Reimagining Development Partnerships: Circular Cooperation

Jonathan Glennie & Paty Alemañy[*]

Abstract: The paper explores the contemporary landscape of international cooperation, highlighting the persistence of outdated frameworks that perpetuate unequal power dynamics between "developed" and "developing" countries. Despite efforts driven by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), cooperation often remains vertical, with Northern countries assuming a dominant role as "donors" and experts. Circular Cooperation emerges as a modality shift, aiming to overcome North-South divisions and foster mutual benefit among all nations. It emphasises reciprocity, respectful relationships, and democratic decision-making in global cooperation strategies. While Circular Cooperation represents a qualitative advance, it acknowledges that other modalities are still relevant depending on the specific context. The paper identifies several areas where Circular Cooperation can thrive, promoting knowledge exchange and collaboration without underestimating the southern experience. Through this lens, the paper calls for a reevaluation of traditional cooperation models/modalities and a move towards more inclusive and solidaristic approaches to international development.

Keywords: Triangular Cooperation, Circular Cooperation, SDGs

Introduction

Despite the paradigm shifts driven by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a significant portion of the international cooperation ecosystem remains entrenched in an outdated approach that portrays "developed" countries as "donors" and "experts," while "developing" countries are perceived as passive "recipients." This narrow perspective not only limits the exchange of knowledge and expertise but also perpetuates a hierarchical structure where development initiatives are predominantly determined by the Global North, undermining southern experiences and solutions.

The urgency of this transformation is underscored by the pressing issues facing humanity, as reflected in the Global Solidarity Score: our world in 2023 is in the Danger Zone, with a Global Solidarity Score of 39 out of 100 (Global Nation, 2023). While the world is not yet at a Breaking Point, it is still far from achieving the Shared Purpose zone we aspire to.

To truly address the complexities of our time, a paradigm shift is needed. It requires building from traditional

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[*] Jonathan Glennie, Co-Founder, Global Nation. Views are personal.
[**] Patricia Alemañy, Programme Officer, Global Nation. Views are personal.

notions of aid and cooperation towards a more inclusive and equitable model. By recognising the unique strengths and perspectives of all countries, beyond their economic status, we can foster a horizontal relationship built on mutual respect, collaboration and solidarity.

From Vertical, Horizontal and Triangular to Circular

According to Alonso and Glennie (2015), development cooperation is

> *[Any] activity that aims to support national or international development priorities, is not driven by profit, discriminates in favor of developing countries, and is based on cooperative relationships that seek to enhance developing country ownership.*

Utilising geospatial analogies, this section aims to elucidate the existing modalities of development cooperation and explore how circular cooperation can expand upon them, addressing gaps left unanswered by them.

From Vertical Cooperation

Over time, the term "vertical cooperation" has become synonymous, in many contexts, with the official resources made available by members of the OECD DAC, namely ODA. It involves a northern "donor" providing to a southern "recipient" country. The concept of North-South Cooperation has a rich history of theoretical debates surrounding its definition. Since 1961, these discussions have been spearheaded by

developed countries within the OECD/DAC framework. It was within this context that the foundational elements of Official Development Assistance (ODA) were first established (Malacalza, 2011).

Vertical cooperation, widely known and the subject of ongoing academic debates, has several inherent limitations, many of which extend beyond its modality and are rooted in its history. In this paper, our examination will center on a selection of these limitations associated with its vertical orientation, recognising that there are many more historically addressed by movements such as Aid Decolonisation and within contemporary frameworks like Global Public Investment. Following include some of these limitations:

Allocation Mechanisms: The allocation and classification of countries by the OECD rely on metrics established by the World Bank, which use per capita income as the sole indicator for development. This approach, based on minimal economic indicators, fails to capture the complexity and diversity of the realities of aid-receiving countries. It overlooks the strengths and capacities of the participating countries and does not necessarily involve developing countries in their own development processes.

Beyond Finit Aid: The practice of graduation based on income, where countries exceeding a certain per capita GDP threshold are deemed ineligible for Official Development Assistance (ODA), underscores the shortcomings of relying solely on GDP as a measure of development. This approach fails to consider the multifaceted realities of countries' development trajectories.

Moreover, it creates a rigid system that prematurely terminates cooperation between countries that may still require support to address deep-rooted challenges. These countries often possess valuable best practices that could benefit others, especially in areas not adequately captured by GDP metrics.

Geography constraints: The perpetuation of the belief that knowledge sharing is primarily the responsibility of Northern countries exacerbates a geographic bias in Aid distribution, hindering the holistic development of regions beyond the Global North. This bias is particularly problematic given the challenges posed by an economic development paradigm centered on resource exploitation, which has historically led to complex challenges in diverse ecosystems, raising doubts about its long-term viability and universality. It is increasingly clear that economic growth alone cannot ensure comprehensive development.

