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INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT DEBATE:  
THE SHORTCOMINGS OF THEORY VERSUS THE ALLURE OF AGENDAS

*LA COOPERACIÓN INTERNACIONAL Y LOS DEBATES SOBRE DESARROLLO:  
LAS PENURIAS DE LA TEORÍA FRENTE A LA MAGIA DE LAS AGENDAS*

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ABSTRACT

Development Cooperation, in addition to clear social and political support, originated from a context which represented a coherent contribution within the framework of Development Theory. However, from the 1980s with the rise of neoliberal ideas, debates on development and the international cooperation system and its strategies took different directions. Currently, the definition and monitoring of the *Agenda* has become the centre of debate, with the consequent abandonment of the theoretical and historical perspectives as well as the traditional perception of development as a process of transformation of reality. This disconnection between ideas on development and cooperation has led to a long-standing confusion over cooperation, with its role becoming increasingly unclear. This paper highlights the need to return to the relationship between theoretical reflection on development and cooperation strategies, through a process of identifying problems, studying their causes and consequently designing strategies. The way in which these links are created will open up the possibility of proposing alternatives according to the risks and challenges to be faced.

*Keywords:* Official Development Assistance; Development Cooperation; Development Agenda.

## RESUMEN

La Cooperación al Desarrollo nació en un contexto en el que, además de un claro respaldo social y político, suponía un aporte coherente en el marco de la Teoría del Desarrollo. Sin embargo, a partir de los 80, con el auge de las ideas neoliberales, los debates sobre el desarrollo y el sistema de cooperación internacional y sus estrategias tomaron caminos diferentes. Actualmente, la definición y seguimiento de las *Agendas* se ha convertido en el centro del debate, con el consiguiente abandono de la perspectiva teórica e histórica, así como de la percepción tradicional del desarrollo como proceso de transformación de la realidad. La desconexión entre las ideas sobre desarrollo y la cooperación ha llevado a una situación de larga crisis de la cooperación, cuyo papel cada vez es menos claro. El artículo plantea la necesidad de retomar la relación entre la reflexión teórica sobre el desarrollo y las estrategias de cooperación, siguiendo un proceso de identificación de problemas, estudio de sus causas y consiguiente diseño de estrategias. La forma en que estos vínculos se construyan marcará las posibilidades de plantear alternativas acordes con los riesgos y retos que afrontamos.

*Palabras clave:* Ayuda Oficial al Desarrollo; Cooperación al desarrollo; Agenda de desarrollo.

*Clasificación JEL:* O19, F35, I31, D63, F53.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Development Cooperation (DC) started up during the period of decolonization after the Second World War as a consequence of democratic ideas and values following the defeat of Nazism. It received significant political support, given the existing geostrategic interests in light of the Cold War and the East-West confrontation. During its initial decades, DC had a solid anchorage in the dominant economic thought at the time, "Keynesianism" and in the emergence of a subdiscipline, "Development Economics". These emphasized the need for the contribution of external capital to overcome both the vicious circle of poverty and the structural problems which hindered economic growth in many countries.

In the 1980s, with the imposition of neoliberal doctrines, development cooperation lost the theoretical support on which it had come to rely and, together with the end of the Cold War, this caused a serious crisis in DC. However, the subsequent failure of adjustment policies put in place in many countries coupled with the resurgence of concerns over the issues of poverty and the emergence of a fresh debate on how to address new dimensions of development, such as sustainability, led to the re-emergence of DC after years of decline. But this scenario was dogged from the beginning by the existence of a strong contradiction between the dominant economic doctrines (in favour of the advance of the market and against the intervention of public institutions) and the objectives and instruments proposed by the new narrative.

