

## GEG Memo

# **New Faces in the OECD Crowd: “Partner” Participation in Busan and the Prospects for South-South Cooperation**

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The OECD’s representativeness and legitimacy in the aid community is contested and it is regularly blamed for being a “rich club”.<sup>1</sup> This is because the organization’s members are industrialized countries only. **In the past years however, the OECD/DAC has made considerable efforts and launched several initiatives to better engage with developing countries and incorporate their visions and interests in the global aid agenda. How successful has the OECD been?** This piece highlights the main features of “partner” country participation in the *Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness* (HLF4) held in Busan. I first provide a global oversight and argue that “partner” participation did not transform aid recipients into partners in rule-making at the global level. I then outline some of the achievements of, and prospects for, the South-South and triangular cooperation initiative.

**Since 2005, governments and some civil society organisations in developing countries have been associated with the implementation and evaluation of the Paris declaration.** At the country level, national experts and civil servants have contributed to the elaboration of surveys and monitoring exercises. The Working Party on Aid effectiveness, set-up in 2003, has included developing countries as members to embed an “international partnership for aid effectiveness”.<sup>2</sup> The rhetoric of practitioners has shifted to foster inclusion and address power asymmetries in the aid relationship. While the words “donors” and “recipients” were still found in the OECD literature a couple of years ago, they have now disappeared and been replaced by the constant reference to “partnerships”. Non-OECD members from the South have also led or taken part in working groups, clusters, task-forces and building blocks related to the implementation of the Paris declaration at the OECD in Paris. Emerging and low income countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa (such as Mali, Honduras or Rwanda)

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<sup>1</sup> For an example of these critiques, see: Glennie, Jonathan. “The OECD should give up control of the aid agenda”, Posted on Friday 29 April 2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/apr/29/oecd-control-aid-agenda>

<sup>2</sup> The Working Party on Aid Effectiveness (WP-EFF) was created in 2003 and “has evolved into with 80 participants including bilateral and multilateral donors, aid recipients, emerging providers of development assistance, civil society organisations, global programmes, the private sector and parliaments”: [http://www.oecd.org/document/35/0,3343,en\\_2649\\_3236398\\_43382307\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/35/0,3343,en_2649_3236398_43382307_1_1_1_1,00.html)

were full-right members of the “sherpas” in charge of drafting, negotiating and approving the conference’s final statement.

In the Busan Outcome Document, “partner” country participation is reflected in two main commitments by donors. The first is to “accelerate [their] efforts to untie aid” (paragraph 18) and the second is to “use country systems as the default approach for development co-operation in support of activities managed by the public sector” (paragraph 19). These are two important achievements for low income countries, whose governments prefer aid to be delivered using national systems and procedures – the national budget, line ministries, spending and monitoring rules – rather than multiple, parallel, donor-driven channels and standards.

In Paris and Busan, one member of the Ghanaian delegation highlighted that the DAC *is* a valuable arena to discuss aid issues – contrary to what some critiques argue. Even a couple of years ago, some recipient country officials “did not dare to open their mouth” during meetings held at the OECD headquarters – at the *Château de la Muette*, a building entirely reconstructed by the Baron Henri de Rothschild in 1921-1922 in a former royal castle and hunting area and now situated in Paris’ wealthy 16th arrondissement. Yet, they now come to OECD meetings stating “this is what we want”.

However, my observation of Southern delegates at Busan reveals a slightly different picture, and suggests that there is only token partnership. “Partner” participation was important, and facilitated by important financial support by the United Nations Development Programme, who allocated a trust fund (financed by the European Commission, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, USAID, Korea and Japan) which paid for plane tickets of delegates from developing countries. But the participation of delegates from the South cannot be assessed only by the *number* of Southern participants, or their contribution to a document that is both binding and deprived of implementation and sanction mechanisms. We must also pay attention to the nature, modalities and forms of their engagement at Busan. In the plenary sessions and the presentations of the different building blocks, “partner” countries were equally represented. Yet very few of the side-events, mini-debates and workshops – which actually made for a big share of the conference’s interest and vibrancy - were actually convened, led or moderated by Southern delegates.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, Southern delegates interventions predominantly provided insights about realities “on the ground” rather than opinions or reflections on the features and future of aid from a broader, over-arching perspective. In doing so these interventions risked confining Southern states to the role of ‘local’ experts, as victims or witnesses of underdevelopment, or case-study examples of a developmental meta-truth. Their speeches often dealt with one country and were framed in the linear two-fold format – “progress made” / “remaining challenges ahead” – characteristic of aid reports and thinking. Even when they talked on behalf of global institutions (public or private) in plenaries for example, some of them were tempted to refer to the experience and situation of their “home” country.

