

# The Role of Economic Cooperation in Achieving Sustainability

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**Fecha de recepción: 05/06/2021**

**Fecha de aceptación: 25/06/2021**

## Abstract

Overcoming underdevelopment and achieving sustainability have been some of the most challenging tasks for the international community. Even though different initiatives have been promoted by international organizations, developed and developing countries, among other actors, there are still gaps to close. In this context, foreign aid and Official Development Assistance have been some of the principal economic tools used by the international community to promoted development. However, the global development agenda, traditionally promoted by the United Nations, and the economic cooperation agenda, supported generally by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, have not always been completely synchronized. Additionally, the re-emergence of South-South Co-

operation, the appearance of new emerging donors from the Global South, and the increasing role of the private sector in the development landscape have created new opportunities and threats to achieve sustainable development. Given this reality, this paper aims to answer the following question: What has been the role of economic cooperation, especially foreign aid and ODA, in achieving sustainability? To answer this question, the paper provides a historical overview of the conception of development and the debates around economic cooperation as one of the tools to achieve it, as well as a review on the actors involved in economic cooperation for development and the channels of disbursement. In the final section, current challenges and conclusions are presented.

### **Keywords:**

***Economic Cooperation; sustainable development;  
foreign Aid; official development assistance;  
United Nations***

## El rol de la cooperación económica para alcanzar la sostenibilidad

### Resumen

Superar el subdesarrollo y alcanzar el desarrollo sostenible han sido algunos de los retos más importantes para la comunidad internacional. Históricamente se han impulsado diversas iniciativas desde organismos internacionales, países desarrollados y en vías de desarrollo, no obstante aún existen brechas por cerrar. En este contexto la cooperación económica, en especial la Ayuda Extranjera y la Asistencia Oficial para el Desarrollo (AOD) han sido promovidas como herramientas claves para promover y alcanzar el desarrollo sostenible. Sin embargo, la agenda de desarrollo global, tradicionalmente promovida por las Naciones Unidas y la agenda de cooperación económica, impulsada generalmente por la Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económico, no siempre han estado completamente sincronizadas. Adicionalmente, el resurgimiento de la cooperación Sur-Sur, la aparición de nuevos do-

nantes emergentes del Sur Global y el creciente rol del sector privado en el escenario de la cooperación económica mundial han traído consigo tanto nuevas oportunidades como amenazas para alcanzar el desarrollo sostenible. Dada esta realidad, este artículo intenta responder la siguiente interrogante: ¿Cuál ha sido el rol de la cooperación económica, en especial la Ayuda Extranjera y la AOD, en el logro de la sostenibilidad? Para responder esta pregunta, el artículo provee una revisión histórica de la concepción del desarrollo y de los debates sobre la cooperación económica como una de las principales herramientas para alcanzarlo. Así mismo, suministra un mapeo de los actores involucrados en la cooperación económica para el desarrollo y sus canales de desembolso. En la sección final se presentan los retos actuales y las conclusiones.

### **Palabras clave:**

***Cooperación económica; desarrollo sostenible; ayuda extranjera; asistencia oficial para el desarrollo; Naciones Unidas***

## Introduction

Overcoming underdevelopment and achieving sustainability have been some of the most challenging tasks for the international community. Even though different initiatives have been promoted by international organizations, developed and developing countries, among other actors, there are still gaps to close.

Underdevelopment is defined by the International Peace Institute (IPI, 2009) as a condition characterized by extreme poverty; disparity in delivery of social services including formalized education systems, medical facilities, and safe drinking water; poor or lacking infrastructure and governance capacity; and an environment of physical insecurity.

Since the end of World War II, with the implementation of the Marshall Plan (1948) and the Colombo Plan (1951), foreign aid and Official Development Assistance have been some of the principal economic tools used by the international community to promote development.

In this sense, these are defined as:

**Table 1.** Definitions of Foreign and ODA

Foreign Aid	ODA
It includes development assistance that seeks to meet long-term development and poverty needs as well as (short term) humanitarian assistance and assistance that primarily meets political/strategic needs such as military aid.	A voluntary transfer of public resources, from a government to another independent government, to an NGO, or to an international organization (such as the World Bank or the UN Development Program) with at least 25 percent grant element, one goal of which is to better the human condition in the country receiving the aid. Military aid and the promotion of donors' security interests are excluded.

