The New Global Context for Development: The Unravelling of Progress in the LDCs

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Development professionals follow a few overriding admonitions. Two important ones are "do no harm" and "understand the local context." A third traditional injunction has recently gained even more relevance: "Think globally and act locally." Yet today, there is a growing need to "think globally and *act* globally."

Bilateral and multilateral donor agencies like USAID and the World Bank have appropriately focused their work at the national and subnational levels. Local ownership is still a valid principle of development. However, transnational issues and the global economic outlook are now overwhelming local development progress. Particularly in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), climate-related disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the consequences of the war in Ukraine are quickly erasing development gains and exposing global inequality even more dramatically.

Despite past efforts, the varied requirements imposed by political overseers have undercut coordinated action among donors. In a time of global crisis, when the poorest of the poor will suffer most, we urgently need a new organizational paradigm to counter the negative effects of these transnational phenomena. Lo-

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cal ownership remains a sound principle, but in a world plagued by pandemics, climate disasters, and war-related food and energy shortages, there is a desperate need for coordinated global action.

First, we must comprehend how global challenges relate to a development policy perspective. Then, we can employ development diplomacy to achieve the coordination needed to define the solutions and scale up the effort to meet the threat that these issues represent. The stakes are high as the world's carrying capacity is already stretched to the limit and the refugee flows caused by conflict and dire poverty are unyielding.

This essay discusses the new context for development and suggests ways to enhance the capacity of donors and partner countries to address these challenges and their impact on growing inequality.

The Aid Effectiveness Agenda

In a series of international forums sponsored by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (DAC), donors, partner countries in the developing world, and even South-South "providers" of assistance like China, India, and Brazil agreed on effectiveness principles, such as mutual accountability, transparency, and local ownership.[1] Developing countries welcomed these principles, as they potentially represented a shift of decision-making power from donors to host country partners.

Among the principles accepted at the Paris Forum in 2005, arguably the most important and most challenging to implement was "local ownership." This principle, referenced as early as 1996 in a Development Assistance Committee report called *Shaping the 21st Century: The Role of Development Cooperation*, held that partner nations and their civil societies should determine their own developmental needs and play the lead role in implementing the projects needed to fulfill the objectives.[2] The premise behind this principle is that host governments and their citizens must own and contribute to development programs to achieve enduring results.

As well-reasoned as this principle is, it has not been easy to implement. Donors are constrained by their legal and oversight structures. Procurement laws, earmarked sector programs (for example, when an agency may be legally required to spend a certain amount on family planning, child survival programs, or other politically attractive programs), and risk-averse bureaucratic regulations stand in the way of giving local partners a decision-making role. The largest bilateral donor, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), is making a major push to overcome these obstacles by granting more resources directly to local entities—part of a more universal effort to "decolonize" aid and to act with conviction on the local ownership principle.[3]

There is obvious merit in engaging partners to assure their full buy-in; the positive results recorded when local "ownership" has been achieved demonstrate this.[4] However, transnational challenges have undermined the gains that have been realized so far. Reconciling the need to defer to local actors with the need to address negative global phenomena will require donor agencies and their partners to acquire a capacity to act both locally and globally.

The Financial Impact on the LDCs

On the accounting ledger, the 47 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) have suffered huge losses in the past two years as the world has confronted the costs of climate-related disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic.[5] Now, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is adding food and energy shortages to the global development agenda. The war will add some 40 million people to the tally of those experiencing extreme poverty.[6] According to Dr. Homi Kharas' "World Poverty Clock," as many as 144 million had fallen into the "extreme poverty" category as a result of the pandemic.[7] The April 2022 World Economic Outlook published by the International Monetary Fund projected global growth to slow dramatically, while inflation induced by disrupted supply chains will increase "food and fuel prices…and hit vulnerable populations in low-income countries hardest."[8]

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A UN report characterized the COVID-19 pandemic as "the most damaging humanitarian and economic crisis since the Second World War." It further stated that the LDCs have "suffered large losses…with 54 percent of low-income countries deemed to be in debt distress or at high risk of debt distress."[9] The Least Developed Expert Group (LEG) under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which focuses on the 1.1 billion people who live in the LDCs, has pointed to the extraordinary stresses these nations face as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and increasingly virulent weather disasters.[10]

Of the three sources of external finance that could mitigate the crisis—Official Development Assistance (ODA), remittances, and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)—only ODA has increased slightly through 2020.[11] Yet, the share of ODA devoted to LDCs remains low, representing only 0.09 percent of the Gross National Income (GNI) of the OECD Development Assistance Committee members.[12] ODA contributions to other developing countries represented 0.32 percent of OECD committee members' GNI, still low in comparison to the UN target of 0.7 percent of GNI.[13]

