

## Thematic Section

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# Development Cooperation: From post-colonialism to interconnected globalization

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**ABSTRACT** *Uncertainty currently dominates the development cooperation discourse. What is the future of this domain of international cooperation and solidarity? Was it a model that suited the world order of western economic, political and military dominance? Does the changing world order with emerging economies and the move to the East, with identity wars and an almost untraceable pattern of wealth and inequality signal that development cooperation itself, not just its models and intervention logic has become redundant? And if so, what's next? Where should the energy, creativity and commitment of all those committed to the fight against poverty, to women's rights and access of the poor to a decent life be directed?*

**KEYWORDS** *globalization; development cooperation; aid and trade; SDGs*

### The world of ambivalence

Development cooperation is today an ambivalent world with no clear pictures and political certainties.

#### **Picture 1: Africa rising?**

There is the picture of 'Africa rising', a song sung by macro-economists and investors and politicians in North and South, pointing to GDP growth in Africa, to signals of the penetration of new technologies, and to the financial stability of most countries (budget deficits, debt to GDP ratio). And there is the picture of a majority still stuck in poverty, the ravaging Ebola crisis that swept away the health systems of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, and paralyzed their economies. People point to the small farmers still stuck in a vicious cycle of smallholdings, low investment capacity for new technology. The fragile states of Somalia, South Sudan, Central African Republic and Mali continue to pose challenges for the world.

#### **Picture 2: ODA decreasing?**

There is the picture of decrease in development aid (ODA). The Netherlands decided to drop the 0.7 percent goal and has steeply reduced their development budget. Although

the United Kingdom is increasing its aid commitments, this seems more the exception than the dominant trend. At the same time, the mercantilist politics of the emerging countries like China and India, swapping natural resources like oil, diamonds, iron ore and the like for investment in infrastructure and services provides a whole new range of opportunities. And the domestic tax revenues in stable countries like Kenya, Ghana, Bangladesh, Peru are providing a new source of funding for public social services. The role of ODA is declining, but does it matter where the money comes from?

### **Picture 3: Burgeoning middle class?**

We hail the growing middle class in the countries of the Global South as a cornerstone of democracy and accountability: no middle class equals no good governance. There are the entrepreneurs providing jobs and opportunities for a young population. But there are widespread concerns about the self-interest of the middle class focused on their own wealth and security and their lack of commitment to the poor living in the slums and in the villages in the countryside. If this middle class is not committed to redistributing the resources and wealth of the country, what is the future of development?

The overall development picture seems to have fragmented into different shards, each corresponding to a different perspective. And in this ambivalence some make the case that we are on the right track, using their preferred perspective as evidence and *vice versa*.

### **The deconstruction of the Global South**

These ambivalences should make us aware that our language about development is no longer useful. It is easy to talk about developing countries – and to imagine that we are referring to a construct that we can all relate to. Yet the reality is that the term ‘developing countries’ is much more confusing than one would imagine. What is the similarity between the emerging economy in India, the fragile state of South Sudan and crime-ridden Honduras? One could question

whether this generalized discourse has ever been justified in face of the diversity of countries, but today it is clear that we can no longer use the terminology of development as loosely as we did before.

I discern three profiles of realities in the Global South:

- The reality of fragile states where a lack of social cohesion and sense of belonging are fragmenting society, increasing vulnerability and subsequently making institutions work ineffective and inefficient.
- The reality of lower middle income countries or those aspiring to become so in the near future. In these countries, connecting to the globalizing world is happening, even though for a limited segment of society. Institutions are getting stronger and the middle class is becoming more vocal (albeit not always on issues that might be considered within the ‘development’ domain).
- The emerging economies that play their role in the world forum of G-20 and have become global players to be reckoned with. Even though pockets of poverty in their own country still exist, they are playing in a different league.<sup>1</sup>

The face of poverty is different in the diverse realities of the Global South. And so therefore should be the intervention logic and theories of change we apply to these countries. Whereas fragile states deserve strong financial support to create basic stability in security justice and social services, the lower middle income countries and emerging economies require a totally different approach.

