EDITORIAL

Rethinking Development Cooperation to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century

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This summer, two countries, as well as the despair of their populations, have taken over the world news: Haiti and Afghanistan. Both states have received significant transfers of Official Development Assistance (ODA) over the years, and despite being very different cases facing unique situations, they are an example of the limitations that development cooperation encounters when addressing the complex and multidimensional causes that underlie poverty, inequality and low levels of human development in much of the planet. These humanitarian emergencies, in addition to many other long-term crises with minor media impact, have coincided in the same year, 2021, in which the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), the multilateral body of the OECD system that stands as a benchmark for development cooperation policies, turns 60 years old. Its first meeting took place on the 5th of October 1961, thus beginning its task of guiding, monitoring and analysing public development aid policies. It is of particular importance within this mandate, to follow-up on UN's 1970 milestone for OECD countries to allocate 0.7% of their GDP to development cooperation [1] In 2020, OECD countries allocate in average 0.32% of GDP, falling short of their commitment.

The DAC, along with the policy of development cooperation, were born in a specific context

and world order, marked by the end of World War II. The policy of cooperation was conceived as one-way transfers from the North to the South and was based on a paradigm that divided the world between “developed countries” and countries that were yet to develop/thrive/prosper/grow. Besides, its conception of development revolved around the idea of economic growth. Over time, development cooperation policy has evolved, adapting itself to the profound changes of the international stage and global agendas, as well as to the emergence of new actors. But more importantly, foreign aid policies have received growing critiques from the countries in the global south who urge to establish more horizontal relations and ask for a greater role in the international agenda.

A new global scenario

Today, the geopolitical scenario of international cooperation is different. We find regional powers and middle-income countries with an increasingly active role in development cooperation, that are encouraging South-South relations, as well as triangular cooperation and assistance through regional development banks. It is especially important to note the growing significance of China in the international cooperation arena, especially in Africa. Although the Chinese government considers its international cooperation to be part of the South-South dynamic, “distinguishing itself from the North-South logic characteristic of OECD countries” [2], it has been estimated that, in 2019, the country’s ODA-like cooperation flows stood at $ 5.9 billion, making it the world’s sixth-largest supplier of Development Assistance [3]. The expanding Chinese cooperation is attractive to many countries in the global South, while for China, it is an important tool at the service of its trade and geostrategic interests, allowing the country to gain greater influence in the battle for world hegemony against the US. Our magazine had the opportunity to explore the role of China’s development cooperation policies (among many other topics) in an issue published earlier this year.

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Over the years, aside from states, a greater number of new actors have emerged in the field of development cooperation, such as sub-state entities and cities, philanthropic foundations or even the private businesses. In addition, the professionalization of NGOs has consolidated the global influence of major international NGOs. For its part, civil society organizations, both in the north and in the global south, are becoming more and more capable of facing the world’s shared struggles at a local and international level. These new elements paint a radically different picture of development cooperation in comparison to the context presented 60 years ago.

Cooperation for what kind of development?

This new global scenario has crystallized in the global political agendas. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, with its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), marks a paradigm shift in the conception of development, with profound implications for cooperation policy. First, the principle of universality presented in the 2030 Agenda breaks away from the classical theory of development: there are no longer “developed” countries and “developing” countries, but all countries are called/urged to transform their development models and to contribute, with differentiated responsibilities, to sustainable global development. Secondly, through the so-called principle of integrity, the 2030 Agenda acknowledges the multidimensional nature of the current crises and, accordingly, considers that the solutions should have the same character, articulating answers related to the economic, social and environmental spheres altogether.

This new understanding challenges the Western model of development, conceived merely as economic growth, for its lack of sustainability. In the third place, the 2030 Agenda is also based on the principle of coherence; meaning that, moving towards the SDGs does not only imply development cooperation policy but also entails the need for all other public policies to be conceived and implemented in line with the concept of sustainable and human rights-based development [4]. This adjustment denotes that the 2030 Agenda is relegating aid effectiveness to the background while focusing on policy coherence for sustainable development. Finally, the 2030 Agenda also incorporates a principle of multilevel cooperation. Understanding that development issues cross borders and recognizing that their manifestations are both global and local, the 2030 Agenda integrates multi-actor and multi-level alliances, encouraging public, public-private and civil society partnership, all conceived as indispensable elements to achieve the SDGs.

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Despite the shifts proposed by the 2030 Agenda, changing sixty years of theories and practices, as well as the underlying mental frameworks associated with the classical paradigm of cooperation, is a complex task. However, the problems we face in the 21st century are very different from those of 60 years ago, and so, require more than ever renewed development cooperation policies. The nature of the current challenges makes indispensable the convergence with other key policies related to migration, taxation, or climate emergency; in order to contribute significantly to profound transformations that are essential to ensure that all people —present and future— have a decent life, with full respect of their rights, and on a sustainable planet. Thus, the new paradigm of the 2030 Agenda, added to the growing debates around the need to decolonize and incorporate a

feminist approach to cooperation, drive essential changes that aim at making development cooperation a truly transformative policy capable of facing the global challenges ahead of us.

An overlap of multiple crises

Indeed, the current challenges are weighty and pressing. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a setback in many of the improvements achieved in recent years and at the same time, has highlighted the overlap of multiple crises. All these elements have exacerbated inequalities of all kinds, increasing poverty and acting as a breeding ground for human rights violations, especially in those most vulnerable communities. We are also witnessing a growing social polarization that combined with the rise of populism and the far right is eroding the democratic structures in many countries. Besides, the health emergency adds to and interrelates with other existing crises such as: climate change, economic downturn together with increasing inequality, migration waves or gender disparities and women's rights violations. The pandemic has worsened the situation of millions of people already living in extreme and precarious situations. The United Nations has warned that in 2021, 235 million people need humanitarian assistance and protection, a figure that stands for 1 in 33 people in the world [5].

