



## FROM POLICY TRANSFER TO MUTUAL LEARNING?

### Political Recognition, Power and Process in the Emerging Landscape of International Development Cooperation

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#### ABSTRACT

The economic and geopolitical shifts of recent years have forced the OECD-DAC member countries to offer greater recognition to the development cooperation activities of the BRICS and other rising powers, who claim to follow a different logic from the coercive policy transfer models associated with North-South development cooperation. At the same time, there has been rapid growth in international “mutual learning” outside the formal framework of development cooperation. This paper explores the implications of this for international policy diffusion in the age of “universal” development envisaged by the UN’s Agenda 2030.

**KEYWORDS:** *international development cooperation; policy transfer; mutual learning; UN’s Agenda 2030.*

#### Da transferência de políticas ao aprendizado mútuo?

#### RESUMO

Mudanças econômicas e geopolíticas recentes obrigaram os países membros da OECD-DAC a reconhecer mais claramente as atividades de cooperação dos BRICS e de outros poderes emergentes que alegam seguir uma lógica diferente daquela dos modelos de transferência coercitiva de políticas públicas associados à cooperação Norte-Sul para o desenvolvimento. Também tem havido um rápido crescimento do “aprendizado recíproco” fora do arcabouço formal da cooperação para o desenvolvimento. Este artigo explora as implicações deste processo para a difusão internacional de políticas públicas na era do desenvolvimento “universal” imaginado pela Agenda 2030 da ONU.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *cooperação internacional para o desenvolvimento; transferência de políticas; aprendizado recíproco; agenda 2030 da ONU.*

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#### INTRODUCTION

Until quite recently policy transfer/diffusion processes originating in the Global South received relatively little attention. The political science literature has predominantly focused on “North-North” diffusion within and between North American and European countries, despite the fact that, as Marsh and Sharman put it, “for either confirming existing hypotheses or generating new ones, the answers lie disproportionately in the developing world”.<sup>1</sup> This “North-North”

[1] Marsh; Sharman, 2009, p. 281.

diffusion literature has emphasised the existence of a broad spectrum of processes between the poles of “voluntary” and “coercive” policy transfer;<sup>2</sup> by contrast, the literature on “North-South” diffusion (which comes predominantly from the fields of development studies and international relations) has emphasised the frequently “coercive” transfer to the South of development policies originating in the North. The phenomenon of “voluntary” policy transfer among developing countries under the rubric of South-South Cooperation (SSC) has received far less attention, despite its long history and growing importance.<sup>3</sup> In this context the emerging literature on cross-border policy diffusion in Latin America, exemplified by several of the articles in this issue of *Novos Estudos* as well as by recent edited volumes, such as Faria et al.,<sup>4</sup> has an important contribution to make. In this paper, we focus on two aspects of this potential contribution that we consider especially significant: promoting dialogue between studies of policy transfer/diffusion and of international development cooperation; and highlighting the existence of “South-North” as well as “South-South” diffusion of policy ideas and innovations originating in the developing world.

International development cooperation has long been central to the ways in which the Global South has experienced policy transfer, understood in Dolowitz and Marsh’s terms as a process through which “knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political setting (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political setting”.<sup>5</sup> However, while research on South-South Cooperation exchanges is beginning to show that international development cooperation has played a significant role as a mechanism in the transfer of policy ideas if not policy models per se,<sup>6</sup> there have been relatively few studies of North-South development engagements from a policy transfer perspective.

The development studies literature does include a rich array of analyses of the micropolitics of knowledge transfer at the local or project level,<sup>7</sup> and both development studies and international relations have generated extensive analysis of the geopolitics of coercive transfer of policies (particularly neoliberal-inspired ones such as privatisation and structural adjustment) to developing countries by institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as the attempts of Northern countries to maintain their hegemony over these institutions.<sup>8</sup> Policy diffusion studies have contributed some more nuanced perspectives on such “coercive” forms of transfer, drawing attention to the ways that they are instrumentalised by developing country policy actors to support or oppose particular positions of the government of the day, as acknowledged by Dolowitz and Marsh<sup>9</sup> and illustrated by Broome

[2] Dolowitz; Marsh, 2000; Shipan; Volden, 2008.

[3] Suyama; Pomeroy, 2014.

[4] Faria et al., 2016.

[5] Dolowitz; Marsh, 2000, p. 5.

[6] Costa Leite et al., 2014; Suyama; Pomeroy, 2014; Suyama; Waisbich; Costa Leite, 2016.

[7] E.g. Mosse, 2011.

[8] E.g. Wade, 2002.

[9] Dolowitz; Marsh, 2000.

[10] Broome; Seabrooke, 2015.

[11] Stone, 2012, p. 485.

[12] Pal, 2014.

[13] Manning, 2008.

[14] Esteves; Assunção, 2014.

[15] The echo of the word “gimmick” is intentional: this is a somewhat tongue-in-cheek label intended to highlight the recent fashion for inventing new acronyms to denote groups of “emerging” countries as well as the nature of the category itself.

and Seabrooke,<sup>10</sup> and to the need to examine “how policies or practices are altered during processes of adoption” to highlight the political interests motivating the exchange.<sup>11</sup> However, we would argue that there is still something of a “missing middle” between the micro (in-country) and macro (geopolitical) levels, since there is as yet little research that has used a diffusion or transfer lens to analyse the role played in less coercive forms of transfer by the international-level institutional and policy architecture of development cooperation itself.

This institutional and policy architecture has long been dominated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an intergovernmental organisation that also functions as a key node in “North-North” policy transfer networks.<sup>12</sup> The OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC), which was founded (as the Development Assistance Group or DAG) in 1960, has brought together the key traditional aid donor countries in a process of “harmonisation” of approaches and practices that culminated in formal declarations agreed at a series of “High Level Fora” such as those held in Paris in 2005 and Accra in 2008.<sup>13</sup> However, in recent years — and particularly in the period since the 2008 financial crisis — the DAC has been forced to respond to an unprecedented level of challenge to its hegemony, as a result of the growing influence of (re)emerging development cooperation providers, in a process that has transformed this policy arena into an “international development battlefield”.<sup>14</sup> Many of these non-DAC providers of development cooperation are positioned (politically as well as geographically) within the Global South, including four of the five BRICS (Brazil, India, China and South Africa), while others (such as Colombia, Mexico, Turkey or the fifth of the BRICS, Russia) frequently claim at least some alignment with the South as part of their bid for recognition as what we call “globally influential middle-income countries”, or GIMICs.<sup>15</sup>

