



Development geography I: Cooperation, competition and convergence between ‘North’ and ‘South’

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**Emma Mawdsley**

University of Cambridge, UK

Abstract

In this report I examine two of the most important trends bearing down on the international development regime in 2015, a landmark year. The first is the consolidation of South–South development cooperation (acknowledging the problematic nature of this designation), materially, ontologically and ideationally. The second is the response of the (so-called) ‘traditional’ donors to the opportunities and challenges provided by the ‘rise of the South’, in the context of the uneven reverberations of the post-2007/8 global financial crisis. Together, these interpolated trends have contributed to an unprecedented rupture in the North–South axis that has dominated post-1945 international development norms and structures – an axis that has also provided the focus for radical and critical approaches to the geographies of development. The resulting development landscape is complex and turbulent, bringing stimulating challenges to theorists of aid and development.

Keywords

South–South development, Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, donors, convergence

I Introduction

Since its inception, the Western-dominated international development regime has been subject to epochal shifts in geopolitical logic and capitalist ideology (Hart, 2009). A more stable feature of the dominant regime, however, has been the normative projection of a global d/Development axis, which has consistently produced the ‘South’ as the disciplinary subject and the ‘North’ as active and benevolent provider of knowledge and material assistance (Kothari, 2005; Kapoor, 2008; Esteves and Assunção, 2014). This framing obscures (with greater or lesser success) the intense counter/cross-flows and intertwining of peoples, ideas and materials

(Silvey, 2010). Recent claims to ‘partnership’ of various sorts have only very partially ameliorated the tenacious material and discursive hierarchies of donor and recipient (Hyden, 2008; Eyben, 2013a).

The last decade or so, however, has witnessed an unprecedented upsetting of this normative hierarchy (Chin and Quadir, 2012; Mawdsley, 2012). We should not overstate this: the ‘traditional donors’ continue to wield

Corresponding author:

Emma Mawdsley, Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, Downing Place, Cambridge CB2 3EN, UK.

Email: mawdsley@geog.cam.ac.uk

substantial power. Nonetheless, it is clear that the non-DAC actors are profoundly unsettling long-standing axes of power. Strikingly, this rupture is revealed as much by the current efforts of many Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (DAC) donors and international institutions to collaborate, co-learn and partner with Southern actors as it is by competitive or hostile commentaries and stances (Li and Carey, 2014).

II The ‘rise of the South’ and fractured hegemony

Geographers have been at the forefront of efforts to expose the imperial DNA of modern development. The tropes and practices of international development have been forensically examined to reveal the work they perform in producing and sustaining regimes of extraction, accumulation and pacification (Ballard, 2013), and the global imaginaries that act to normalize these processes and hierarchies (Dogra, 2012). The critical contestation of colonial and post-colonial North–South inequalities and development hegemonies remains a vital task for scholars (McEwan, 2009; Radcliffe, 2015). But in one of the most interesting and important trends confronting geographers in the last decade, this classic axis is being re-oriented. Global and national landscapes of wealth, poverty and (in)equality have changed substantially (Kanbur and Sumner, 2012; Rigg, 2012; Sidaway, 2012), with a number of countries ‘graduating’ to official calculations of ‘middle income’ status, while sometimes continuing to have significant shares of the population living in grinding poverty and/or enduring vulnerability. At the same time, growing economic vitality in the South has enabled many traditional recipients to reduce their dependence on aid (Janus et al., 2015).

It is now widely recognized that many Southern providers are not ‘new’ or ‘emerging’ as

development partners, having often been engaged in various forms of assistance for decades. Like their DAC peers, they too are motivated by the pursuit of geo-economic interests and soft power, but as (former) socialist, Third World and Arab states they were and are positioned differently within regional and global power structures; they are shaped by different domestic agendas and capacities and their development assistance is framed by very different geo-cultural scripts of giving and receiving (Bayley, 2009). China still dominates research and commentary (e.g. Mohan, 2014), but the field has matured as researchers have extended their gaze not just to the other BRICS, individually and collectively (e.g. Chaturvedi et al., 2012), but to the ‘second tier’ of MINTs and CIVETS¹ (Schulz, 2010), taking in Turkey, Indonesia and Mexico, amongst many others.

Analysts are also turning to less well-known development partners, such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Thailand (Cordier, 2014; Sato, 2007), and to much smaller and often more sporadic donors, who may nonetheless punch above their weight in terms of soft power or generosity. Smith (2011), for example, calculates that amongst the top ten humanitarian donors to the Haiti Emergency Response Fund after the 2010 earthquake were Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Tunisia and the Republic of Congo. We can also observe a nascent but growing research interest in the role of and implications for civil society in more formal South–South development assistance (Tomlinson, 2013; Vaes and Huyse, 2013; Poskitt et al., 2015), the private sector (e.g. Gu, 2009), and in ‘ordinary people’, such as migrants and small-scale business people (Mohan et al., 2014). More specialist work is also emerging, with growing research into particular sectors, such as security, health or agriculture; on particular bilateral relationships; and on the views and experiences of various recipients/partners (e.g. Greenhill et al., 2013; Abdenur and Marcondes-Neto, 2014; Adhikari, 2014).

