

# Weaving the Future: Integrating Indigenous Knowledge into International Cooperation

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*Abstract:* As we approach the end of the deadline to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda, this paper proposes networks as a cooperation modality, from a focus on the cosmovision of Indigenous Peoples to contribute to develop solutions based on their ancestral knowledge, to the current challenges to save Mother Earth. This approach gathers diverse contributions from Indigenous Peoples. Taking into account the contributions of South-South Cooperation (SSC) and Triangular Cooperation (TC) from a perspective that contemplates Indigenous wisdom, it is proposed to favour the work in cooperation networks as a natural and necessary evolution. These networks allow the inclusion of diverse perspectives and approaches, fostering the exchange of knowledge and experiences, based on the recognition of cultural diversity. In addition, they facilitate collaboration among diverse actors, promoting innovative solutions to local, regional and global challenges that take into account the knowledge of the communities.

*Keywords:* Triangular Cooperation, SSC, SDGs.

## Persistent Inequalities: The Dilemma of International Cooperation

With almost 5 years to go before the end of the term to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda, this paper seeks to contribute to rethink the international development cooperation system from a perspective that catalyses the efforts of traditional cooperation mechanisms, South-South Cooperation (SSC) and Triangular Cooperation (TC) from a holistic perspective of networks

where everything is interconnected. The worldview of Indigenous Peoples emphasises interconnectedness, seeing the world as a living and interrelated system where everything, from land and water to human beings, collectively, and other socio-political institutions, is interconnected, where natural and ancestral solutions are proposed to face various current challenges, to save the Mother Earth.

In September 2024, the Summit of the Future: Multilateral Solutions for a Better Tomorrow, convened by the United Nations, will take place, which

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invites us to rethink the international cooperation system, and seeks to rebuild confidence in a system that has been challenged and eroded by the multiple environmental, social, economic, cultural and geopolitical crises compromising humanity and the planet. The global community and the cooperation system face serious challenges in terms of the environment and climate change.

Climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, sustainable water management, and poverty are realities that affect all of us. However, vulnerable populations are the most exposed to these effects (PAHO, 2021). These phenomena impact our daily lives, the way we live, the way we dress, what we eat and, above all, our relationship with the planet. Successful examples, such as sustainable certifications and bio-products, valuing ecosystem services and collaborative watershed management between local governments and indigenous communities, demonstrate the viability and benefits of integrating western and indigenous practices. These cases underscore the potential for creating cooperation networks that will bring about a substantial shift towards a more inclusive, sustainable and equitable system of international cooperation.

The vision of Indigenous People on the relationship with the land, trees, water and all living and non-living beings on the planet contains ancestral wisdom that can help to face current challenges (Cajete, 2000). This ancestral knowledge can offer valuable and sustainable perspectives that could be the key to effectively address persistent problems,

despite numerous international efforts.

## **A Differentiated Approach to Development Cooperation**

The international system, erected after World War II, was based on the establishment of formal regimes and intergovernmental relations. At the end of the 20th century, international cooperation underwent three major revolutions: in actors, instruments and objectives (Severino and Ray, 2009). In this context, progress is being made towards global governance organised around soft-law rules and informal institutions, where it is recognised that, along with States, civil society organisations and transnational corporations are also actors that influence international policy (Berman, 2017).

In recent decades, the cooperation base has broadened, cooperation between countries of the South has become increasingly important and working alliances between state and non-state actors such as academia and civil society have multiplied, aiming to combine knowledge and efforts for sustainable development.

Although non-state actors have been present in traditional cooperation since the 1970s, the experience they have accumulated “has positioned them in recent years as sources of knowledge, resources, capacities and technology, generating -and requiring- new ways of linking with public actors in favour of a coordinated and effective cooperation in its purpose” (Huitrón, 2020, p.73).

