

North-South cooperation and partnership: Mind the gap

Interview with Stefano Manservisi

Professor Stefano Manservisi served as Director-General at the European Commission, of International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO), for Migration and Home Affairs, and for Development and Relations with African, Caribbean and Pacific States. Currently, he is the Chair of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund, Adjunct Professor at Sciences Po/ PSIA and EUI School of Transnational Governance.

Development Cooperation Review (DCR): Professor Stefano Manservisi (SM), you have long tried to bridge the gap between the so-called West and what we now refer to as the Global South - is a new relationship possible? How can we help the EU reform its approach to the developing world from a partnership perspective rather than that of a donor?

SM: Not only is it possible, but it is necessary and even urgent. In the West, and certainly in Europe, albeit in a different way, we have been contributing towards developing this sort of gap. We have been witnessing this gap develop between the so-called West and the Global South. Ironically, until a few years ago, the common language was “emerging power,” referring to China, Brazil, India, etc., which many found laughable because these countries had already “emerged,” and more. This was

based on a certain assumption of the centrality of the West, the centrality of Europe, and the centrality of the United States, and this was the starting point in looking at the other. This was a big mistake. This gap has now become not only very big, but also very complex, not only in terms of being recognised, but in terms of values, in terms of approach to crises in the world.

I think it is not only an objective for those dealing with “development” - and this should also be redefined - but also for all those observing the state of the world. If we look at the votes in the General Assembly, starting from Ukraine and now on the Hamas-Israel war, there are different visions and there is the risk that this gap will increase further.

Now, not only is it possible to close it, but we must all work in order to do so because the new equilibrium - which in itself is a compromised concept, rather a new way of living together - can only

be reached by building it together and starting with the existing powers like China, Brazil, India, etc. So, therefore, it is possible and necessary.

Secondly, you refer to the European Union and the EU's development policy. I think we have to make the distinction because the European Union, if I may say, should remember and believe in what the peculiar characteristics of the European Union are in order to play a stronger and more effective role. If you go back to the root reasons behind the European integration process, you have to recognize that the European Union has been specifically created on the basis of values which are supposed to be universal, but not imposing them on anybody. In 1958, the idea was to create the conditions for no more war in Europe, building shared prosperity, through democracy, solidarity and fundamental freedoms.

As a consequence of this approach, the idea that the European Union would never bring war prevailed, and therefore it was not only an approach concerning only the Europeans, but it was a characterization of the European Union as a would-be power where war, aggression, imperialism - you can call it as you will - were antagonists with this idea of Europe. Europe was built on solidarity, built on human rights, on democracy also, but also on the recognition of differences. This inspired the international projection of Europe, notably through its development policy. Whether the results were up to these ambitions and whether the EU has been fully credible is a matter for debate, of course. But this was part of its DNA.

Today, what is happening in the world is putting huge stress on this construction and there is an issue for the European Union to be able not to lose this DNA, while responding to unprecedented challenges and to build its political decision and political action accordingly.

Unfortunately, I have to say, and I'm very critical, today the prevalent idea is that in order to grow up, the European Union should become not only geopolitical, which is perfectly correct, but geopolitical in the security sense, meaning to possess an army and to become a hard security big player to fulfil its objectives. While having an army is certainly necessary for Europe, I perceive that in the minds of many, this is the main, if not the only, way to grow up. To my mind and the minds of many others, this is an important complement which must not overshadow our founding DNA elements, which are those to build just and sustainable peace as a method of rejecting colonialism, imperialism and any logic of dominance. Maybe one can say that this logic is closer to the US approach for a number of reasons, but it is certainly not in tune with the very founding reasons of the EU.

Today, Europe is at a crossroad. On one side, it is absolutely necessary for the EU to support Ukraine, but what next with our big neighbour Russia and the Russian people? On the other side, even more today, with the Hamas and Israel war it is clear that here the EU is at the centre of a situation that we always said in political terms is not sustainable. In spite of this, the European Union didn't do anything to address the situation.

In this context, the development policy of the European Union, which has a long history, even well before having a legal basis to call it a 'development policy' (the Lomé agreement, for example, was more than a development scheme, it was an international agreement with the biggest group of developing countries - the Global South, as we would say today) which kind of role can the EU play?

