 1995, Adger et al 2001, Di Chiro 2003). Critics drawing on work by Chantal Mouffe (2005) term this consensus-oriented discourse “post-political”, in that it neglects conflicting interests (see Swyngedouw 2007).

However, international climate politics is a field of constant discursive (re)negotiation. Alternative discourses question and challenge the dominant discourse by bringing forward different narratives and dimensions. Framings and key concepts replace each other on the agenda and their meanings shift along the way as they are interpreted and given new meanings by different actors. How the issue of climate change is framed in turn determines which strategies are suggested for dealing with it.

For example, academics and activists are promoting more radical perspectives, in which responsibility for and exposure to impacts of climate change are more explicitly linked to socioeconomic structures and power imbalances (see e.g. Ravindranath & Sathaye 2002, Terry 2009, Roberts & Parks 2007 and 2009). In these framings, climate change is often perceived as an effect of the prevailing capitalist market system with its focus on consumption and economic growth, and climate change impacts are placed in a context of unequal power relations. Overarching changes in the political and economic system are seen as required for addressing climate change. Of course, there is not one single alternative discourse on climate change; perceptions of causes and solutions differ and also the alternative discourses are subject to constant negotiations and shifts.

In my research I intend to focus on a specific setting in which different framings of climate change co-exist and crisscross, and explore mechanisms and consequences in this particular context.

2. Climate Change and International Development

With this larger picture in mind, my research interest is directed towards one particular field that has recently gained increased attention within international climate politics: international development cooperation.

The links between climate change and development have been widely recognized during the past years. Among others, the IPCC and the UNDP bring forward the concern that climate change impacts may threaten the objectives of fulfilling the UN Millennium Development Goals and wipe out previous progress in various areas of human development. Internationally funded

¹ For examples of framings in influential documents, see the Stern Review 2006, IPCC 2007, UNDP 2008, World Bank 2009

assistance for adaptation will therefore, they argue, be crucial in low-income countries (UNDP 2008, IPCC 2007). Climate change is thus increasingly acknowledged as a central issue for international development cooperation (see e.g. World Bank 2009, UN DESA 2009).

Development cooperation is perceived as an instrument for handling *adaptation* to climate change impacts as well as *mitigation* of the effects of climate change (see e.g. UNDP 2008, IPCC 2007, World Bank 2009, UN DESA 2009). On one hand, it is increasingly acknowledged that climate change impacts are expected to be most heavily felt by poor people in low-income countries. Therefore, adaptation to climate change impacts is emerging as an important component of development cooperation and regarded as something that needs to be considered in all development efforts in order for them to be effective and beneficial in a longer perspective (IPCC, UNDP). On the other hand, a continuing conflict in international climate politics (recently evident during the COP15 negotiations) regards the distribution of responsibilities for handling the climate crisis. Even if it is generally agreed that the Northern countries bear the major responsibility for past and current greenhouse gas emissions, and therefore also for mitigating their effects by cutting down emissions, coercion is also directed towards low-income/developing countries to limit their emissions, in accordance with UNFCCC's principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" (UNFCCC 1992, Hermele et al 2009). As phrased by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "even if advanced countries begin to match their words with deeds, their efforts are, by themselves, unlikely to be sufficient to meet the climate challenge. The active participation of developing countries is now required and such participation can occur only if it allows economic growth and development to proceed in a rapid and sustainable manner" (UN DESA 2009:v). International development cooperation is regarded as an instrument for this purpose (Ibid., World Bank 2009). The emphasis on *economic growth* proceeding in a *sustainable manner* – also a main feature of the World Bank's World Development Report for 2010 – is worth noting to observe the underlying perception in dominant discourses on both climate change and international development that economic growth is compatible with environmental protection. This implies that climate change can be combated within the existing, growth-oriented political/economic system.

3. The Swedish Context

In my research I am going to focus on climate discourses guiding the activities of Sida, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. Sida is an operative unit under the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and the agency's priorities and activities are determined by the government. In the following sections I will briefly sketch out the Swedish political context in the field of international development and climate.