Over recent decades, this contradiction has continued to be present both in the debate and in the practice of development cooperation, hindering its capacity as an instrument to overcome inequality, to advance in sustainability and, ultimately, to bring about social transformation<sup>1</sup>. This paper analyses this contradiction based on the contrast between the limitations observed in the theoretical approaches or in the explanatory and normative frameworks adopted around development over recent years (Gore, 2000) and the popu-

<sup>1</sup> The analysis carried out in this paper refers to the bilateral and multilateral development cooperation system, its instruments and the proposals arising from it. Therefore, everything related to non-governmental cooperation and forms of international solidarity that arise from other entities or from civil society itself is outside of these considerations. The paper also does not include other approaches to cooperation and other practices emerged beyond the sphere of influence of the DAC, such as those carried out by China, Venezuela, or Saudi Arabia, which rest on different logics and are part of a broader approach that is often called South-South cooperation.

larity attained by the so-called development agendas, a notion that in recent times has encompassed a complex amalgam of objectives, goals and means.

## 2. NEOLIBERAL IDEAS AND THE CRISIS OF COOPERATION: BREAKING THE LINK BETWEEN COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT THEORY

The break with Keynesian ideas after the crisis of the post-war model of accumulation and its replacement by the so-called neoliberal paradigm as a new mainstream meant, among other issues, the negation of the need for a subdiscipline or a field of study specifically to address the issues encompassed by development economics. This meant the return to monoeconomics (Hirschman, 1980) and the affirmation of a single theoretical and methodological perspective in any country for the analysis of economic problems.

Although the official orthodoxy still considered that advances in terms of economic growth constituted the very expression of wellbeing and the solution to other social problems, the new thinking was based on emphasizing the superiority of the market as the motor of the process and denial of the role that development theory had assigned to public institutions.

### 2.1. THE DECLINE OF DEVELOPMENT THEORY

This shift in the theoretical perspective resulted in far-reaching changes that would condition the doctrinal debates on development and on the role of cooperation.

In the first place, it led to the abandonment of the historical perspective in development analysis previously upheld by representatives of the mainstream, such as Rostow, and in that of structuralism, supported by Prebisch. In the new approach, the dynamic aspects of development and the inherent transformation processes were replaced by an emphasis on the allocation of resources in the short term (Bustelo, 1998), requiring the proposal of diagnoses and solutions outside the historical context.

Furthermore, it called for the adoption of a basically internal/national explanatory framework when analysing problems and their causes in place of the multi-causal examination used in previous approaches which looked at difficulties such as the generation of domestic savings, structural dualism, deterioration in terms of trade, institutional weakness, etc., as well as internal and external factors. In the new framework, the explanatory causes of identified problems, such as poverty or unemployment, focused on macroeconomic imbalances, especially inflation and the public deficit, generated almost always by inappropriate and harmful policies implemented by governments in the name of development (Lal, 1983, 1985).

It also proposed a format or normative framework based on stressing the importance of globalization and its requirements for participation. This would



suggest not only the opening of economies of each country to the outside world as a condition for their prosperity, but also progress towards a new world order based on the liberalization of capital movements and the elimination of trade barriers. The commitment to this new normative framework, referred to as the Neoliberal International Economic Order (NIEO)<sup>2</sup>, in practice, meant a break away from one of the basic pillars of prevailing development economy which rested on the idea of sovereignty, or at least some autonomy, of the different national processes and their institutions for defining strategies and policies and especially for channelling domestic savings (Unceta, 2009).

In addition, discussions on internal and external problems, on development strategies as a process of conscious transformation of reality and on the role of different institutions (the market, public institutions and organizations) were replaced by the definition of short-term objectives and proposals aimed at achieving macroeconomic equilibrium and the full insertion of countries in the process of globalization. This set of objectives and proposals, apart from medium and long term challenges and objectives, was known as the *Washington Consensus*. Some of its advocates later pointed out the difference between it and market fundamentalism (Williamson, 2002), although other authors such as Stiglitz (2002) stressed the similarity between the two.

In short, the decline of the debate on development came from the very terms on which it had been previously based. It denied in practice the specificity of the problem to be addressed in different contexts. It disregarded the idea of development as a process of change and took the discussion towards the goals to be pursued and the evaluation of achievements as an expression of the *performance* of the countries (Gore 2000). In doing so, it abandoned the destiny of different countries to the fate of global capitalism. For some, this supposed the disappearance of the idea of development that, in essence, had been conceptualized as a national process (Maestro and Martínez Peinado, 2012).