Firstly, getting away from a restrictive definition of 'development' because today, in reality, and at least since Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals, it is a form of cooperative action to address global issues, where solutions must be found jointly because it is a question of correct policies, a question of rules and obviously also a question of money. Therefore, firstly, development is implementing SDGs and it is not 'donor' and 'beneficiary' anymore.

Secondly, the idea of the perception that in any case, even in language, the European Union must get rid of the old toolbox and the old language and concepts of donors, etcetera, now is common. Jean-Claude Juncker wanted to say that openly in 2017, when he said, "let's stop donorship and let's be driven by partnership". President Von der Leyen went further, and she was very clear since the beginning of her mandate, even changing the name of my former DG into "partnership", and rightly so. Leaving the political correctness of the wording aside, it is true that there is now, speaking for the European Union institutions at least, the awareness and the determination to build partnerships, and therefore a different way to build the

agenda with Africa, for example.

But a great deal must be done to leverage this. You have seen the EU-Africa summit last year; the final conclusion was "Two Unions, One Vision", which signalled a shift in mindset. However, in Ukraine and even more so in Palestine, it is hard to say there is but 'one vision'.

We have to realise that this EU-Africa relation transcends a mere bilateral relation, it impacts several fronts and we have to listen carefully to all interlocutors in the whole Global South, such as India and others. However, this broader perspective is, in my opinion, not fully grasped within the European Union. There is room for improvement in how the EU engages with Africa, for example, emphasizing a partnership that extends beyond a simplistic view of "European-African relations." Instead, it should be seen as a contribution to a comprehensive global agenda. This collaboration is not about pursuing isolated benefits for Europe, nor for Africa, but it is rather a contribution to the overall political shape of the world and of its economy. Take trade, for instance - a prime example - while it is imperative for Europe to maintain and enhance access to its market, the approach differs from practices in the 1990s. EU industrial policy in the making requires working collaboratively with African nations to facilitate their integration into international trade, recognizing that it is essential for redefining supply chains not only in the EU interest, but in the broader interest of the global trade system as well. In this context, urging

Africa to expedite initiatives like the Pan-African Free Trade Area becomes crucial. The intention is not to impose a model but to share experiences.

This awareness extends to EU relationships with other significant players such as India, Brazil, and China, placing these interactions within a broader context. While acknowledging political differences and even contrasts, especially with China, when it comes to development, there must always be room for collaboration to explore. Hence, the prospect of collaboration is not just plausible but imperative for navigating the complex dynamics of our shared global stage.

DCR: Professor, you advocate for reform of the system of cooperation, and you are in a position to push this forward. Rethinking measurement of development and success, or economic growth for a country, peer elaboration of development strategies, building global public goods, and cooperation governance. Where do we stand on this concept of “development in transition”?

SM: When we started discussing and conceptualizing “development in transition”, we had two objectives. The first is to go beyond the characterization and the categories established by the DAC in terms of eligibility to ODA. In transition, why? Because precisely at the time, the issue was “why Chile, Uruguay and the Caribbean islands”, for example, the so-called countries that ‘graduated’ and therefore got out of the eligibility

criteria of ODA and development action. The point was, having listened carefully, especially to the small islands and to Latin America, that we found that this categorization was brutal and counterproductive. Development is a process. Therefore, the first objective was to keep these countries under the radar. They don’t necessarily need a lot of money, but development is not only about money; it’s about sharing, working together, and, yes, also money. If we restrict it to eligibility, policymakers and governments get frustrated when they don’t see a reason as they shift from needing assistance to needing partnership.

So, the first objective was to address the link between being an eligible country and a non-eligible country, especially the middle-income ones, shedding light on the fragility, particularly the level of inequalities in these countries. Instead of focusing only on GDP or GNI, we wanted to focus on the complex elements of bringing a country forward in a sustainable way. In my experience, our analysis indicates that attempting a clear-cut separation between political activities and development is, frankly speaking, a mistake, both from the political and the development angle. Moreover, there is a need to revisit and update the development concept in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), maintaining it as an active agenda even with countries that, from a formal GDP perspective, were relatively affluent. This was the initial idea, and I believe it has gained widespread acceptance within the European Union and the OECD development system (still

hoping the DAC will follow eventually). Policies reflecting this perspective have been formulated, evident in the recent EU-Latin America Caribbean summit discussions, where this language was prominently featured. There is still a great deal of work to do, but I am optimistic.