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<sup>3</sup> This observation is based on the events and conferences that I personally attended. I could of course not attend them and it is possible that other settings were organized differently. Accounts of this and comments on this post are warmly welcome! Please contact me: isa\_berga@yahoo.fr

The casting of Southern delegates as ‘local’ experts by the overall setting: chairs and moderators focused on the importance of hearing and learning about country realities and lessons learnt “at the country level” when introducing Southern delegates, who in turn probably felt more comfortable presenting themselves under those terms. Indeed, aid-recipient representatives are used to delivering such speeches in their daily “policy dialogue” with donors at the country level, and have learned quite efficiently to say what donors expect to secure continued support in the past, say, thirty years. In addition, HLF4 represented an official venue dominated by diplomatic caution and organised by the OECD - an international institution that recipient countries know relatively little about and which they are not formal members of.

One notable exception to this was the assertive speech delivered by the President of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, who pointed to donors’ own incapacity to meet their commitments, their “unending questions that no answer can fully satisfy” and the burden they represent for recipient leaders and their administrations in a rather bold way.

**The promotion of South-South and triangular cooperation represented another important feature of “partner” country participation at HLF4.** The Task-Team<sup>4</sup> started three years ago and seeks to enhance exchange between developing countries, in collaboration with “traditional” donors (hence the reference to a triangle). Since then, the Task-Team has produced deliverables (presented at the Bogotá High Level Event on South-South Cooperation and Capacity Development in March 2010), collected 110 stories of the world and conducted 31 case-studies of South-South cooperation experiences from all regions. After Busan, it will result in a Building Block as part of the *Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation*. The latter is the new international political platform in charge of supervising the implementation of commitments, placed under the tutelage of the DAC-chair and led in coordination with the United Nations Development Programme (the framework’s modalities still need to be detailed).

In Busan, events organized by the Task-Team gathered many participants, even on Day Three when a South-South side-event was taking place concomitantly with the final plenary. References to South-South cooperation have “moved up” in the Outcome Document and now appear in its second paragraph (see extracts below), which was a source of satisfaction for the leaders and coordinators of the initiative:

“The nature, modalities and responsibilities that apply to South-South co-operation differ from those that apply to North-South co-operation (...). The principles, commitments and actions agreed in the outcome document in Busan shall be the reference for South-South partners on a voluntary basis”.

Panels about South-South cooperation were the only ones where Chinese officials were acting as speakers or moderators. The reference to the differential “nature, modalities and

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<sup>4</sup> “The Task Team on South-South Cooperation’s (TT-SSC) main objective leading up to the Fourth High Level Forum is to deliver evidence-based policy recommendations. Mutual learning between southern practitioners and north-south practitioners will be encourage with the aim of identifying effective practices”: [http://www.oecd.org/document/51/0,3746,en\\_2649\\_3236398\\_43385523\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/51/0,3746,en_2649_3236398_43385523_1_1_1_1,00.html)

responsibilities” of South-South cooperation and the commitment of South-South partners “on a voluntary basis” results from Chinese positions in the negotiation and the OECD’s will to accommodate them to ensure their endorsement of the document.