## 2.2. THE CRISIS OF COOPERATION

From the point of view of Development Cooperation, the doctrinal changes highlighted would involve a clear questioning of the same, with different emphases and consequences.

Firstly, it brought into question the role of Official Development Assistance (ODA) as a necessary instrument for alleviating the absence of domestic savings in certain countries and its contribution to the achievement of certain

<sup>2</sup> The attempt to deliver this Neoliberal International Economic Order would begin by modifying the previous function of the IMF and attempting to link the policies of the WB to its guidelines; it would involve the creation of the WTO and the granting to it of the broadest mandate on trade, investment and intellectual property; it would take up the objective from the failed MAI to free investment and capital flows from almost any government control; and, it would also include the implementation of regional free trade agreements such as APEC, NAFTA or TTIP).

objectives, be they economic (growth promotion), social (overcoming poverty) or environmental (sustainability and preservation of resources), all tasks that should be entrusted to the proper functioning of markets. In addition, some diagnoses included the institutions of development cooperation among those that had contributed to the inefficiency through interference in economic activity and market dynamics (Bauer, 1979; Krauss, 1983).

Furthermore, changes led to the questioning of the need for cooperation. This was expressed in strong terms by rejection of it because of its counterproductive role during the previous period<sup>3</sup> or in more nuanced terms by limiting the role of the same in alleviating situations of extreme vulnerability within the framework of what is now referred to as Humanitarian Aid. However, while international development cooperation was being questioned, poor countries were held responsible for their own problems yet were deprived of the autonomy and capacity necessary to make decisions, sometimes forcing them to implement policies that contributed to a deterioration in living and working conditions (Unceta, 2003).

Added to this was the appearance of the conditionality discourse, which linked the ODA and external financing of development to the implementation of certain neoliberal macroeconomic policies and to the achievement of specific results in the control of certain variables (Dijkstra, 2010; Kapur and Webb, 2000; World Bank, 2002). These conditionalities, be they explicit in the case of international financial institutions or implicit in the case of private funders, would ultimately be decisive in the orientation of the policies of many governments, in many cases radically modifying the bases of development previously undertaken.

In short, there was a disconnection between DC and the reflection on development. In the new context, the traditional DC, based on the ODA, went from being part of the official doctrine on development to representing an obstacle to achieving the objectives now proposed. This implied that, in the future, the social and political legitimization of cooperation policies would depend on factors different from those applied in structural and theoretical support up until that point.

Despite the importance and impact of all these issues, it must be stressed that the rise of neoliberal ideas, especially significant during the 1980s, did not mean the end of discussions about cooperation. Other social and institutional factors would contribute to its continuity. On the one hand, during the period of expansion of DC an important institutional network was created and consolidated, interconnected by different reasons (diagnosis of problems, policy de-

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Eberstadt, of the American Enterprise Institute, in 1996 asserted before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee that "Enormous and steady flows of concessional external finance from developed countries have permitted Third World governments to pursue 'development' policies that have been wasteful, ill-conceived, unproductive—or even positively destructive" (Burnside and Dollar, 1997).



sign, financing, management of the ODA ...)<sup>4</sup>. It consisted of a powerful system with significant levels of specialization in some areas and thousands of experts working and reporting, not always in line with the ideas of the mainstream. This framework prompted the questioning of official doctrine, which was expressed in the Washington Consensus, as in the case of the papers *Adjustment with a Human Face* (Cornia *et al.*, 1987) or *Productive Transformation with Equity* (CEPAL, 1990).

On the other hand, during the decade of severe adjustment in which more growth was demanded of the market and official funds for cooperation were drastically reduced, the problems relating to poverty and humanitarian catastrophes continued to grow. This, together with the increasingly important role of the images transmitted by the media when it came to highlighting the plight of human deprivation to the world, and the work carried out by the NGOs, maintained a certain level of social conscience for the need for international solidarity and cooperation.

