Towards a UN Convention on International Development Cooperation

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Executive Summary

This paper makes the case for a fundamental transformation of international development cooperation (IDC). It argues that Official Development Assistance (ODA) or foreign aid, traditionally framed as benevolent assistance from the Global North to the Global South, must instead be understood in the context of colonialism and ongoing systemic injustice. International development cooperation must be decolonised and reframed as reparations for historical injustices and a collective obligation to global justice and solidarity.

The paper examines how centuries of colonialism, combined with contemporary mechanisms like debt servicing, illicit financial flows, and unfair trade regimes, result in the ongoing net transfer of wealth from the Global South to the Global North. This has led to obscene levels of global wealth concentration, accompanied by the extreme concentration of power that prevents meaningful collective action on shared global challenges, from climate change to pandemics. Redressing global inequality is, therefore, essential not only for the Global South but for all of humanity.

The paper calls attention to the issues in the global governance of IDC as practiced by the OECD-DAC, UN DCF, and the GPEDC, as well as the limitations of South-South Cooperation frameworks like the Buenos Aires Plan of Action. It shows how these mechanisms fall short in addressing structural injustices, lacking enforceable obligations and often reinforcing unequal power relations.

In response, the paper proposes a legally binding UN Convention on International Development Cooperation. Such a convention would enshrine principles of human rights, solidarity, and reparative justice. It would advance binding financial commitments from developed countries, stronger leadership from the Global South, and an inclusive role for civil society organisations in governance and accountability mechanisms.

The proposals put forward in this paper will surely be opposed by those with vested interests in current policy norms. Others may sympathise with these proposals but may be reluctant to champion them in the current political climate. In an era where multilateralism is under siege, political elites in many countries are fanning the flames of xenophobia, racism, and national chauvinism to consolidate domestic power. This political climate breeds regressive forces that are contrary to international commitments rooted in global solidarity and shared responsibility. Yet history teaches us that as long as systemic global injustice persist, peoples' movements will continue to resist and demand transformative changes in the international order. The struggle for a fair and just system of international development cooperation is, ultimately, a struggle for the future of humanity itself.

PART 1

Decolonising International Development Cooperation

Foreign aid, official development assistance (ODA) and international development cooperation (IDC) are traditionally regarded as means by which wealthier nations in the Global North support the development of poorer nations in the Global South. This view, however, obscures the structural foundations of underdevelopment in the Global South rooted in the history of colonialism. Indeed, the post-colonial "aid "system" has served to reinforce various dimensions of unequal relations between former colonies and global powers now standing as donor countries. This paper calls for the decolonisation of international development cooperation in order to redress these historical injustices and rectify contemporary inequities between the Global South and the Global North. It puts forward the case for a UN Convention on International Development Cooperation that reframes ODA as the expression of states' commitment to redistributive justice, equity and global solidarity.

The traditional view of foreign aid

While the legitimisation for foreign aid can be traced back to the civilising mission of European colonisers from the 15th century onwards, the post-colonial expression of this sentiment was famously articulated by United States (US) President Harry Truman during his State of the Union address in 1949 wherein he declared that "we must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas" (quoted in Develtere et al., 2021, p. 74).

Since then, "development aid" or "official development assistance" has been seen as a welcome and even necessary intervention by developed countries to assist the less developed countries in overcoming poverty, fostering economic growth, advancing scientific progress, and improving governance. The underlying premise is that the developed countries in the Global North not only possess more wealth but also more advanced technologies, institutions and knowledge, thus legitimising its position as the architect of progress for the Global South (Escobar, 1995; Kapazoglou & Goris, 2022).

Since 1961, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an exclusive club for high-income, mostly Western donor countries, have set the standards for ODA delivery. It continues to define the norms of the largest share of bilateral ODA flows in the world even as the global "aid industry" that has grown out of this system has been frequently criticised for paternalism, its conditionality-driven nature, and its role in entrenching economic dependencies rather than fostering endogenous development (Derlich & Simonds, 2024; Moyo, 2009; Riddell, 2007). The Bretton Woods Institutions - the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank - have also reinforced this dynamic as they compelled indebted Global South countries to implement austerity measures, liberalise trade and investments, and privatise public services which often led to sluggish growth and widening disparities within and between countries (Stiglitz, 2003; Woods, 2006).

Reframing International Development Cooperation

In light of these inconvenient truths, decolonising “aid” is long overdue. ODA must be recast as a means to achieve redistributive justice, wherein wealth acquired by rich countries through historical colonisation and exploitation is rechannelled to Global South countries. This will provide the fiscal space to prioritise structural transformation, equitable wealth distribution, and South-led sustainable development efforts.

IDC as reparation for historical injustices

Rather than framing international development cooperation as an act of benevolence or generosity, IDC should be understood as a form of reparation for historical injustices rooted in colonialism. A reparative approach to development cooperation requires countries that benefited from colonial and neocolonial exploitation to acknowledge their historical harms and make financial commitments based on historical responsibility rather than discretionary goodwill or, worse, strategic self-interests. They must rechannel at least part of the wealth they drained from the Global South back to the Global South.

By acknowledging historical injustices and addressing the structural inequities that persist today, international development cooperation can move beyond the flawed donor-recipient paradigm and become a means for promoting global justice and solidarity.

