DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION ACTORS

New Challenges and Emerging Actors in Multi-Actor Cooperation

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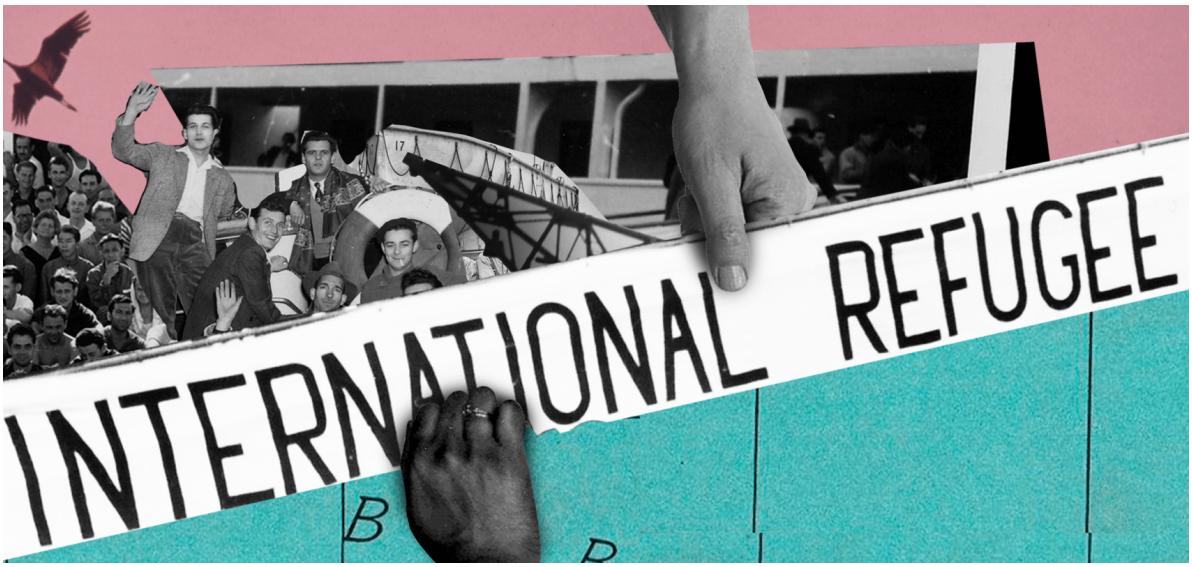

Illustrator: Hansel Obando

The current circumstances are fairly unique with regards to international cooperation and public policy, not only in Catalonia but also in Spain, Europe and the rest of the world. The reform of the current Spanish Cooperation Law fuelled a reflection that led to a series of parallel processes, or even merged with or led into other areas of debate that are usually of a critical nature and have been ongoing for years. Civil society and certain public administrations, at various levels, have for some time been highlighting the need for a new form of cooperation; one that is able to meet the key challenges of this century while remaining useful as a policy at both the local and global level.

The national and regional context of the legal reform represents the outcome of a new political cycle, in which international cooperation has gained fresh impetus despite the attempts (whether formal or otherwise) by different public administrations to dismantle it over the course of the preceding years. During the previous economic crisis, international cooperation was one of the most notable victims of the public spending cuts, which in some cases amounted to almost 90% of its total budget. This had a dramatic impact on the process of cooperation itself and on the main actors responsible for it, including public administrations as well as civil society organizations [1]. However, the current context of

the pandemic has probably had the opposite effect, which explains the political revitalisation that lies behind the legal reform. Cooperation has come to the fore as part of the response to a problem in which the global-local conception of the common good, especially health, has been reinforced and incorporated into the political narrative with a certain force and prominence.

Certainly, cooperation has gained momentum, although it is surrounded by a series of key issues that must be resolved if it is to be consolidated as a public policy, rather than just an exercise in good intentions, ethical reconciliation or greenwashing.