The second is the operational implementation, particularly through promoting triangular cooperation. Triangular cooperation was our way of exploring what Mario Pezzini and I called ‘functional or experimental multilateralism’. It’s a way of saying, “Look, we can have big political problems in some areas, but if we are all committed to the SDGs, we should find ways, not just bilaterally but multilaterally (for example, triangularly) mobilising capacities, resources, experiences, brains and people of partners from the South, believing that solutions don’t only come from the North.” This was the second component of the “development in transition” concept. I think that while the concept is well embedded now, triangular cooperation is a bit more challenging because there is a tendency in the Global South to promote the South-South as a political alternative (“we can do it on our own, among ourselves”). I do not think this is in our common interest, since it limits the potential global leadership of many from the South and it indirectly plays the China game. But if China obviously has a hegemonic vision and project, I am not sure this is valid for countries like India and Brazil, which don’t necessarily have the same idea of superpowers, being more driven to

solve problems effectively. Therefore, on this second component, which is the implementation, there’s still a lot of work to be done, and trust-building is crucial.

DCR: Can we repair fractured global relations by focusing on regional relations first?

SM: There’s no quick fix because there is a trust issue which is amplified, particularly visible. Now on the solidarity with Palestinians. Regardless of one’s perspective, for those who have been travelling in the Global South for decades, as I have, in discussions with political figures, civil society, and ordinary people, there has always been the perception and conviction of double standards. For example, concerning the International Criminal Court, largely targeting the South. With the current situation in Gaza, recognizing the victimhood of Palestinians not only in Gaza but for decades requires nuanced consideration.

Trust needs to be rebuilt or, rather to be built on a new basis, and this is a test that should be applied to various areas. Climate change is another such area where the perception in the Global South of double standards, such as on the energy transition or financial responsibilities.

However, to translate it into action, it also requires many in the Global South to play differently, and explicitly call on China and the Arab states to contribute to the loss and damages fund, for example, acknowledging their responsibilities along with the North. It’s

a question of money and of responsibility. Climate change is probably the field in which the concepts, ideas, and ways to close the gap can be pragmatically successful. It's doable.

Certainly, regional integration and cooperation schemes play a crucial and beneficial role. However, it is imperative that these initiatives remain open to the global community, fostering interactions and addressing worldwide challenges. Their primary aim should be to contribute to resolving global issues. It is essential to guard against the risk of these efforts becoming inward-looking or adopting protectionist measures. Such a shift could potentially lead to increased tensions and the emergence of new forms of nationalism, despite the seeming paradox.

DCR: Following up on a recent interview of yours for EUI TV, which is more important to progress or development; the strategy, the framework, the implementation, or the people? Which element would you see a priority?

SM: I believe we need to shift our focus to actions and concrete deliverables. While we often discuss strategies, the key lies in implementation. The example of migration illustrates this point vividly. The challenge is not the absence of strategies on paper, but the actual delivery of tangible results.

For instance, when it comes to migration, Europe, driven by internal political reasons, is compelled to show it is able to manage its borders in an effective way. African states understand

this need and are keen to cooperate. The challenge lies in translating cooperation into tangible results for everybody, notably creating jobs and attracting investments. Despite some progress, particularly in infrastructure development, much remains to be done.

Addressing the issue of mobility, fellowships, research opportunities, and student exchanges, but the existing schemes are fragmented, complicated, and not easily accessible. Visa problems and high rejection rates further hinder these movements. An integrated and streamlined policy with visible results is lacking.

Regarding regular migration for work, in spite of a widespread narrative describing Europe "flooded" by migrants, Africans in particular, the reality is that the EU needs more migrants to fill vacancies in the labour market. But the problem is that EU member states decide individually on quotas, considering their own situation, as if the EU's single market did not exist. A more coordinated and consolidated approach would be needed. Let's imagine if, at the next summit with Africa, discussions would address not only border management but also how to facilitate regular migration of one or two million African workers for the whole of the EU's single market. And this approach could be followed vis-à-vis many regions and countries in the world.

Another tangible commitment from the Europeans in recent years has been to significantly reduce transaction costs for remittances. While progress has been made over the years in lowering these costs, they persist at levels that are still

deemed excessive. The costs are often linked to the perceived risk associated with the destination country. This is a clear example of where meaningful contributions can be made.

By addressing these challenges, the EU would strengthen the partnerships

with the whole of the Global South, and it would send a powerful signal towards addressing issues related to mobility and migration on a global level.

Thank you!