Narrative: The narrative surrounding traditional cooperation has long been entrenched in the paradigm of charity, portraying it as a benevolent act of generosity from wealthier nations to their less fortunate counterparts. However, this antiquated perspective fails to capture the multifaceted nature of modern development cooperation. The narrative of charity not only perpetuates hierarchical power dynamics but also undermines the dignity and agency of aid recipients. This patronising attitude not only hampers effective cooperation but also reinforces existing inequalities. Therefore, the narrative surrounding development cooperation must evolve to reflect the principles of mutual benefit and equality (Glennie, 2020) To make the space more open and inclusive, it is essential to enhance its flexibility. Currently, the structure is quite limited in both its narrative and design. It lacks openness in terms of geography and fails to involve non-traditional actors.

To Horizontal Cooperation

The closest approximation to horizontal cooperation within the current framework is found in South-South Cooperation. Forty-five years after the Declaration of Buenos Aires (1979) and more than 40 years since the establishment of ECLAC's South-South Cooperation Committee, the landscape of international relations has changed significantly from its early days. The growing importance of countries that historically were aid recipients but have now emerged as donors—such as China, India, and South Korea in Asia; Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Cuba, and Venezuela in Latin America; and South Africa in Africa—demonstrates the need to question traditional North-South and even South-South dynamics. We find ourselves at a crossroads, where it is crucial to ensure that these relationships are increasingly tailored to the specific needs of each case (Malacalza and Lengyel, 2011).

In this new context, where some historical aid recipients have emerged as donors, it is important to note that certain South-South Cooperation initiatives may still exhibit a vertical orientation, such as for example a China-Zambia partnership.

As Malacalza has highlighted the dynamic nature of South-South Cooperation :

> *Similarly, this trend has drawn the attention of academics, politicians and consultants who have dealt with the qualitative differences in this form by using adjectives such as developmental, supportive, flexible, adaptable, horizontal and humanist to qualify it. Thus, in some cases, these characterisations have even identified SSC as a dynamic with a nature, objectives and instruments better (and that should be considered an alternative) to those used by the "traditional" North–South Cooperation (NSC). However, the random use of the term SSC to indicate a wide range of phenomena associated with relations among Southern countries often involves a slight concern to define and delimit its conceptual scope, stimulating a connotative vagueness and making it impossible to generate theoretical knowledge on its dynamics (2011).*

Moreover, horizontal approaches can also apply to North-North cooperation, as seen in collaborations among European nations. Traditional classifications are no longer adequate for addressing current challenges. Instead of using outdated structures, we must rebuild them to facilitate honest and efficient exchanges. By "horizontal cooperation," we imply collaborative efforts among countries of comparable size or nature.

And Triangular Cooperation

In recent years, the concept of "triangular" cooperation has garnered prominence, seeking to transcend the binary donor/recipient relationship and foster engagement in development projects among communities of varying wealth levels, leveraging complementary strengths.

Typically, this involves a high-income country providing funding, referred to as the facilitating partner, a middle-income country offering expertise, known as the pivot partner, and directing development impact towards a low-income country, termed the beneficiary partner. However, even this triangular approach retains verticality, wherein a less affluent country receives support from nations higher up the income hierarchy.

Following is the United Nations' definition of Triangular Cooperation

> *Triangular cooperation involves partnerships driven by countries in the Southern hemisphere, often between two or more developing nations, with the backing of a developed country or multilateral organisation. These partnerships aim to implement development programmes and projects. Evidence suggests that Southern providers of development aid often require financial, technical, and expertise support from multilateral and/ or developed-country partners while assisting other developing nations (see TCDC/9/3). Northern partners also benefit,*

as they can tap into increased institutional capacity in the South and amplify the impact of their aid by leveraging resources from multiple Southern partners. Developed nations increasingly endorse this developmental approach, expressing a willingness to share their experiences and lessons learned. However, they emphasise that the process of triangular cooperation must be led and owned by Southern actors to ensure effective development outcomes. (2016).

While Triangular Cooperation represents a positive step forward in international development cooperation, there is still room for improvement. It often relies on a vertical logic for money allocation and operational dynamics, maintaining a hierarchical structure (donor-recipient framework). Moreover, it tends to oversimplify the global South by understanding it as a homogeneous entity, ignoring the diverse needs and capabilities of individual countries.

Furthermore, the definition provided emphasises the advantages accruing to the global North merely from Southern capacity building, framed as a "win-win" situation. However, this perspective overlooks the potential for reciprocal learning, wherein the North could also acquire valuable insights and best practices from the South.

To Circular

While these modalities of cooperation are undeniably valuable, they still exhibit the characteristics of outdated 20th-century frameworks. In the contemporary landscape, characterised by evolving patterns of education, mobility, and technology diffusion, opportunities for countries and communities across all income levels to contribute and lead have become increasingly feasible.

The notion of Circular Cooperation emerges as a paradigm shift in the field of international cooperation, grounded in the principle of mutuality as a starting point. This approach recognises the importance of reciprocity in designing global cooperation strategies and seeks to optimise the cooperation system by creating an environment based on respectful relationships among stakeholders. It promotes democratic decision-making regarding the scope, purpose, and accountability of contributions.

However, it is important to note that Circular Cooperation will not always be the appropriate modality. The choice of cooperation modality will depend on a series of criteria, especially based on the specific problem to tackle.