**Source:** Lancaster (2007), Kragelund, (2019), OECD (2021).

Significant progress has been made in previous decades. For example, the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (2013) pointed out some of the MDGs' achievements, emphasizing that there are half a billion fewer people in extreme poverty;

about three million children's lives saved each year. Four out of five children now get vaccinated for a range of diseases. Maternal mortality gets the focused attention it deserves. Deaths from malaria have fallen by one-quarter. Contracting HIV is no longer an automatic death sentence.

In 2011, 590 million children in developing countries attended primary school.

However, according to the United Nations (UN) (2019), 736 million people still live in extreme poverty; 750 million remain illiterate; 3 billion lack



clean cooking fuels and technology; in many countries, an increasing share of income goes to the top 1%; the global mean temperature is 1°C higher than pre-industrial baseline; and biodiversity loss is accelerating.

Given this reality, this paper aims to answer the following question: What has been the role of economic cooperation, especially foreign aid and ODA, in achieving sustainability?

To answer this question, the paper provides a historical overview of the conception of development and the debates around economic cooperation as one of the tools to achieve it, as well as a review on the actors involved in economic cooperation for development and the channels of disbursement. In the final section, current challenges and conclusions are presented.

## History

The quest for achieving sustainability has its origins at the beginning of the 1960s, when the UN General Assembly designated the first UN Development Decade (Coate, R 2018). The purpose of this action was: "To mobilize and to sustain support for the measures required on the part of both developed and developing countries to accelerate progress toward self-sustaining growth of the

economy of the individual nations and their social advancement." (UN, 1960).

During this decade also the UNESCO played a critical role in promoting development, declaring the International Hydrological Decade in 1965, and sponsoring the UNESCO General Conference in 1966 and the International Conference of Experts on the Biosphere in 1968.

Additionally, during this period, international concerns about fostering the development of developing countries arise, as underscored by the Pearson Report of 1969 and the Tinbergen Report of 1970. In 1969, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) officially introduced the concept of ODA. In 1970, the UN General Assembly proposed that donor countries allocate 0.7% of their Gross National Product (GNP) to ODA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1994).

At the beginning of the 1970s, the UN celebrated the Conference on the Human Environment (1972). It led to other several major conferences such as the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea (1974) (1982), the World Population Conference (1974), the World Food Conference (1974), the UN Conference of the Interna-

tional Women's Year (1975), the UN Conference on Human Settlements (1976), the Conference on Desertification (1977) and the World Climate Conference (1979).

The decade of the 1980s is often referred to as the "lost development decade." (Coate, R 2018). However, in 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development provided in its report "Our Common Future", the definition of sustainable development that remains in use until today. In this report, Sustainable Development is defined as "a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

In 1992, the UN convened its members in the Earth Summit, celebrated in Rio de Janeiro. It had the participation of political leaders, diplomats, scientists, representatives of the media, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from 179 countries focusing on the discussion of the impact of human socio-economic activities on the environment. (UN, 2021).

The principal outcome of this summit was the adoption of a comprehensive plan of action called Agenda 21. This plan covered various issues related to biodiversity, biotechnology, deforestation, and



institutional and procedural issues involving financing, technology transfer, and institutional arrangements.

The end of the Cold War provoked new ideas and concerns in the development community about the role of foreign aid. This situation provided an opportunity to reconsider the ODA definition. For example, the Government of Finland suggested adding to the existing ODA concept a broader concept of concessional resource flows for development, humanitarian and environmental purposes (Hynes, W & Scott, S 2013).

At the same time, while heads of states and ministers were making promises about development initiatives at global summits in the mid-1990s, traditional donors started to decrease ODA allocations as a share of GNI, which led to a decline in total ODA globally (Hulme, D 2009).

Hulme (2009) also emphasized the difference in the development priorities of the UN and the OECD-DAC. The DAC's focus was primarily on making a case for increasing foreign aid and demonstrating that aid would be used effectively. In contrast, the UN aimed for a broader agenda encompassing different socio-economic aspects.

In this context, Dollar & Pritchett (1998) wrote a report sponsored by

the World Bank entitled "Assessing Aid". It aimed to generate a more significant "rethinking of aid" in two ways. First, the authors showed that there remains a role for economic cooperation and development assistance. Second, it tried to re-conceptualizing the role of assistance in light of a new development paradigm.