One way to unpack the fracturing of the hegemonic development regime is to think through a tripartite framework of material, ideational and ontological. The 'material' refers to the quantum of 'aid' and 'aid-like' flows of finances (grants, different forms of loans and concessional financing instruments), goods (e.g. food aid) and technical assistance (e.g. consultancy, training, educational scholarships, medical personnel, agricultural extension). For many non-DAC partners, development cooperation merges with humanitarian assistance (a much criticized distinction that continues to be made by Western donors), and is often blended with commercial investment, trade and finance, rendering some elements illegible to the calculative tools of the mainstream aid community. For a variety of reasons then, estimates of the financial and in-kind assistance provided by non-DAC partners vary widely, and are open to considerable misunderstanding and misreporting (Bräutigam, 2011; see recent initiatives by AidData).²

However, the headline trend is clear, and that is the absolute and relative increase of bilateral and multilateral contributions from the non-DAC development partners (Zimmerman and Smith, 2011). Depending on definitions, most reliable estimates suggest that non-DAC 'aid' and 'aid-like' flows have increased from around 5% of the global ODA/ODA-like share in the late 1990s (although it should be said that this represented a historic low) to around 15–20% at present (UNDP, 2013). Although still far below DAC levels, dollar for dollar many Southern development partners are able to leverage more impact than their Western counterparts. Loans are often tied to the purchase of donor goods and services, but these usually come more cheaply than DAC equivalents, producing better value for money. Second, the blended nature of many development assistance packages can make them very attractive to recipients – technical assistance and 'aid-like' loans may be accompanied by a commercial financing arrangement and a trade agreement, for

example. Much of the buzz around the New Development Bank (earlier called the BRICS Bank) and now the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is to what extent they will have the capacity or intent to act as a competitor to the IFIs (Abdenur, 2014).

The second element of the framework proposed above is ontological. By this I mean the profound re-making of (inter)national identity that has accompanied the achievement of global recognition and respect for Southern states in their role as development partners over the last decade or so. The speed with which this has happened is remarkable. Until quite recently, many within the 'traditional' development regime (including Western media, publics, academia and think-tanks) had overlooked or in some cases been dismissive of South–South development cooperation.³ This started to change in the early new millennium and, following the growing visibility and activity of China in particular, a trickle of awareness and analysis rapidly turned into a flood. There were plenty of critics, some thoroughly alarmist (e.g. Hitchens, 2008), as well as less absurd but still invidious discourses of heroes, villains and dupes. More formal commentators like Moises Naim (2009), who wrote about 'rogue donors' supplying 'toxic aid', reflected not uncommon concerns, although rarely as quotably. Most mainstream analysts, however, publicly offered more considered responses, which recognized opportunities and legitimacy as well as potential problems (e.g. Manning, 2006). Even so, to different extents, many implicitly assumed or explicitly stated that the role of the OECD-DAC and its members would be to 'socialize' the rising powers. Conferences, outreach programmes, study groups and invitations to participate in donor meetings and forums were expected by many to act as the venues and vectors by which the Southern partners would learn from and adopt Western 'best practice' and superior experience. But by the 2011 High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, held in Busan, Korea, it was the

OECD-DAC donors who were doing the running in trying to persuade Brazil, India and, above all, China to come to the table; and who were willing to make very considerable concessions to ensure the semblance of a global agreement (Eyben and Savage, 2013; Abdel-Malek, 2015). The politics of this event were complex (and by no means pivoted on a 'North-South' axis alone), but the voluntary nature and policy leeway expressed in the Busan Outcome Document clearly demonstrates the ability of the Southern partners to resist those traditional donors who sought to bind them to shared obligations and targets.

Current approaches amongst individual 'mainstream' development actors vary. Some seem to warmly embrace the possibilities of co-learning and cooperation, viewing Southern partners not just as providers of additional resources but also complementary knowledge, ideas and experience (Shankland and Constantine, 2014). However, there is also evidence of resistance, or at least attempts to slow the transition down (Eyben, 2013b). Vestergaard and Wade (2014), for example, demonstrate how the apparent re-balancing of voting rights in the IMF towards greater Southern representation in fact reflects a concerted retention of power by the traditional powers, while Abdenur and Da Fonseca (2013) trace in the suite of initiatives for cooperation and collaboration between Northern and Southern partners an agenda to domesticate these emerging rivals.

