

Duisburg's other Silk Road: revisiting international cooperation

Adolf Kloke-Lesch, Imme Scholz

Adolf Kloke-Lesch is Co-Chair of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network Europe (SDSN Europe). During his decade-long professional life, he served i.a. as Director General with the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and as Managing Director of Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). His close cooperation with Dirk Messner started when the two met in early 1998 at the Institute for Peace and Development (INEF) in Duisburg for an exchange on the future of development policy. It further intensified when Dirk Messner became Director of the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) in 2002. In 2013/2014 both took the initiative to set up SDSN Germany for which Dirk Messner became the first Co-Chair (alongside Klaus Töpfer) while Adolf Kloke-Lesch took over the role of the Executive Director of the network.

Prof. Dr. Imme Scholz is a sociologist and president of the Heinrich Boell Foundation in Berlin. She is very active at the science-policy interface on several arenas and matters related to global sustainable development, including the German Council for Sustainable Development, the Independent Group of Scientists charged with the next Global Sustainable Development Report, and the Think 20. She met Dirk Messner in 1990 when both were researchers at DIE in Berlin and joined him as his deputy in 2009 while he was director of the Institute. Leading and shaping the Institute with him was both an intellectual pleasure and a rewarding learning process for her.

Germany's western city of Duisburg is one of the main end points of the New Silk Road with 60 freight container trains per week arriving from China, still half of them going back empty. China's New Silk Road probably is the biggest state-driven international investment endeavour since the Marshall Plan of the United States after World War II. But Duisburg is also one of the places where in 1995 the delicate silk threads of new ideas on international cooperation for the global common good began to be spun into a broader concept of global governance. By their critical examination and further development of the approach of the Commission on Global Governance, Dirk Messner and Franz Nuscheler, both then with the Institute for Development and Peace in Duisburg, introduced quite a

new thinking (the ‘Duisburg School’) into the German discourse on development and international cooperation. They spoke of shared sovereignties through the transfer of competencies, the intensification of international cooperation by means of international regimes governed by binding rules, and a foreign policy geared to the global common good (Messner & Nuscheler, 1996). Their ideas inspired an aid community that was moving beyond a primary fixation on reducing poverty by implementing reasonable projects and programmes in developing countries. The ensuing new development discourse focussed on global structural policy instead. However, the optimism of the 1990s which culminated in the United Nations Millennium Declaration was quickly challenged by the war on terror after 9/11 and the resurgence of geopolitical tensions. In the aftermath, the realist school in international relations regained sway in academic debates and political practice.

What is international cooperation and why should it change?

Is mankind doomed to a world where ‘man is a wolf to man’ and nations behave just like this? Whoever had a chance to listen to one of Dirk Messner’s speeches has been taught otherwise. His trust in humans’ inclination to strive for the better and their ability to cooperate is as intriguing as his proficiency in spotting movement into the right direction against all odds. Fifteen years after his first stint in Duisburg and during his time as Director of the German Development Institute (2003–2018), Dirk Messner was a key partner in setting up the Centre for Global Cooperation Research at the University of Duisburg-Essen. By drawing on research on human behaviour, Messner and colleagues arrived at the conclusion that there may be a natural human propensity to cooperate and that the predisposition to cooperate is independent of culture (Messner et al. 2016). They identified a relatively small set of mechanisms that enable successful cooperation, encapsulated in a cooperation hexagon (figure 1) with reciprocity at its centre. While acknowledging the reality of power struggles, they argued that this hexagon could be scaled up to international cooperation.

Figure 1: *The cooperation hexagon*, Messner et al., 2016: 134.



This is a much more qualified understanding of cooperation compared to the standard definitions and can be applied to international relations in the forms of diplomacy and international cooperation in an operational sense. In this context, international cooperation is understood as working together to achieve specific objectives via joint projects by using financial and other means. In contrast, diplomacy is primarily about regulating relations and competition between nations including multilateral regimes, e.g. on trade or global public goods.