The report showed that although economic assistance is necessary, it has been proved that it is not enough to achieve development and that sometimes it can lead to the perpetuation of the problem. In this sense, the World Bank proposed some improvements based on previous successful experience, among them:

- Donors need to find a national champion to lead internal development reforms.
- Development initiatives must have a long-term vision of systemic change.
- Donor countries must support knowledge creation.
- Donor countries and recipient governments must engage civil society.
- Donors need to work as partners rather than competitors.

With the beginning of the new millennium, there was a huge expectation about the UN Millennium Summit to be celebrated in September 2000. In order to meet

the expectation, the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, took the lead in shaping the Agenda and proposed his vision in the report "We the People", which placed a strong focus on poverty eradication.

An exhaustive negotiation process took place in the summer of 2000 to reach an agreement for the millennium declaration, and even though the final document incorporated additional aspects, the core was framed for the report of the Secretary-General.

Nevertheless, the millennium declaration did not specifically include the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Instead, these were adopted in September 2001, after another year of negotiations between different international bodies such as the OECD-DAC, the World Bank, the IMF, and the UN. (Hulme, D 2009).

The MDGs were composed of 8 goals: 1) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; 2) Achieve universal primary education; 3) Promote gender equality and empower women; 4) Reduce child mortality; 5) Improve maternal health; 6) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; 7) Ensure environmental sustainability; 8) Develop a global partnership for development.



ODA was emphasized in Target 8.B, which addresses the special needs of the least developed countries. In this sense, it is highlighted the need for more generous ODA for countries committed to poverty reduction.

Similarly, the final declaration of the International Conference on Financing for Development (the Monterrey Conference), in 2002, recognized that "a substantial increase in ODA and other resources will be required if developing countries are to achieve the internationally agreed development goals and objectives, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration. To build support for ODA, we will cooperate to further improve policies and development strategies, both nationally and internationally, to enhance aid effectiveness".

Therefore the debate about international cooperation, especially the role of foreign aid, was shaped by the evolution of the global agenda. Hirst (2010) highlighted that the OECD established novel approaches. These were systematized in the Paris Declaration (2005), encompassing responsibilities, distribution of resources, governments' attributions, the role of international institutions and NGOs, but the most crucial point was the complexity of the new development landscape.

Academic debates have also permeated the discussion on sustainability and the role of aid as one of the tools to achieve it.

For example, Professor Jeffrey Sachs (2005) proposed that: 1) developed countries should raise their contributions to ODA to 0.7% of GDP; 2) the development of fair trade should be promoted; 3) the external debt of the most backward countries needs to be forgiven and; 4) attention should be paid to the problem of climate change.

Contrary to Sachs and the vision of aid advocates, William Easterly (2006) claimed that loans for structural adjustment should be suspended, large-scale utopian plans should be abandoned, and there should be fewer working groups and reports. Instead, he proposed that donors must develop a form of work that includes feedback, responsibility, independent evaluation of aid, incentives, and cooperation with small-scale initiatives.

Similarly to Easterly, Professor Angus Deaton (2013) also criticized the role of aid in achieving development. He argued that by trying to help poor people in developing countries, the rich world may corrupt those nations' governments and slow their growth.

In his view, foreign aid can weaken the Government-People relationship, leaving a government less accountable to its people, the congress or parliament, and the courts. He also believes that the idea that developed countries must save everyone else is condescending and similar to the ideas of colonialism.

Twenty years after the Earth Summit in 1992, the member states of the UN convened in Brazil in the Rio+20 Summit. There the international community launched a process to develop the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which would build on the MDGs and constitute the post-2015 development agenda.

In this context, in July 2012, the then Secretary-General of the UN, Mr. Ban Ki Moon, tasked a High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons to make recommendations on the development agenda beyond 2015.

The panel discussed two of the world's biggest challenges – how to end poverty and how to promote sustainable development. The report provided an example of how new goals and measurable targets could be framed in this new stage of promoting development.

The proposed goals were as follows:





**Graphic N° 1.** Goals Proposed by the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons



**Source:** United Nations, (2013).

Fifteen years after the Millennium Summit, the UN, its member states, and a diverse series of stakeholders launched, through the resolution 70/01, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This Agenda encompasses 17 goals, 169 targets, and 230 indicators aiming to achieve sustainable de-

velopment before 2030. It involves developed and developing countries alike, and the goals are integrated into the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental).