Understanding the meaning of cooperation

Although Catalonia and Spain are societies that stand out at the European level for their acceptance of cooperation as a public policy, even within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic [2], the imaginary surrounding international cooperation objectives has not evolved a great deal since its practice became generalised towards the end of the twentieth century. Emergency humanitarian aid enjoys outsized levels of visibility, particularly if we link it to the public resources it utilises and in light of the media impact it creates among citizens and decision-makers at the political level. Unsurprisingly, the mobilisation of Catalan society that occurred in 2015 following the images of the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, resulting from the conflict in Syria, meant that cooperation had reached its lowest point before the cuts began to bite. The need to take action against the televised horror in the sea and on the beaches -which were now being shared with such desperate people- provided a sufficiently simple and powerful explanation to justify the involvement of public administrations. It is a story that repeats itself in cycles, the most recent of which is the fall of Kabul at the hands of the Taliban. Moreover, the intervention of the Spanish army in evacuating its local partners has served to conceal the most reactionary positions behind the central role played by the armed forces, thereby presenting a kindlier face to the world.

Humanitarian action, whether emergency or otherwise, is one of the fundamental aspects of cooperation, even though it accounts for less than 4% of the Spanish state’s resources. The management of new crises arising from climate change, human rights violations or war means it is inevitable that the current meagre levels of aid will be increased. However, the bulk of activities in the field of cooperation focus on development and education, which are much less spectacular and more difficult to explain to both citizens and a political class that is increasingly more sensitive to the urge for immediacy driven by social media. Achieving an impact on the processes that shape our (and every) society requires a long-term vision and an understanding of the complexity that comes with it, especially when the aim is to do so by ensuring collective rights on a universal basis, rather than simply meeting certain needs in line with our own economic surplus.

Of course, there is a challenge waiting to be met with regard to the way in which political parties and their cadres, which have become public managers or auditors of their actions, incorporate this idea of what cooperation means today. This is especially so within the framework of the 2030 Agenda and the United Nations’ SDGs, which –despite all the

criticism– have been able to assign a role to every public administration in correcting the course of the world we live in. However, we still need to move away from the idea that cooperation is the aid given by certain organisations, with public or private backing, to those most in need in other countries, and towards the very different idea that cooperation is a policy that will enable us to collaborate with other communities in order to tackle global challenges that affect us all. Without this transition, international cooperation will continue to be based on the ethical mandate of distributing our surplus until it is gone, thereby missing the opportunity we are given to share capacities and experiences that are key to tackling the common challenges we are facing.

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When we talk about decentralised cooperation, as is the case with Catalan cooperation, it is vital that we understand and internalise this idea, regardless of whether or not the Spanish government does so. We need to move on from the debate as to whether the provision of foreign aid is Catalonia's prerogative, and instead seek to determine the specific role of these administrations in the collective construction of international cooperation, at both National and European level. Fortunately, this seems to be on track in the debate surrounding the new Spanish law, although proof will lie in its subsequent implementation. It is also necessary to realise the value of the knowledge gained from cooperation built around issues that coincide so strongly and legitimately with our own self-interest, such as fighting climate change and extending the policies of equality beyond our own borders. Furthermore, it is a challenge to replace the idea of cooperation as an amiable form of compensation within the process of promoting internationalisation, with the vision of a mutual enrichment that provides experiences, exchanges and collaboration based on trust rather than commercial interests. Without this understanding of what cooperation means, it would be difficult to truly exploit all of its possibilities and align it with the demands of the present.

Challenges beyond our capabilities

The paradigm of competition as a driver of change and global improvement seems to have run its course. It may seem a somewhat naive assertion, but the challenges we are facing –and which are already having an obvious impact– will not affect us individually as separate societies or in line with our expertise, commitment or capacity for innovation. It is increasingly nonsensical to overlook the global impacts of our policies or actions, even though if, a priori, they are limited to our own national borders. This has numerous

implications, not only for international cooperation but also for all other types of policies.

