

ing of the Declaration ex-ante, or that it should be binding.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ 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 Savage⁶⁶ and Mawdsley.⁶⁷ 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.^{68,69} 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".⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ 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 office 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.*⁷²

[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.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ Eyben and Savage's acute observation of the Busan HLM⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶

[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.⁷⁷

[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 Investment Infrastructure 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.⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹ 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.⁸²

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,⁸³ 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.⁸⁴

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.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶ 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”.⁸⁷ 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”.⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹ 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 interactive adaptation”.⁹⁰ 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 biases⁹¹ 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.⁹²

A revived GPEDC would also have to navigate the risk of failure resulting from lack of resources and time under pressure or during crises.⁹³ 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* success⁹⁴ — 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”⁹⁵ 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.⁹⁶

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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