The Agenda revolves around five critical areas for the humanity and the planet:

**Graphic 2 .** Critical Areas for Achieving Sustainable Development



**Source:** United Nations, (2015).



**Graphic 3.** Sustainable Development Goals

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



GIFT supports SDGs.

**Source:** United Nations, (2015).

The 2030 Agenda emphasizes the role of economic cooperation in the 17th goal: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development. Specifically, its target 17.2 calls for developed countries to implement fully their official development assistance commitments; including achieving the target of 0.7 percent of GNI for ODA to developing countries and 0.15 to 0.20 percent of ODA/GNI to least developed countries.

Additionally, the agenda highlights the necessity of strengthening the means of implementa-

tion and revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development through North-South, South-South, and triangular cooperation.

Previously that year, the Addis Ababa Plan of action also recognized that the way forward for the SDGs and sustainable development governance depends on providing the resources and enabling an environment necessary for their success.

Also, the 2030 Agenda encompasses other developmental frameworks aiming to achieve sustainable development:

**Graphic 4.** UN Developmental Frameworks



**Source:** Zhang Qiang, (2021).

In this sense, ODA remains crucial, particularly for countries most in need. Nevertheless, aid alone will not be sufficient. The plan also addresses other kinds of financial sources, including public and private, domestic and international (UNDESA, 2015).

## Actors

Lancaster (2007) highlighted that the number of organizations and countries involved in development cooperation is large. Several dozen international organizations, like the World Bank, the Asian, African, and Inter-American Development Banks, and the UNDP, plus approximately thirty governments have significant programs of foreign aid, including all the rich countries of North America, Europe, and Japan as well as oil-producing countries in the Middle East and "middle-income" developing countries, like South Korea, Thailand, and Turkey. In addition, former socialist countries in Eastern Europe are also establishing new aid programs, and even relatively poor countries provide aid to other poor countries.

Foreign aid has been historically promoted by traditional donors related to the OECD-DAC founded in 1961. Among these are the U.S, France, Japan, Germany, the U.K, and Nordic countries.

Additionally, oil providers primarily in the Middle East and countries such as South Africa, India, Nigeria, and Brazil provided small amounts of aid in their particular regions to fortify their roles as regional leaders (Lancaster, 2007). These countries are categorized nowadays as "emerging donors", an umbrella term for all the States development aid providers that are no members of the DAC-OECD. It overlooks the fact that most of the donors in this group are, in fact, re-emerging countries in the development arena. Since the beginning of the century, countries like China and India, and initiatives such as the BRICS and ALBA-TCP have gained relevance in the development landscape (Kragelund, P 2019).

The resurgence of emerging donors has generated different reactions since the beginning of the 21st century. On the one hand, for example, Moises Naim (2007) warned in Foreign Policy about rogue donors who supplied toxic aid and pushed toxic ideas. Likewise, the former chair of the DAC, Richard Manning (2006), argued that the rejuvenation of emerging donors may cause postponement of necessary reforms in the Global South due to the absence of conditionalities and worsen developing countries' debt burden due to bad terms.

On the other hand, authors like Yamada (2011) suggest that from the technical perspective, emerging donors offer a number of advantages over traditional capacity development approaches. Relying on linguistic, cultural, historical, and even geographical similarities between providers and recipients, SSC facilitates the delivery of appropriate solutions tailored to the needs of other developing countries.

Similarly, Gomez (2019) highlighted the increasing role of emerging donors bringing new resources, ideas, and experiences that appear to be more relevant to countries benefitting from cooperation since they provide opportunities to innovate beyond the status quo of international cooperation.

Likewise, since the beginning of the century, an influential group of private donors, including individuals, foundations, and global corporations, began to play a growing role in development cooperation. For example, in 2006, Warren Buffett gave a mega-donation of \$30 billion to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for programs seeking to reduce inequities around the world (Osili, U 2014).

