



# Towards a UN Convention on International Development Cooperation

*The following will be the last part of a forthcoming IBON International paper on development cooperation today. The first and second sections were released prior as “Decolonising Development Cooperation: Towards a reframing,” and “The Unfinished Agenda of International Development Cooperation,” respectively.*

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 rechanneling 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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