IDC as commitment to global solidarity and equity

Beyond reparations, IDC should also be reframed as collective responsibility to address global inequities for the shared well-being of humanity. Indeed, even untied aid has been shown to generate positive spillovers that redound to donor countries (Betschinger & Bertrand, 2024). For instance, IDC for infrastructure-building not only improves people’s mobility and access to information and networks in recipient countries, it also makes it easier for domestic and international businesses to operate. This is especially important for firms that are integrated into global supply chains for which physical and digital connectivity are essential. Even non-infrastructure related IDC can help enhance human capital, boost productivity, expand markets for goods and services, reduce economic and political uncertainties, facilitate international cooperation, and help address global challenges like diseases and climate change.

However, there is a need to ensure that international development cooperation is primarily employed as a means for promoting equitable and sustainable development rather than a tool for economic and political leverage of donors. For this, the world needs a new global architecture for international development cooperation that is inclusive of all states and other stakeholders and does not place donors in the driver’s seat.

PART 2

The Unfinished Agenda of International Development Cooperation

The global development landscape continues to be shaped by historical injustices and persistent structural imbalances that disadvantage the Global South. Despite decades of development cooperation, progress remains uneven, and many of the challenges faced by developing countries are deeply rooted in colonial legacies and ongoing economic exploitation. At the same time, developed countries have consistently failed to meet their commitments to official development assistance (ODA), both in quantitative terms (e.g., the 0.7% Gross National Income target) and in qualitative terms (e.g., adherence to development effectiveness principles). Given these persistent failures, there is a pressing need for a legally binding United Nations Convention on International Development Cooperation. Such a convention could strengthen accountability, address structural imbalances, and create a more just and effective global development framework.

Growing development challenges in the Global South

While there has been significant progress throughout the world in terms of eliminating extreme poverty, increasing life expectancy, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, extending literacy and basic education to more people, and other dimensions of human development, the outstanding development challenges remain enormous, especially in the Global South.

The 2024 Sustainable Development Goals Report highlighted that nearly half the 17 SDG targets are showing minimal or moderate progress, while over a one-third are stalled or going in reverse. For instance, while extreme poverty had been declining in the period up to 2019, the COVID pandemic set this back by three years (UN DESA, 2024, p. 8).

Looking at a more expansive indicator of human deprivation, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates that 1.1 billion people in 112 countries or 18.3 percent of the world's population are in "acute multidimensional poverty", over half of whom are children under the age of 18. Notably, multidimensional poverty is not confined to low-income countries. In fact, nearly two-thirds or 65.2% of all poor people live in middle-income countries compared to 34.8 percent in low-income countries (UNDP, 2024, p. 1).

Over half (637 million) of the 1.1 billion poor people live in households where at least one member does not have adequate nutrition, nearly half (513 million) are deprived of access to improved sources of drinking water, 828 million lack adequate sanitation, 886 million lack housing and over half (579 million) of all poor people lack electricity. And despite higher literacy rates globally, 590 million poor people live in a household where no member has completed six years of schooling while 482 million belong to households where one or more children are out of school (UNDP, 2024, p. 8).

Furthermore, only 31 per cent of the working-age population are legally covered by a comprehensive social security system. That means more than 4 billion people lack any social protection in a world marked by increased precarity of livelihoods due to climate change and changes in the world of work. On average, 85 per cent of the population in high-income countries is covered by at least one social protection benefit, while in low-income countries, the corresponding figure is only 13 per cent (United Nations, 2024, p. 5).

All these development challenges are expected to worsen and be compounded in the foreseeable future due to mutually reinforcing impacts of the climate emergency, armed conflicts, debt and the dismantling of social institutions by right-wing governments and oligarchies.

Widening financing gap

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has repeatedly emphasised the urgency of boosting international cooperation so that the SDGs are not left behind. Mobilising financial resources is a crucial part of this international cooperation.

The UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs (UN DESA) estimates that the annual SDG investment gap in developing countries amounts to about USD 4 trillion, with over half, or USD 2.2 trillion, needed for the energy transition alone. The most recent estimate of this investment gap for 2023 is 60 per cent higher than the USD 2.5 trillion estimated in 2019 due to financing shortfalls in previous years, compounded by more recent global challenges, including the pandemic, the food, fuel, and debt crises (UN DESA, 2024, p. 42).

Oxfam calculates that low- and middle-income countries need an additional USD 8.5 trillion in financing for the attainment of their SDGs in health, education, and social protection over the period 2023-2030. This translates to an annual financing gap of USD 2.8 trillion for these social sectors alone. This excludes the estimated financing gap of USD 13.7 trillion for climate change mitigation, USD 2.8 trillion for loss and damage and USD 2.4 trillion for climate adaptation for the whole seven year-period up to 2030 (Seery & Didier Jacobs, 2023, p. 2).

If the necessary actions already identified are not backed up by adequate financing posthaste, the social and environmental costs of inaction will continue to mount and the financing gap in the future is also likely to grow exponentially. For instance, one estimate of economic losses due to climate change puts it at USD 2.4 trillion by 2030 resulting from a reduction in total working hours under a business-as-usual warming scenario compared to a 1.5-degree warming scenario. This excludes the cost of damages caused by extreme weather events as well as the hundreds of thousands of lives lost from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea, heat stress and other climate-related causes (OECD, 2025, p. 31).

