

Trilateral Development Cooperation: How Do Poor Countries Experience It?

Dr Siphamandla Zondi is the Executive Director at the IGD.

Siphamandla Zondi ¹



Global Insight aims to provide members of the policy community with concise but trenchant analyses of topical issues. Comments and suggestions are invited.

Introduction

Development assistance is changing partly because of efforts in search of more efficient and effective ways of aid delivery linked to development effectiveness discussions taking place under the auspices of the High-Level Panel on Development Effectiveness. It is also partly brought on as a result of changes in the balance of power globally from which comes a greater role and responsibility for the world order being taken by major developing countries, manifesting itself in their growing role as emerging donors.

While the analysis on trilateral cooperation, largely dominated by knowledge institutions of the global north like the OECD, is expanding, not enough attention is paid to the experiences and perspectives of the ultimate beneficiary of the assistance. This policy brief outlines key dynamics that shape trilateral cooperation drawing on data from research fieldwork in Lesotho and Malawi as well as discussions with various actors. At the back of my mind is the question: what is distinct about trilateral cooperation from the vantage point of a beneficiary country?

What is Wrong with "Old" Bilateral Aid?

Trilateral or Triangular Development Cooperation is largely about the structure of relations and number of actors involved in a development assistance initiative. It is the fact that there is a donor country working in partnership with an emerging actor in development assistance directed at a third country in need on the basis of agreements between three. The location of the emerging actor at the centre of the partnership means that a country closer to beneficiaries in geographical distance and in terms of shared historical experience is directly involved in shaping development projects being undertaken. The hope is to overcome the paternalistic nature of traditional aid delivery as an act of kindness from former colonial powers to former colonies. The age-old paternalistic donor-beneficiary relationship remains entrenched though despite general acceptance of its failures and harm.

¹ This policy brief arises from research fieldwork funded by DfID. The author would like to thank several reviewers of this document.

Traditional aid is blamed for perpetuating poverty and underdevelopment in the developing world. It is argued that it is a fundamentally flawed idea based on the logic of the colonial era's civilising mission premised on assumptions about the European man as a saviour of others. In this sense, the donor is not only the source of finances, but also of civilizational ideas and policy choices that must be made because they are "international best practice", when in fact they are just western practices. The logic of aid as a White Man's Burden, to borrow from William Easterly, is tied to the heritage of the European Enlightenment period where the European man came to regard himself as superior to others, a harbinger of civilisation that he assumed others did not have, science and innovation others did not have, democracy and development that others did not have. Aid has been a civilising mission used to extend the European civilisation in the form of its Euro-Christian norms & values, liberal democracy, liberal conception of human rights, particular kinds of education and health care, and liberal/neo-liberal economics. Therefore, like the civilising mission, aid is the enticing, attractive and Salvationist language of colonialism and its successor, neocolonialism. No wonder, after independence aid has played a crucial role in keeping former colonies on the periphery of a Westernised world. It is one of the ghosts of the empire that Kwasi Kwarteng only touches in passing in his famous book entitled *The Ghosts of Empire*. It remains trapped in the coloniality of power, being and knowledge, i.e. the multiple hierarchies constructed to entrench the European at the apex the human ladder.

Development aid is a misnomer that conceals the anti-development logic underpinning it. It is aid without a genuine response to underdevelopment, which cannot be undone without sacrificing the power and privileges of developed countries.

Its name has changed many times as criticism increased, from civilizing mission to development aid to development assistance, development cooperation to partnerships, without changing its underlying logic. It is premised on theories of change that privilege the experiences, dreams and visions of the North. It is still pretty much about the objectives of the North a lot more than the key imperatives of beneficiary countries. While the language and discourse have changed quite a lot as a result of international commitments including the Paris Declaration, the essence of the aid relations is still experienced by developing countries as a paternalistic relationship still laden with conditionalities to do with Northern norms. Worse, as the works of Dambisa Moyo, William Easterly and others show, aid has in fact been exactly what has undermined Africa's economic development. Billions in aid flows have been found to be anti-growth and anti-development. One of the latest developments in the aid industry is the emergence of major developing countries as providers promising to do things differently. Arising from this, Northern donors have also innovated, seeking donor partnerships with these countries in the hope that this would improve the political legitimacy of aid and reduce the paternalism trap.