The elements of the cooperation hexagon could be well observed when in 2015, in a rare and historic achievement of diplomacy, the world came together in adopting the 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement on climate change. Indeed, reciprocity is at the heart of both agreements, aiming at transformation everywhere with a view to the global common good. They were an expression of both a we-identity of humankind and the quest for reputation which no country would like to put at risk by staying away. They could only be achieved by a long process that created trust and gave all sides the necessary assurances about the fairness of the deal. They built on intense multi-level and multi-actor communication and entail at least some means of enforcement. However, the first six years of the implementation of both landmark agreements did not meet expectations. A rise of populist and nationalist counter-transformations and a further increase of geopolitical tensions let multilateral, solution-oriented cooperation grind almost to a halt.

But can this failure be attributed only to the 'big picture' or are there also weaknesses in the cooperation system embodied in both agreements that hinder effective implementation? So far, most of international funding is channelled through the agencies and procedures of development cooperation. But what do we learn when we look at them through the lens of the cooperation hexagon? The main feature of development cooperation is built around the concept of aid, not around the idea of reciprocity. As the desired change lies only at one end of the partnership, a we-identity

is difficult to arise and reputation is trapped in the donor-recipient model. Mutual trust and fairness are often perceived as weak, communication and enforcement mainly come as one-way streets.

Towards a new narrative

In contrast, the universal character of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement constitutes sort of a Copernican turn in the thinking about global development (Kloke-Lesch, 2020; Messner & Scholz, 2018) and stipulates transformative change to happen everywhere if it is to happen globally. Taken seriously, this requires a comparable overhaul of the pre-2015 world's cooperation architecture. A fit for purpose 21st century cooperation must spur transformation not only in poorer but in richer countries alike, because the latter are also critical to global success. This is all the more important as domestic and external policies are intricately related and need each other more than previously, due to external effects of domestic policies (spill-overs of action and non-action).

In 1996, Messner and Nuscheler posited the global common good as the horizon against which foreign policy should define its objectives and priorities. They were confident that international regimes could be equipped with strong mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement. Twenty-five years later, it is clear we cannot rely only on international regimes to foster a decision-making at national levels that situates national well-being within the global context, spatially and time-wise. Rather and in addition, we need a system of cooperation that supports and enforces the achievement of these global goals by engaging all countries in a universal and reciprocal way.

Overcoming hindrances to universality

The 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement leave no doubt about their universal character. To achieve their goals, both call for an international cooperation that is as wide as possible. However, both accords focus cooperation on support for developing countries and have little specifics about cooperation beyond North-South and South-South. This reflects the broader lopsidedness of the means of implementation as encapsulated in the 2030 Agenda. Not one of them is geared specifically towards 'developed countries'. This obviously reflects the interests of major groups

of countries as well as institutional path-dependencies. Still, the letter and the spirit of the majority of these means are truly universal and establish a responsibility of 'developed countries' to act on the SDGs also in their relations with each other (Kloke-Lesch, 2020).

Against this aspiration of universality, there are two main weaknesses in today's cooperation architecture, the first related to the concept of 'graduation' within the framework of North-South cooperation, the second referring to North-North cooperation.

Development cooperation (North-South) has been framed around the concept of official development assistance (ODA). It still is by far the most important source for external funding to implement multilateral agreements and insofar is related to universality. In a way, also the eligibility to ODA could be seen as a conditioned expression of universality since all countries can receive ODA if they are or become low or middle-income countries. History has shown countries entering the recipients list of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), like Eastern European and Central Asian countries in the 1990s, or leaving it after becoming high-income countries or joining the European Union. These changes reflect ups and downs in countries' economic development as well as geopolitical changes but unfortunately not the ever more pressing needs related to global sustainability. Graduating countries from the ODA recipients list means that cooperation with them towards the global common good will not be counted as ODA anymore, leading in most cases to its phasing-out. In addition, there is a more creeping graduation taking place when cooperation with middle-income countries is wound down due to a focus on low-income countries. In both cases, the contradiction between the inner logics of the ODA system and action towards global sustainability becomes strikingly apparent. As a result, many middle-income as well as formally graduated countries fall behind the traditional horizon of cooperation although many of them are highly relevant for achieving the SDGs and securing the global common good.