South-South Cooperation (SSC), since 2000, has gained renewed

momentum and consolidated as a cooperation modality for the resolution of common problems of the countries of the South. A cooperation, where the State, since its inception, has been the main agent and actor, occupies a key role in its conceptualisation, implementation and coordination at the technical and political level (Ojeda, 2019). However, in recent years, the Ibero-American region has seen an increase in SSC and TC initiatives that incorporate other non-state actors (SEGIB, 2022). Triangular Cooperation (TC) has been positioning itself as a horizontal cooperation modality that enables the implementation of initiatives through multi-stakeholder, multi-level and multi-sectoral partnerships. A modality that combines technical and financial resources through flexible and innovative partnerships, in order to broaden the scope of cooperation and adapt to specific contexts (UN, 2019).

It is worth mentioning that, although the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015) recognises SSC and TC as instruments of the international development cooperation system that contribute to the implementation of its goals and targets, it is only in the Final Declaration of the Second United Nations High-Level Conference on South-South Cooperation in Buenos Aires in 2019, better known as PABA+40, that the importance of enabling and incorporating the participation of non-state actors and academia in SSC and TC in order to contribute to sustainable development is evident.

The increasing diversity of agents and actors participating in SSC and TC, challenges governmental administrative and regulatory arrangements. It calls for the design of new forms that consider institutional and cultural differences, to achieve sustainable development with a human right approach. This approach establishes the territory as a key subject through multi-actor collaboration and the construction of alliances and networks, both at a local and global level.

In this sense, changes are required in the international cooperation system that emphasise multidimensional development from a human rights approach. This involves considering cultural diversity and the construction of policies that treat the territory/ Mother Earth as a main subject. Such changes should be achieved through multi-stakeholder articulation and the construction of alliances and networks. This implies challenges in terms of governance, articulation, participation and co-creation of policies.

The world view of Indigenous People is an integral and holistic dimension that permeates all aspects of life, it is a way of understanding the world (Villela, 2009, p. 465). For Indigenous Peoples, everything is interconnected (UNDP Guatemala, 2006): The land, water, animals, plants, human beings, and institutions are part of an interrelated whole. (Villela, 2009, p. 465).

The worldview of Indigenous Peoples, or as Cajete aptly describes, “Indigenous Science”, (Cajete, 2000) offers valuable lessons from the collective

consciousness to address current global challenges, especially the relationship with Mother Earth. Understanding networks of interconnectedness can inspire more sustainable ways of living and managing natural resources, especially those related to Natural Resource Stewardship. By adopting a perspective that recognises the interdependence of all living things, it is possible to develop policies and practices that promote ecological harmony and balance (Berkes, 2012).

While the holistic worldview may manifest differently among different Indigenous Peoples, they share a common ground at its core. The interconnectedness of all things, they perceive the universe as interconnected web of relationships, where each being, each object and each subject is intrinsically linked to the others, forming a fabric where each thread is essential to the integrity of the whole (Cajete, 2000). Indigenous peoples perceive life as a continuous cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Indigenous ceremonies and rituals are often aligned with natural cycles, such as the seasons (Villela, 2009; Basso, 1996). In the Indigenous cosmovision, reciprocity is key. Relationship between humans and nature is based on balance and mutual exchange. Indigenous peoples believe that if something is taken from nature, it is necessary to ask permission and give something back in return with great respect (UNDP Guatemala, 2006; Basso, 1996).

Interconnection networks, according to the Indigenous cosmovision, can be understood as a network intertwined

with their natural environment in such a way that they conserve and protect it, in the same way, they recognise that each species has a role and that the alteration of one part can have repercussions in the whole system. Social and cultural networks are essential for social cohesion, family, and community networks that are based on mutual collaboration, solidarity, collective help and the transmission of ancestral knowledge. Finally, spiritual networks connect individuals not only with each other, but also with their ancestors and nature spirits (Knudtson and Suzuki, 2006). These connections are strengthened through ceremonial practices, meditations and offerings.

