

COOPERATION FOR WHAT DEVELOPMENT?

The challenges of the 21st century call for a radically different approach to North-South relations

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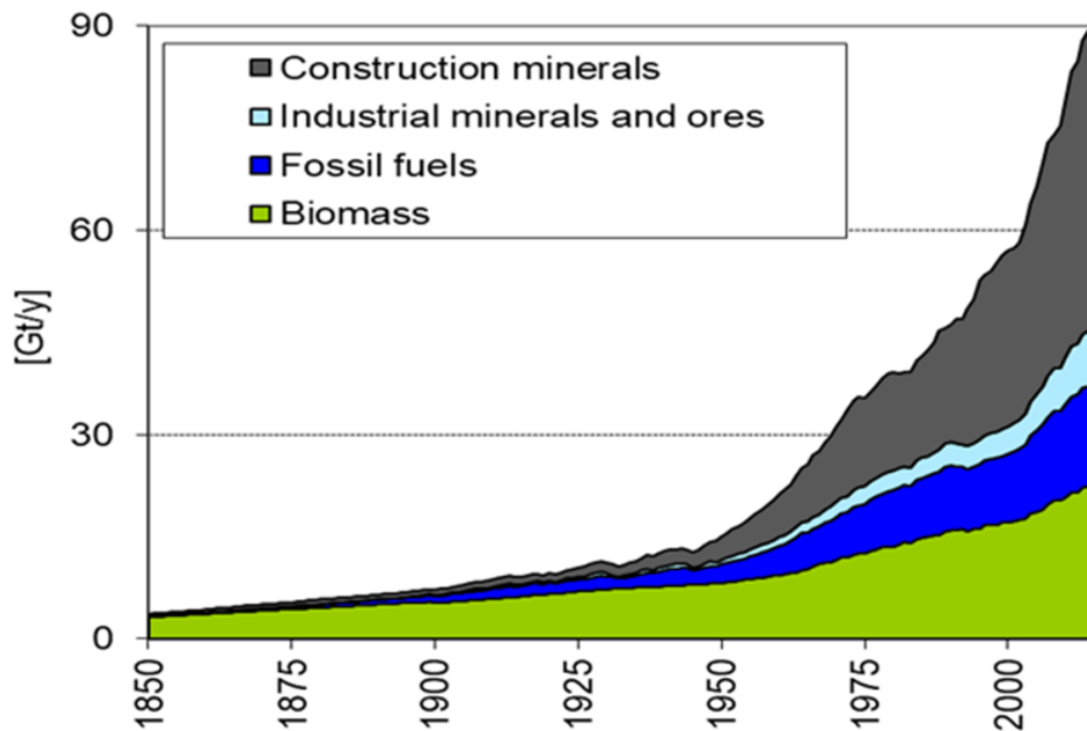
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The development era reordered the world after the Second World War, drawing a geography divided between “developed” countries and “underdeveloped”, or poor, countries. Although the concept of “development” already existed, it became hegemonic when the Government of the United States, the new world power at the time, made it the core of its international policy in 1949. The United Nations was created not only to prevent future wars, but also to foster development in those two-thirds of the world, especially in the geopolitical South, which were classified as “underdeveloped” at the time. This was the time when the Declaration of Human Rights was written and the Bretton Woods international financial system was created. In the industrialised countries, mass consumption became generalised and the Welfare State appeared. These were decades when strong economic growth was able to soften the class conflict. This is why, even today, the dominant discourse readily equates gross domestic product growth with people’s social wellbeing. The years between 1950 and 1975 are seen as a sort of golden age that marked an ideal state of society. In the countries of the geopolitical North, it is sorely missed, now

that it has been dismantled by neoliberal austerity. In the different Souths, where it never really materialised or only very ephemerally, there is a desire to achieve it, precisely because of the great promise of development it offers. It is an illusory promise that any society in the world can reach the same level of consumption, public services and relative democracy that existed during those years in some countries of the North.

Development was always a false promise

It is during this same period that the rapid economic growth of the industrialised countries led to an exponential overexploitation of all the planet's biophysical resources in just seven decades. As the chart below shows, the extraction of all types of materials from the Industrial Revolution until 1950, which marks the beginning of this "development era", is not comparable in any way with its subsequent exponential growth. Although, of course, the Industrial Revolution laid the foundations for this process.



Source: Christoph Görg, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna.

It is what Will Steffen and his colleagues have called the Great Acceleration [1]. A truly meteoric increase in the (over-)use of the basic materials that make human life possible on the planet, and all the associated pollutant and destructive effects. These materials, for example, oil, were extracted from countries in the geopolitical South or peripheral countries, but were mainly consumed in the major centres of the capitalist world-system. The new rules of the world economy established profoundly unequal terms of trade, from both the ecological and economic viewpoints, as the dependency theorists pointed out. In terms of social welfare, this accelerated economic growth in the capitalist centres had very disparate results in different parts of the world. It has pushed us towards outrageous levels of inequality. Today, we can say that economic growth is the main driver of both

environmental destruction and social inequality.