Apart from the cost of inaction on climate change, the UNESCO estimates that the annual global cost of inaction on education is USD 10 trillion in terms of reduced productivity and economic growth (quoted in OECD, 2025, p. 31), not to mention the potential human capabilities foregone.

While one side of this widening financing gap is widely acknowledged, namely the rising costs of dealing with the social and ecological impacts of the polycrisis, the other side is often ignored or even denied by Global North governments, namely the unjust international order that constrain the fiscal and policy space of Global South countries. International tax, financial, legal, trade and tech rules continue to facilitate the extraction of resources from the Global South that could be used instead to finance essential public services. While ODA would not be enough to remedy this situation, ramping up and reorienting ODA and IDC more generally can be part of the solution.

Persistent ODA shortfall

While the development challenges and the corresponding demand for IDC continues to increase, ODA levels remain far below what is needed. For instance, ODA from DAC donor countries rose to an all-time high of USD 223 billion in 2023. But only one-third of this total is considered country programmable aid (CPA)[1] which approximates the magnitude of ODA that actually flows to recipient countries. On the other hand, USD 31 billion or 14.4% of reported ODA was spent by donors in-country for costs related to hosting refugees and another 11.8% went to humanitarian relief rather than development efforts in the Global South (OECD, 2025, p. 123). Moreover, around one-fifth of all bilateral aid from DAC donors was tied aid which is a blatantly self-serving form of assistance as it requires recipient countries to procure from companies from the donor country (Derlich & Simonds, 2024).

ODA is also being reoriented to mobilise commercial financing towards supporting the SDGs, even though this blending of ODA with private finance has been shown to be more expensive than pure public financing. More problematically, blended finance also redirects investments away from low-income populations who need most support even as its development additionality remains questionable (Blended Finance Project, n.d.). This is part of a wider effort of the OECD-DAC to "modernise" ODA by stretching its definition beyond recognition (Eurodad, 2023).

Even though reported ODA figures are inflated by including tied aid, money that remains in donor countries, money spent on humanitarian aid and other concerns that are not primarily for economic development, plus the practice of double counting, the wealthy countries still consistently fail to live up to their commitment to earmark 0.7 per cent of their gross national income (GNI) to ODA. Wealthy countries made this commitment at the UN General Assembly as early as 1970 and reaffirmed this pledge as recent as 2015 as part of the SDGs. Yet only a handful of donor countries have ever delivered on this promise over the course of the past half a century.

If one computes the unpaid ODA of the G7 countries alone, as Oxfam has done, one can conclude that the G7 countries owe the poor in developing countries USD 4.49 trillion as of 2023 or more than half of the ODA they promised. Total "undisbursed ODA flows" owed by DAC donor countries to the Global South have now reached USD 7.2 trillion, according to the Civil Society FfD Mechanism. By paying their "unpaid ODA debt", developed countries could provide vital resources to finance poverty eradication and address inequalities in developing countries (CSO FfD Mechanism, 2024).

Instead, ODA trends are going the opposite direction. If humanitarian aid to Ukraine and other conflict areas is excluded, ODA earmarked for eradicating poverty in developing countries is expected to decline in the coming years. Even before Trump and Musk decided to shut down USAID, eight wealthy countries have already announced USD17.2 billion in cuts to their ODA budgets over the next five years, and three other donor countries are likely to follow. Even Sweden and Norway, among the few countries that have fulfilled their 0.7% ODA/GNI commitment in the past, announced their intentions to slash their ODA moving forward. Moreover, a bigger share of the shrinking ODA pie is likely to be diverted by donors towards deterring migration and refugees entering their countries, or used as currency in "transactional diplomacy" to win over allies and undermine foes (Gulrajani & Pudussery, 2025).

[1] The OECD-DAC defines Country Programmable Aid (CPA) as official development assistance (ODA) that is subject to multi-year planning at the country or regional level. It is calculated by subtracting the following categories of aid from the total of gross bilateral ODA: debt relief, humanitarian aid, administrative costs not included elsewhere, imputed student costs, promotion of development awareness, refugees in donor country, core support to NGOs, equity investments and, other unallocated. As such, CPA is closer to capturing actual aid flows to countries than the concept of gross ODA.

Indeed, while claiming fiscal constraints, donor countries are “more generous” to particular recipient countries based on geopolitical considerations rather than the development needs in the Global South (Reality of Aid, 2023). For instance, Ukraine, as a war-torn country at Europe's doorstep, was the single largest recipient of aid in 2022 and 2023, absorbing close to 9% of total ODA since 2022 compared to just 14.8 per cent going to 45 least developed countries (LDCs) (Derlich and Simonds, p. 6).

PART 3

The Global Governance of Development Cooperation

The persistent development challenges of the Global South, coupled with the failure of developed countries to meet their commitments, highlight the inadequacy of the current global governance of international development cooperation. The history of global norms for development cooperation reveals a complex and often contradictory landscape. While frameworks such as OECD-DAC's effectiveness agenda, UN-DCF and FfD processes, the UNOSSC’s South-South Cooperation initiatives, and the GPEDC have all contributed to shaping global development cooperation, they have largely failed to address the structural inequities that define the global order.

The OECD-DAC

In 1960, ten donor countries and the Commission of the European Economic Community formed the Development Assistance Group (DAG) as a forum for consultations on assistance to developing countries. A year after, the DAG was renamed the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and became part of the newly formed OECD. In 1969, the DAC adopted the concept of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to refer to official financing provided on concessional terms with the primary aim of promoting the economic development and welfare of developing countries (OECD, 2021). Since then, the DAC has functioned as the principal institution for the global governance of ODA.