The concept of duality is a fundamental theme for Indigenous Peoples, which refers to the idea that there are two opposing and complementary forces in the universe that interact to create a balanced whole (Berke 2012, Smith 2012). In short, Indigenous spirituality and worldview invite us to perceive the world as an intricate web of interconnections, where each element is fundamental to the wellbeing of the whole. This vision becomes crucial for environmental sustainability by providing a framework for building more just and equitable societies.

## **Promoting Cooperative Networks to Address Global Challenges**

Current cooperation mechanisms, such as SSC and TC are attempting to address development challenges in a meaningful way. These approaches are

based on the exchange of knowledge and experiences between countries with similar challenges, promoting greater ownership of the proposed solutions. However, despite progress and positive results, these mechanisms are still not sufficient to fully address social, economic and environmental problems globally as well as locally. SSC in the region is characterised by a collaborative approach among developing countries, sharing technical knowledge and successful practices. This method focuses on solidarity, equity and mutual participation. Conversely, TC enables the participation of other actors, such as developed countries and international organisations, which contribute resources, knowledge and experience. This creates a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to achieve common objectives. Both mechanisms can benefit from the advantages of networks, thereby increasing their scope and the sustainability of the results achieved.

Considering the essence of SSC and TC, cooperation networks emerge as a natural and necessary evolution. These networks allow the inclusion of diverse perspectives and approaches, creating a platform where knowledge, know-how, skills and experiences can be exchanged more effectively.

Cooperation networks can take advantage of this perspective, understood ancestrally by Indigenous Peoples, to create more integral and sustainable solutions, highlighting the relevance of integral individual and collective development. The Indigenous

cosmovision underlines that everything is interrelated and highlights the value of the connection of the surrounding environment.

In particular, the holistic perspective of Indigenous Peoples offers a deep understanding of the interconnectedness between all elements of life, using networks as the basis of the social, cultural, economic and political fabric to address challenges from various directions.

### **Cooperative Networks: A Holistic Approach**

This holistic approach (Scheithauer, 2014-2015) is essential for addressing development challenges, as it allows us to address problems in their entirety, considering all aspects and understanding their complexity.

One of the key elements for building networks is clear and open communication. Approval processes based on real knowledge of the issues, even if they take time to be explained, are crucial to ensure that all parties involved know, understand and agree on the actions to be taken. This inclusive and participatory approach build trust, increase ownership and enable effective cooperation.

### **Networks as Instruments for Development**

As stated in the National Cooperation Plan of the Republic of Panama 'Panama Cooperates 2030' (PNC, 2017), cooperation networks are characterised as a valuable instrument for development. These networks are recognised for

their breadth and openness, promoting dialogue and encounter between a variety of actors. This collaborative approach and constant exchange make it possible to implement innovative mechanisms that offer creative and effective solutions to challenges at both the local and regional levels.

After highlighting the fundamental role of cooperation networks as instruments for development, it is essential to explore concrete examples that demonstrate their effectiveness in practice. These examples not only illustrate the feasibility of this approach, but also highlight its positive impact in various fields. For example, the promotion of certifications and sustainable bioproducts in international markets has emerged as an effective strategy for combating poverty and protecting the environment. Similarly, projects focused on valuing the ecosystem services provided by nature, such as water purification and crop pollination, have proven to be viable and beneficial solutions. Additionally, collaborative watershed management between local governments and Indigenous communities underscores the importance of integrating ancestral knowledge into development policies, thus achieving sustainable water management and improving the quality of life of the communities involved. These successful examples validate the relevance of cooperation networks and highlight their capacity to generate innovative and effective solutions to global and local challenges.

It is pertinent to explore the role of cooperation networks in the creation of knowledge communities in specific areas. These networks, more than mere development mechanisms, act as dynamic platforms that facilitate the exchange of ideas and experiences on specific topics, such as natural resource management, gender equity or youth empowerment in communities.