The World Bank projected over a 7 percent reduction in remittances to the LDCs for 2020 and 2021, the largest reduction since the 5 percent drop recorded during the 2009 global recession. The impact of this reduction is varied though, and a few of the LDCs actually saw a slight increase in remittances as their need for humanitarian relief grew more dire, causing friends and relatives who had migrated to respond.[14]

Pandemic-related decreases in Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) have had the biggest impact on developing country finances over the past two years. While FDI has been averaging well over a trillion dollars in transfers over the past decade, only 1.8 percent has reached the poorer countries, because weak development indicators have translated into intolerable investment risk.[15] According to the UN Conference on Trade and Development's (UNCTAD's) World Investment Report, FDI fell by 49 percent worldwide in the first half of 2020 due to COVID-related lockdown measures.[16] While little found its way into the LDCs to begin with, the resulting ripple effect of this drop has undoubtedly been felt on a regional basis when neighboring middle-income economies have suffered.

In addition to COVID-19, climate change also poses a significant threat to development in LDCs. According to the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, there has been a sharp increase in economic losses caused by climate-related disasters from $895 billion between 1978 and 1997 to almost $2.3 billion in the past 20 years.[17] Still, assessing the cost of climate-related disasters in the LDCs is an imperfect science as cost estimates available only relate to insured property, which is mostly located in the developed world. Since most property in the LDCs is not only uninsured, but oftentimes unregistered as well, these costs likely underestimate the true losses. There is little doubt, however, that climate-related disasters, only likely to become more frequent in time, have

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Combatting COVID-19

The centerpiece of the global effort to address the COVID-19 pandemic has been the World Health Organization (WHO). WHO's response to the pandemic was hindered when the United States dropped out of the organization in July 2020 under the Trump Administration.[18] Still, the United States is now back and engaged, contributing vaccines and therapeutics to the organization through COVAX, a facility set up to pool the procurement and equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics.[19] In a recent setback, the Biden Administration' request for additional resources to continue this global effort was rejected by Congress in April 2022.[20] This legislative battle is far from over as the Biden Administration continues to appeal for more resources.

The Biden Administration also has called for an exception to the World Trade Organization's patent protection for COVID-19 vaccine formulas. If facilities in places like India and South Africa, where the technical capacity exists, could produce vaccines, more would be available for the developing world at less cost.[21]

The heads of the key multilateral aid organizations met in December 2021 to promote the increased use of vaccines and therapeutics in low-income and lower-middle-income countries. But only 13.6 percent of the population of these countries were vaccinated as of March 2022, due to limited vaccine supply and poor logistical capacity for distributing vaccines.[22]

Donor agencies have addressed previous global health crises by combining life-saving methods with sustainable preventive measures. For example, the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1990s was addressed initially with a series of preventive steps involving national programs to promote safe sex and the use of modern contraception. These measures reduced infection rates in many countries.[23] Antiretrovirals, increasingly easier to deploy in remote areas as technology improved, increased the availability of treatments for infected people across the world. These therapeutics, combined with the preventive measures, drove progress in treating the disease and lowering infection rates. According to UNAIDS, HIV/AIDS infection rates have been reduced by 31 percent since 2010.[24]

Donor agencies are well placed to assist in the distribution of vaccines and therapies to combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this role sometimes detracts from the effort to help partners build the capacity to detect and respond to the current crisis and future ones.

In October 2021, USAID announced a new program to track unknown viruses with pandemic potential. This five-year plan is similar to an earlier one that was eliminated by the Trump Administration in 2017. This new plan is meant to strengthen the global capacity to detect and understand the risks of "viral spillover" from animals to humans that could cause another pandemic; the knowledge then gained from this worthy enterprise will be shared with partner countries.[25]

Political commitments to address the urgency of the COVID-19 challenge in the developing world abound, especially as new variants emerge in countries with low rates of vaccination. As new variants land on the shores of Western countries, political leaders and publics have begun to recognize that the virus has the potential to migrate quickly and without respect for national borders.[26] Translating that understanding into an action program, however, remains difficult.

In the longer term, donor agencies and healthcare partners in developing countries will have to take on the more challenging task of building viable public health systems. Preventing the transmission of pathogens will require surveillance systems, access to research, improved emergency care facilities, and trained medical personnel. Progress has been made, particularly in the effort to contain cases of malaria, HIV/AIDS, and Ebola, but much more needs to be done and on an urgent basis.