**The South-South initiative as it has developed has three interesting characteristics, which partly account for the momentum it has gained at the OECD in the past years.**

Firstly, the Task-Team dedicated to this issue is presented as inclusive. It has been *led by developing countries*, in particular Colombia and Indonesia, and thus appeared more representative and country-led than other OECD or DAC spaces. It seeks to build on the principles of equality, mutual respect and benefit, horizontality and sovereignty, and to associate actors other than states, such as civil society, local governments, the private sector and academia. The format of the side-event on South-South and triangular cooperation itself was designed in a way that allowed greater and wider participation: the room was divided into four relatively small groups along thematic lines. Secondly, the initiative puts the focus on the *processes* – and not only the results – of aid, and on the *human* dimension of international cooperation. To many, this appears particularly appealing in an aid field otherwise saturated with quantitative evaluation mechanisms, proliferating statistics and indicators and bureaucratic monitoring exercises. Thirdly, the initiative gave priority to *knowledge-sharing* and provided considerable room for the engagement of academics from the global South.

I suggest five patterns and pending questions that, in my opinion, are useful to analyse and understand the achievements and future of the Building Block on South-South and triangular cooperation.

### **1) What are the link(s) with other South-South cooperation efforts?**

South-South cooperation is not new; on the contrary, it has a long history. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, Asian, African and Latin American Countries worked to build joint-projects and coalitions as part as their attempts to develop, emancipate towards the North and negotiate a “New International Economic Order” (NIEO). The Non-Aligned Movement, i.e. the refusal of newly independent countries to choose side (either for the capitalist “free world” or the Soviet bloc) in the context of the Cold war, was established at a conference organised in Bandung (Indonesia) in 1955. Later, dependency theory – whose leading thinkers were from Latin America and closely associated to the work of the *Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe* (CEPAL) - criticised the unequal interactions between the “centre” and the “periphery” and the “imperialistic” nature of aid.

The geopolitical landscape has changed and such discourses have vanished from the core international policy agenda. Officials from Indonesia mentioned past experiences only in passing in their presentations but did not elaborate on their legacy for the current OECD-based initiative. Recently, President Chavez of Venezuela has tried to use aid as a tool for a global “Bolivarian” revolution.

So the question is: does the OECD wish to build on, or rather depart from past or present competing South-South initiatives? Some pillars of the initiative – solidarity, equality, sovereignty – recall past attempts. But the fact that the initiative refers to “triangular

cooperation” and includes “Northern” partners suggests that it does not pursue the ideal of autonomy at the basis of the Non-Aligned Movement and other more recent trends present in Latin America, but this could be made more explicit.

## **2) What are the differences with North-South cooperation?**

How can South-South and triangular cooperation preserve its specificities and increase its influence to positively affect the way aid is done by “traditional” DAC donors? This ambitious challenge was outlined by the Task-Team’s coordinator, Enrique Maruri (Colombia) at a panel event at Busan.

As previously mentioned South-South cooperation has three specificities in the contemporary aid field: it is led by developing countries, focused on processes and knowledge-sharing. In the case of triangular cooperation, the role of the Northern donors or multilateral agencies/development banks could be defined with greater precision so as to ensure that the principles and goals of equality, non-interference and horizontal cooperation are respected.

## **3) What are the interaction(s) with the Paris agenda?**

To what extent should the principles, targets and indicators outlined in the Paris declaration apply to South-South cooperation? Some of them – such as aid coordination – are considered irrelevant or inapplicable by emerging donors like Brazil, China or India. While the Paris agenda was arguably elaborated as a response to the defects and perverse effects generated by over fifty years of aid practice and the bureaucracies of “traditional” donors, a country like Brazil does not have an aid agency so to speak, which means that it has different perceptions, resources, positioning and constraints as a donor. In parallel, and although China is very reluctant about this point, the Task-Team insisted on the need to show results and set up monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. This can be traced down to both normative beliefs and a strategic move, which for newcomers consists of embracing and complying with the international standards produced by the OECD in order to be recognized as legitimate and valuable actors. But the Task-Team’s claim to focus on aid processes is innovative and refreshing and should be preserved in future steps.

## **4) What South and whose cooperation?**

The Task-team on South-South and triangular cooperation was launched and co-chaired by Colombia and Indonesia. The OECD was eager to involve the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) in its new “development partnership”. Brazil is not part of it, but some low-income countries are active members. But in Busan, I had the impression that the initiative was mainly driven by delegates from South Africa, Colombia and Indonesia. As a result, one can wonder how and to what extent low-income countries will take part in the coming Building Block on South-South and triangular cooperation.