In this paper we argue that processes of policy transfer/diffusion have assumed particular importance in the current phase of the ongoing transformation of the field of international development cooperation, for two reasons. The first is the growing centrality of knowledge exchange — long a key feature of South-South Cooperation — to the institutional and policy architecture of development cooperation as a whole, and in particular to the response of the DAC donors to the challenge of SSC. The second is the demand for a shift away from unidirectional transfer (whether North-South or South-South) towards processes of multidirectional policy learning in order to meet the challenge of the UN’s Agenda 2030, which has emerged from the agreement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. This is because the SDGs are framed as “universal” goals and targets

which involve the entire world, developed and developing countries alike.<sup>16</sup> These “global goals” imply that countries of the Global North will have to adopt domestic policy changes as well as continuing to provide expertise and financial resources to the countries of the South, as they did under the model which underpinned the precursor Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

In this context, it is especially encouraging that we are beginning to see the emergence of a literature on processes of South-North transfer/diffusion.<sup>17</sup> Such processes have now acquired particular importance as developed countries increasingly grapple with the sorts of development and inequality challenges that developing countries have long had to manage, leading some researchers and practitioners in the North to become increasingly interested in learning from Southern development solutions<sup>18, 19, 20</sup> Maximising the potential of policy transfer/diffusion to support the global effort to fulfil the SDGs would seem to be a natural role for international development cooperation, and indeed signs are beginning to appear of a growing response from the “development industry” to this opportunity. However, the emergence of this response has been slow and its focus on the “how” of implementation — and thus on the best way to ensure that the policy and institutional architecture of international development cooperation works effectively to promote multidirectional policy transfer — has thus far been inadequate. Our aim in this article is to examine why this should be the case, combining insights from the fields of policy diffusion and transfer with findings from recent research on the shifting geopolitics of development cooperation.

We begin by briefly reviewing the role of policy diffusion and transfer within North-South development cooperation, contrasting this with the history and principles of SSC. We then examine the implications of the challenges to the prevailing Northern-dominated development cooperation regime posed by (re)emerging powers such as the BRICS countries. These challenges are described by Mawdsley as “material, ideational and ontological”; that is, they relate to the volume of financial and other flows, to the recognition of Southern countries as significant development cooperation providers, and to the “discursive construction and projection of development ‘norms’, such as those concerning modalities, priority sectors, languages of partnership and so on”.<sup>21</sup> The processes of contestation and recognition leading to the adoption of all seventeen SDGs under Agenda 2030 (as well as the adoption of the Paris Climate Change Agreement) confirmed that these challenges had resulted in a considerable shift in the power balance within the global development cooperation landscape. Although sceptical voices remain, most observers agree that the process leading

[16] United Nations, 2015.

[17] E.g. Ganuza and Baiocchi, 2012; Porto de Oliveira, 2016.

[18] Constantine; Bloom; Shankland, 2016.

[19] UKSSD, 2017. UKSSD is the UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development, a multistakeholder platform founded by a group of NGOs and private sector organisations (see <http://ukssd.co.uk/about/our-partners>). In February 2018 it hosted an event in the UK on “Implementing the SDGs: Lessons from around the World” including Colombia, Uganda, Finland and Germany.

[20] For example, the Centre for Global Development recently published an open letter seeking to promote an online conversation on how ideas from international development might be used to address domestic challenges in the USA. See Huang, 2016. See also Constantine and Santarelli, forthcoming 2017.

[21] Mawdsley, 2015a, p. 4.



[22] Constantine; Pontual, 2015.

[23] See for example “Improving Aid Quality through Increased Mutual Learning”, 2011; and “Policy Dialogue, Knowledge Sharing and Engaging in Mutual Learning”, 2015.

[24] See “China’s African Policy, 2006”, 2017; see also Zhong, 2010, and Stephen Chan’s suggestion that this “horizontal reciprocation” is rooted in Confucian thought, in King, 2014.

[25] Kingdon, 1984; Mintrom, 1997; Stone, 2001.

[26] Porto de Oliveira, 2016.

[27] John, 1998.

[28] Stone, 2004.

[29] Shipan; Volden, 2012.

to the agreement of the seventeen goals included a diversity of voices not previously heard at the UN negotiating table.<sup>22</sup>

We go on to review the principal attempt to respond to these challenges by the established donor countries of the OECD-DAC, the creation of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC) after the Busan High Level Forum in 2011. We examine the ways in which the GPEDC has sought to reframe the role of Northern-dominated institutions such as the DAC in development policy transfer, and in particular its adoption of “mutual learning”,<sup>23</sup> a term generally accepted as emerging from China’s take on “mutual benefit” and featuring in papers from Chinese scholars and speeches from Chinese politicians since the 2000s.<sup>24</sup> Mutual learning is a key element of the horizontality underpinning the discourse of SSC. We conclude, however, that the GPEDC has failed to follow through on the changes implied by this shift in discourse and move away from its predominantly North-South transfer logic. Constrained by both institutional and geopolitical factors, it has responded to the ideational and ontological challenge of SSC by trying (with only partial success) to incorporate Southern development knowledge providers into its policy transfer framework, rather than by changing its own practices to reflect SSC principles and thus develop a universal approach to multidirectional policy learning that can go beyond the boundaries of North and South. Key SSC providers, in turn, have responded by refusing to legitimate the GPEDC as a policy transfer platform. The result has been a potentially fatal weakening of the scope for official development cooperation to serve as an effective catalyst for effective multidirectional policy learning and diffusion.

We conclude by examining the implications of some dynamic recent examples of South-North policy diffusion, from a range of fields including health system reform, urban governance and food security. Here, we see encouraging signs that the “mutual learning” agenda is gaining purchase among policymakers in the North, as DAC member countries and rising powers alike grapple with challenges of rising inequality, threatened sustainability and faltering growth. However, we note that recent successful examples of “mutual learning” share a common feature, which is that they were driven not by the established institutions of international development cooperation but by decentralised policy networks, often catalysed by policy entrepreneurs,<sup>25</sup> “ambassadors”,<sup>26</sup> “policy brokers”<sup>27</sup> and “transfer agents”.<sup>28</sup> This reflects the conclusions of recent policy diffusion research on the importance of decentralisation as an enabling factor.<sup>29</sup> We argue it also suggests that the current architecture of international development cooperation is not fit for purpose in an age that requires an intensification of multidirectional policy diffusion to meet the challenge of universal development goals.

## NORTH-SOUTH AND SOUTH-SOUTH DEVELOPMENT KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Historical legacies of colonialism, aid, and the effects of top-down programmes such as Structural Adjustment Plans (SAPs) have all influenced developing countries' perceptions of aid relations with the "global North", and developed countries' perceptions of the "global South". While international development has moved on from the days of the SAPs and other coercive neoliberal "policy solutions" imposed on (and accepted by the elites in) developing countries, their echoes are present in the politics of North-South development "knowledge transfer",<sup>30</sup> which still dominates much of traditional aid and cooperation activities, particularly since aid given by traditional donors still far outstrips that given by non-traditional donors such as the BRICS. This is further complicated by the dichotomisation of "DAC versus non-DAC donors",<sup>31</sup> and the power that aid relations have tended to give to donors vis-à-vis recipients.