Below are several topics identified as compatible with Circular Cooperation, whereby there exists no theoretical or practical basis to presume that Northern countries possess more knowledge or have more experience compared to Southern countries:

Subject Areas and Circular Cooperation

Areas	How the South Can Support the North
Human Rights	Sharing successful grassroots movements and legal frameworks that have advanced gender equality and anti-discrimination policies. Particularly around gender equity, discrimination, youth and migration.
Climate Adaptation	The recognition of indigenous knowledge's significant role in climate change adaptation is gaining traction, as evidenced by its inclusion to consider different knowledge systems within the fifth assessment report (AR5) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (Jan Petzold et al, 2020). This includes urban sustainability, risk reduction, resilience building, among others.
Drug Abuse Management	Offering insights from community-driven rehabilitation programmes and traditional healing practices. This approach, used by South Africa on a local programme, has proven effective in identifying and addressing local public health issues related to substance abuse, promoting the rebuilding of community control over associated harms (Abruoso et al, 2022).
Mental Health	Introducing holistic and culturally sensitive approaches to mental health care, including Sarason's (1974) concept of the psychological sense of community (PSOC), which emphasises belonging and being an integral part of a larger collectivity.
Social Programmes to Combat Hunger	Demonstrating successful community-led food security and nutrition programmes. For instance, initiatives such as the "A Community-Led Central Kitchen Model for School Feeding Programmes in the Philippines"+ could offer valuable support in addressing food-related challenges in the global North.
Education	The South can play a crucial role in enhancing access to education and promoting inclusivity by sharing inclusive educational practices and alternative teaching methods. These approaches not only foster greater educational participation but also improve learning outcomes and educational equity. Through collaborative efforts, innovative approaches to education can be shared and adapted, promoting access, inclusivity, and mental health support within educational systems worldwide.
Conflict Resolution	Providing models of community-based conflict resolution and peace-building initiatives, as demonstrated by the research conducted by Wallace (2009) offers valuable insights into effective grassroots approaches for negotiating power dynamics and fostering social change.
Comprehensive Care Systems	Demonstrating integrated health care systems that focus on community involvement and preventative care, as discussed by Mandoki and Brosius (2020) through their research on South Asia care practices, aligns with the contemporary understanding of active aging within the human development framework. This framework emphasises lifelong engagement in meaningful relationships and contexts to delay physical, psychological, and social decline, contributing to overall well-being and quality of life.
Science and Technology	Sharing innovative technologies and collaborative research models, exemplified by initiatives like the Plan Ceibal in Uruguay, could enrich knowledge exchange, as data already show significant impact in reducing connectivity gaps (Rivoir, 2009).

Source: Author's Compilation.

The circular cooperation model aims to build bridges between the global North and South, which is essential for addressing concepts of equity and international solidarity.

As Martins (2020) highlights, *The concept of "equity" is often used in global development frameworks to describe actions taken by the global North towards the global South. That is, Northern institutions aim to carry out development in a way that ensures their interventions reach various groups equitably, especially the poorest and most marginalised. However, this does not address the equally important issue of creating systems that foster equity between the South and the North, particularly in the context of entrenched power imbalances resulting from complex histories of colonialism and current-day neocolonial practices (Hickel, 2018).*

Circular Cooperation emerges as a paradigm shift, rooted in the principle of mutuality and reciprocity, offering a more inclusive and equitable approach to global collaboration. By promoting a horizontal decision-making process and respectful relationships among stakeholders, Circular Cooperation seeks to optimise cooperation systems for sustainable development.

However, it is important to recognise that Circular Cooperation may not always be the most appropriate modality, and the choice should be guided by specific criteria aligned with the problem at hand. As we navigate the complexities of development cooperation, it is essential to embrace innovative approaches like Circular Cooperation to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of our collective efforts towards a more equitable and prosperous world.

Embracing Circularity

By recognising the globally relevant contributions of all countries and communities and affording them respect and agency in international partnerships, circular cooperation offers a more compelling and morally sound rationale to engage in collaborative efforts towards sustainable development.

In summary, the concept of Circular Cooperation offers a fundamental shift from outdated models of international cooperation, emphasising mutual respect, equitable partnerships, and shared responsibilities among nations of all income levels towards common goals. By recognising the invaluable contributions of all income level countries and communities and granting them the respect and power they deserve on the global stage, Circular Cooperation provides a more compelling and ethically sound rationale for high-income contributors to engage in collaborative efforts towards sustainable development.

Furthermore, while the concept of Circular Cooperation is still under development, it offers a compelling framework for development projects. This approach recognises their invaluable role as co-contributors to international endeavors, thereby offering a more

compelling and ethically sound self-interest rationale for contributions from high-income participants.

Endnote

See more about this programme here: https://www.ghspjournal.org/content/10/6/e2100391?utm_source=TrendMD&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=Global_Health per cent253A_Science_and_Practice_TrendMD_1&fbclid=IwAR1Yc8iSutEabb4-3TAuTzaIq5h5gTSc3bhH0d3gfKeUPUrF0pfl0B267iE

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