Firstly, we must understand that cooperation is a policy with extremely limited options. Even if achieved the 0.7% of GDP (a target reached, with hard effort, by only a handful of local administrations in Catalonia), it would in no way be sufficient to meet all of the needs that are currently pressing. Even a simple efficiency and impact analysis would show that this reinforces the (old) idea of using these resources to promote endogenous processes, aligned with the provision of rights at the local level, and no longer generating dependencies or covering the deficiencies of administrations in other countries. The idea of a non-material and eminently political form of cooperation is even more daring within certain contexts, especially if it is horizontal and network-based in nature; and it is also somewhat incompatible with a diplomatic approach that jealously guards sovereignty (or is geared towards reclaiming it) and is keen to open up new markets and business opportunities. As the language naturally evolves, we now call for the “decolonisation” of cooperation; however, the key is to make this policy an emancipatory tool, rather than just another means to reproduce old centre-periphery relationships, albeit with new forms. Abandoning the provision of equipment or infrastructure as the central idea of cooperation and prioritising processes that democratise, foster equality or build capacities in poorer countries clashes fundamentally with the search for opportunities on the part of national companies. This issue has arisen in the debates surrounding the new state law and also in Catalonia, with the eternally postponed decision to create the Observatory of Human Rights and Business (ODHE).

Additionally, it is necessary to assume the mandate of policy coherence stipulated by the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, thereby aligning local policies with global challenges. It is irresponsible to continue producing public policies with the usual reductionism and ignoring the impacts they have beyond their formal territorial jurisdiction. Obviously, this transcends the sphere of international cooperation, while at the same time amplifying the transformative potential of our actions. Understanding the global nature of our societal metabolism will, of course, allow us to go far beyond the symbolism of the 0.7%; however, it also requires us to address the core business of our political practices if we truly wish to tackle everything that might destabilise or threaten our well-being, our rights, and –realistically speaking– even our civilisation. It requires us to construct individual responses within the framework of much broader strategies: responses that are able to reach beyond our own front door and to sidestep electoral dynamics, in terms of both time-frame and format. We have seen this in Catalonia with the debate over the expansion of El Prat Airport, where a large part of the political spectrum did not question the prevailing local economic model from the perspective of its global impacts. It is also clear in the Spanish government’s response to the ongoing refugee crisis at the southern border, where it continues to adopt a security-based approach that is diametrically opposed to the PR exercise of the evacuation in Kabul and the conversion of the Torrejón military air base into the European hub for the Afghan crisis.

Undoubtedly, migration and climate emergency are two major issues, the complexity of which require for them to be addressed through cooperation, as well as through the other public policies. Perhaps this latter point is the differentiating factor that we need to

incorporate: it is no longer enough (has it ever been enough?) to make one policy responsible for generating well-being in other countries; we need to bring every policy to bear, gradually progressing from “no harm” to alignment and active involvement. Cooperation will not bring about an end to something as innately human as migration, and nor can it be used in exchange for building border controls and rewarding dictatorial governments in Europe’s backyard. However, it can help us create the conditions in which economic, political or environmental exile is no longer the only option for millions of people in Africa, Asia and the Americas. But refusing work permits, deporting (whether legally or illegally) or stigmatising unaccompanied minors cannot form the basis of a solid response, which must always take the form of the fair regulation of flows created by inequalities on either side. In the case of Africa, which has become the final frontier in the expansion of capitalism, we cannot continue to implant economic models based on limitless growth, in which the role of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa is limited to facilitating the extraction of raw materials and receiving infrastructure designed to ensure the continuation of the activities of our engineering companies.

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Similar conclusions are reached in the recently published sixth report of the IPCC [3] on the unsustainable nature of economic growth and its undeniable links to the climate emergency. Cooperation can explore the creation of reasonable options for economic growth in areas where it is still necessary in order to ensure basic services for the most disadvantaged populations (clean drinking water, sanitation, healthcare, education, energy, food, communication, etc.), but without a clear roadmap for degrowth in industrialised countries, our efforts will be futile. However, to reduce the environmental question to the climate emergency alone would be to ignore the larger part of the iceberg which, once again, the information frenzy does not allow us to see: issues such as desertification and biodiversity are just as important, and were identified as such as far back as the Earth Summit of 1992, and our decades-long inaction has only served to lower our chances of success. It is also easy to forget that, in essence, we are still talking about the same inequalities as always; they have simply been exacerbated by the increasing vulnerability caused by climate change.