The generalized development discourse and the images and frameworks connected to that discourse belong to the era of the distinction between the West and the developing world. These frames are firmly anchored in the mindset of politicians and the general public. We used the development language to shape a world and now that this world has changed, we have to consider what new language we can develop. Trying to fill old language with new content and meaning will most likely not work for the general public and we cannot pretend continuity where there is deep transformation.

### **Development cooperation as post-colonial discourse**

The notion of development as support for poor countries was used for the first time by the American President Truman in his speech at the fledgling United Nations in 1949. It, however, became prominent at the beginning of the sixties as the decolonization process advanced rapidly in Africa. Development thus became the framework to redefine the relationship between the newly independent states, the former colonial powers and other western countries. Development was based on the assumption that the former colonial powers (and the West) were 'advanced' and the poorer, newly independent countries needed to be 'developed' to attain the levels of progress that the West boasted. Thus, the western world was the model to emulate in matters of governance, democracy and human rights, the economy and basic social services. Knowledge, technology and financial support were part of the toolbox to get these developing countries up to the same level: the white man's burden in a post-colonial outfit.

Over the last 50 years, the tool-box has had different priorities. From a focus on technical assistance, via the focus on macro-economic restructuring (structural adjustment), via the peace dividend (after the fall of the Berlin Wall), the basic social services approach (MDGs) and the shift to private sector development (the current preference). But all these strategy-changes fitted into the same model of post-colonialism: the benchmark remained the modern western world and the direction of flows was from the North to the South. The financial and economic flows, the political alliances, the cultural influences were along the North–South axis.

The globalized world shows a different pattern. South–South trade is today eclipsing North–South trade. The western model of liberal democracy is losing ground to a more state centered, autocratic political culture. New forms of illiberal democracies (democracies without the traditional set of liberal values and institutions) are regaining ground, combining a market-based economy with single party democracy (China), populist democratic policies (Venezuela, Ecuador)

or (legitimated by elections) strong-man political leadership (Rwanda, Uganda, Sudan). Previous 'wins' such as the principles of human rights and the accompanying discourse are increasingly challenged as the human rights discourse has become a new battle ground (restrictions on civil society, gay and lesbian rights). Traditional political and human rights conditionalities accompanying development aid by ODA-countries are increasingly being rejected by recipients.

### **Development cooperation: at the end of its lifecycle**

The world order of the post-colonial era is coming to an end. And with this, development cooperation has come to the end of its lifecycle. It derived its discourse and framework from the post-colonial era and the relationship between the former colonies and colonial powers. Now that these relations are fundamentally changing, the concept of development will become part of that history.

There is no reason to deplore this fact. It creates space for new thinking about the future of our world, one that is different from copying the life styles and institutions of the western world. The rising inequality, the meritocratic discourse, the social exclusion, the ongoing ecological crisis have not yet made westerners rethink their way of life nor challenged their assumptions of their political, economic and social institutions. There remains a world of self-satisfaction and very little self criticism. In fact, there is hardly any inclination for transformation.

This end of lifecycle of development cooperation is not the end of global engagement and of global solidarity. In a globalizing world interconnectedness will grow and international social relations will expand. But they will not be shaped in the form of development cooperation as we know it: programmes and projects that are financed by ODA or financial contributions from international NGOs.

### **Private sector, aid and trade: the last spasm or beginning of a new era?**

The new development strategy of western European countries of combining aid and trade is merely seeking

to adjust the development discourse in face of the globalizing markets. This strategy supposedly offers developing countries an entry into the globalized markets with aid used as one of the modalities in overarching strategies to make developing countries fit for the globalized market.

This strategy could be seen as a response to the reality of a globalizing world. Some remarks can be made about this strategy from the development perspective:

- It accepts the globalization of the capitalist economy as the basis of our globalizing world: capitalism is the uncontested economic model, adopted on a global scale by the West, the emerging countries (India, China), the former socialist countries (Russia) and the new class of low middle income countries (Kenya, Ghana, Bangladesh).
- It sees the economy as the most important and most powerful lever for the transformation of other aspects of life: the trickle down theory gets a new lease of life: boosting the economy will bring about better basic social services, which becomes an indirect goal.
- It presupposes stimulating the open global economy is the trigger for more transparency and therefore better functioning states. The assumption is that growing middle class will demand greater voice and through this process of demanding accountability, bring about better governance.
- The discourse on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is part of these private sector/aid and trade policies to keep the social and environmental consequences in check, without challenging the traditional profit-driven discourse of the private sector.