While South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation nowadays is perceived as a growing dimension of development cooperation for the achievement of the SDGs, a rarely asked question is whether and how North-North cooperation satisfies these requirements. North-North cooperation is not an established concept, but it entails many features familiar to South-South cooperation which ranges from trade to investment to science and technology and to jointly implemented projects. It encompasses, on the one hand, bilateral cooperation like the Franco-German Treaty of Aachen or the European Union-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, both of which indeed at least refer to the SDGs and

climate goals. On the other hand, there are platforms such as the Group of Seven (G7) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as well as multilateral treaties that are limited to ‘Northern’ geographies like the Arctic Council. In these cooperation settings, the main objective is to regulate competition in economic and political terms instead of engaging in concrete collaborative efforts to achieve specific goals, such as climate neutrality. Thus, North-North cooperation is bound to change, too. Propelling transformative change also in richer countries needs to become an indispensable element of a future cooperation architecture.

Strengthening reciprocity

The weaknesses of the cooperation architecture with regard to enhancing transformative change in graduating middle-income and in richer countries are mirrored in a low level of reciprocity in cooperation formats. In this context, South-South cooperation follows a specific approach. It claims being not asymmetrical but reciprocal as it is agreed among equals and pursues mutual benefits. In practice, however, asymmetries abound. It requires much effort to avoid the pitfalls of donor-recipient relationships. Still, the conceptual starting point is an acknowledgement that cooperation depends on the objectives and interests of all participants while not assuming that they are altogether altruistic on the side of the provider of funding and expertise. In addition, the mutual benefit of South-South cooperation seems only rarely being linked to structural change on both sides of the partnerships. Interestingly, also triangular cooperation is geared only towards change at one end, forgoing the opportunity of a circular process of learning for the global common good.

This is all the more the case with North-South cooperation that does not consider engaging in a reciprocal change and learning experience with so-called recipients and invest very little in education and science systems in developing countries which would enable them to devise local solutions and accelerate learning, change and exchange. Reciprocity builds on shared interests in creating solutions for shared problems and on the benefits of learning to do this together. An example: a transformative alliance of countries with a sizeable share of coal in their energy systems could be crucial for accelerating the transition to climate neutrality. Such an alliance would have to comprise countries like Poland and Australia, India and South Africa as well as countries like the Philippines and Vietnam where coal-fired plants are still being planned.

One factor that makes it especially difficult to discover the advantages of reciprocal North-South cooperation is the above-mentioned concept of graduation. It kicks countries out of the group eligible for development cooperation just when their potential for reciprocal partnerships is advancing in a way that could facilitate learning experiences and transformative change also for so-called donors. But reciprocity can and should be possible also with poorer and smaller countries. They should have more possibilities to address domestic policies in richer countries that they deem relevant to them and the global common good. Obviously, this can be started easier within regional or multilateral formats, e.g. by giving the World Bank or the African Union a role regarding transformative change in the European Union. Also within bilateral cooperation formats, partners could take visible roles in specific contexts that demonstrate the riches they can contribute to a common we-identity. Another way of moving forward is by opening cooperation formats with developing countries to other developed countries, tearing down the walls between North-South and North-North cooperation.

Against all odds

Sustainable development can become the biggest global investment endeavour of our times. A universal and reciprocal approach to cooperation would emphasise co-responsibility and co-creation aiming at a global public investment system where “all contribute, all benefit, and all decide” (EWG-GPI, 2021). When all countries invest financial and knowledge resources, they are more prone to engage in processes of mutual structural change. The governance of this system would depart from the distinction between donors and recipients and underline shared interests and responsibilities. It would probably rely on a mosaic of global funds, UN organisations and multilateral development banks as well as bilateral and interregional cooperation settings. Currently, it is hard to imagine how such a reform could be implemented – but in times of crises bold visions are needed to guide action when sudden change appears to be possible. In the meantime, we should follow disruptive incrementalism. Universality and reciprocity come in many ways. By looking for doable, smaller steps we can trigger bigger, transformative change. Sooner or later, containers from Africa will be arriving in Duisburg full of fresh ideas for the development of Europe.

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