Until now, the perception of development that associates it closely with economic growth, expressed in terms of gross domestic product, continues to be hegemonic – despite the acute environmental crisis that is currently unfolding around us and the multiple attempts to redefine development (human development, sustainable development, etc.). The international financial institutions have not changed their perspective on this and neither have they lost power. Even the Sustainable Development Goals include a goal focused on growth – a paradoxical goal considering that we inhabit a limited space.

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For many rural communities in Asia, Africa and Latin America, development today is the slogan that justifies their displacement, their uprooting, the loss not only of their livelihoods, but also the loss of their social, environmental and spiritual relations. In their experience, development is any type of mega-project that serves distant, abstract ends and leaves them with nothing but dispossession, impoverishment and violence.

The coloniality of development cooperation

Development cooperation is one dimension of the larger development paradigm. It is a specific form of relationship between geopolitical Norths and Souths that was born in the development era. The rationale of the development/underdevelopment binomial and the vision of the world it builds started to be questioned in the 1990s. It was the decade when the environmental justice movement was born, when migrant or black women began to question white and middle- or upper-class feminisms from a different place of enunciation, and when in Latin America, Aníbal Quijano and the modernity/coloniality group formulated their theses about the unbroken persistence of the coloniality of power and knowledge, more than a century after the end of colonialism as a historical epoch.

As the deprofessionalised Mexican intellectual Gustavo Esteva points out, classifying and labelling very diverse societies – which had their own ways of organising the production of goods and exchanges, and their own cultural and wellbeing horizons – as poor and underdeveloped, applying the lens of capitalist economics as the only parameter, implied by its very nature a considerable burden of epistemic violence. The euphemism “developing” invented later on does not in itself disarm this binary and hierarchical conception of the world. As Esteva says: “Underdevelopment began on 20 January 1949. On that day, two billion people became underdeveloped. In fact, from that time onwards, they ceased to be what they were, in all their diversity, and became an inverted mirror of other people’s reality: a mirror that despises them and sends them to the back of the queue, a mirror that reduces the definition of their identity, that of a heterogeneous and diverse majority, to the terms of a small and homogenising minority” [2].

The exclusion of local rural knowledge to give priority to expert modern knowledge and the application of standardised “toolboxes” considered universal to all kinds of very diverse socio-historical contexts are some of the forms that this epistemic violence took.

For decades, we have scorned the knowledge of country people, indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, artisanal fishermen, and people who live from and with the forest in different parts of the planet. As we know today, these populations have the merit of having preserved 80% of the biodiversity we still have [3]. We insist on calling these groups poor just because monetary income is not central to their way of life. Or backward, because they do not share the goals of growthism, of infinite linear progress. They uphold other values, such as balance with the environment, or the quality of relationships, not only with other humans, but also with other species and with nature in general, which they see as the source of life. It is they who are practitioners of different forms of *sumak kawsay*, life in plenitude, translated as good living by Latin American progressivism. Each group in its own way, as dictated by its context, its historical trajectory and the biophysical conditions of the place it inhabits.

It is these groups that, classically, appear as the poorest in population censuses and thus become a target for development cooperation. A process which, according to the economic anthropologist Jason Hickel in his macroanalysis of money flows, benefits the donor countries much more than the countries receiving this “aid”. According to Hickel, “each year, two trillion dollars flow from the global North to the South, in development aid, loans and foreign investments. But actually, five trillion dollars flow back in the opposite direction, from the global South to the North. That means that the North takes a net total of three trillion dollars from the South every year. That is 24 times the aid budget that the South receives. That’s a huge transfer of wealth from the poor countries to the rich countries”.

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According to Hickel, this is happening thanks to several mechanisms: first, tax evasion and illicit transfers of funds involving large transnational corporations, as well as interest payments on debts whose value has already been paid many times over. Second, the rules of international trade, designed to benefit rich countries by allowing them to extract resources and labour from countries in the South at artificially low prices. According to these calculations, the countries of the South contribute most of the labour and raw materials to global production. But at the same time, the poorest 60% of the world’s population receives only 5% of the new income generated each year by economic growth. The rest goes directly to those who are already rich.

Latin America: the world's materials warehouse

There is a long history of unequal exchanges between Latin America and the different regions of the North. Latin America is also currently the region with the highest net exports of materials per capita in the world, along with Central Asia. Since the 1970s, material extraction in Latin America has increased fourfold, a growth rate that is much higher than the global average. The recent level of extraction has reached unprecedented levels: it is possible that in the last four decades, more materials have been extracted from Latin America for export than in the entire previous history of the region. At the same time, most Latin American economies import at a higher price than they export. In other words, they are decapitalised in material terms, without this necessarily generating positive economic returns. This reaffirms the thesis of ecologically and economically unequal exchange [4]. Obviously, there is no development cooperation capable of reversing these dominant trends.

This critical look at the functionality of the concept of development for unjust international relations does not mean that there have not also been many very valuable development cooperation efforts, with truly emancipating consequences for the communities of the South, insofar as they had the opportunity to be actors and not “beneficiaries”. Furthermore, cooperation was and is a field in dispute, in which individuals, groups and even institutions instituted radical changes and unconventional practices. However, cooperation, even at best, was never more than a band-aid in a long history of exploitation and plunder.

