

International (development) cooperation in a post-COVID-19 world: a new way of interaction or super-accelerator?



Medical supplies donated by China arrive in Afghanistan, April 2020 (Credit: CIDCA)

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1 May 2020

The outbreak of COVID-19 as a global health emergency and the resulting socio-economic crisis is testing global structures of cooperation. The challenges give rise to new forms and expressions of transnational solidarity. The UN Secretary-General titled one of his articles on COVID-19 “**We will come through this together**” – reminding us that no country can tackle this issue alone and cooperation is crucial for addressing existing challenges. In April 2020, UNDP Seoul Policy Centre held a series of **webinar discussions** where representatives from think tanks around the world presented their views on what to expect in the area of international (development) cooperation after the pandemic. This blog post, while not intending to represent the views either of our panellists or of UNDP, is informed by the discussion at those webinars.

We expect that the future framing of development cooperation will be significantly impacted by the current global crisis. With the crisis acquiring global dimensions, the provision of **global public goods** seems to be increasingly more important. Is this a new narrative for development cooperation, particularly with international cooperation budgets coming under increasing pressure in developed countries?

The North-South cooperation model remains important, but it is continuously losing significance as the predominant cooperation model in developing regions. **South-South cooperation** has received a push – at least in terms of visibility – but has also spurred creative solutions. At the same time, we also see **other forms of cooperation** becoming increasingly prominent, including “South-North cooperation” (for example **China’s support to Italy**) and “East-North cooperation” (for example Russia sending medical material to the United States). In these circumstances, the status seeking efforts of the countries are intertwined with the peoples’ spirit of mutual solidarity in

the face of a common challenge.

These examples represent cooperation that is increasingly multi-directional and universal. Will these developments herald a new form of cooperation or do they indicate the reinforcement of existing tendencies? The establishment and adjustment of institutional structures will mainly be a non-linear process; it will take place through incremental steps and modifications. However, certain changes could also be brought on by abrupt political decisions (like the United States' **decision** on contributions to the WHO).

We do not know the details of what a post-COVID-19 world will look like. However, we do know that high-quality international cooperation is fundamental for dealing with existing and emerging global challenges. Addressing the needs of the most vulnerable countries through development cooperation will be an essential part of future cooperation structures. **Meeting global challenges through international cooperation is in compliance with national interests!** This argument is not only valid within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but is also relevant to mega-challenges such as climate change.

In our view, we are facing three main crossroads when we reflect on the post-COVID-19 international (development) cooperation landscape.

1. COVID-19: game-changer or super-accelerator?

Initial debates indicate that COVID-19 needs to be regarded as a **game-changer in international relations**, including development cooperation. However, looking at the evidence available, the COVID-19 pandemic might instead speed up several pre-existing trends. The international development cooperation environment continues to be characterised as highly competitive even during the COVID-19 crisis. **Some experts** also highlight the existence of a fundamental paradox between the increasing demand for greater and better cooperation, and a decreasing willingness of the international community to act collectively. International cooperation is weakening in many areas, and the sharpening role of rising powers and their impact on development cooperation norms and standards through South-South cooperation might serve as important illustrations in this regard. Thus, such indications hint to COVID-19 being a super-accelerator for **trends that existed in the international system** before the pandemic.

2. Better and more cooperation or further thinning of multilateralism

Is COVID-19 leading to an enhancement or to further thinning of international cooperation? Over the last few years, we have seen a fundamental **“thinning of multilateralism”**. Generally speaking, collective action by the international

community (for example, multilateral solutions) is well-suited for dealing with the current global health crisis and is necessary for all other types of global and regional challenges. Actors in public health recognise that there is an urgency to follow a “weakest link” approach (that is, the global public health situation depends on the countries with most limited capacity). Hence, multilateral solutions work naturally.

However, in a global context, where a significant number of governments are explicitly competing to maximise national gains, the creation of win-win strategies through multilateral approaches becomes considerably more difficult to achieve. Thus, most IR (international relations) textbooks would probably suggest a multilateral approach to manage the current pandemic and the underlying systemic weaknesses of the global health situation. In reality, the risk is that we might experience a number of specific approaches where governments might prefer bilateral cooperation, as well as more club governance (like G20) and a more pronounced way of “forum shopping” (that is, looking around for the best institutional offer or even creating new platforms and institutions). These approaches do not exclude multilateralism. However, these comprehensive forms of collective action might rely on smaller groups of “like-minded” countries.

3. Quick economic recovery versus smart recovery

Managing the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic might lead to perceived trade-offs between “better recovery” and “quick wins”. COVID-19 requires a massive socio-economic recovery effort. Numerous actors are in the process of setting up plans to mitigate negative consequences and working on mid- and long-term recovery plans. It is very clear from the beginning that the recovery process requires vast amounts of financial resources, which can be invested by several OECD countries to some extent. Additionally, many other countries (especially low-income countries) will need significant external support through development cooperation in finance, technologies, and knowledge.

We expect a period of extraordinary pressure, demanding all countries to move as quickly as possible towards recovery. Economic growth will be, and needs to be, a fundamental aspect of any recovery strategy. However, growth is a means, not an end. The rationale behind the Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remains unequivocally valid. There is a risk that governments might disregard ecological aspects of socio-economic recovery during the implementation of massive recovery plans to achieve rapid results. As Geoffrey Boulton and Heide Hackmann have rightly stated, “[t]he new global ecology we have created through our ravaging of Earth’s resources holds great risks for humanity.” Naturally, countries will look for quick solutions; the same might apply to development cooperation. The search for quick wins might neglect and override fundamental

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priorities of sustainable development and climate change. Therefore, international (development) cooperation needs to start with a “smart recovery” approach from the very beginning. Development cooperation, during the pandemic and in its aftermath, has been presented with an opportunity to build a better approach for “smart recovery”, one that does not replicate the unsustainable patterns of the past.

This post is part of the [#COVID-19 and international development](#) series.

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