Climate Change and Sustainable Development

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely inhibited efforts to deal with the climate change crisis, devastating LDCs and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS), where weather-related disasters take a huge toll. Because Western industrial countries and now the growing markets in India and China are responsible for most of the greenhouse gasses that cause climate change, these poor states and vulnerable island nations believe that their future existence is in the hands of those creating the problem.[27]

In response to this, the OECD Development Assistance Committee issued a joint Declaration on 27 October, 2021, just before the Glasgow Convention on Climate Change (the Conference of the Parties or COP), announcing a "new approach to align Official Development Assistance with the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement." This statement, endorsed by all DAC members, acknowledged that the development goal of poverty alleviation cannot be achieved unless climate change is addressed.[28] The DAC statement recognized that the LDCs and SIDS contributed little to the causes of climate change but "suffer disproportionately from its impacts." The donors committed to "greater accountability and transparency in how we define, account for and report ODA related to climate, biodiversity and the environment."[29]

A good part of this challenge comes from the imprecise definitions in the finance mechanism created by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This mechanism has been plagued by inconsistencies and methodological problems, and problematic guidance from the Convention has made it far too easy for donors to double count and rationalize their contributions.[30]

Parties to the COP16 in Paris in 2010 recommitted to the "goal of mobilizing jointly $100 billion per year of 'new and additional' funds by 2020 to address the needs of developing countries."[31] This goal was never reached, but it was reiterated at COP26 in Glasgow, held between October and November 2021, with a greater sense of urgency.[32] The COP nations will meet again in November 2022 to assess progress made by individual nations and efforts made to mobilize funds for use in the poorer nations.

DAC members are now committed to strengthening their accounting systems, but the question about how to attribute the costs of adapting to and mitigating the effects of climate change still remains. Unless and until the donors and the UNFCCC agree on what is "new and additional," the attribution problem will remain a source of tension.

In spite of the pledges, in September 2021 the OECD reported an increase in funding of only 2 percent, from just over $78 billion in 2018 to $79.6 billion in 2019. This reported amount included a mix of the contributions of bilateral donors, international financial institutions such as the World Bank, export credits, loans, and private finance. Some $44.5 billion of the total was composed of public loans.[33] Questions have been raised as to whether all of these loans constitute real "donor effort."[34] This relates to the extent to which the loan is concessional, well below commercial rates, thus containing the equivalent of a grant element. Hopefully, the DAC commitment to greater accountability will clear up this apparent discrepancy.

Despite the absence of a clear basis against which to assess the overall effort, climate-financed development generally consists of efforts to adapt and mitigate. Both are integral to the climate change agenda and sustainable development. According to the UNFCCC, "adaptation refers to adjustments in ecological, social, or economic systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli and their effects or impacts."[35] Measures taken relate to any number of interventions to make development initiatives more resilient against the effects of climate change. This means adapting to climate change in all sectors: infrastructure, agriculture, healthcare systems, housing, and education.

Mitigation, broadly inclusive of strategies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions or capture carbon released from energy use, might hold even more potential for the poorest countries. This could be achieved in LDCs by transitioning to renewable energy, especially in those countries that do not already have high fossil fuel consumption. Mitigation also entails enacting regulatory frameworks and enforcement measures to preserve tropical rainforests, and natural carbon sequestration sinks.[36] However promising, these measures are only possible *if the necessary financing is available*.

The $100 billion commitment for funding beyond the support already provided to developing countries was seen as a new challenge for development. Yet, some 80 percent of grant resources spent on adaptation and mitigation come from ODA and are spent mostly on adapting development projects to the effects of climate change—not mitigating the emissions that themselves drive it. Measuring this component is a challenge, as it is built into the design process and is difficult to define and separate out for attribution.

There will be continuing tension between those countries that produce the greenhouse effect and the states that suffer most from the consequences. More may be being done today than is fully appreciated, but obscure attribution systems fail to credit these efforts. A vital first step would be to reach a consensus among donors and the UNFCCC as to what additional expenditures qualify for attribution. The OECD/DAC should invite the UNFCCC to meet and clarify the guidance using the October DAC Declaration and the existing UNFCCC guidelines as a starting point.[37]

Integrating Professional Communities

Addressing the transnational challenges represented by COVID-19 and climate change will require the further melding of different professional communities and reaching an agreement on collective goals. Differing professional perspectives can only be reconciled at the political level by enlightened direction. If the leaders of international organizations and nation states fail to assert themselves, there will be further fragmentation of the effort. Understanding the requisite professional attributes, their built-in biases, and the bureaucratic walls they build around themselves is the first step.