Is Trilateral Development Cooperation a North-South Partnership?

The structure and content of Trilateral Cooperation cannot be adequately understood from the perspective of dominant actors to the exclusion of the views of beneficiary countries, the weakest of the three parties. This is because there are major differences between conditions seen from the vantage point of providers of assistance and the experience at the point of encounter or the view of beneficiary countries. From the point of view of the former, assistance is all glossy because the glossy objectives of the providers are assumed to be the reality. But beneficiaries experience more than just what is stated in vision statements and objectives of

programmes, which includes the possibility to experience the direct opposite of the grandiose aims.

Providers have a positive feeling about their intentions, but their positive intentions do not automatically translate into reality on the ground. There are many reasons for this.

Often it is trilateral cooperation when a Northern party provides significant funding while the emerging donor from the south provides project management and technical expertise while it also makes an investment in the initiative. Often, the funding still comes with conditionalities like democracy, good governance and human rights, thus ensuring that the fundamental problem of political conditionalities is still tied to it.

A quick review of the experiences of Lesotho and Malawi with specific trilateral development cooperation initiatives tying in South Africa with the USA (USAID) and Ireland (IrishAid) to support food security through the development of drought-resistant and pestilence-resistant potato cultures is revealing. Both Malawi and Lesotho had identified support for potato production (with in-built components of technology and skills transfer) as their great need. Both countries had bilateral agreements with both South Africa and the two Northern donors on food security and agriculture that provided the framework for convergence of interests between the three actors in each case.

Malawi and Lesotho are not mere beneficiaries, but contribute financial, technical and human resources to the project. They actually are responsible fully for implementation and were obliged to appoint project leaders to take full responsibility for everything but funding flows. USAID and IrishAid keep a healthy distance from project implementation. Ultimately, SA takes their place and carries their burden in the eyes of beneficiary countries. The management of the project is in the hands of SA officials liaising with a project manager on the ground in Malawi or Lesotho.

In each of these cases, SA keeps control of funding and accounting for the projects, making spending on the projects subject to approvals in Pretoria sometimes to the detriment of elements of the project on fragile potato cultures. For instance, when project workers discover one morning that rats have created a hole to enter the greenhouse, this must be fixed within hours. However, this can take weeks of procurement processes done in Pretoria.

Therefore, the emerging development actor in the triangle has the burden to exercise direct oversight over and continuous support to the project, while also managing its relationship with the northern co-funder of the project. This places a huge responsibility on the SA government department responsible for project management, in this case the Department of Science and Technology. This works where capacity exists, but leads to resentment where it is overstretched. Emerging actors can take their goodwill and legitimacy for granted without due regard to the possibility that longstanding donor cultures can creep in aid-like relationships.

Trilateral cooperation does inherit the sins of development assistance, especially paternalism arising from the use of private sector companies to whom elements of project work is outsourced. The problem of SA companies and their attitude in the rest of Africa including the two countries is widespread and can play itself out in the trilateral development arrangements, as we found in this case. There was an element of the experience of beneficiaries in both cases that was not different from normal paternalistic development assistance. In this sense, perceptions of SA as a big brother, a self-interested regional hegemon or even a sub-imperial power doing the bidding for former colonial powers resurface due to practical experiences of the power of Pretoria in the relationships. Equipment for the project is sourced from white SA companies and in some cases one of the companies used displayed a condescending attitude,

thus influencing the vantage point of project participants on the ground.