3.1 Development: A Contested Political Field

After the general elections in 2006, the social democratic government – which had been in power for over a decade – was replaced by a right-wing coalition. Elections for the next 4-year period were held on the 19th of September this year, resulting in a continuing mandate for the same coalition.²

The main aim of Swedish development cooperation is to contribute to an equitable and sustainable global development and create prospects for poor women and men to improve their living conditions (Regeringskansliet 2009B). Swedish politics on climate and development are strongly influenced by dominant international discourse – most importantly through OECD, EU and the UN – but Swedish politics may arguably also have some influence on international discourse formation, and Swedish politicians have a tendency to portray Sweden as a forerunner when it comes to both environmental consciousness and development cooperation.³ Sweden chaired the EU during the fall of 2009, including the COP15 negotiations. Since the change of government in 2006 development cooperation sector has gone through some considerable changes and been subject to heated political and public debate. The Minister for Development Cooperation, Gunilla Carlsson, has expressed concern with how the sector has been managed before, and especially with practices at Sida. Much of Carlsson's concern seems to be based on the perception that the agency has been held a little too loosely, without adequate monitoring by the government and the ministry, and that the agency's activities need to become more results-oriented. Carlsson has taken initiatives to reform Swedish development cooperation and make it more results-oriented. In 2007, the number of partner countries for cooperation was decreased, with the motivation that this would increase the quality of the activities (Regeringskansliet 2007).⁴ Sida was re-organized in 2008, but on August 31 this year a new organizational structure, which will be valid from January 2011, was presented by the Sida board (Sida 2010A). In May 2010, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs decided to replace Sida's general director as part of the reformation of the agency (Sida 2010B). The transformations of the development sector has received praise as well as heavy criticism and arguments by Carlsson herself and some of her opponents have repeatedly been published in leading newspapers and debate forums on the Internet (see e.g. Carlsson 2010, Tham & Göransson 2010). Sida is currently going through an economic crisis since the agency has exceeded its budget and is required to radically cut its expenses (Nejman 2010).

² However, the right-wing coalition did not obtain a majority on their own in this recent election; there are current speculations on whether they will form a minority government, or seek to collaborate with either the Green Party or the far-right Sweden Democrats. This is to be settled before October 4.

³ For examples, see <http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/9437/a/88290> and <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/10954/nocache/true/a/111784/dictionary/true>

⁴ It is currently speculated whether there will be a new reduction of the number of partner countries. See Orrenius 2010.

3.2 Climate Change as a New Development Focus

In accordance with the international trend, the Swedish government has increasingly emphasized climate change as a crucial factor to consider in development cooperation (see e.g. Regeringskansliet 2009A:11). The official Swedish political ambition on international development is formulated in the PGU (*Politik för Global Utveckling*, or Policy for Global Development) established in 2003 and reformulated in 2008. This policy aims to harmonize all policy areas relevant to international development (Sida 2009B, Regeringskansliet 2008A). In the 2008 version of the PGU, climate change and environment is conceptualized as one of six “global challenges” for international development that the government commits to focus on, and framed in a way that in many aspects echoes the dominant international discourse. A sustainable use of resources is presented as a “prerequisite for lasting economic growth and an equitable and sustainable global development” (Regeringskansliet 2008A:31, my translation); environmental concerns are thus portrayed as compatible with economic growth, and those factors are unified in the construction of (sustainable) development. Climate change is depicted as a borderless challenge, and a threat to development achievements, which calls for global collaboration (Ibid.: 9-10, 32-34). Sweden is portrayed as a model country that has managed to combine decreased greenhouse gas emissions with economic growth. It is declared that the Sweden should aim to be a forerunner in the fight against climate change in terms of both mitigation and adaptation by providing expert knowledge and technical solutions and taking a leading role in international climate negotiations (Ibid.:33-34).

Environment and climate is one of three selected thematic priorities for Swedish development cooperation for the period 2008-2010, ”with the overarching aim of contributing to an environmentally sustainable development and thereby contributing to create prospects for poor people to improve their possibilities to sustain themselves” (Sida 2009A, my translation). This focus has materialized in a number of actions.