For example, even within the donor agencies, there is a fundamental difference between the objectives of professionals involved in long-term development and those engaged in humanitarian relief. Development professionals are working with partners to achieve sustainable changes that can eventually be financed and maintained by national entities such as government ministries and civil society organizations (CSOs), while the objective of humanitarian relief operations is to save lives or, as seen more recently, to prepare populations for natural disasters through improved resilience. These may seem like minor bureaucratic distinctions, but the missions are carried out by professionals with different mindsets and very different tools, and better coordination is needed to overcome these divides.

Likewise, public health experts come in many forms. In the U.S. system, public health professionals who work at the Center for Communicable Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have a different professional orientation than public health officers at USAID. The CDC's primary mission is to prevent infectious diseases from impacting Americans.[38] USAID professionals see their role as helping developing countries create the healthcare systems that will protect their own populations.[39]

Obviously, in a world where viruses transit national borders, the CDC and USAID personnel often work together—but not without some tension. USAID wants to use resources for the long-term development of healthcare systems, whereas the CDC needs resources to quell the ongoing epidemic. Increasingly, real-time emergencies have drawn resources away from development objectives.

The climate scientists who have forged the international agenda to limit global warming to below two degrees centigrade by 2030 represent a community apart from that of development professionals.[40] Communication between the two groups is often difficult. Much of the focus of climate scientists, understandably, has been on the industrial developed world, where most emissions occur. Donor agency professionals are usually environmental specialists who orient themselves more toward eliminating pollution in growing urban areas, preserving biodiversity, and saving dwindling rainforests.

Each of these professional communities brings unique knowledge to the table. The challenge is to create diverse teams of experts capable of tackling these immense global challenges concurrently and together. Doing so will require each community to understand and respect what its counterparts have to offer. It will also require higher-level leadership to overcome bureaucratic boundaries.

Conclusion

The global crises we now face have done more to undermine development progress and expose global inequality than any before them. The effects have been devastating for the LDCs as the loss of life and human potential has set back development progress for at least a decade. Those individuals with the ambition, ability, and opportunity have migrated in hopes of finding a better life for themselves and their families. The rest are relegated to what Thomas Hobbes described as a life that is "nasty, brutish and short."

The challenges the world now faces threaten to overwhelm the institutions created some 70 years ago to foster peace and prosperity. The concept of a globalized world economy with all its inequalities is yielding to protectionist pressures, and Western markets are pulling back trade and investment to strengthen their local productive capacity. Globalization has produced its own set of "discontents," as Joseph Stiglitz has observed; however, the impact of moving away from trade and investment is creating new challenges for developing countries that have provided cheap labor for the industrial world.[41]

The poorest nations on earth have become both a source for and the victims of the transnational threats that impact us all. A new paradigm is urgently needed that will enhance international cooperative efforts to confront these challenges. It will require development agencies to participate more effectively in the policy process, to engage actively in development diplomacy, and to foster professional partnerships that are capable of fully addressing the complexity of these new challenges.

If long term investments in development cooperation are to be preserved, there will have to be an effort to incorporate components that provide resilience. The connections between the relief and resilience components, efforts to provide transitional assistance in post-conflict situations, and the long-term development mission have been weak and less efficacious as they have operated in separate professional spaces. The threat to development progress is real, and sustainability cannot be reached if there isn't a better appreciation for the need to connect resilience to development.

Donor agencies are organized well to support field missions, but they are less proficient in participating in the policy process. While diplomats will most likely take the lead in negotiating international agreements that can enhance cooperation, donor agencies have their own role to play in offering strategic and tactical insights, especially as they relate to the developing world. Often the heads of development agencies hold ministerial rank and meet as part of executive cabinets. They also have frequent interactions with counterparts in other donor governments and partner countries. Agencies should be better organized to play these policy and diplomatic roles more successfully.

The time for further discussion has long passed as we watch years of development gains being wiped out. A ten-fold increase in ODA for the countries most in need is an essential first step in getting ahead of transnational threats and preserving gains made by past investments.

Inequality—and its thoroughly negative global manifestations—is no longer just creating a humanitarian crisis. It is contributing to universal insecurity as well. This should inspire new models of cooperation as we can no longer confront these threats from the comfort of tired sectoral and bureaucratic professional compartments. The new transnational context for international development cooperation can be ignored only at our collective peril.

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