### 3. DEVELOPMENT AGENDAS AND NEW DEBATES ON COOPERATION

In the mid-1990s, the question of development was once again part of academic and political debate and had been reincorporated into the work of different international organizations. The World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995 and the Millennium Declaration by UN in the year 2000 would undoubtedly be the most visible milestones of this return. However, this return occurred in circumstances and terms very different from those that marked the previous discussions on the neoliberal approach. Development strategies were rarely mentioned and development theory even less so. The key word, the one that would come to occupy the centre of attention would be that of *Development Agenda*. Over the last twenty years, the latter has become the concept used as the main reference in debates on cooperation.

#### 3.1. RETURN TO THE DEBATE ON DEVELOPMENT AND ITS SCOPE

It should be noted, however, that this “return of development” to academic and political debate generally took place within the framework imposed by the prevailing economic doctrine and without it being questioned in its essential aspects, such as the central role of the market as a more efficient allocator of resources and as a more appropriate instrument for solving the set of problems in evidence. In fact, the most important fissures that appeared in the structure of the official doctrine had more to do with the already mentioned negative

<sup>4</sup> Organizations within the scope of UN especially linked to development questions (UNDP, UNICEF, FAO, etc.), Multilateral Development Banks (World Bank, IDB, ADB, AfDB ...), Government Development Agencies, OECD's Development Assistance Committee ...

effects of the adjustment policies carried out than with reflection on the most appropriate strategies for achieving the desired objectives.

However, this new thinking helped to prompt debate about a change in focus. This was initially expressed in the *Market Friendly Approach* (MFA) (World Bank, 1991), later giving way to broader visions that would end up forming a set of positions known as the *Post-Washington Consensus*, whose scope would be valued with different emphases over the ensuing years. Bustelo (2003) points out the existence of different versions closer to the initial Consensus (Burki and Perry, 1998), or more removed from it (Stiglitz, 2002). Other authors such as Gore (2000) point to its relationship with other criticisms of the Consensus, such as those coming from a *Southern Consensus* in which analyses from Latin American neo-structuralism and East Asian developmentalism converge. All this occurred within the framework of open debates on globalization and its consequences on governance at different scales (Martínez González-Tablas, 2000; Rodrik 1997).

In any case, the shift outlined in the official discourse on development throughout the 1990s had as its most relevant aspects its gradual reincorporation into the analysis of social issues (especially poverty), the recognition with different emphases of the role of institutions and the acceptance of new issues (among them, the environment) as one of the problems to be addressed. However, as stated earlier, all this took place without openly questioning the main nucleus of the dominant orthodoxy. In the end, this would considerably limit the scope of the new approaches, evident in the Monterrey Conference on Financing for Development (2002), as well as demonstrate their mutual incompatibility.

When examining the importance of this “return to development” in relation to the debates that existed prior to the 1980s, it should be noted that the new approaches focused on the debate on goals and objectives, renouncing what had been the essence of development theories before they were annihilated by neoliberalism; the question of strategies and development policies. This is directly related to the fact that the historical method, reviled after the neoliberal shift, was not recovered and in most cases led to a lack of analysis of the causes of the problems and ways for overcoming them.

This new way of dealing with the debate on development has stressed the need to establish goals and indicators related to different types of objectives based on the priorities established in various *Agendas*. In this context, the greater or lesser progress towards these goals has been examined as an expression of the *performance* of different countries; a word that, in a large section of the economic literature, has replaced the term *development*. However, this change is not inconsequential because, while the notion of development evoked a process of long-term transformation, the term performance relates more to the achievement of short-term objectives that may or may not represent structural transformations and that may even be achieved at the expense of setbacks in other objectives. In fact, performance evaluates the behaviour of a country with respect to certain goals established from within or without but does not examine the more general changes taking place.





Also, the marked return to the debate of development in some areas such as the World Bank(WB) took place at the same time as very different sectors and institutional areas questioned the concept itself or its meaning as a consequence of failures over several decades. The idea of *maldevelopment*, (Amin, 1990; Danecki, 1993; Tortosa, 2001) as an expression of the problems related to poverty, the environment, gender equality, human rights or cultural diversity, generated and / or aggravated by the model promoted was the prelude to different theoretical approaches on the subject, generating a vast literature on the idea of development itself, as the *capability approach* by Sen (1993), and also on the attributes that accompany it. In this debate, the notion of development, as an objective, would sometimes be denied (post-development criticism), in others adjectivally and partially questioned (human development, sustainable, community development, with a gender perspective ...), and sometimes replaced by related concepts such as wellbeing, happiness and so on.