In October 2007, the Swedish government initiated an international commission on climate and development, chaired by Gunilla Carlsson (Swedish Government 2009A). The motivation behind this initiative was “a will to direct the world’s attention towards the situation of the developing countries, and their adaptation work” (Ibid, my translation), given that the poorest countries are hardest hit by climate change impacts which threaten to erase previous development progress and add to the difficulties of fulfilling the Millennium Development Goals (Ibid.). The Commission’s main task was to “make proposals on how to integrate risk reduction and adaptation to climate change into the development and poverty reduction plans of poor countries, as well as proposals on how to frame Official Development Assistance so as to take account of climate impacts and the risk of disasters” (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2007). The Commission’s final report, *Closing the Gaps*, was released and handed to the UN Secretary-General in May 2009. In the report, the Commission calls for increased commitment by the world’s leaders to actively address the issue of climate change, in terms of both adaptation and mitigation, in order to achieve a more sustainable development (Commission on Climate Change and Development

2009). The report's contents are clearly in line with the dominant international discourse on climate change; focus is on concerted global-scale institutional effort and economic means (Ibid.). According to the PGU, "the results of the commission's work will be used in the formulation of the Swedish politics for climate and development aid but also be conveyed to the EU and the international community" (Regeringskansliet 2008A:32, my translation).

Through the *Climate Initiative* launched in 2008 the government assigned 4 billion Swedish Crowns (about 434 million Euros) to climate change actions in the development sector during the period 2009-2013⁵, with a special focus on adaptation measures. Of these, 1 150 million Swedish Crowns (about 120 000 000 Euros) are to be channeled through Sida for climate related cooperation in certain countries and areas (Sida 2009A, Swedish Government 2008, Sida 2009C). This initiative has been criticized by political opponents as well as environmental organizations such as the WWF, who point out that this initiative is financed through the budget for international development cooperation, not by additional funds. Thereby, the critics argue, resources are extracted from other important, but less fashionable, areas of development (Nyström 2008, Flygt Högberg 2009).

As one of 12 new Swedish policies for the area of development cooperation, a new policy on environment and climate within international development – which will guide not only Sida but all official development-related activities – is currently being formulated by the government in dialogue with Sida and other actors, e.g. from civil society and the private sector. This is a new practice for formulating policies; until 2008 Sida's policies were developed within the agency itself. This new procedure may be regarded as a way for the government to reclaim influence over Sida's activities. The policy can further be perceived as an operationalization of the Climate Commission's report (Öhrman 2010). Since the final policy text will be an agreement between several actors (including different divisions within Sida and all government departments), it can be expected to turn out as a compromise without controversial or radical formulations. However, it will certainly be in line with the agenda of the current government. The policy will eventually be followed by internal guidelines for Sida staff. The existing Sida environment policy which is currently in use is not considered to include climate issues to a sufficient extent. Meanwhile the new policy and guidelines are formulated, Sida has developed temporary documents on climate change and are providing crash courses to give their staff some support as they are expected to mainstream climate issues into all activities.

Among Sida staff members that I have interviewed, there seem to be mixed feelings about the current politics and the new policy procedure. There is hope that the new policy and guidelines will fill some gaps in the current documents in relation to climate issues. At the same time, there seems to be some discontent at least among part of the staff regarding how issues of climate and development are handled by the government. One staff member that I have talked to expressed concern about what he perceived as a profound lack of understanding on government level

⁵ The original time span was 2009-2012, but it was later prolonged until 2013.

regarding the realities of development cooperation on implementation level. He questioned the seriousness of the Climate Initiative as the activities are intended to happen fast and within a short period of time, while there may not yet be sufficient capacity within Sida to handle the issues adequately. It is still to see what practical effects the policy will eventually have.

4. The Case of Bolivia

My research will be focused on the empirical case of Sida's activities in Bolivia. In the following sections I will provide a short background to the current political situation in Bolivia and to Swedish cooperation with the country. Then I will turn to a brief outline of the complex discursive struggles on climate issues in which Swedish and Bolivian actors partake.