Cooperation networks (Panama Cooperates, 2017; Lopez and Garcia, 2022) both function as development mechanisms and serve as platforms for the creation of knowledge communities in specific areas, such as water management in a watershed, protection of an endangered species, implementation of conservation policies, etc. These networks may well focus on issues such as transboundary natural resource management, gender equity, and youth empowerment, both urban and rural.

Experts agree that development cooperation must adapt to the new times through the implementation of support, implementation and accompaniment networks. The growth in the diversity of actors in cooperation and their roles, together with the introduction of network elements, are shaping new forms of collaboration. There are several successful cases of models of cooperation with Indigenous Peoples that have implemented these concepts.

The relevance of these approaches is confirmed in the 2023 SDG/SDG report, which highlights how, at the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda, all SDGs

are significantly deviating from their intended trajectories. Despite some initial progress, the pandemic and other crises have stalled global progress on the SDGs. This report underscores the importance of reviewing and strengthening national strategies and multilateral cooperation, emphasising the urgent need to increase investments and reform the global financial architecture.

In this context, the application of collective network building methodologies for the submission of proposals and implementation of SSC and TC mechanisms, especially in environmental protection and climate change mitigation projects, requires a profound debate in the West. Understanding and assimilating this holistic view could significantly transform collaborative proposals. In the future, Indigenous Peoples may make a great contribution to humanity by providing innovative and collaborative mechanisms to address global challenges, for the time being, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) at its 23rd session approved a study for direct funding to support their actions for biodiversity, climate and the protection of Mother Earth. Its holistic vision and focus on the interconnectedness of all elements of life offer a sustainable and balanced model for global development.

In short, promoting cooperation networks is essential to face local, regional and global challenges effectively, allowing the mechanisms we already know to have a wider scope and a more inclusive and holistic collaboration. Taking advantage of the ancestral wisdom of Indigenous

Peoples, adapting the current cooperation mechanisms would allow the creation of Cooperation Networks, which would mean a substantive change in the way of understanding the international cooperation system in a more sustainable way for all.

## **Global Networks and Ancestral Wisdom: An Integrating Approach**

Promoting cooperation networks to address global challenges is an imperative need in the current context. Despite significant efforts through SSC and TC, social, economic and environmental problems remain profound and complex. The inclusion of diverse perspectives, especially indigenous worldviews, can provide more holistic and effective solutions.

Cooperative networks enable the integration of multiple actors and approaches, facilitating an exchange of knowledge and experience that enriches the proposed solutions. SSC and TC have proven to be valuable approaches, but cooperative networks further extend their reach, promoting more inclusive and participatory collaboration. Clear and open communication, along with informed consent processes, are crucial elements for the success of these networks.

Successful examples, such as sustainable certifications and bioproducts, the valorisation of ecosystem services, and joint watershed management between local governments and indigenous communities, demonstrate that collaboration between the West and ancestral knowledge is possible and

beneficial. These cases show that it is feasible to integrate sustainable practices that benefit both local communities and the environment.

Expert perspectives and the growing diversity of actors in development cooperation underline the need to adapt to changing times. The introduction of networking elements and the creation of knowledge communities in specific areas are crucial steps for more effective and dynamic cooperation.

The application of collective network building methodologies and the implementation of SSC and TC mechanisms in environmental and climate change mitigation projects require in-depth debate and adaptation in Western policies and practices. Understanding and adopting the holistic view of Indigenous Peoples could significantly transform the approach to global development.

In the future, Indigenous Peoples have the potential to make a monumental contribution to humanity by providing innovative and collaborative approaches to address global challenges. Their holistic perspective and emphasis on the interconnectedness of all elements of life offer a sustainable and balanced model for global development.

In short, cooperative networks represent a necessary evolution to address global challenges more effectively. By incorporating the ancient wisdom of Indigenous Peoples and adapting development practices to modern times, we can create a more sustainable and equitable future for all.

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