From these (inevitably) mixed signals, we can discern at least one shared point, namely that over the short space of a decade or so South-South development cooperation – and, more unevenly, different Southern partners – have acquired genuine recognition and (more variably) respect from the 'traditional' donors. Their status as providers and not just recipients, as necessary and legitimate contributors to global development governance, ideas and resources, and indeed as rivals in the same fields, is now universally acknowledged. Eyben (2013b) charts the move from 'closed spaces' to

'invited spaces' as one indicator of a power shift, to which we could add 'declined spaces': some Southern partners are uninterested in gracing particular meetings with their presence, and such is their new necessity that this can undermine the credibility of the event in question (as with the 2014 Global Partnership meeting in Mexico). The OECD-DAC and individual members remain attractive partners for various collaborations and ventures, but Southern states are increasingly selecting which ones and on whose terms. At the same time, although relationships are by no means always straightforward or uncontested, recipient/partner countries have generally welcomed Southern development partners, comparing them favourably in some respects to their Western donors (Large and Patey, 2011; Mohan and Lampert, 2013). In sum, the development imaginaries that once discursively overlooked and diminished Southern states as providers of development assistance can no longer be sustained. The ontological hierarchy of Northern donors and Southern recipients has been profoundly upset.

The third part of this interlocking framework is the ideational. This refers to the discursive construction and projection of development 'norms', such as those concerning modalities, priority sectors, languages of partnership and so on. One reading of current trends amongst the OECD-DAC donors is that they are moving *towards* Southern development norms and modalities. Provocatively, we could say it is the Southern states that have over the last few years more successfully projected ideational power in international development. A more structural interpretation, however, would suggest that transnational economic and political elites of all hues are finding areas of alignment and mutual interest in driving capital extraction and accumulation ever more deeply and unevenly (Hart, 2009), and the development policies and financial instruments of many Northern and Southern partners are – in part – being harnessed to this end (Rowden, 2011; Curtis, 2013; Kragelund, 2015).

To understand this ideational shift, and potential convergence around it, we need to look back to the mid/late 1990s. Hulme and Fukuda-Parr (2009) suggest that at this time a particular confluence of actors, events and ideas created a policy window, through which emerged the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). For the first time in international development, poverty reduction became the central principle around which other supporting objectives – economic growth, good governance, social welfare, sustainable development, security, gender empowerment, and inclusive finance – were (supposedly) organized. This was accompanied by a programmatic focus on the ‘soft wiring’ of development. Economic growth was certainly on the agenda, but subordinate in official aid discourses, policies and spending to poverty reduction goals, albeit framed by neoliberal principles of individual entrepreneurship (Roy, 2010). In the last few years, however, it appears that poverty reduction is being de-centred by the return of economic growth as the central analytic of ‘development’. Donors are still talking about poverty reduction and, for that matter, about health, education, gender, governance and even inequality, but the focus on how to achieve these is being increasingly insistently presented as ‘growth’, amongst DAC and non-DAC states alike.

This ideational shift is the result of the interplay between different trends, events and actors. The material, ideational and ontological challenge of the non-DAC partners has coincided with the impacts of the ‘global’ and Eurozone financial crises in many donor countries, leading to mounting public and political pressure to reduce or redefine foreign aid. While South–South assistance includes humanitarian provision and technical cooperation in education, health and welfare, most Southern donors have tended to prioritize building energy and transport infrastructure, supporting agricultural modernization, and enhancing primary and secondary production (e.g. Modi and Cheru, 2013).

These interventions have brought dislocation and violence, extraction and exploitation – but they have also brought roads, electricity, jobs and cheap goods. For many ordinary people in poorer countries they have helped fan hopes of ‘modern futures’, as well as fears and resentment (Carmody, 2009). For political and economic elites, they have often brought expanded opportunities for legal and illicit profits, and political entrenchment (Soares de Oliveira, 2015). For ‘traditional’ trade partners, investors and development donors, they represent opportunities (infrastructure development and rising consumer power can benefit all) as well as competition for contracts, resource access, market share and political influence. Overall, though, it is a model that looks increasingly attractive to Western governments, keen to ensure their hold in frontier and emerging markets (Carmody, 2011).

DAC donors are increasingly insistent that the private sector must become a major partner and vector of growth-led development (Tomlinson, 2012; Di Bella et al., 2013; Blowfield and Dolan, 2014). They are encouraging a more substantial role for firms, investment and trade with expanding and newly legitimized modalities of developing financing that move ‘beyond aid’ (Severino and Ray, 2009; Griffiths, 2013; Janus et al., 2015). A number of governments (in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK, for example) have re-structured their international development agencies, sometimes reabsorbing them into Ministries of Foreign Affairs/Trade. This is accompanied by an explicit insistence on the pursuit of national interests through aid contributions and programmes, accompanied by re-formulated discourses of virtue, doing good and ‘smart aid’ (Banks et al., 2011; Parfitt et al., 2012; Reilly-King, 2012; Van der Poel, 2012; Mawdsley, 2015).