[30] Stone, 2001.

[31] Mawdsley, 2012.

The emphasis on knowledge transfer as a central element of development cooperation had its origins in the late 1990s, a period when criticism of the social impacts of SAPs and increasing political resistance to explicit conditionality were beginning to force Northern-dominated development cooperation institutions to consider a change in approach. According to Narayanaswamy,

*in its World Development Report of 1998 entitled "Knowledge for Development", the World Bank promoted the idea that a lack of information and knowledge was one of the key barriers to development in the global South. This belief has become entrenched in development practice [...] [although] from the time of its publication, the World Bank's knowledge paradigm has sustained heavy criticism for its emphasis on market-driven, technical knowledge transfers from the "developed" North to the "underdeveloped" South.*<sup>32</sup>

[32] Narayanaswamy, 2013, pp. 1065-1066.

In North-South development knowledge flows the domestic experiences of the North are rarely applied in cooperation programmes overseas, and the knowledge exchange process is overwhelmingly unidirectional.<sup>33</sup> The "solutions" applied by developed countries to developing countries are different to those applied at home, and people working in international development rarely mix with those working on domestic development issues in their home countries, even when there are clear links between their work, experiences and issues faced. One example of this can be seen in the use of case studies in international development, still a popular tool with the World Bank, OECD, UNICEF and other UN agencies; which tend to be overwhelmingly written by experts from the North but using material drawn from countries of the South.

[33] Eyben, 2014.

[34] Glennie, 2009.

As Glennie<sup>34</sup> has pointed out,

*for all the shifts in our understanding of what development means, there is one paradigm that stubbornly persists. It is still about how we in the West can help the poor in other countries. What can we give you? What can we teach you? What can we campaign on that will make the world better for you? At your service. But are we right to be so confident of what we have to offer?*<sup>35</sup>

[35] Glennie, 2009.

By contrast, the attractiveness of South-South Cooperation — and of engagement with “rising powers” such as the BRICS whose discourse adheres to the principles of SSC — lies both in its apparent absence of coercion and in the perception that these countries are, in Glennie’s terms, “right to be so confident” about the value of their knowledge, because it derives from direct experience of policymaking and implementation in the provider’s own country, rather than from the deployment of transnational expertise in the observation and synthesis of other countries’ experiences. Whilst not all providers of SSC are the same, and despite the ever-growing power asymmetries between them, the overall framing of SSC is underpinned by a discourse of horizontality which not only denies the legitimacy of coercive transfer but also challenges development cooperation providers to internalise the possibility that they have much to learn as well as much to teach.

SSC is defined by the UN as “a broad framework for collaboration among countries of the South in the political, economic, social, cultural, environmental and technical domains [...] [in which] developing countries share knowledge, skills, expertise and resources to meet their development goals through concerted efforts”. It is also associated with a number of principles including “respect for national sovereignty, national ownership and independence, equality, non-conditionality, non-interference in domestic affairs and mutual benefit”.<sup>36</sup> The insistence on these principles has allowed rising powers to *claim* they are partners in a more horizontal relationship where financial flows may well be tied to commercial or diplomatic interests but do not include political conditionalities, and in which the benefit is mutual, *if not necessarily equal*. This discursive stance is meant to provide a deliberate and powerful contrast with the entrenched asymmetries of North-South aid architectures.

The discourse on the origins of SSC tends to date it to the Bandung Conference of 1955, where newly independent African and Asian States decided to work together at the UN as the Afro-Asian Group.<sup>37</sup> In 1974, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution for the establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) as a challenge to the Bretton-Woods institutions, alongside developing an

[36] For NIEO see <http://www.un-documents.net/s6r3201.htm> and for TCDC see [http://ssc.undp.org/content/ssc/about/what\\_is\\_ssc.html](http://ssc.undp.org/content/ssc/about/what_is_ssc.html).

[37] Li; Carey, 2014.



institutional structure within the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to promote Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries (TCDC).<sup>38</sup> This was followed by the 1978 Buenos Aires Plan of Action (BAPA) for Promoting and Implementing Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries. This emphasis on knowledge exchange led to a growth in interest in “mutual learning” as well as “mutual benefit”. Drawing on this long tradition of supporting opportunities for learning in the “global South”, either between regions or among countries within the same region, SSC has formed the foundation for a wide range of multistakeholder knowledge-sharing exchanges in the South.

According to The Group of 77 (G77),<sup>39</sup> SSC’s unique selling point was the “tremendous force of solidarity” which would enable the G77 to “overcome even the biggest challenges”. Optimism about the potential of SSC, which had waned under the “Washington Consensus” hegemony as successive financial crises exposed the South to the rigours of structural adjustment, began to re-emerge as a number of rising powers increased their international development cooperation efforts. These efforts gained greater symbolic and material importance after the 2008 financial crisis shook the credibility of the North, and by the time of the 2009 High Level UN Conference on South-South Cooperation in Nairobi, optimism about SSC had once again reached the level of the 1970s. The Nairobi Consensus outcome document highlighted the roles that national governments, regional entities and UN agencies should play in supporting and implementing SSC and “triangular cooperation”.<sup>40</sup> Triangular Development Cooperation (TDC) is an arrangement whereby two countries carry out joint actions for the benefit of a third country. It has (re)emerged in recent years as a “new”, horizontal way for developed (“traditional partners”) and developing countries (“Southern partners”) to work together, at a time when broader geopolitical changes are challenging the terms of engagement between donor and recipient countries within the framework of the OECD-DAC. In this context, TDC has been described as a strategy for allowing DAC donors to “keep a foothold” in development cooperation.<sup>41, 42</sup>

The prevailing narrative about SSC is that it is based on direct knowledge exchange. As a UNDP film on SSC describes it, the process consists of more than the exchange of solutions, with “the South taking leadership and ownership of its own development through the sharing and transfer of successful and scalable policy options — people-centred solutions and appropriate technologies for inclusive growth and sustainable development”.<sup>43</sup> Such sharing was initially legitimated by the notion of “appropriateness” of models from other countries of the Global South, promoted by discourses ranging from

[38] In 2004 this was renamed the Special Unit for South-South Cooperation.

[39] The Group of 77, 2003.

[40] South-South Steering Committee for Sustainable Development webpage on SSC, <http://ss-scsd.org/south-south-cooperation/>.

[41] The OECD-DAC Accra Agenda for Action expressly called for the further development of triangular cooperation (AAA, Article 19b, 2008); and the end of the 2000s saw a series of international conferences held on SSC and TDC.