Thus the development actors can be categorized as follow:

**Table 2.** Actors in Development Cooperation

Actors	Example
<b>International Organizations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The United Nations</li> <li>• The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development</li> <li>• The World Bank</li> <li>• Others</li> </ul>
<b>Traditional Donors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The United States of America</li> <li>• Japan</li> <li>• Germany</li> <li>• The United Kingdom</li> <li>• Scandinavian countries</li> <li>• Others</li> </ul>
<b>Emerging Donors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• China</li> <li>• India</li> <li>• Brazil</li> <li>• The United Arab Emirates</li> <li>• South Africa</li> <li>• Venezuela</li> <li>• Others</li> </ul>
<b>Private Sector</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Bill &amp; Melinda Gates Foundation</li> <li>• Others</li> </ul>

**Source:** Elaborated by the author, (2021).

## Tools

Development cooperation initiatives are driven mainly by three different modalities: North-South Cooperation (NSC), South-South Cooperation (SSC), and triangular Cooperation.

North-South cooperation, which is the most traditional type of cooperation, occurs when a

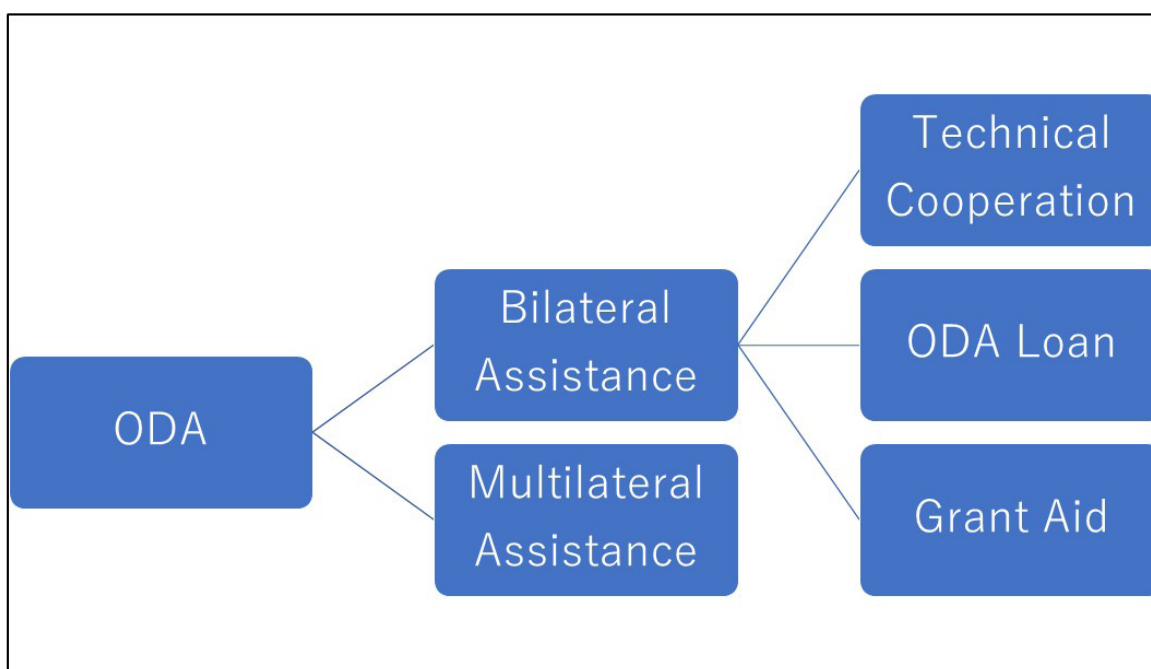
developed country supports economically or with another kind of resources a less favored one, for example, with financial aid during a natural disaster or a humanitarian crisis (UNDESA, 2019).

Thus, North-South cooperation is a broad framework for development cooperation between the North (the developed countries) and the South (the deve-

loping countries) in the political, economic, social, cultural, environmental, and technical domains. Involving two or more developed and developing countries, it can take place on a bilateral, regional, subregional, or interregional basis (UCLG ASPAC, 2021).

ODA promoted by countries of the Global North has been primarily promoted through three main schemes:

**Graphic 5.** ODA Schemes



**Source:** JICA, (2021).

North-South cooperation has been traditionally characterized by conditionality that covers not only every aspect of policy (e.g., economic reforms, good governance, institutional and social develop-

ment) but also its process of elaboration and implementation (e.g., civil society participation, transparency, the introduction of results-based management techniques) (Bergamaschi, I & Tickner, A 2017).