The DAC performs this role in three ways. First, it monitors ODA flows and remains the only official source of comparable and complete statistics on ODA. Second, it facilitates international policy dialogue among members and produces guidelines that set benchmarks and standards for various aspects of development cooperation such as the untying of aid, local cost financing, donor coordination, procurement practices, gender and development, environmental assessment of aid, and so on. Third, the DAC conducts regular peer reviews to assess the development cooperation practices of members and hold them to account against their commitments and international standards (DAC website).

Over the years, DAC’s membership has grown to 33 member states including the largest providers of ODA. Eight non-OECD countries that are major providers of development cooperation also participate in the meetings of the DAC and its subsidiary bodies along with eight international organisations. The latter include the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Development Programme and regional development banks (OECD website).

Despite this, the DAC has always suffered a legitimacy deficit for being an exclusive (mostly Western) donors' club overseeing an aid system that serves donor interests as much if not more so than developing country interests. For instance, in 2023, 22% of the total ODA reported by DAC members was spent domestically (Teutem & Ritchie, 2025). Moreover, despite enjoining donors to untie foreign aid since 1974, close to 16% of bilateral ODA is still tied or partially tied in 2022 (OECD Data Explorer).

Even the allocation of "untied aid" is heavily influenced by donor countries' self-interest. In their comprehensive review of the vast literature on aid effectiveness, Dreher, et al (2024) conclude that "the allocation of aid across countries suggests that donors take the economic need of recipients into account, but it plays a minor role." (p. 3). On the other hand, "there is solid evidence that a broad range of donors allocate aid in line with their (assumed) commercial interests." (p. 5). They also "prefer to cooperate with governments that share their political ideology and use aid to help friendly regimes stay in power" but at the same time, "donor countries use natural disasters as opportunities to exert influence on strategic opponents through the allocation of humanitarian and civil society aid." (p. 6)

To enhance its legitimacy, the DAC launched its Outreach Strategy in 2005. It expanded the composition of the Working Party on Aid Effectiveness to 80 members including representatives from bilateral, multilateral and emerging donors, developing country governments, civil society organisations, international aid initiatives, and the public and private sectors. The Working Party spearheaded the Paris High Level Forum in 2005 attended by over 100 developed and developing countries. The Paris HLF endorsed the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness which established a monitoring system to ensure that donors and recipients hold each other accountable for their commitments (OECD, 2021).

The DAC also expanded its membership since 2009 to add 11 "new aid providers" in its roster including Korea, Czechia, Iceland, Poland, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, and Lithuania (DAC website). It has also established dialogue structures with major non-DAC donors such as China, some Arab states and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Verschaeve & Orbie, 2016).

Yet the DAC has been unable to shake off questions about its legitimacy as the de facto global governance body for IDC, not just because of its donor-led composition and structure but also because ODA continues to be wielded as a tool by donors for their commercial and geopolitical interests.

South-South Cooperation

In contrast to the power imbalance intrinsic to North-South ODA, development cooperation between and among countries in the Global South are characterised by their practitioners as horizontal partnerships. The UN defines South-South Cooperation (SSC) as "a process whereby two or more developing countries pursue their individual and/or shared national capacity development objectives through exchanges of knowledge, skills, resources and technical know-how and through regional and interregional collective actions, including partnerships involving Governments, regional organisations, civil society, academia and the private sector, for their individual and/or mutual benefit within and across regions" (UN, SSC/19/3).

SSC can be traced back to the 1955 Asian-African Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia, where the newly independent countries declared their commitment to deepen the process of decolonisation and achieve greater social and economic development for their people. The Bandung Communique enunciated ten principles which have since served as the touchstone for Global South countries' international relations. These include what many still consider the core normative principles of SSC:

- Respect for fundamental human rights
- Respect for national sovereignty
- Recognition of the equality of all races and all nations
- Non-interference in the internal affairs of another country
- Promotion of mutual interests and cooperation
- Respect for justice and international obligation

The Bandung Conference led to the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961 and the Group of 77 (G77) in 1964. This united front of the third world led the United Nations General Assembly to adopt the Declaration for the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in 1974 despite the opposition of developed countries (Gosovic, 2018). The NIEO contained proposals on trade, industrialisation, agricultural production, finance, transfer of technology and regulation of transnational corporations with a view to "correct inequalities and redress existing injustices, [and] make it possible to eliminate the widening gap between the developed and developing countries…" The NIEO declared that "international cooperation for development is the shared goal and common duty of all countries" while also advocating for closer economic cooperation among developing countries to build the collective self-reliance of the Global South (United Nations, 1974).

A Special Unit for Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries was established to promote technical cooperation among developing countries. Its mandate was reinforced when the United Nations Conference on Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries (TCDC) adopted the Buenos Aires Plan of Action (BAPA) in 1978. This Special Unit hosted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was renamed the UN Office for South-South Cooperation in 2012. It describes the BAPA as "a detailed blueprint for major changes in approaches to development assistance and for a dramatically heightened emphasis on national and collective self-reliance among developing countries as foundations for a new international economic order" (Special Unit for TCDC, 1994 [1978]).