4.1 Political Context

The political condition in Bolivia is characterized by deep tensions. Many of these go far back in time and need to be understood in light of the region's colonial history. 60-70 percent of the inhabitants are estimated to belong to one of the 36 different indigenous groups (Kohl & Bresnahan 2010B). Of the remaining thirty-eight percent, most are *mestizos* and others are European descendants and immigrants. There are great socioeconomic gaps and the indigenous people in rural areas tend to be the most marginalized (Kohl & Bresnahan 2010A, Regeringskansliet 2008B). Bolivia has a turbulent political history with numerous coups and even since democratic elections were started to be held in 1982, several presidents have been forced to interrupt their office terms, partly due to fierce opposition by social movements (Kohl & Bresnahan 2010A).

Since 2006, Bolivia is governed by MAS, *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement Towards Socialism), a socialist party strongly rooted in indigenous popular movements. MAS' political agenda is characterized by a combination of anti-neoliberal critique and indigenous activism (Kohl & Bresnahan 2010B). The president, Evo Morales, is depicted as the country's first indigenous president. Morales and MAS have their main support in the north-western highland regions (including La Paz) with a large indigenous and low-income majority, while they have faced great opposition in the wealthier eastern lowlands, the so-called *Media Luna* (Half Moon) (Kohl & Bresnahan 2010B).

In January 2009 a new constitution was approved by referendum, and in January 2010 Morales began his second term after being re-elected in 2009 (Ibid.). However, the regional elections in April 2010 presented MAS with some drawbacks, and according to a Sida staff member in La Paz, the support for and confidence in Morales is shrinking (Personal interview).

4.2 Sida's Climate Focus in Bolivia

Being one of the poorest states in Latin America, Bolivia has high presence of international donors. It has been a partner country for Swedish development cooperation since the early 1990's and is the only country in the region which remained a partner country for Swedish long-term cooperation after the number of countries was reduced in 2007. The cooperation is centered on the thematic priorities of democracy and human rights; education; and environment and natural resources, with a special focus on climate (Swedish Government 2010). Activities are taking place in direct cooperation with local government agencies as well as in collaboration with other donor agencies. Sweden is considered a middle-size development actor and development activities are to a great extent funded in collaboration with other donors (Regeringskansliet 2009B). The strategy for Swedish cooperation with Bolivia is formulated in line with Bolivia's National Development Plan and with EU:s code of conduct regarding complementarity among donors. It is stated that the choice of areas for cooperation is based on the Bolivian government's priorities and an analysis of Sweden's comparative advantages in the country, evaluation of previous results and the need for complementarity and division of tasks among cooperation actors (Ibid.). Among Sweden's comparative advantages in cooperation with Bolivia are mentioned a high level of trust and long-time experience, as well as a local recognition of the relevance of the thematic priorities (Ibid.).

Bolivia is one of the five countries targeted by the Swedish government's Climate Initiative (Sida 2009A), and is (together with Mali and Cambodia) among the three countries that Gunilla Carlsson and the international commission on climate and development visited to gain insights into the realities of climate change impacts (Swedish Government 2009A). During 2010, Sweden (through Sida) is chairing the international donor group on climate issues in Bolivia. Environment and climate change is selected as one of the main questions for dialogue with local authorities (Regeringskansliet 2009B).

4.3 Contesting Climate Discourses

Climate change is gaining increasing attention in Bolivia also among other foreign development agencies operating in the country, as well as among national government authorities and in public debate. Bolivia is considered to be one of the places in the world where climate change is already evident, causing water shortages and unpredictability in weather patterns (Slunge & Jaldin 2007, Danida 2007). During the past years, a strong national climate discourse has emerged in the country. Bolivian government officials have on various occasions promoted a discourse that Dryzek and Stevenson term "green radicalism" (Dryzek & Stevenson 2010). It is characterized by strong anti-capitalist standpoints in combination with references to Andean worldviews centered on *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) and harmony with nature.