There are also huge problems relating to poor national ownership and coordination in beneficiary countries, matters common in paternalistic development assistance. In the case of Lesotho, there was evidence of weak project management and ownership among domestic actors - the government department concerned, University of Lesotho and farmers. A long history of aid, we know already, has built a culture of dependency and weak national ownership. It will take ages to undo this. African recipients of aid over time learn to give up on their potential to take control of their destiny. There is also reluctance to integrate the project into national policies and programmes.

Conclusion

Triangular partnerships are an important new trend in development assistance, but what is really new in this case is the intention on the part of the northern donors to share with major developing countries the burden to respond to needs and the responsibility for aid as an age-old tradition steeped in coloniality of power. What is also new is the willingness of major developing countries to leverage their geopolitical proximity to poor countries in need to influence how assistance is provided. But as far as the poor countries targeted in this are concerned, the underlying logic of development assistance as a paternalistic encounter is yet to change and therefore major developing countries take the risk of being seen as conniving to perpetuate historical aid patterns. This implies that in spite of evidence of greater country ownership of interventions on the part of poor countries targeted, major developing countries are quickly inheriting the negative consequences of development assistance, quickly becoming big brothers looking down on their smaller neighbours.

Recommendations

- Emerging actors like SA must invest in thought about what is different in their involvement in development assistance beyond just coining terms like development partnerships in place of development assistance, development partner instead of donor. This should entail greater reflection on post-development paradigms they espouse, notions of power they seek to promote and logics of culture that underpins their activities so as not to perpetuate the ghosts of empire.
- They have to invest a lot more in project management systems so that there is sufficient expertise for ensuring continuous and intensive project oversight and support. SA has to create project units dedicated to this specialised skill without becoming a replica of a donor because it cannot undertake this responsibility without systems to carry this out excellently.
- Much more time, resources and expertise must be invested in project management support to beneficiary countries, so that SA does not have to be the project accountants on behalf of donors, generating a lot of ill-feelings from project leaders on the ground.

Select References

1. Chaturvedi S., Fues, T. and Siridopolous, E. (Eds.) 2012. *Development Cooperation and Emerging Powers: New Partners or Old Patterns*. London: Zed Books
2. Djankov, S., Montalvo, J. and Reynal-Querol, M. 2008. 'The Curse of Aid', *Journal of Economic Growth*, 13 (3): 169-94.
3. Easterly, W. *White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest have done so Much Ill and so Little Good*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
4. Escobar, A. 1995. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
5. Knack, S. 'Aid Dependence and the Quality of Governance', *Southern Economic Journal*, 68 (2): 310-29.
6. Kwarteng, K. 2012. *Ghosts of Empire: Britain's Legacies in the Modern World*, London: Bloomsbury.
7. Masters, L. 2014. 'South African Foreign Policy and Trilateral Development Cooperation', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 21 (2):177-91.
8. McEwan, C. and Mawdasley, E. 2012. 'Trilateral Development Cooperation: Power and Politics in Emerging Aid Relationships', *Development and Change*, 43 (6): 1185-1209.
9. Moyo, D. 2009. *Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There is a Better Way for Africa*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
10. Sidiropoulos, E.2012. 'Rising Powers, South-South Cooperation and Africa', Policy Brief No. 47, March, SAIIA.



The IGD is an independent foreign policy think tank dedicated to the analysis of and dialogue on the evolving international political and economic environment, and the role of Africa and South Africa. It advances a balanced, relevant and policy-oriented analysis, debate and documentation of South Africa's role in international relations and diplomacy.

The IGD strives for a prosperous and peaceful Africa in a progressive global order through cutting edge policy research and analysis, catalytic dialogue and stakeholder interface on global dynamics that have an impact on South Africa and Africa.

3rd Floor Robert Sobukwe Building
263 Nana Sita Street
Pretoria South Africa

PO Box 14349
The Tramshed,
0126
Pretoria South Africa

+27123376082
+27862129442
info@igd.org.za
www.igd.org.za

All rights reserved. The material in this publication may not be reproduced, stored or transmitted without the prior permission of the copyright holder. Short extracts may be quoted, provided the source is acknowledged.