So, in this context, as the notion of development became more complex and ambitious, political practice moved away from the theoretical debate while problems worsened (Martínez Osés and Martínez, 2015). This would show the limitations of these new approaches when proposing strategies for the achievement of the stated objectives, in a framework clearly favourable to the defenders of commodification and globalization without rules.

### 3.2. THE RISE OF THE AGENDAS

Most of the issues identified ended up forming a framework for debate and proposals condensed and expressed around the idea of the Development Agenda. It began to gain strength in reference to the challenges posed in the Millennium Declaration and to the subsequent proposals included in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

The idea of the Development Agenda came to express the existence of a catalogue of issues or "pending tasks" in relation to development that, in some way, placed the debate in a different framework from the one established by the priorities in the Washington Consensus. Jose Antonio Ocampo, one of the main advocates of the Development Agenda, raised the need for it as an alternative to the *Reform Agenda* expressed in the famous Decalogue outlined by Williamson (Ocampo, 2001). In this context, the Development Agenda appeared as a statement of dissatisfaction with the results of the adjustment and, also, as a road map capable of raising different, or broader, priorities in which social and environmental issues had a better fit.

The Development Agenda has not had an explicit definition, although it can be considered as a set of proposals that combine principles, objectives, goals and indicators related to a move towards greater social progress. These proposals sometimes contain ideas, almost always generic, about financing mechanisms but do not contemplate analysis of the causes of the problem in

question nor specific strategies aimed at achieving the stated goals. UN (2007) refers to the Development Agenda as an integral set of goals that serves as an internationally shared framework for development, for action at the global, regional and country levels.

Over the last 20 years, the Development Agenda has been applied in many different remits although it has been associated mainly with the proposals on goals made by UN in 2000 and in 2015. As mentioned earlier, the Millennium Declaration, approved in 2000, had involved the staging of a new interpretative framework on the challenges associated with development, after the vacillations and silences maintained for years by some of the main international institutions. In this context, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) represented the attempt to translate the Millennium Declaration into an operational action plan. This would be a kind of Globalization's *Social Agenda* (Sanahuja, 2007) that would end up being identified with the Development Agenda.

In fact, neither the Declaration nor the Millennium Goals came to represent anything particularly novel from the point of view of the debates on development, but they came to summarize concerns and objectives already raised at various world conferences held in the 1990s. However, their dissemination in the form of the 2015 Development Agenda allowed the MDGs to concentrate attention on them, eclipsing the rest of the reflections contained in the Declaration (Unceta *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, both the reductionist selection of objectives and priorities (Maxwell, 2003), as well as their translation into MDG targets and indicators (Bello, 2010), their exclusive attention to the problems of poor countries (Martens, 2013) or, especially, their interpretation as a Development Agenda (Vandermoortele, 2009), was the subject of important criticisms and controversies which opened a wide debate on their limitations (Alonso 2013; Easterly, 2009; Fukuda-Parr and Greenstein, 2011; Kabeer 2010; Vernon and Baksh, 2010).

This debate would end up being reflected in the review of the aforementioned goals and in the discussion on the new Agenda. However, the transition from the 2015 Agenda to the 2030 Agenda is a good example of the difficulties of progressing with the explanatory and normative views mentioned above in a coherent manner. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the 2030 Agenda try to overcome the many criticisms levelled at the reductionism of the 2015 Agenda, although the more ambitious framework offered is mainly focused on the expansion of goals and objectives, but not on a different methodology able to propose a theoretical outline of the problems of development. The result is, to a large extent, an Agenda focused on goals that are not always well defined, of doubtful viability (Kedir *et al.*, 2017; Nicolai *et al.*, 2015) and without prescriptive force to guide the policies of the different actors (Martínez Osés and Martínez, 2015).