In contrast, the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) defines SSC as a broad framework of collaboration among countries of the South in the political, economic, social, cul-



tural, environmental and, technical domains. Involving two or more developing countries, it can take place on a bilateral, regional, intra-regional or interregional basis. Developing countries share knowledge, skills, expertise, and resources to meet their development goals through concerted efforts. Recent developments in SSC have taken the form of increased volume of South-South trade, South-South flows of foreign direct investment, movements towards regional integration, technology transfers, sha-

ring of solutions and experts, and other forms of exchanges.

This modality of cooperation has relied historically on the principles of the Bandung Conference (1955), which still seem to guide much of the SSC programs in the new millennium. The principles are: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence (Quadir, F 2013).

According to Gomez (2019), the rejection of the vertical relation donor-recipient is explicit in all South-South cooperation initiatives. In this sense, horizontal exchanges that entail mutual benefit, or that can be reciprocated, are preferred.

In this sense, a comparison between these modalities of development cooperation is presented in table 3:

**Table 3.** Schematic overview of North-South vs South-South development finance

	<b>South-South Cooperation</b>	<b>North-South Cooperation</b>
Acceptance of DAC Principles	ODA and OOF are mixed	Clear separation between ODA and OOF
Governance structure	Overlapping, competing institutions, and embryonic strategies	Governed by strategies, policies, and clear institutional framework
Bilateral vs multilateral channels	Primarily bilateral channels	Both multilateral and bilateral channels
Donor collaboration	Occasional trilateral cooperation	Common donor meetings
Official Purpose	Geopolitics and economic development at home and abroad	Social and economic development in recipient country
Use of conditionality	No strings attached	Widespread use of ex-ante and ex-post economic and political conditionality
State vs civil society	Respect for national sovereignty	Involvement of civil society
Degree of connection to other flows	Development finance facilitates trade and investment	ODA separated from trade and investment

**Source:** Kragelund, (2019).

Finally, Triangular Cooperation is defined by the UNOSSC (2021) as collaboration in which traditional donor countries and multilateral organizations facilitate South-South initiatives through the provision of funding, training, management, and technological systems, as well as other forms of support.

Similarly, Potter (2015) describes it as cooperation that involves collaboration between a donor country and a former aid recipient in assisting a current aid recipient.

## Challenges and Conclusion

As we have seen through this paper, the quest to achieve sustainable development is not a new problem for the international community. It has been on the global agenda since the beginning of the 1960s. However, despite the different initiatives promoted by a wide variety of actors, and the achievement made in the last 50 years, there are still gaps to close.

Likewise, the concept of development has been the subject of different epistemic debates. Even though there is some consensus, it is still an evolving concept linked to rapid changes, increasing inter-

connections, and complex challenges taking place in the international system.

Even though economic cooperation for development, especially foreign aid, has been intertwined with the evolution of development since it has been promoted as one of the main tools to achieve it. As shown by Hulme (2009), it is necessary to highlight that there have been differences between the priorities promoted by the UN and the OECD-DAC. At some points, the DAC has primarily focused on increasing foreign aid and demonstrating its effectiveness, while the UN has aimed for a more comprehensive development agenda. In this context, the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development represents a major achievement since it was built on a broad consensus, including the member states of the UN, other International Financial Institutions, civil society, private sectors, the academia, among other stakeholders. However, it still faces different challenges, among them:

- Its non-binding nature poses a threat to its fulfillment since governments can prioritize political approaches that, based on sovereignty and security, promote unsustainable practices, even to the detriment of its effectiveness (Tri-

nity College Dublin, 2021). However, Schmassmann (2017) said that this was the only way to getting all countries to approve a 2030 Agenda as the reference framework for the next 15 years. This way, many goals could be introduced to the negotiation process that would have stood no chance had the document been more binding in nature.

- Competition rather than complementation between traditional and emerging donors can lead to overlapping and duplication of efforts and consequently ineffectiveness of development cooperation (Dollar, D & Pritchett, L 1998). Nevertheless, Esteban & Pérez (2017) establish that the needs for financial flows in different regions of the world, such as the Latin American and Caribbean region, are so vast that competition between emerging and traditional donors does not make much sense.

- Asplund & Soderberg (2017) recognized that the affinity of interests and a shared vision of the world between governments attract cooperation. However, different political ideologies and prioritization of national political agendas can undermine effective cooperation for development.



- Finally, authors like Garcia (2020) highlight that the Covid-19 pandemic has shown the weaknesses of the international system generating uneven results, especially in developing and LDCs. Thus, it remains to be seen what will be the role of international cooperation to address future challenges.

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