It is worth emphasising, however, that the UN TCDC and BAPA essentially limited South-South cooperation to "technical cooperation". This effectively excluded many aspects of economic cooperation envisioned in the NIEO, not to mention political cooperation, due to the reservations of developed countries (Gosovic, 2018).

Indeed, SSC encompasses a wide spectrum of norms and modalities including trade, investments, technology transfers, technical cooperation, regional integration and other forms of exchange. Some countries such as China even combine economic cooperation with political, social, cultural, judicial, and military cooperation (Velasquez and David, 2024). This makes SSC notoriously difficult to measure, monitor and compare across countries and over time, even by the UNOSSC.

Nevertheless, there is remarkable continuity in the normative principles that SSC partners invoke. Echoing the Bandung Declaration, the website of the UN Office of SSC states, “The South-South cooperation agenda and South-South cooperation initiatives must be determined by the countries of the South, guided by the principles of respect for national sovereignty, national ownership and independence, equality, non-conditionality, non-interference in domestic affairs and mutual benefit.”

However, despite a rhetorical consensus behind these SSC principles, in reality Southern governments are selective in their application. While SSC partners are generally averse to imposing and accepting conditionalities related to governance or political institutions, it is not uncommon for SSC to be packaged with commercial strings attached such as the obligation to purchase products or approve investments from the country “providing” SSC. Southern governments also appear to promote SSC in line with their foreign policy objectives such as garnering support for their positions in international forums, averting diplomatic isolation on the regional or global stage, or boosting soft power projection more generally (Velasquez and David, 2024, p. 71). In any case, all these are justified based on the SSC principle of mutual benefit.

But civil society organisations have criticised numerous SSC projects and initiatives for their lack of transparency, disregard for human rights, lack of social and environmental safeguards, absence of meaningful participation of affected communities, and deficient accountability mechanisms. The absence of a robust and consistent reporting framework for SSC poses extra challenges for monitoring and evaluating its impacts (Reality of Aid, 2010). More fundamentally, CSOs and critical scholars have criticised the SSC practices of emerging countries such as China, India and Brazil for perpetuating the same donor-recipient hierarchies they criticise and for promoting the same hegemonic development agenda of the global North that benefits domestic and transnational elites at the expense of people and the planet.

The UN DCF

With the rapid growth of China and a handful of other middle-income countries since the 1990s alongside the slowdown of developed economies, SSC in all its diverse forms and modalities grew rapidly in terms of magnitude relative to ODA. This accentuated the legitimacy deficit of the DAC as the putative governance platform for international development cooperation. This prodded the G77 to call for reforms in the global aid architecture during the United Nations (UN) World Summit of 2005. The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was thus mandated to convene a multi-stakeholder forum on international development cooperation which led to the establishment of the Development Cooperation Forum (DCF) in 2007.

According to DCF’s mandate, it is open to “all stakeholders, including the organisations of the United Nations, the international financial and trade institutions, the regional organisations, civil society and private sector representatives” (Article 4). Members of parliament, representatives of local governments and academics are also invited to take part in its work. As such, the DCF claims to be the only international space that welcomes equal participation from all actors to the development process (Verschaeve and Orbie, 2016, p. 577). Therefore, from its inception, the DCF was explicitly positioned as the more inclusive and democratic alternative to the donor-led DAC.

However, the DCF has not been able to translate this inclusivity into effective governance of IDC. First, major donors show little enthusiasm for attending its activities. Records show that the European Union, France, the US, the UK, and Sweden among other large donors are frequently absent during the biannual gatherings of the DCF or the preparatory meetings in between these high-level events (ibid., p. 578).

Second, the DCF has no fully fledged secretariat to support its mandate. Instead, it relies on an advisory group of experts and information sourced from other institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and the DAC. This means the DCF has limited capacity to produce novel or innovative research that draws from its more diverse knowledge base to yield innovative analytical outputs for policy makers. Third, the DCF's format is not conducive to meaningful dialogue and consensus building. Its meetings follow a tight schedule but allows all participants to take the floor, leaving little room for discussion and deliberation. Fourth, it has no mechanisms for monitoring or enforcing compliance with whatever agreements are reached during DCF meetings (ibid.).

Because of all these factors, the DCF has acquired the reputation of being a mere talk shop with little consequence on IDC policy and practice. Despite being positioned as a much more inclusive forum and an alternative to the DAC, the DCF has not made a significant dent on reshaping global norms and standards in IDC.

The GPEDC

While participating in the DCF, albeit in a low-commitment mode, the traditional donors in the DAC continued their outreach strategy to enhance DAC's legitimacy as well as influence beyond DAC members. This culminated in the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in 2011 attended by over 3,000 delegates in Busan, Republic of Korea. After extended negotiations facilitated by 18 sherpas elected to represent a wide group of stakeholders, the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation was endorsed by 161 countries and territories, and 56 international organisations.

This declaration established an agreed framework for development cooperation based on four principles of development effectiveness, namely, country ownership, focus on results, inclusive partnerships, and transparency and mutual accountability. The following year, the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC) was formally founded, replacing the Working Party on Aid Effectiveness, with secretariat support provided by the OECD and the UNDP. The GPEDC proclaims itself the broadest multi-stakeholder formation on international development cooperation, "bringing together governments, bilateral and multilateral organisations, civil society, the private sector and representatives from parliaments and trade unions among others, who are committed to strengthening the effectiveness of their partnerships for development" (GPEDC, 2025).