In the 21st century, we need a different paradigm to guide North-South relations

The thesis that I would like to propose here is that both the development paradigm and cooperation are essentially 20th century phenomena. The challenges of the 21st century call for establishing North-South relations of a different kind, based on a radically different approach. This new approach is based, first, on the recognition that the world-system we have built historically is riddled with profound injustices, coloniality and racism, which persist to this day. And second, it is based on the fact that we are increasingly facing global problems that threaten humanity as a whole, in the context of a multidimensional, civilisational crisis: climate change, loss of biodiversity and extreme inequality are just some of its manifestations. The COVID-19 pandemic has painfully shown us just how crucial it is to design truly global solutions to global challenges that do not reinforce pre-existing structural asymmetries, rather than simply responding with a sum of very disparate and unequal national strategies.

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Our understanding of the challenges facing human societies today is more detailed than ever. We can accurately model the future of the world's climate. We know that at least a hundred times more species are currently becoming extinct than would be expected from natural processes. Especially in the tropics of Latin America and the Caribbean, where, according to WWF, populations of fish, reptiles and amphibians, mammals and birds fell by an average of 94 per cent between 1970 and 2016. Paradoxically, in contrast to this level of knowledge, we find it very difficult to develop life-sustaining responses to these problems.

The European Union's "green" economic growth

The hegemonic actors reacted to global warming with a change in discourse: they put decarbonisation on the agenda. In December 2019, the European Union launched its Green Pact, which aims to achieve "net zero" greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 and boost economic growth by transitioning the technology base of infrastructures and production towards renewable energy sources [5]. The document advocates "green" economic growth, supposedly decoupled from resource use and pressure on ecosystems, which would be made possible by the digitisation of a large part of the economy (although all digitisation obviously requires raw materials and a considerable amount of energy). The United States also wants to eliminate "net" CO2 emissions from its economy by 2050 and halve them by 2030. China, for its part, aims to reach peak emissions by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2060.

In this dominant scenario of ecological modernisation, the European Union is advocating "green" alliances with countries of the South to ensure the flow of resources it needs to transform its economy. Implicitly, these strategies assign four roles to regions such as Latin America. Each one contains a strong dimension of appropriation and imposition of foreign interests in their territories:

- On one hand, Latin America is seen as a storehouse of raw materials for the large economies' transition to other energy sources. The World Bank forecasts a 500% increase in global lithium demand between 2018 and 2050. Latin America holds more than half of the world's lithium reserves. The subregion is also home to 40 per cent of the world's copper reserves, also a highly prized metal, for example, for building electric vehicles. This heralds a new wave of extractivism, with even more social unrest and environmental devastation.
- On the other hand, Latin America is one of the potential places for "neutralising" the CO2 emissions that will continue to be produced in the major powers through offset projects, so that they can numerically reach their "net zero emissions" targets (not to be confused with a real end to emissions).
- Third, Latin America will be one of the destinations for the growing export of all kinds of waste to the South, including electronic and toxic waste.
- Finally, Latin America is seen as a potential market for selling "renewable" energy technologies.

In any case, the dominant perspective is that regions such as Latin America would naturally be at the service of the energy transition in the world system's centres, without much

discussion of the consequences for the region, in a re-enactment of the old colonial relationship. At most, it would be sold a little “clean” technology that would be installed with the help of European experts. The possibility that the subcontinent’s societies could have a project of their own for transitioning towards a decent future [6], centred on themselves and their needs, and only after these have been met, on the world market, does not appear in the dominant discourses. Although, of course, there is no possible prospect of global sustainability if the scenario is that of a few privileged “green” islands in the North, with clean air and electric cars, while zones of sacrifice and devastation continue to grow in the other parts of the world.

A new rationale for North-South relations, based on global justice

In order to guarantee the conditions for their survival and to successfully face the challenges of the 21st century, human societies must find a new basis for their coexistence on this planet. They must reduce their social metabolism in absolute terms, that is, the total flows of materials and energy between nature and society. Instead of pursuing infinite economic growth, they must learn to focus their forms of economic and social organisation on caring for and sustaining life. They must profoundly rewrite and democratise the rules of the relationships between the geopolitical North and South, and introduce justice and equity in the rules of international trade and the rules of the financial system. They must abolish asymmetrical trade treaties and regulations that prioritise the profitability of private transnational corporations over the rights and lives of peoples, as is often the case in the litigation involving bilateral investment treaties. They must de-privatise intellectual property and the patent system. They must rewrite the history between the former colonial empires and their former colonies, moving from a paternalistic narrative of supposed civilising action, aid and development cooperation toward a more truthful narrative of systematic plunder legitimised by racism, which today translates into a huge accumulated debt with the societies of the global South. Environmental debt, climate debt, colonial debt. They must regionalise economies, that is, partially abandon the globalised structure that has stymied us, and these regions must stop living at the expense of other distant regions. The international cooperation of the future must leave behind the binary concepts of development and underdevelopment, progress and backwardness. It must recognise the world as a pluriverse, in whose diversity lies the possibility of learning to restore balances.

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