## **5) Knowledge-sharing or development finance?**

In terms of the goals and modalities of the new South-South initiative, its promoters have significantly focused on the importance of *knowledge-sharing* during HLF4 in Busan. This

stems from three main factors. First is the wish to exchange experiences, lessons and “best practices” expressed by participants on several occasions. Marco Farani, of the Brazilian Ministry of External Relations, asserted that South-South cooperation is based on a “community of realities and problems” faced by developing countries. Second is the relatively modest financial amounts of funds and scope of current South-South cooperation (with the exception of China, which does not endorse fully its role as an aid *donor*). Rogelio Granguillhome, Executive Director of the Mexican brand-new Agency for International Development, spoke out on the difficulties of securing sufficient finance. Colombia’s aid is focused on Central America and will only be able to reach Africa or Asia if available aid funds increase. Third is the World Bank’s desire to secure its future role in the changing “aid architecture”, a role of *broker* between countries who want to learn and those who want to share, and a provider of funds for multi-partner exchange, dialogue and transfer across the global South.

Two sets of questions follow. One was raised by Jonathan Glennie (Overseas Development Institute) in his intervention in Busan: is the OECD-based South-South cooperation initiative *only* about knowledge-sharing, or is it about development finance? If the answer lies at the second end of the spectrum, then emerging donors will have to “scale up” to become significant players in the aid field.

On the other hand, the involvement of academics has fueled the Task-team’s work so far and is considered instrumental for future “knowledge-sharing”. This is certainly welcomed and a great accomplishment with long-lasting potential, but also raises issues. When presenting one of the case-studies conducted for the Task-team, Ida Ruwaida, a sociologist from the University of Indonesia, explained that her commitment triggered debate at the university, with colleagues arguing that a lecturer at a public university could not be considered as a member of “civil society”.

In her “radical history of development studies”, Uma Kothari recalls that the discipline finds its roots back in European colonial administrations. Since then, she argues, the discipline has been the site for debate between researchers “who feel that the study of development is most closely connected to ideas about social, economic and political change” - and hence to the broader social sciences - and those who “are informed by a more instrumental goal of shaping policy and a practical concern with the implementation and evaluation of development interventions” - and thus feel closer to the agendas and preoccupations of aid agencies and development professionals. This distinction echoes a distinction between research *on* development and research *for* development.<sup>5</sup>

In the contemporary era, such debates are revived by the growing urge for universities to offer policy-oriented educational programs – aimed at training practitioners and attracting potential students – and produce “evidence-based” knowledge with direct implications for policy-making – in order to finance research projects. Knowledge about development is closely intertwined with development institutions as academics often work with, and for,

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<sup>5</sup> Kothari, Uma (ed.). *A Radical History of Development Studies: Individuals, Institutions and Ideologies*. London/New York: Zed Books, 2005, p. 5.

governments, NGOs and international organisations. In these conditions, minimal conditions for academic engagement are needed to guarantee the production of critical, independent knowledge that does not systematically embrace but deconstructs the buzzwords coined and interventions led in the name of “development”. These difficult questions relate to the goals of research, the role and place of researchers in policy, politics and society. This is what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called “reflexivity”, thereby encouraging academics to think about these and to interrogate the material, political and social conditions of their work, their sociological, intellectual and political backgrounds, their own positioning in different fields and relations with institutions.

After spending one day with the team gathered around the Task-Team in Busan – as an “observing participant”<sup>6</sup> rather than participant observer! - I have no doubt that they will deploy their dynamism, commitment and creativity to forge a constructive path through the South-South cooperation journey. It surely is an exciting project.

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<sup>6</sup> This well-thought phrase was coined by H el ene Baillot (PhD candidate at Universit e Paris 1 Panth on-Sorbonne) in the introduction of her Master’s dissertation about North-South relationships in an anti-debt international network: *Penser la division du travail et les rapports Nord- Sud au sein d’un r eseau transnational de lutte contre la dette*. Paris : Universit e Paris 1, Panth on-la Sorbonne, 2010, 204 p.