At the COP15 negotiations, the Bolivian negotiators expressed explicitly radical views. Together with a number of other states, Bolivia firmly rejected the proposed Copenhagen Accord, based on its contents as well as the arguably non-inclusive process in which it had been formulated (Dryzek & Stevenson 2010:23). The consequence of this refusal was that the Accord could not be officially adopted (Müller 2010). During a public seminar at KlimaForum, the parallel civil society forum in Copenhagen, the Bolivian lead negotiator Angelica Navarro claimed that the North owes a “climate debt” to the developing countries that must be paid back and further argued that the developed countries live in a “dictatorship of money” and need to recreate a harmonious relationship with *Pachamama*. Navarro was applauded when she, on behalf of the Bolivian state, offered to provide “capacity building” to the Northern countries for this purpose.⁶

In April 2010 a “World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth” (PWCCC) was held in Cochabamba, Bolivia, with the aim of serving as a “people’s” counterbalance to the UNFCCC negotiations. It was initiated by the Bolivian government and brought forward narratives that differ strongly from those prevalent in dominant international climate discourse and could be placed in the green radicalism discourse (PWCCC Homepage, Dryzek & Stevenson 2010). The conference attracted over 30 000 participants, of which 10 000 from abroad – a blend of government representatives, bureaucrats and activists working e.g. on climate justice and indigenous people’s rights⁷ (Müller 2010). It attracted positive attention from independent media broadcasters and from well-known debaters like the journalist and writer Naomi Klein, while it did not receive any significant coverage in Western mass media and was met by skepticism and criticism from some observers. President Evo Morales’ inauguration speech has been deemed dogmatic and unfocused, and concern has been raised about the fact that the UN representative invited to talk at the conference could not finish her speech due to loud protests and booing from the audience (Embassy of Sweden 2010). The “Cochabamba People’s Accord” that was the document emanating from the conference has been considered rather vague (Müller 2010). Furthermore, the organizers’ hostility towards critique of Bolivia’s internal environmental politics was a matter of concern. Two of Bolivia’s largest organizations for indigenous people’s rights prior to the conference accused the organizers of neglecting internal environmental malpractices by placing all responsibility on the North. Since this critique was not incorporated in any of the conference’s 17 regular working groups, an 18th group on this topic was formed outside the conference area (Embassy of Sweden 2010).

The greenness of the Bolivian government has thus begun to be questioned both internally and externally. Critique has been raised against what is termed a “new extractivism”, as the country’s

⁶ It should be mentioned that Bolivia has argued for the recognition of Mother Earth also within the UN, with some success: an official “Mother Earth Day” on April 22 has recently been appointed by the UN (UN 2009). The Bolivian representatives now work to gain support for an official declaration of the rights of Mother Earth, similar to the Declaration of Human Rights.

⁷ However, people from outside the Americas were underrepresented due to the unfortunate timing of the Icelandic volcano ash.

economy is dependent on gas and mining industries. Also, the government has recently decided on some heavily contested infrastructure projects, e.g. a highway that may threaten the fragile balance of the Isiboro-Securé National Park, which caused the previous Vice Minister of Environment, Juan Pablo Ramos, to resign from his post out of conscience (Friedman-Rudovsky 2010).

Concludingly, Bolivia promotes a green radicalism climate discourse that is opposed to the dominant international climate discourse, but resonates well with a variety of actors, ranging from governments of other developing countries faced with the consequences climate change to advocates for indigenous people's interests and climate justice activists. Yet, it is being questioned whether this is simply empty rhetorics that are far from the government's actual activities. (For the sake of fairness it should however be added that the Bolivian government is hardly the only one that could be accused of hypocrisy and application of double standards in relation to climate change.)

5. Conclusions and Further Research

Just like Swedish officials, Bolivian government representatives are upholding a strong climate profile and like to portray themselves as heroic forerunners in the battle against climate change. Both groups of actors claim a moral high ground, however from entirely different standpoints. Their claims are located within diametrically different discursive fields.

Discourses are not just words and ideas on a theoretical level; they are translated into practices that have material effects. In this paper, I have proposed international development cooperation as a field where discourses are reproduced and materialized, a field permeated with power dynamics and political interests. I have lined out and contextualized a particular arena for clashes between opposed discourses on climate and development: Swedish official development cooperation with Bolivia. In order to understand the interplay of discourses and their implications in practice, a closer empirical study is needed, which will be undertaken on site in La Paz later this fall, as part of my Ph.D. project.

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