[42] Abdenur; Fonseca, 2013; see also Maluf, Santarelli and Paulino, 2016.

[43] Available at: <http://ssc.undp.org/content/ssc/library/videos.html>.

intermediate technology to socialist solidarity. This has come to be supplanted in recent years by an idea of Southern “rising powers” as sources of policy and programme “models” to be emulated by countries seeking to escape from poverty and aid-dependence. This idea draws on a range of “social imaginaries” associated with the countries in question, including their economic achievements, policy processes, technologies and even landscapes.<sup>44</sup> These imaginaries, in turn, have been stimulated by the rising powers themselves through the international marketing of their innovations and successes, often via large set-piece events such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the India-Africa Forum or the Brazil-Africa Dialogue.

[44] Shankland; Gonçalves, 2016.

This positioning of rising powers as “models” for other countries risks reproducing the one-way knowledge flows characteristic of North-South development cooperation. However, the combination of the aspiration to symbolic equality and mutual learning with the reality of asymmetric exchange in SSC policy transfer processes has given rise to some innovative formulations that have wider potential for application in development cooperation, whether South-South, North-South or South-North. These include the notion of “structuring cooperation” developed by Brazilian agencies involved in SSC, particularly the Ministry of Health research and training institute Fiocruz.<sup>45</sup> Structuring cooperation is a dialogical and mutual-learning-based capacity development strategy that aims to support the emergence of strong and sustainable institutions in the partner country that are strategically located in key sectors.

[45] Almeida et al., 2010.

In Mozambique, for example, the partner institutions for Brazilian structuring cooperation initiatives include the National Institute of Health (INS) and the National Agricultural Research Institute (IIAM). The enthusiastic buy-in of key leaders in the partner agencies has been reflected in a desire to imitate the Brazilian exemplars (in these two cases, Fiocruz and the Brazilian agricultural research institute Embrapa respectively) in as many respects as possible, leading to a South-South variant of the phenomenon of “institutional isomorphism” familiar from the policy diffusion/transfer literatures.<sup>46</sup> This kind of isomorphism runs counter to the insistence in SSC (including among advocates of structuring cooperation) that policy transfer must be subject to a process of adaptation to fit local realities. This insistence, in turn, draws on rising power countries’ own domestic experiences of policy learning, which include a strong component of adaptive learning in transfer processes within and across levels of government, whether in Chinese regional development policy<sup>47</sup> or Brazilian social policy.<sup>48</sup>

[46] Marsh; Sharman, 2009.

[47] Husain, 2015.

[48] Sugiyama, 2008.

Exactly how adaptive learning can best be managed and promoted within international development cooperation is, however, an area

where SSC theory and practice has struggled. This is a field within which the role of international learning and knowledge platforms is key — but it is also a field where geopolitical tensions shape a contested knowledge politics that can serve to block rather than promote processes of mutual learning. In the following sections, we examine this phenomenon through the case of the DAC-led Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation.

### THE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

The precursor to the GPEDC was the OECD-DAC Working Party on Aid Effectiveness and Donor Practices.<sup>49</sup> Set up in 2003 and dissolved in 2012, the trajectory of the WP-EFF shows us how rapidly the aid landscape has changed in the last 10–15 years. Consensus had been reached at the 2002 Monterrey conference on the actions needed to promote a global partnership for development in order to meet the MDGs. As part of this, the DAC had committed to working on the “effective aid” principles of ownership, harmonisation, alignment, results and mutual accountability. The signing of the Paris Declaration in 2005 appeared to be a defining moment for the aid effectiveness agenda; however, growing dissatisfaction with the quality of aid paved the way for a significant shift in the relationship between donors and developing country recipients, which was visible at the next high level forum on aid effectiveness. For the first time, at the Third High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (HLF3), held in Accra in 2008, there was significant participation from other stakeholders who had hitherto not had the same level of access to or participation in such events, including parliamentarians, civil society organisations and other non-state actors, as well as “emerging economies” — a first move towards what might become a more global partnership. Nevertheless, the OECD-DAC-led aid architecture was still predominant, with the donor/recipient dichotomy and aid effectiveness agenda visible in the key OECD documents during the preparations for the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (HLF4), which was to be held in Busan, South Korea, in 2011. Notably, the first draft of the outcome document for Busan did not make any mention of SSC.

However, as the date for HLF4 approached, it became clear that the shifts in the politics and practice of development cooperation over the course of the previous decade had changed the balance of power on the international development stage.<sup>50</sup> The large “emerging economies” of the Global South were becoming increasingly active as development actors.<sup>51</sup> Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa had become the BRICS, a bloc which was initially accommodated and then actively courted. Fragile and conflict-affected states had also clubbed

[49] The last part of its title is often left off references to the WP-EFF, but it speaks to the OECD’s knowledge-sharing mandate. See “Improving Partnerships for Effective Development: The Working Party on Aid Effectiveness”, [s.d.].

[50] Woods, 2010; Mawdsley, 2012; Li; Carey, 2014.

[51] Cabral; Weinstock, 2010; Gu; Shankland; Chenoy, 2016.

[52] The g7+ is a group of twenty countries that are or have been affected by conflict and fragility. Its members span Asia, the Pacific, Africa and the Caribbean with a combined population of around 260 million. The g7+ aims to support its “members to achieve transitions towards resilience and next stages of development, by engaging with actors at both the national and international level” (see <http://www.g7plus.org>).

[53] The IBSA Dialogue Forum was established by India, Brazil and South Africa as a forum for increased trade and South-South Cooperation in 2003, with a focus on knowledge exchange for equitable development (Brasilia Declaration, 2003). While it has been superseded by the various new BRICS fora and institutions, India has announced it will host the first IBSA forum since 2012 in 2017. See: “India to host IBSA summit next year”, 2016. BASIC comprised Brazil, South Africa, India and China, and was formed in 2009 under China’s leadership to form a bloc and common position at the Copenhagen climate summit (Hochstetler, [2012]). The term “BRICs” was coined by a Goldman Sachs analyst but evolved to become a political bloc comprising Brazil, Russia, India and China, with the later addition of South Africa and a growing degree of institutionalisation since 2009 (Costa Leite et al., 2014; Gu; Shankland; Chenoy, 2016).

[54] Mawdsley, 2012, p. 209.

[55] “Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation”, 2011.

[56] OECD-DAC, 2012.