The signal achievement of Busan was getting "new actors" on board, specifically the emerging economies that are increasingly important contributors to SSC such as China, India and Brazil. Prior to Busan, these middle-income countries had been wary of entering DAC's aid effectiveness tent for many reasons (Li et al., 2018). First, as developing countries that are still struggling to overcome poverty at home, they refuse to be lumped together with donors because that would make them ineligible to receive ODA and other forms of development cooperation. Second, they fear that the traditional (DAC) donors might increasingly offload their historical responsibilities to financing development and global public goods onto the shoulders of emerging economies (Bracho, 2021).

Third, they are unwilling to be held accountable to the same standards as traditional DAC donors. For instance, middle income countries typically engage in SSC based on the principle of mutual benefit, but this is generally considered contrary to the Paris principles on Aid Effectiveness. Fourth, emerging economies have their own bilateral, regional or inter-regional SSC platforms such as the BRICS, the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB), and the Network of Southern Think Tanks (NeST) where they have greater autonomy from Northern donors. Lastly, when it comes to global governance, they see the UN as a more legitimate forum, not the OECD-DAC or DAC-initiated and -led formations such as the Working Party on Aid Effectiveness (Besharati, 2013).

Busan was different from Paris because emerging economies were able to participate in the drafting of the outcome document and secure a slot for South-South cooperators in the governing structure of the GPEDC (Bracho, 2021). More crucial, however, were two key provisions in the Busan agreement. First is the explicit recognition that South-South cooperators are developing countries and therefore "they remain eligible to benefit from development cooperation provided by others" (Article 14). Second is the assurance that they will not be held accountable to the same standards as Northern donors. This is expressed in Article 14 which states that their inclusion as new actors is "based on common goals, shared principles and differential commitments." Even more significant is Article 2 which states, "the principles, commitments and actions agreed in the outcome document in Busan shall be the reference for South–South partners on a voluntary basis" (emphasis added). These provisions are analogous to the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" codified in the UNFCCC which was strongly opposed by Northern governments (Bracho, 2021). This Busan compromise was the price to pay for getting middle-income countries to support the GPEDC.

This conditional support, however, was short-lived. In the post-Busan process of negotiating the monitoring framework, DAC donors reasserted their convening power, brushing aside dissenting positions from partner countries and civil society (Deremeyer, 2012). The Post-Busan Interim Group, tasked to develop the monitoring framework for the GPEDC, declared a consensus behind ten indicators that draws from the Paris Declaration monitoring framework, supplemented with additional indicators intended to capture the broader dimensions of the Busan Partnership agreement (OECD & UNDP, 2014).

However, emerging economies who were not party to the Paris Agreement saw many of these indicators as applicable to traditional donors but not to South-South cooperators. They were therefore opposed to being evaluated according to these criteria. And while emerging providers were not required to provide data on their development cooperation activities, the first monitoring round of the Busan agreement presented information on ODA-comparable activities of China, India and other middle-income countries derived from data provided by receiving countries. In effect, emerging countries providing development cooperation were monitored and subjected to practically the same scrutiny as those of the traditional donors, contrary to the Busan compromise which was the basis for their participation in the GPEDC. As a result, China and India decided not to participate in the First High Level Meeting of the GPEDC in Mexico City in 2014, substantially weakening the claims of "inclusivity" of this partnership (Bracho, 2021).

The failure of the GPEDC to live up to its promise cannot be attributed solely to the donors' insistence on universal standards or emerging economies' avoidance of responsibilities. Uneven development in the Global South has given rise to some upper middle-income countries emerging as important sources of development assistance for other countries. While these "emerging economies" still adhere to the narrative of South-South solidarity when it comes to IDC, there is growing diversity of needs and interests among countries of the Global South. There needs to be a space and a process for Southern providers of IDC, their partners, and civil society to articulate norms appropriate to this distinct category of IDC. By extension, this will necessarily reshape the norms and practice of IDC globally, not just SSC. Therefore, there is a need for a new platform for the global governance of IDC that is not dominated by traditional donors or path-dependent on the norms and standards already laid down by the DAC.

PART 4

Towards a UN Convention on International Development Cooperation

The global governance of international development cooperation is currently fragmented, ineffective, lacking legitimacy and accountability. A UN Convention on International Development Cooperation can address these shortcomings by fundamentally reorienting IDC based on human rights, solidarity and justice; establishing binding agreements inclusive of all IDC partners; and enhancing transparency, accountability and effectiveness of development cooperation. It would not only address the quantitative and qualitative shortcomings of ODA but also tackle the deeper structural imbalances that perpetuate global inequalities. Without such a framework, development cooperation will continue to be driven by geopolitical interests rather than a genuine commitment to global justice and shared prosperity.

Purpose of the Convention

The purpose of the Convention on International Development Cooperation is to uphold the duty of States to cooperate in supporting development that ensures the means to live a life of dignity for all of humanity, eradicate economic and social disparities, and safeguard the environment for future generations. The Convention defines the obligations of developed countries, developing countries and south-south development partners in fulfilment of their duty to cooperate for international development.

General principles

Human rights

The realisation of civil, political, economic, social, environmental and cultural rights is a requisite for a life of dignity for every person. Moreover, development is a human right that is indivisible from and interdependent with all other human rights.

Self-determination

The process and direction of development should be determined by individuals and peoples as rights holders. The right to development and the right to self-determination of peoples are integral to each other and mutually reinforcing.