Humanitarian crises, which respond to increasingly complex and multidimensional causes, have become more and more recurrent and persistent, often even becoming chronic. The effects of the climate emergency, armed conflicts and the different forms of violence are among the causes of humanitarian crises, and they demand for more integral responses that link humanitarian actions with development and construction of peace, while at the same time ensuring a feminist approach. Unless accompanied by endogenous processes within the countries themselves, the limits of development cooperation as a tool for state-building have also become clear, as we have seen recently with the events in Afghanistan.

The pandemic has as well highlighted the centrality of the digital transformation and the importance of using new technologies for the development of societies. The growing phenomenon of digitalization, however, is not without risks. There is obvious discrimination when it comes to accessing technology, not only between countries but also between population groups. The need to democratize its access and use, as well as regulate the risks associated with data protection and digital rights, place the digital challenge as one of the greatest of the 21st century. Development cooperation will therefore need to consider and integrate digital and new technology matters in the coming years; not only in order to address the risks they might pose, but as well, to take advantage of the opportunities it can provide aiming at increasing the effectiveness and impact of cooperation actions.

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In short, the current scenario is marked by great global challenges, that have clear manifestations and local impacts, and for which the answers will have to be multi-dimensional and multi-level. Accordingly, the policy of cooperation has an important role to play in our present-day reality, for its ability to act locally and globally. At the global level, notions of public investment and global public goods, which are increasingly present in the debates about the future of development aid, will gain in importance and can even transcend the concept of development cooperation itself.

Catalan cooperation

All these issues and debates also concern Catalunya, if we want our cooperation programs to be of quality and transformative in the coming years. The Catalan region has a great trajectory concerning solidarity: on the one hand, there is a Law on development cooperation that this 2021 has celebrated its twentieth anniversary; and on the other hand, we find a remarkable wealth of committed actors, towns and cities and municipal entities, ONGD, universities, professional associations, companies, youth organizations, etc. all over the territory. Also, the cooperation policy of the Generalitat de Catalunya aims at meeting these global challenges, by establishing a target for economic growth close to 0.7% of unconditional national income to be reached in 2030, and through an improvement of strategies in order to achieve more efficiency.

In this direction, a series of webinars with experts and activists on COVID and cooperation have been held during this year, which have provided many elements for rethinking about development and cooperation in a post-pandemic world. The actors that make up the Catalan cooperation are no strangers to paradigm shifts and are therefore subjected to the renewal of cooperation strategies, as well. As an example, the Development Cooperation Council, a consultation and participation body that brings together the Catalan cooperation community, has carried out this year an exercise of joint reflection concerning the changes needed for a new model of cooperation in Catalonia.

Contributing to the debate

This issue published by IDEES joins all these initiatives addressing the thoughts and debates around the policy of development cooperation, providing multiple voices, visions and perspectives coming from experts in the field, including both authors from the global South and North. The Centre for Contemporary Studies and the magazine IDEES promote the reflection on global issues by giving voice to Catalonia’s institutions and civil society, academia and other sectors in the country. For these reasons, we feature this timely debate on our future development.

The first block of the monograph focuses on the concept of “development” and reflects on how to rethink its meaning, as well as how to contribute to it through cooperation. In this section, we want to examine alternative proposals to the Western model of development, provided for example by eco-feminism or the worldviews of indigenous peoples.

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Next, the second block of articles offers a historical perspective of development cooperation in order to understand its origin and evolution in relation to the changes of the world's order. Some authors explore the possibility of overcoming the concept of "official development assistance", and propose a transition to new models of cooperation related to governance and global public goods. The second part includes some articles regarding some cooperation challenges, such as global health, digitalization, humanitarianism, or education for critical citizenship.

The third block analyses the risks that may reduce the transformative capacity of cooperation policy, as well as some of the opportunities to enhance it. This part comprise articles focusing on the limits of international cooperation under a system based on economic growth and determined by geostrategic interests. In consequence, as some authors point out, many development cooperation strategies fail to address their essential target: reducing inequalities. As for the opportunities, we delve in the role of cooperation vis-à-vis the Agenda 2030 and the configuration of a new social contract based on the acknowledgement of solidarity and interdependence, as well as recent debates on decolonizing development cooperation.

The fourth block tackles the financing of development, with a series of articles on the evolution of the 0.7% target and the emergence of the concept of global public investment, designed to face collectively the shared challenges. Additionally, the topic/subject/matter of debt and international taxation, along with participation of the private sector through public-private partnerships and the role of policy coherence in sustainable development is discussed in this same section.

Following, the fifth block provides a series of considerations and debates on the need to include and connect cooperation with new actors and groups in order to generate multi-actor alliances, presenting specific articles on youth, NGOs, the private sector and the role of regions or sub-state entities.

The last block, explores specific cases of cooperation actions aiming at development challenges in Morocco, Senegal and Latin America. The final part will pay attention to Catalan cooperation through some articles that refer to the 20th anniversary of the Law on development cooperation, and explain the evolution and challenges of municipal cooperation as well as the Catalan solidarity associations.

All these articles will appear in the Magazine in the coming months, in the spirit of contributing to a slow and profound reflection and debate. We hope that this monograph will put on the table some of the key elements of this necessary and urgent debate on development cooperation, aiming at making this policy a transformative and driving tool for

the profound and systemic changes essential to meet the global challenges and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

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