[57] Mosse, 2011.

together, forming the g7+ (tagline: “Goodbye Conflict, Welcome Development”)<sup>52</sup> speaking for other low- and middle-income countries when they took a stance against being “characterized and classified through the lens of the developed rather than through the eyes of the developing” (g7+ Statement, 10 April 2010, Dili, Timor-Leste). And a veritable alphabet-soup of new groupings — the TIMBIs, CIVETS, BASIC, BRICs/BRICS/BICs, IBSA and others — was coined in the years preceding and following Busan, with some becoming more well-established than others, depending on the origin and purpose of the acronym.<sup>53</sup> The North-South paradigm which had typified aid relationships for decades was being successfully challenged, and the DAC countries were scrambling to keep up with what might be termed GIMICs, or globally influential middleincome countries. In recognition of these shifts, later drafts of the Busan outcome document incorporated references to SSC, as well as changing the HLF’s title from “aid effectiveness” to “development effectiveness”, encouraging some observers to talk of a “post-aid world”.<sup>54</sup> As the final text of the Busan outcome document put it, “the world has changed profoundly since development co-operation began over 60 years ago [...] [as] economic, political, social and technological developments have revolutionised the world in which we live”.<sup>55</sup>

Busan celebrated the establishment of “an agreed framework for development co-operation that embraces traditional donors, South-South co-operators, the BRICS, civil society organisations and private funders”.<sup>56</sup> However, the recognition which this seemed to offer to non-traditional donor states and non-state stakeholders in international development spaces traditionally dominated by developed countries fell far short of a genuine paradigm shift in what some researchers have come to call “Aidland”.<sup>57</sup> In the case of some aid establishment actors and institutions, it was not true recognition but rather a pragmatic position which acknowledged that the world has changed and that new stakeholders “doing development” had to be included; growing restrictions in development funding linked to the rise of austerity agendas and protracted financial crises meant that widening the pool of potential funders and partners was both an attractive and sensible proposition. For others, there was genuine belief that the correct response to the rise of countries like the BRICS was to “bring them into the fold”, under the aegis of the development effectiveness agenda.

And herein lies the problem: the BRICS did not want to be “brought in”. Their attempts to be more active participants in multilaterals such as the World Bank and IMF had been rejected in 2010 when the US Congress decided to bar the agreed reforms to their voting structures despite the BRICS’ agreement to provide

increased capital injections to support the response to the global financial crisis, while other Northern countries also resisted changes that would reduce their vote share.<sup>58</sup> A Southern candidate for the IMF Director-General was rejected in favour of the French candidate, Christine Lagarde. This rejection was a recent memory when the BRICS agreed to participate in HLF4 in Busan, and influenced their insistence that the provisions of the outcome document not be considered binding on them. Countries with a strong commitment to SSC like China, India and Brazil had no desire to dilute the historically important distinction between North-South and South-South development cooperation, as well as no inclination to accept that their own rise removed the obligation of the North to finance international development. In line with their predominantly multilateralist discourses, they were also reluctant to credit any OECD-led initiative with the same normative legitimacy as a UN process.

[58] Vestergaard; Wade, 2013.

Nevertheless, key DAC member countries insisted on interpreting the BRICS' willingness to sign the non-binding communiqué from HLF4 as meaning that they had "signed up" for the post-Busan Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation established in 2012. This was clearly the position of the UK, which became one of the GPEDC's founding co-chairs, together with Indonesia and Nigeria. Over the two years between the GPEDC's founding and its first High Level Meeting (HLM) in Mexico in 2014, the UK made repeated attempts to push the BRICS countries towards active participation, without adequately demonstrating an understanding of the sensitivities inevitably evoked when this role was played by a former colonial power and close ally of the US, or of the domestic policy processes that were shaping the BRICS' SSC activities. As recent research has made clear, understanding the dynamics between the global North and countries such as the BRICS in international development policy means understanding not only the logic of geopolitical and global economic interests but also history, imaginaries and domestic drivers, which are in continuous flux and should not be seen as mutually exclusive or fixed policy positions.<sup>59</sup>

[59] Eyben, 2014; Constantine; Shankland; Gu, 2015; Gu; Shankland; Chenoy, 2016.

#### **THE GPEDC AS A CATALYST FOR POLICY DIFFUSION?**

Faced with the resistance of the BRICS to making an explicit commitment to the GPEDC, the DAC turned to Mexico to host the first HLM after Busan, which took place in April 2014. In recent years Mexico has changed the level of its engagements in global policy spaces, and it was seen as a country with the potential to go beyond the divisions of North and South and so bring a wide range of partners together under the Busan Principles. Mexico, an OECD country but not a DAC

member, was a large middle-income country in the global South which had been growing its engagement in international development, notably setting up the Mexican Agency for Cooperation (AMEXCID) in 2011, while simultaneously making efforts to highlight the problems that “graduation” from eligibility to receive aid poses in fast-growing middle-income countries that still have large sections of the population in poverty due to persistent inequality.

Mexico was committed to promoting the GPEDC as a catalyst for policy diffusion, not least because the country believed it had an interesting story to share through experiences such as setting up the large national social protection programme, Oportunidades. AMEXCID and the Ministry for External Relations (*secretaría de relaciones exteriores*) made it clear to stakeholders that Mexico was keen on listening and learning, as well as contributing its experience as a middle-income country with significant developmental challenges and achievements — very much in line with the BRICS’ narrative on development cooperation — and highlighting its commitment to South-South Cooperation and inclusive development partnerships. Mexico’s President, Enrique Peña Nieto, opened the HLM with a speech emphasising that “not all countries have the financial resources to support other nations, but all have experiences and successful policy examples that they could share beyond their borders”.<sup>60</sup> The HLM programme included 28 Focus Sessions, designed to explore “critical themes” and inform development of the post-2015 agenda, positioning the GPEDC’s contribution as being about the “how” of development cooperation.<sup>61</sup> Some of these Focus Sessions — including the one organised by the authors of the present paper on the engagement of Civil Society Organisations, businesses and think-tanks from middle-income countries in South-South Cooperation policy and practice — sought to bridge the gap between “knowing” and “doing”, and move towards what Peters, El-Saharty, and Janovsky<sup>62</sup> call a “learning-doing strategy”, focusing on the *process* of delivery rather than simply coming up with a list of lessons learnt.

Large multi-stakeholder, intergovernmental events such as the GPEDC can provide an important space for multidirectional learning.<sup>63</sup> However, the promise of the GPEDC as a catalyst for the diffusion of policies and practices — rather than a mechanism for their coercive transfer — was undermined by a return to the flawed logic of Busan in Mexico’s approach to engagement with the BRICS. Although it was an excellent host and organiser of the meeting, Mexico made a key miscalculation in its diplomacy, which was to insist that the BRICS should agree to a binding outcome document ahead of the HLM. This led to the Chinese delegation cancelling its attendance at the HLM at the last minute, as China did not want to agree the word-

[60] Shankland; Constantine, 2014, p. 113.

[61] The use in its corporate literature of the “‘how’ of development cooperation” to describe what the GPEDC does was added after the first HLM.