This aid and trade embrace is the transition to a new discourse that fits the globalizing world by building on the global consensus about a capitalist economic model with international trade as its cornerstone. For those working in development that are fundamentally critical of the global liberal economy because of its dire consequences for people and planet, this aid and trade agenda is not the desirable next phase for international cooperation. There is no doubt that economic development

is part of the agenda to combat poverty and create more stable and secure livelihoods for those living on less than US\$2 a day. And there is a key role to play for economic actors in the private sector to make this economic development happen. But the dominant economic model has too many adverse side-effects to be embraced by those who care about justice and sustainability. Whether the CSR policies (most of them voluntary and not legally binding principles) will be a sufficient answer to these social and environmental concerns has yet to be seen. CSR policies do not fundamentally change or challenge the profit driven paradigm of private companies and it is to be seen whether companies who support such policies will continue to do so when competition and accompanying pressure on profits mounts. Social entrepreneurship, which is not profit driven and is primarily aiming to create positive externalities, would perhaps be a better economic model to promote and develop as cornerstone in economic development.

### **The SDGs challenging the development discourse**

The SDGs that are adopted at the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2015 reflect the transition from a post-colonial to a globalized world. They break with the traditional (North-South) development discourse in four ways:

- They broaden the thematic scope from the limited basic social services (the MDG-agenda) to a holistic agenda that includes economy, environment and climate, security and governance.
- They broaden the geographic scope from the least developed countries to the globe: all countries (North–South–East–West) have to contribute and have to take stock of their obligations in order to fulfill these SDGs.
- They broaden the scope of actors to encompass the private sector and knowledge and research institutes: no one can withdraw from this agenda.
- They broaden the financial basis from ODA, provided by the OECD members to a broader range of international and domestic instruments, including private investment.

## Development 58(1): Thematic Section

This SDG agenda is a huge success for development activists that criticized the MDGs for being too limited and focussing too much on the consequences without addressing the root causes of poverty. Development organizations have for years pointed to the coherence problems of development: many of the root-causes of poverty lie in the global policies and politics of multinational corporations and governments (western and emerging economies). In the same vein they have addressed the security and governance issues in a comprehensive way. With the SDG agenda these development organizations get what they want: a global and comprehensive agenda.

### The weaknesses of strong SDGs

But this success comes at a price. With all their limitations, the MDGs had focus in their geographical ambition and thematic scope. The broader SDGs will run the risk of getting lost in a myriad of goals, indicators and strategies:

- The problem of cherry picking: with such a broad agenda, governments can decide that they have to choose which SDGs they will prioritize. As such, SDGs become part of political and electoral calculations. OECD countries in the West will declare of the SDGs irrelevant for them, providing an alibi for other governments to follow suit. If it is not for political reasons, there will be capacity reasons to select.
- This will lead to a fragmented agenda: when every country makes its own selection, there will be no global focus and monitoring progress will become problematic.
- With so many indicators, it will be doubtful to see whether we can gather the relevant data needed. It is expected that we can count on the big data revolution to master this statistics problem. Nobody knows whether this perspective is realistic.
- How do we maintain focus on the bottom billion? There is a shared conviction that the entrenched poverty in the fragile areas is the biggest challenge for the international community. Instead of focusing on the most pressing

issues on the poverty agenda, the bottom billion are submerged in a broad unspecified agenda.

- Accountability: Who holds whom accountable? And how does the Global South holding the Global North accountable for their contribution? Our current multilateral institutions are not well equipped to turn the accountability process upside down.

In a global world the OECD/DAC becomes an anachronism. Is the OECD/DAC really willing to hand over its role in the poverty agenda to the United Nations? Does the United Nations have the power to redress political choices in the agenda and seek accountability?

### SDGs as a challenge for development agencies

The holistic agenda of the SDG is a big success for the lobby and advocacy endeavours of development organizations and their allies, but it signals that the traditional model of development organizations is also coming to an end. I see four challenges for development agencies in the SDG-era.