### 3.3. IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

Beyond the shortcomings and contradictions pointed out, the return of some debate and the new prominence achieved by the Development Agenda represented the emergence of a framework for analysis which, despite its limitations, proved to be sufficient to recover and/or justify the need for cooperation and put it back on the *development* map. This was not alien to the involvement shown by some of the more important institutions of the cooperation system (such as the World Bank and the Development Assistance Committee) in the shift undertaken and in the resurgence of debates on the question of *development*. In addition, the involvement of these institutions was not only seen in the opening of the debate towards new issues such as the role of institutions or social problems but also reflected in the concern to translate all of this at an operational level, thereby allowing development cooperation (and particularly the ODA) to recover a certain role. The very idea of setting MDGs had to be considered in this context since the initiative to set quantitative goals with the time horizon of 2015 had already been proposed by the DAC before (OECD, 1996).

However, the scope of the changes that all this represented for cooperation must be considered in the light of three main issues raised in the new context: effectiveness, coherence and means.

Firstly, the onset of *Aid fatigue* and the demand for evidence of results meant the acceptance of cooperation came with conditions of effectiveness as specified in the Paris Declaration of 2005; the contents of which would later be expanded and/or developed in Accra and Busan. The debate on effectiveness (Alonso and Mosley, 1999; Cassen, 1994; Easterly, 2008; Hansen and Tarp 2004) represented a step forward in the face of the rigid framework of the conditionality imposed in the most difficult years of adjustment. However, the doctrine emanating from Paris did not serve to give more substance to cooperation. In fact, it raised a framework of mainly technical analysis, placing the problems within the chain of aid and avoiding the analysis of the nature and causes of the problems they were trying to tackle as well as their relationship with other policies that hindered them (Alonso, 2005; Martínez and Zabala, 2014).

This last question was at the origin of another great debate: that of the Policy Coherence for Development (PCD), initially raised within the DAC (OECD, 1996) and the object of later attention from different authors (Barry *et al.*, 2010; Carbone, 2008; Forster and Stokke, 1999; Hoebink, 2003; Picciotto, 2005). The PCD approach objectively addressed the central role attributed to effectiveness, but without coming up with solid strategies to move towards it. The PCD was a good opportunity to take up some of the theoretical debates on the subject because it opened the door to the study of development policies in different fields and the multi-causal analysis of the problems, setting an interpretative framework which cooperation had lacked since the 80s (Gutiérrez-Goiria *et al.*, 2017). But the potential of the PCD was to be diluted to a certain

extent by imposing more restrictive versions of it, circumscribed to the scope of the ODA and its relationship with other external policies of donors.

Finally, funding has not served to provide coherence and solidity to cooperation policies, neither has it led to the proposal of a theoretical framework capable of relating the objectives set with the nature of the problems and with the means most appropriate for overcoming them. Thus, the ideas and proposals put forward in Monterrey, Doha or Addis Ababa did not take into account either the new global scenario or the challenges arising from different dimensions of development (Clemens *et al.*, 2007; Vandemoortele, 2009). On the contrary, they deepened the privatization of financing, rejecting at the same time the new proposals on the replacement of the ODA by a new global financial architecture (Severino and Ray, 2009), or on the implementation of different forms of international taxation (FitzGerald, 2011).

#### 4. IS COOPERATION FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT POSSIBLE WITHOUT AN EXPLANATORY AND NORMATIVE THEORETICAL SUPPORT?

At this point, questions should be raised about the current situation of the debate on development and cooperation as well as the existing theoretical and practical limitations and subsequent concerns. What relationship can be established between the crisis of cooperation and the weakness of theoretical approaches to development?

##### 4.1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON DEVELOPMENT

As already stated, the possibility of proposing a theoretical framework on the question of development requires study, on the one hand, of the aspects related to diagnoses and explanations and, on the other hand, of those that affect the policy prescriptions and proposals, all of which suggests the need for both an explanatory framework and a normative framework (Gore, 2000), in a context where the adoption of a historical perspective is unavoidable (Chang, 2002).