[62] Peters; El-Saharty; Janovsky, 2009, p. 282.

[63] Successful examples include the regional and national participatory, deliberative conferences held by the Brazilian health, food and nutritional security sectors as part of policy-making processes (Cornwall; Shankland, 2008; see also Füglistner, 2012).



ing of the Declaration ex-ante, or that it should be binding.<sup>64</sup> India also refused to send a delegation, while the director of the Brazilian Cooperation Agency (ABC) did attend but took every opportunity to state that his country was not a member of the GPEDC, and neither did it intend to become one. South Africa was also present, but its new development agency SADPA (South Africa Development Partnership Agency) kept a low profile.<sup>65</sup> This demonstrated the consequences of the persistence of the OECD view (now internalised by Mexico) that effective development cooperation required socialising the rising powers into the particular DAC tradition of development cooperation, rather than accepting the distinctive and co-equal status of SSC as a tradition in its own right. The growing tendency of the OECD-DAC to recognise and incorporate many elements of SSC in its discourse on development cooperation was already becoming apparent, as shown by Eyben and Savage<sup>66</sup> and Mawdsley.<sup>67</sup> However, this discourse was not matched by diplomatic practice; the heavy-handed approach espoused in Mexico City caused lasting damage, as evidenced by the refusal of China, India and Brazil to send official delegations to the follow-up GPEDC meeting held in Nairobi in 2016.

Significantly, however, at the same time as the Mexico HLM was failing to secure formal BRICS government commitment to the GPEDC, representatives of key government think-tanks from India, Brazil and China were using it as the launch pad for an ambitious new initiative to strengthen BRICS countries' thinking on development cooperation policy and practice.<sup>68,69</sup> This was the Network of Southern Think-Tanks (NeST), which brings together institutions from the BRICS and beyond to work on collating evidence, trends and statistics for the detailed empirical analysis of South-South cooperation. Other NeST objectives include "de-mystify SSC, promote cross-country learning and exchange of experiences among development cooperation agencies of the South".<sup>70</sup> Since its launch NeST has engaged in a great deal of technical, foundational work on the measurement and evaluation of aid, as well as a series of workshops attended by the core members, allowing them to develop more solid working relationships.<sup>71</sup> NeST members have also been active in attending larger fora, which provide an opportunity to disseminate their work and objectives, as well as to garner support and eventual members. This has included a very significant presence at the 2016 Nairobi HLM, the follow-up to Mexico.

NeST's focus on indicators and measurement can be seen as in part a response to the challenge identified by Fejerskov, Lundsgaarde and Cold-Ravnkilde whereby

*given the rapid growth in the volume of SSC, it is only a matter of time until countries engaged in SSC will have to prove the claims about mutual benefits*

[64] At the time there was some speculation that China's absence may also have been linked to the ongoing discussion around the delayed launch of its new white paper on development, although recent conversations with Chinese officials working on development indicate that this was not a factor.

[65] Russia, by contrast, was a highly active presence — although this was perhaps less favourable given current political events at the time, such as the annexation of Crimea.

[66] Eyben; Savage, 2012.

[67] Mawdsley, 2015b.

[68] The Network of Southern Think-Tanks was subsequently recorded as a Voluntary Initiative in the HLM communiqué. NeST's founding members are RIS (India), Ipea (Brazil), SAIIA (South Africa) and CIDRN (China). The NeST launch, hosted in the offices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the margins of the GPEDC in Mexico in 2014, included representatives from the Instituto Mora (Mexico), Articulação Sul (Brazil), the Asia Foundation, Centre for Policy Dialogue (Bangladesh), and Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation (CAITEC). The following organisations were invited as observers: OECD-DAC, UNDP China, Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and German Development Institute (DIE).

[69] Constantine; Shankland; Gu, 2015.

[70] Summary from the Meeting of Southern Think Tanks, Ministry of External Relations, Mexico City, 14 Apr. 2014.

[71] See, for example, Besharati et al., 2015.

[72] Fejerskov; Lundsgaarde; Cold-Ravnkilde, 2016, p. 9.

*and comparative advantages of SSC [...]. Whether the norms and principles can be formulated in ways that are distinctively different from those of the OECD-DAC remains to be seen.*<sup>72</sup>

[73] Bianca Suyama, Articulação Sul (Brazil), pers. comm., Apr. 2016.

However, it is also a response to the growth of domestic debate on rising power countries' SSC activities, and the accompanying calls for greater transparency and accountability.<sup>73</sup> From a policy diffusion/transfer point of view, however, we argue the chief significance of NEST is that in echoing the OECD-DAC logic that greater codification and standardisation are necessary to enhance the legitimacy and utility of SSC, it is implicitly accepting the value of this approach. It can therefore be seen as a case of policy transfer — or even institutional isomorphism, should NEST eventually evolve into something resembling a “DAC of the South” — for which the key policy field is development cooperation itself, rather than cooperation being simply a mechanism for the diffusion or transfer of countries' own development experiences.

#### **DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION BEYOND THE GPEDC**

[74] Mawdsley, 2015b.

[75] Eyben; Savage, 2012.

After Mexico many DAC member countries shifted away from aid effectiveness principles, as a combination of domestic political and economic pressures, and desire to compete with the rising powers led to a greater emphasis on trade and business opportunities.<sup>74</sup> Eyben and Savage's acute observation of the Busan HLM<sup>75</sup> showed a plethora of countries — developed and developing, Northern and Southern alike — already changing their geography by aligning themselves with a claim that “we are all Southern now”. At the Mexico HLM, DAC member countries' imitation of SSC's inclusion of economic relations under the umbrella of “cooperation” was evident in the substantial private sector presence promoted by the UK in its role as GPEDC co-chair. Since Mexico, DAC member countries have increasingly adopted the discourse of “mutual learning” as well as the logic of “mutual benefit”. However, our observation of the GPEDC process, including EU-DAC-hosted working meetings of the GPEDC at the European Commission in Brussels, suggests that a gulf remains between the positions espoused by individuals from DAC member states and by those from low-income and non-OECD middle-income countries. The deeper contradictions between the discourses of these actors also reflect the continued asymmetries of power between DAC and non-DAC states, and the apparent reluctance of some DAC donors to offer political recognition to non-DAC states as development cooperation actors.

There was always an awareness that the OECD's repositioning of what became the GPEDC was going to be challenging, given its history and the clear preference from many developing countries to work within the framework of the UN. However, the UN's alternative mechanisms, the Development Cooperation Forum (DCF) and High Level Political Forum (HLPF) remain largely trapped in a bloc-based logic in which geopolitical positioning is more important than openness to new knowledge. Formal status as an intergovernmental negotiating body — the lack of which made the GPEDC illegitimate in the eyes of the BRICS — has proved a disabling factor for the potential of the UN's alternative spaces to promote genuine multidirectional learning. This has led some observers to conclude that the world of development cooperation faces a choice between a (DAC-led) space that is effective but not legitimate and a (UN-led) space that is legitimate but not effective.<sup>76</sup>

[76] Janus; Klingebiel; Mahn, 2014.