First development agencies have to become real global agencies. Although it seems that that is happening (Save the Children, Oxfam, World Vision are rapidly spreading in the Global South with national branches), the current globalization process of development NGOs seems to be more an isomorphic process trying to copy the big global brands like Google, Apple and Nike. Development agencies tend to develop brand-strategies to make themselves visible all over the world and become global players with their headquarters and business models firmly based in the North. How will the internal checks and balances develop themselves in these networks? Will the branches in the Global South remain mainly 'country-offices' of the global brand or will they develop themselves as actors with decision-making power within the global networks?

Second, it will be interesting how development agencies will rebalance their programme and advocacy work in the Global North and the Global

South. Much of the advocacy and lobby work is executed in the Global North to influence decision-making and financial flows, whereas the vast majority of the programmes are in the South. The SDG-era will challenge organizations to rebalance this pattern of the past.

Third the broadening of the thematic scope will challenge development organizations to think about their agenda. Development organizations will have to build new alliances with peace and environmental organizations to be able to effectively address the holistic agenda. They cannot be good on all issues and they cannot satisfy themselves with acting superficially on the broad agenda. More focus in coherent and effective alliances will be necessary.

Fourth, the resource question will push development agencies on a different path. If ODA is to be complemented by a diversity of other sources, development agencies too will have to diversify their funding strategies. If domestic resources and investments become part of the strategy to finance the SDGs, the funding strategy of development NGOs have to be redesigned.

It is not yet clear whether development agencies are able to make the transition, whether they are willing to accept a process of creative destruction to get ready for a new era where acting and intervening as a foreign agency will become less self evident than it was in the past.

### **The problem of interventionism**

The interventionism of development cooperation has been self-evident in the post-colonial era as a continuation of the colonial intervention. It became morally justified in the poverty and human rights discourse: all the interventionism was in the best interest of humankind and was a contribution to solve problems countries themselves could not solve on their own.

This interventionism of development cooperation is now contested. Increasingly, developing countries see development as an internal issue and want to take control of what happens and who does what in their countries. Less access and more control are the trend. The clamping down on civil society and increased control and occasional

shutting down of the Internet, are worrisome and are challenging traditional intervention models. Increasingly too, emerging economies and low middle income countries are better equipped through increased domestic resource mobilization to address poverty themselves. Their dependency on foreign aid is decreasing. Even if pockets of poverty in these countries continue to exist, the justification and the space for interventionism is decreasing.

### **Conclusion**

As has been stated before, development cooperation is at the end of its lifecycle. As a post-colonial model it is not fit for the interconnected globalizing world where power relations between West and East, between North and South have fundamentally changed. We can expect over the next decade that ministries for development cooperation will disappear. What will remain of the traditional development cooperation will be the support for fragile states. For the lower middle income countries and the emerging economies, the traditional models and systems (ODA) will be phased out. The concern for poverty, human rights and for social and environmental justice will continue to exist but will have to find new forms and systems. Three critical aspects will be decisive for the future of development NGOs:

- They will have to find new forms of agency that are not built on the traditional interventionist model. Alliances and collaboration with local actors that go beyond the traditional funding role and the outsider-advocacy role will have to be developed in order to become a legitimate actor in the low middle income countries and emerging economies.
- Development NGOs will have to prove their added value. This value added factor will challenge development organizations to profile themselves where they are good at. General concern about poverty and injustice will not be enough. They will have to move from their circle of concern (which is in general very large) to their circle of influence (which is often much more restricted).

## *Development 58(1): Thematic Section*

- Development NGOs will have to distinguish themselves from the mainstream liberal political economy that is dominant in the globalizing world because of the profit driven character of the liberal economic model and the rising

inequality that accompanies this model. Without such a profiled position, development NGOs will be submerged by the mainstream of actors positioning themselves to take advantage of the interconnectedness of the globalizing world.

### **Note**

- 1 As always categorization has the problem of sharp distinctions in blurred realities. Is Nigeria a fragile state or an emerging economy? Are the criminal states in Central America falling into the state of fragility or climbing the ladder?