Global solidarity

The realisation of human rights including the right to development requires an enabling national and international order created through a spirit of cooperation and unity among individuals, peoples, States, international organisations and civil society organisations. States have the primary responsibility to engender these enabling conditions, including fiscal spending that reflects this commitment to human rights and international development, as well as protecting and expanding civic space.

Common goals and differential commitments

While all States have a duty to cooperate in support of international development based on common goals and standards, countries at various stages of development have different needs and capacities. Hence, obligations and responsibilities defined in the Convention will also be differentiated accordingly.

Reparative justice

Countries that benefited from colonial and neocolonial exploitation have an outstanding duty to redress this grave historical injustice by acknowledging their historical wrongdoings and rechannelling at least part of the wealth they drained from the former colonies back to developing countries.

General obligations of developed countries

Developed countries reaffirm their commitment to transfer public financial resources equivalent to 0.7% of their GNI to developing countries in the form of unconditional grants. This will be additional to the USD 7.2 trillion ODA Debt owed by DAC donor countries to the Global South for failing to meet their ODA commitment since 1970.

This amount shall be dedicated for the primary purpose of supporting economic development and ending poverty and all forms of deprivation and inequality in developing countries. Financial transfers and other forms of development cooperation primarily intended for climate change mitigation and adaptation, loss and damages due to the impacts of climate change, humanitarian relief, or other purposes shall be additional to this ODA commitment. Moreover, ODA shall not be blended with private financing or expressly designed to catalyse private investments.

Developed countries commit that this amount will be fully untied and country programmable. Where the full use of country systems is not possible, the provider of development cooperation will state the reasons for non-use, and will discuss with government what would be required to move towards full use, including any necessary assistance or changes for the strengthening of systems.

Developed countries also commit to provide developing countries with timely and relevant information on their intentions regarding future development cooperation over the medium term in the form of regular, timely rolling three- to five-year indicative forward expenditure and/or implementation plans.

Developed countries commit to prioritise developing countries with the greatest need for such development assistance, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and landlocked developing countries. To this end, developed countries reaffirm their commitment to allocate ODA equivalent of 0.15-0.2 per cent of GNI to the least developed countries.

General obligations of all Parties

All Parties to the IDC Convention shall adopt common but differentiated standards for rights-based, just and effective international development cooperation, including South-South Cooperation. These standards shall build on the principles of effective development cooperation as expressed in the Monterrey Consensus, the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) and the Busan Partnership Agreement (2011). This should also draw on the principles of South-South Cooperation as expressed in the Bandung Declaration (1955), the Buenos Aires Plan of Action (1978) and BAPA+40 (2019), among other South-centred cooperation frameworks.

Furthermore, Parties shall agree on measurable, time-bound, and enforceable indicators to assess compliance with the IDC Convention. Development results shall be clearly defined and systematically assessed using human rights, social justice, gender equality and sustainability metrics.

All Parties to the Convention shall also adopt a more inclusive and democratic mode of country ownership and mutual accountability. This means involving a wider set of stakeholders in the entire country process of formulating, implementing, and evaluating development policies and programs, not just the executive branch of governments. This includes parliaments, local authorities, academe, mass media and civil society organisations and movements, especially organisations of the poor and marginalised. This is based on the recognition that all these stakeholders have essential contributions to IDC and in constructing a just social and international order in which the right to development can be fully realised.

Implementation mechanisms

The IDC Convention shall establish a Conference of IDC State Parties consisting of representatives of UN member states whose mandate is to promote the adoption and implementation of the Convention. It shall meet every two years to monitor progress in implementation at the national and international levels, formulate recommendations to ensure compliance with the Convention's provisions, and adopt additional protocols to the Convention.

In addition, the IDC Convention shall establish a Conference of IDC Stakeholders composed of representatives from non-state stakeholders who are involved in IDC, particularly rights-holders. The Conference of Stakeholders shall be mandated to receive, discuss and provide independent reports on the implementation of the IDC Convention and submit recommendations to the Conference of State Parties.

A roadmap towards a legally binding instrument on IDC

The UN Development Cooperation Forum (DCF) can form an Open-ended Intergovernmental Working Group to prepare a draft of a legally binding instrument on international development cooperation. The Working Group can meet each year and report the status of its work at the regular meetings of the DCF. UN agencies, other international organisations, as well as civil society representatives may participate as observers in the meetings of the Working Group.

Upon completion of the Working Group's mandate, the DCF shall submit the draft Convention, together with commentaries from various stakeholders to the Economic and Social Council for transmission to the General Assembly. The GA can then convene an intergovernmental conference, under the auspices of the United Nations, with the mandate to consider the draft text of the IDC Convention and conclude the final text of an international legally binding instrument on international development cooperation.

Conclusion

We are living in a time when multilateralism is under unprecedented attack, and where the resurgence of unilateralism and protectionism — trends accelerated by the Trump administration — continues to cast a long shadow over international cooperation. Across the globe, political elites are exploiting crises to shore up their domestic power, eroding the spirit of global solidarity and undermining commitments to collective responsibility.

This challenging environment emboldens forces that seek to dismantle the fragile gains made in international development cooperation over recent decades. Nevertheless, systemic global injustices generate resistance. Peoples' movements around the world have consistently risen to demand transformative change.