After Mexico, the BRICS began to invest more heavily in creating their own alternative policy spaces and processes, rejecting the status quo in favour of a messier, more complex, multipolar world where power is fractured and fragmented, with new spaces emerging which are sometimes not visible to (or recognised by) those in the global North. These include the various BRICS fora — which range from working groups, ministerial and high level meetings on a variety of thematic issues to the New Development Bank (formerly the BRICS Bank) — and the China-led Silk Road Fund and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. These spaces have begun to demonstrate considerable potential for mutual learning about policy responses to development challenges.<sup>77</sup>

[77] Constantine; Bloom; Shankland, 2016.

However, these BRICS-led spaces are not open to non-member countries, and unlike the DAC have hitherto shown little inclination to “sign up” others from either the North or the South. One exception has been China's launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which had a wide range of countries joining the queue to become AIIB members, ranging from the BRICS to the UK and other developed and developing countries and emerging economies. The very public failed attempt of the US to lead a boycott of the AIIB not only served to bolster China's position, but confirmed to developed and developing countries alike that the new multipolar world order is here to stay. Along with the recent establishment by the Chinese government's Development Research Centre (DRC) of a Knowledge Center for International Development, tasked with developing an anthology of case studies of Chinese development experiences identified as suitable for adoption elsewhere, this may signal the beginning of China's attempt to establish itself as a key site for international policy diffusion. For this attempt to be suc-

cessful, however, the exceptionalism embedded in the rising tide of Chinese national self-assertion would need to be tempered with a greater emphasis on the relevance of other countries' experiences to China that is integral to the principle of mutual learning. Following the GPEDC's failure to win sufficient legitimacy, not only has the existing institutional and policy architecture of development cooperation has proved unable to provide an effective platform for multidirectional policy transfer, but an alternative architecture has yet to evolve at the international level. In the next section we examine whether emerging trends at the subnational level may suggest an alternative possible future for development policy diffusion.

#### **SOUTH-NORTH SUBNATIONAL POLICY DIFFUSION: A SIGN OF THINGS TO COME?**

A number of fascinating and increasingly better-documented examples of South-North policy exchange are now easier to find, particularly at the subnational level. There are various city-to-city cooperation networks engaged in multidirectional learning exchanges, from South to North and North to South (e.g. the European Union URB-AL regional cooperation programme with Latin America) which have played a role in diffusion processes such as the global spread of participatory budgeting.<sup>78</sup> Cities in the North have also engaged in policy learning from Southern countries' experiences of conditional cash transfers, as in the 2007 case documented by Bowman and Arocena in which New York City mayor Bloomberg and his team drew on lessons from Brazil, Mexico and various other countries to inform the design of the Opportunity NYC Family Rewards programme after the UN hosted a "North-South learning exchange" on this topic.<sup>79</sup> More recently, examples of South-North policy learning and exchange have been documented in the policy fields of health systems, citizen participation, reconciliatory justice, and food security.<sup>80</sup> The authors have been involved in some of these subnational policy exchanges, including a UK-São Paulo exchange on how Brighton's local health authority could learn from Brazilian health specialists to learn more about how their Single Health System (SUS) patient and public engagement experiences might be applied to the NHS; and a project supporting mutual learning on food and nutrition policy between Brazil and the UK.

This trend was discussed at the International Seminar on Policy Diffusion held in São Paulo (May 2016), which included a panel on the role of subnational politics in policy diffusion at which one of the authors of this paper presented a work on Brazil-UK cooperation in food and health policy and officials from the cities of Osasco and Guarulhos shared their work on the diffusion/transfer of municipal

[78] Ganuza; Baiocchi, 2012; Porto de Oliveira, 2016.

[79] Bowman; Arocena, 2014.

[80] Learning from the Global South, Royal Society of the Arts round-table, Brighton, 13 June 2016, <http://www.ids.ac.uk/events/learning-from-the-global-south>; see also Richard Longhurst, 2016, <http://www.ids.ac.uk/opinion/time-to-learn-from-the-south-and-that-includes-brighton>.

innovations.<sup>81</sup> The discussion bore out the evidence from the diffusion literature that politicians and officials are more likely to explore policy solutions that are both useful and politically viable, and will work through common networks and intermediaries which offers a greater variety of policy choices.<sup>82</sup>

The international cooperation official from Guarulhos acknowledged that part of his team's desire to get involved in SSC and South-North cooperation was to share some of the limelight enjoyed by federal government officials. However, the way they engaged in cooperation was through mayoral and city-to-city networks, which operate outside of the context of international organisations such as the OECD and UN. Decentralised development cooperation policy transfer allows for what Shipan and Volden term the unleashing of the experimental power of policy diffusion,<sup>83</sup> which can bring about both healthy and unhealthy competition across different levels of government. The discussion also showed how the role of individual actors — including politicians and civil servants in high and middling positions — in transfer/diffusion/learning is often shaped by necessity. They are not a third party trying to broker learning; rather, they need solutions to “bread-and-butter” policy issues such as enabling access to basic services such as water and sanitation, managing overly-full cemeteries, setting up functional and politically-viable tax collection systems and more. This echoes evidence from studies of diffusion processes in China, which have concluded that success often derives from a focus on technical, nitty-gritty procedural issues.<sup>84</sup>

The panel's discussion of the transfer of policy innovations from Brazilian to Mozambican municipalities concluded that both sides had assumed that their experiences were sufficiently similar to provide a foundation for their exchange.<sup>85</sup> Such assumptions are, however, often related more to notions of solidarity (based on shared experience, including of colonial or postcolonial oppression by the North) than to actually observable similarities in conditions.<sup>86</sup> Even where such similarities exist, power asymmetries ensure that they do not translate simply into equality of exchange. Exponents of SSC are quick to point out that “mutual benefit”, like “mutual learning”, is a two-way process but not one that necessarily implies equal benefit or equally extensive learning on both sides of the relationship. They are perfectly well aware of the risk that “some new actors, while seeking to promote self-interest, may introduce new power imbalances at the expense of the poorest countries and citizens, emphasising high levels of difference and inequality both between and within the countries engaged in SSC”.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, both SSC discourse and the emerging field of decentralised South-North policy diffusion remain highly critical of any symbolic or structural subordination in development

[81] Discussion with International Relations Coordinators Fernando Santomauro (Guarulhos City Hall) and Luciano Jurcovichi Costa (Osasco City Hall), International Seminar on Policy Diffusion, Fapesp University, Osasco, São Paulo, 11 May 2016.