The usual suspects (or not)

Recurring efforts have been made to expand the range of actors in the sphere of international cooperation and to incorporate as many capacities as possible. As we have already seen, it is undoubtedly more effective to align all of these actors with a set of public policies designed to create a much fairer economic, social and environmental system at the

global level. Even if the corporate world could be integrated into the sphere of cooperation effectively, the impact would be far smaller than the effects of convincing companies to accept fair taxation, to not discriminate against women, and to incorporate quality labour standards throughout their supply chains, among other measures. Clearly, from a branding perspective it is cheaper and more profitable to pin an SDG badge to one's lapel than implement wholesale changes in well-established industries and mature markets. However, this could constitute the major contribution of the corporate world: instigating a genuine transition towards sustainability and the protection of human rights, leaving marketing activities to one side and making this vision part of the brand identity. How good it would be if the world had many more companies like Ben & Jerry's, questioning the illegal occupation of Palestine even if it risked compromising their bottom line.

The idea is applicable to all of the actors who have already collaborated with international cooperation efforts throughout the years. Beyond their valuable contributions to these efforts, unions and universities would have had a greater impact on global justice by incorporating this coherence into their overall mission. However, there are a number of new actors who, by virtue of their deeper involvement, can play a leading role and enhance cooperation, which must learn how to be useful in the face of challenges as complex as those discussed above. Firstly, the social and solidarity economy: the cooperatives and social enterprises that operate in our country can contribute all of their knowledge to a new economy, focused on the provision of services and products from a standpoint of respect for the common good, collaboration and self-organisation. Additionally, as suppliers to administrations and organisations, they can ensure the needs of international cooperation are met while also bringing professionalism, energy and a set of values that are naturally shared by other actors in the field.

Within the world of the social and solidarity economy, we should also highlight the role that can be played by ethical financial institutions. Financial cooperation has now emerged as one of the key foundations for the modernisation of the Spanish system of cooperation, in line with international trends. Using this approach, the aim is to mobilise the majority of the resources available over the coming years, providing support to major institutions and trust funds with a sectoral or geographical specialisation. The versatility of management they offer is a big attraction for an administration that has seen how supporting small, NGO-led initiatives requires an unworkable investment of time and resources. Moreover, in practice it would enable Spanish companies supplying services at the international level to position themselves within the market created by cooperation; a not-insignificant advantage in times of economic tribulation. Against the current backdrop, in which it is difficult to stimulate the growth of small and medium-sized companies in poorer countries, the involvement of ethical banks and collaboration with like-minded organisations could extend the range of local companies to work with, thereby boosting practices such as fair trade. Additionally, it would have the power to attract citizens and develop savings products oriented towards the achievement of social and environmental impacts at the global level, far removed from the commercial profits that cover up injustices of every kind.

Secondly, social movements, particularly those of an ecological and feminist nature as well as those that strive to make cities more dignified places to live or promote a particular

culture, remain inexhaustible sources of new actors and transformative energy. Their constant mutation and adaptation in line with local or national struggles should not prevent cooperation from seeking to benefit from their actions and the things they seek to build. The cross-cutting qualities they offer and their links to the defence of human rights serve as a foundation for the development of policies oriented towards the common good and the construction of genuinely endogenous democratic processes. Also of note is their capacity for renewal and adaptation, even of a technological nature, as we have seen in recent years with the string of popular protests in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

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Lastly, we must also take into account the ways in which bureaucratic and regulatory red tape strangulates the activities of both old and new actors. Any reform or reframing of cooperation will be futile without new ways to support the initiative of civil society and administrations to work globally, such as the Subsidy Act or the Local Administration Rationalisation and Sustainability Act (LRSAL). Without relaxing the current demands, the main threat to cooperation is not posed by cuts; rather, it is the series of bureaucratic obstacles, the relentless squandering of energy and the inability to look ahead and work towards improving a future that is approaching rapidly and appears increasingly more unjust.

REFERENCES

1 — The project La Realitat de l'Ajut (The Reality of Aid) is an initiative for transparency and surveillance of Catalan cooperation, offering data and contextual information.
2 — For further data, take a look at the Catalan Development Cooperation Fund's website.
3 — *AR6 Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis*. Sixth Assessment Report by the International Panel for Climate Change (IPCC). Available online.

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