Today, more than ever, the defense and revitalization of multilateralism is not simply a political preference; it is an urgent necessity. The international community must strive to maximize and build upon the positive elements of current practices and modalities of development cooperation. At the same time, there is a historical obligation — to the peoples of the Global South and to future generations — to forge a more coherent, equitable, and just architecture of international development cooperation governance. The struggle for a fair and transformative system of global development cooperation is, ultimately, inseparable from the broader struggle for systemic change and structural transformation.

Annex:

Proposals for a UN Convention on International Development Cooperation

The idea for a UN Convention on International Development Cooperation is far from new. As early as 2010, during the run-up to the 2011 Busan forum, civil society such as those under the banner of BetterAid have called for such a convention (IBON International, 2011). Since then, with the revival of conversations on international economic governance amid the pandemic, this demand has been articulated by different actors.

Republic of Zambia

In its "Elements paper for the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development," the Republic of Zambia, calls on UN Member States to "[a]gree on a UN Convention on International Development Cooperation, including establishing a mechanism for the fulfilment of the trillions in unmet 'aid debt' owed to the Global South through decades." It regards IDC as "essential for achieving the SDGs, especially in supporting the poorest and most vulnerable countries with limited capacity to raise domestic resources, such as LDCs and conflict-affected nations." It also notes that "[c]ontinued access to international public finance is crucial, even after countries graduate to middle-income status."

With regards to ODA, Zambia urges the following:

- Set concrete and binding timetables to meet commitments, particularly the unfulfilled commitment of developed countries to dedicate of 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) as ODA

- Enhance the quality and effectiveness of ODA by aligning it with recipient priorities ensuring predictable and timely delivery, reducing conditionality, and improving donor coordination.

- Increase ODA for climate action, particularly for adaptation and resilience building in vulnerable communities, and integrating climate considerations into all development cooperation activities, ensuring that ODA supports the transition to low-carbon and climate-resilient economies.

- Set up an expert technical group to develop and present to Member States options for a coherent framework that accounts for climate finance and ODA in a transparent manner.

- Reaffirm existing targets for LDCs with binding timetables.

- Establish a fund from ODA grants to help finance social protection floors in the poorest countries.

- Ensure increased coherence and strengthened linkages of ODA to the three pillars of sustainable development.

Zambia also calls for strengthening South-South cooperation initiatives that "promote the exchange of best practices, technology transfer, and capacity building in areas such as agriculture, health, education, and infrastructure, while ensuring that cooperation is demand-driven and aligned with the priorities of the participating developing countries."

Civil Society FfD Mechanism

Likewise, in its FfD4 Elements Paper input dated 15th October 2024, the Civil Society FfD Mechanism reiterated its call for a UN Convention on IDC that would:

- Establish norm- and rule-setting on the use and flow for development cooperation and to democratise the governance of IDC
- Reframe the narrative surrounding IDC from a perspective of charity to one of justice and reparations, recognizing and addressing historical injustices
- Establish the UN target for 0.7 GNI as a floor on aid quantity while recognising the trillions in unmet aid/ODA commitments as a debt owed to the Global South
- Ensure universalising the principles for development effectiveness
- Ringfence ODA for poverty eradication and addressing inequality
- Be agreed to by all countries and applied to and enforced for all actors
- Uphold and not abandon existing commitments, but instead integrate them and apply them in a manner consistent with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and a recognition of past harms
- Create a level playing field, promote greater alignment, and overcome fragmentation of development cooperation.

The CSO FfD Mechanism also maintains that the UN Development Cooperation Forum could play an important role if given the appropriate authority and mandate.

Eurodad and Oxfam

Similarly, civil society organisations who are also part of CS FfD Mechanism, support the IDC Convention.

The European Network on Debt and Development (Eurodad) summarized the reasons why the world needs a United Nations Convention on International Development Cooperation as follows:

"An IDC Convention would:

- provide the necessary scale, scope and leverage to house all commitments, new and existing, in a single instrument;
- provide a universally understood and airtight definition of IDC and common norms on the use of aid flows;
- be binding to avoid another decade of unmet commitments;
- include systems of monitoring and accountability;
- create a level playing field for agreeing on the definition, purpose and implementation of IDC;
- overcome the fragmentation of IDC through a shift to a single decision-making instrument housed under the UN;
- extend to all forms of providers, including non-traditional providers, which have also raised concerns regarding accountability and inclusive participation in development cooperation"

Oxfam International also supports the call for a UN Convention on IDC because this "would transfer the power to decide what counts as aid from an elite club of wealthy countries to UN members. This shift would give all countries, donors, and aid recipients alike, a voice regardless of economic power."

Oxfam International writes:

> The Convention should establish comprehensive rules for development cooperation, framing aid not as charity but as a matter of justice to redress historical injustices. It should prioritize ending poverty and reducing inequality and ensure that donor countries come to view the goal of allocating 0.7 per cent of their Gross National Income (GNI) to aid as a starting point, not as a ceiling.

Rich donors may view this proposal as a potential loss of power, influence, or even purpose. But are these fears justified? A new UN Convention would compel DAC members to share power with recipient countries and, hopefully, put an end to self-serving practices like counting donations of surplus vaccine as aid in their budgets. But this reform wouldn't make the DAC irrelevant. In fact, it would provide a unique opportunity to leverage the DAC's expertise and move from empty rhetoric about equal partnerships to genuine collaboration between aid donors and recipients.

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