[82] Shipan; Volden, 2012.

[83] Shipan; Volden, 2012, p. 6.

[84] Husain, 2015.

[85] Husain, 2015.

[86] Taela, 2017; Shankland; Gonçalves, 2016.

[87] Fejerskov; Lundsgaarde; Cold-Ravnkilde, 2016, p. 9.

cooperation relationships, which makes them potentially valuable resources for meeting the challenge of promoting genuinely multi-directional policy transfer processes. In the final section of this paper, we reflect on the prospects for the institutional and policy architecture of international development cooperation to draw on these resources in attempting to meet this challenge.

#### **CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS MUTUAL LEARNING IN AN ERA OF UNIVERSAL DEVELOPMENT?**

As we have argued above, the advent of the SDGs should herald new opportunities for transforming the practice and politics of development cooperation, and the rationale for multidirectional, multi-stakeholder, mutual learning is more powerful than ever. Financial flows still count, but so do flows of knowledge and expertise, and the increasingly multidirectional character of the latter is reinforced by the growing recognition among policy actors in the global North that the chances of tackling sticky national and international development problems can be boosted by applying learning from the policy experiences of countries in the Global South.

This recognition is now apparent even in the UK, despite its earlier failure when leading the GPEDC to understand that “the traditional donors [...] may be reaffirming their old imperialist identity when they take the lead in initiatives and seek to block those led by the South”.<sup>88</sup> The UK’s growing awareness of the need for a new approach was evident, for example, at an event in London on the Nutrition for Growth Global Compact in April 2016 in which a Conservative member of parliament, Baroness Verma, highlighted both the shift in who learns from whom and the importance of an ongoing relationship between the UK and Brazil in the effort to tackle all forms of malnutrition, before adding that “Brazil has achieved what many aspire to achieve on nutrition and food security”. In a similar vein, a February 2017 event convened by the UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development platform included contributions from senior civil servants from Colombia and Uganda (as well as Germany and Norway) to a discussion on “Implementing the SDGs: Lessons from around the World” that included reflections on the applicability of lessons from these countries to the UK.<sup>89</sup> These are concrete examples of a Northern country showing interest in learning from the South in areas where it perceives itself to be facing development challenges.

This emerging awareness of South-North exchange and partnership has the potential to disrupt the traditional asymmetries of development cooperation discourse (North-South, developed-developing, rich-poor, donor-beneficiary) whose persistence was evident in the

[88] Eyben, 2014, p.111.

[89] Northcote, 2017.



failed attempt by the GPEDC to respond to the ontological challenge of SSC. If the GPEDC has a future, it lies in reinventing itself as an enabling platform for the exchange of experiential learning, which lies at the heart of SSC — and which increasingly features in development cooperation discourse under the guise of adaptive learning approaches such as “problem-driven interative adaptation”.<sup>90</sup> However, the policy transfer/diffusion literature provides some useful reminders that successful diffusion requires more than simply promoting access to exemplars of successful policy-making in similar or relevant contexts. Any such reinvention of the GPEDC would have to contend with the barriers to learning produced by inherent biases<sup>91</sup> of the kind that were evident in the case of the Mexico HLM. These biases are deeply embedded in the nature and logic of “Aidland” instruments such as those used to define the measurement of aid flows; as a result, they tend to push attempts to standardise the different traditions of development cooperation towards conformity with Northern framings. This effect can be seen in the way that Southern-led development cooperation policy initiatives such as NeST have come to develop norms for SSC that reflect some of the underlying assumptions (including about the nature of expertise and the measurement of success) that underpin the approaches of the DAC and other Northern-dominated “development knowledge providers” such as the World Bank.<sup>92</sup>

A revived GPEDC would also have to navigate the risk of failure resulting from lack of resources and time under pressure or during crises.<sup>93</sup> This risk has been intensified by recent political changes in key countries of the North and South, which bring with them a further narrowing of the space for multistakeholder dialogue and exchange, a reduction in the availability of financial resources and a greater likelihood of stalemate at the level of multilateral development initiatives. In this context, geopolitical dynamics may make it significantly harder to gain traction and momentum for a mutual learning agenda, regardless of how much DAC and non-DAC thinkers and practitioners might call for it. Above all, the policy diffusion literature highlights that policy choices are inherently political first, and *policy* success is weighed up against *political* success<sup>94</sup> — and in such volatile times, political success is becoming increasingly hard to predict.

Given these levels of bias and risk, it is tempting to move away from the international development cooperation policy and institutional architecture altogether when searching for high-quality, enabling spaces for mutual learning. The São Paulo conference panel discussion mentioned in the previous section concluded that South-North (and indeed multidirectional) policy diffusion/transfer seems to happen more successfully when it is outside the context of “international development”, and free from the risk of

[90] Andrews; Pritchett; Woolcock, 2013.

[91] Weyland, 2007.

[92] As Fejerskov, Lundsgaarde and Cold-Ravnkilde (2016, p. 6) point out, “the new actors may be highly dynamic and as likely to go through changes themselves as they are to initiate changes in the field [...] organisations coming together will adopt similar traits over time and influence other organisations to do the same as they start entering the field, underlining the strong regulatory and normative processes of the field of development cooperation”.

[93] Shipan; Volden, 2012; Moynihan, 2008.

[94] Gilardi, 2010, authors’ emphasis.

[95] Porto de Oliveira, 2016.

[96] Shipan; Volden, 2012.

co-optation by formal international structures such as the GPEDC. It is therefore likely that the strongest momentum for mutual learning may come from outside Aidland, driven by policy fields where South-North diffusion and transfer is already taking place. As discussed above, recent examples of successful “mutual learning” are often driven by decentralised policy networks, sometimes catalysed by entrepreneurial policy actors — “ambassadors”<sup>95</sup> who benefit from brokering such learning and relationships, and not by established international development cooperation institutions, reflecting the conclusions of recent policy diffusion research on the importance of decentralisation as an enabling factor.<sup>96</sup>

However, the impulse to scale up these localised processes and develop common platforms for multi-directional policy transfer may yet take root, driven not by hegemonic geopolitics or solidarity-based idealism but by self-interest. The universal nature of the UN’s Agenda 2030 is grounded not only in political aspiration but also in practical reality: countries need to internalise the logic of the Global Goals in order to tackle rising inequality, threatened sustainability and faltering growth, individually as well as collectively. Meeting these challenges will require greater openness to flows of experience-based policy learning from unusual as well as established sources. If the institutional and policy architecture of international development cooperation can overcome the barriers we have discussed in this article and evolve into an effective facilitator of such flows, it may yet have a future.

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