While there is much to welcome in the ‘beyond aid’ agenda (Barder and Talbot, 2014), the ways in which it is being implemented, by whom, and in whose primary interests

are raising concerns. The available evidence suggests that inadequate attention is being paid to the connective fabric between such ‘growth’ and ‘development’, in terms of how these are conceptualized, programmed into initiatives, monitored and enforced (Kwakkenbos, 2012; CDPE, 2013; Eurodad, 2013). Although donors talk in various ways about ‘inclusive growth’, patient capital, impact investing and supporting partner country firms, including small and medium enterprises, critical analysts find policies and programmes that are overwhelmingly acting to support donor firms, and most evidently corporations, consultancies and financial firms. Parallel critiques may be levelled at many Southern development partners, which often ground their support for investment, infrastructure and (agro-)industrial growth in simplistic assertions of ‘win-win’ that pay little or no attention to conflicts of interest, displacement, labour terms and conditions or sustainability (Rowden, 2011).

III Conclusions

The last decade has witnessed a paradigmatic shift that both upsets and transcends the old hierarchies of ‘North’ and ‘South’. This has not simply been a redistribution of (‘development’) power from the ‘North’ to the ‘South’. Rather, in what Overton and Murray (2014) refer to as the rise of ‘retoliberalism’, fusing elements of mercantilism, state-led industrialization and neoliberalism, Southern and Northern partners are competing and collaborating but also converging on a more open agenda of subsidized support for private sector growth (and state-owned enterprises) in the name of ‘development’. Within the international development community, poverty reduction, health, education and good governance will remain prominent concerns and goals, and are increasingly being joined by the idea of ‘global public goods’ under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but they are being re-sequenced within

a powerfully reinvigorated insistence that (publicly subsidized) private sector-led economic growth is the key engine of development.

In some ways this exhumes much that is associated with modernization theories of the 1950s and 1960s: the conflation of GDP with development, the focus on energy and transport infrastructures, agro-industrial productivity, resource extraction and, for some, an optimistic sense of forward momentum. If and where it provides a foundation for a broad-based improvement in economies, livelihoods and standards of living, it will be widely welcomed. But it also raises the spectre of accelerated accumulation by dispossession, in which the ‘virtuous’ claims of DAC donors and Southern partners simply provide slightly different ‘moral’ narratives around the creative destruction of ‘development’. Other theorists are reviving neo-dependency theories, examining whether poor countries will find themselves further locked into an ultimately unprofitable global division of extraction and production, but with an expanded ‘core’ that now includes China, India and other Southern powers. In both cases, however, there are important differences with earlier eras, including the different articulation of power between states, firms and markets in a neoliberal era; the prominence of financial firms and interests rather than more traditional profit-seeking enterprises; and the complexity of actors. Finally, we note that analysts reflexively deploying more critical theories to explore South–South cooperation – postcolonialism, feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory and so on – as yet remain rare. They include Six (2009), on ‘postcolonial’ donors, and a collection edited by Amar (2012) on how emergent powers in the Global South are transforming and deploying distinct internationalist security and militarized humanitarian development models. The contributors to this volume examine the identities and subjectivities of peacekeeping troops and other public and private security personnel, as well as their insertion

into global hierarchies of labour, race, and post-colonial identities.

The SDG negotiations and final outputs reflect an international development regime that is more pluralized than ever before. The 'rise of the South' (UNDP, 2013) as well as other non-DAC development partners has driven a genuine re-balancing – if a partial and still resisted one – in the international development architecture, development financing approaches and actors, and in shifting paradigms of aid, development and partnerships (Power, 2015). Critical development geographers have long wished this moment, and despite the cautious – even pessimistic – tone of much of this report, there is unquestionably much to celebrate. However, notwithstanding more progressive outcomes and possibilities, there appears to be growing ideological convergence around the use of 'development' finances and activities to support national geo-economic interests, centred on resource extraction, market-making, and ensuring investor profits. This is hardly new in international development, but at the present juncture it is being revived across a novel confluence of actors and contexts, with complex implications for wealth creation, poverty reduction, (in)equality and development. The formal realm of international development is being 'provincialized', as Western hegemony – material, ontological and ideational – is at last being eroded. Critical development geographers are and should be at the forefront of theorizing the 'post-2015' era.

Notes

1. CIVETS (Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey, South Africa); MINTs (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria and Turkey).
2. See: <http://aiddata.org/>
3. There are, of course, very notable exceptions, and quite a substantial literature on South–South development cooperation within area studies, history and international relations. But as far as I can tell, there has been relatively little research or theorizing on South–South

development cooperation within development geography (although this may reflect my own lack of awareness, and I would be happy to be proved wrong). Baker and Edmonds (2004) provide one earlier example than most.

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