Currently, in line with the dominant neoliberal doctrine, the main explanation of the existing problems has remained basically national (inadequate policies, corruption, inefficiency ...) presented as the causes of a bad "performance" of certain countries. However, in parallel, a growing concern has been emerging in some sectors, including some that are part of the establishment, calling for the consideration of an international framework. One of the best known expressions of this concern comes from the debate on "Global Risks" promoted by the Davos Forum. This has led to a greater presence of international explanatory frameworks that incorporate external factors as part of the problem that nations must face in their "performance".

This recognition does not imply a questioning of the principles that have inspired globalization, which the official line of thought considers to be the



most appropriate way forward for the progress and wellbeing of countries and people. However, there are currently some tensions in this regard, manifested around two main issues. On the one hand, pressures have increased to incorporate issues such as environmental protection and climate change into the debate on the global normative framework; and, to a lesser extent, other issues need to be considered such as cybersecurity, control over the hidden economy and tax havens, etc. On the other hand, some of the foundations of the so-called Neoliberal Global Order have been questioned, such as the hegemony of the World Trade Organization's directives or some Intercontinental Free Trade Agreements. At the same time, some neo-protectionist proposals arise, and the States are claimed as regulatory framework in some issues.

However, none of the tensions formally challenges the accelerated process of commodification derived from the dominant neoliberal doctrine (Carroll and Jarvis, 2015), which continues to constitute the fundamental nucleus that inspires the policies of the main governments and international institutions. On the contrary, all these tensions are embodied in a context of significant theoretical vacuum on the issue of development, which ends up imposing the dynamics of increasing marketization inspired by the dominant thought and which aggravates the various problems observed. Faced with this, there is no general theoretical framework that takes into account the necessary internal and international changes required by current challenges (Berzosa, 2002), from which de-commodification strategies that place human aspirations at the center of analysis could be considered.

This absence of frames of reference, necessarily multidimensional and multiscalar, contrasts with the diffusion reached by the Development Agendas which, as mentioned earlier, have become a central part of the doctrinal body on the subject. They encompass a confused amalgam of principles, goals, aspirations, targets and indicators along with a broad presentation of issues and areas on which governments should intervene to *promote, facilitate, stimulate, encourage or prioritize* such actions.

As Martínez Osés and Martínez (2015) point out, the International Development Agenda is not the main reference from which the most important decisions affecting human wellbeing are taken, such as inequality, climate change, human security or human rights. However, the issue of Agendas has managed to attract the interest of many specialists in the subject and over the last two decades has focused the attention of institutions and agencies dedicated to development cooperation.

For this, and in the absence of more concrete theoretical foundations, the Agendas have been relying on so-called *narratives* about development, understood as a combination of descriptions, analysis and proposals on the subject. The existence of different narratives has been acknowledged since the beginning of the century (Haddad, 2008), associated with different emphases depending on the importance and scope of the problems to be dealt with. The UN itself has raised the need for a solid narrative to address the Development Agenda and the challenges posed at a global level. Some authors such as Max-

well (2005) have gone even further by raising the need for a *meta-narrative*, as a set of visions and proposals that go beyond the Washington Consensus and serve as the basis for a comprehensive discourse on the different aspects that are part of the debate on development, a discourse that would also include the *Development Agenda*.

#### 4.2. DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION IN THE LABYRINTH

As regards the debate on the future of cooperation, it seems evident today that it stems mainly from the inertia of the past, relying weakly on the growing awareness of the threat posed by inequality or deterioration of the environment and the need to make a safe and habitable world. These problems, the exacerbation of poverty or climate and humanitarian emergencies, justify and support public action for international solidarity but it is increasingly conceived as a response to concrete needs and not, as in other times, a specific contribution to a medium and long-term development strategy. In fact, these practices are considered in a context of permanent regression of cooperation and governance worldwide.

Indeed, the dream of a neoliberal international economic order that some tried to implement in past decades, especially in the 80s, 90s and early 2000s, is increasingly distant. And, in the previously mentioned debates on the need to expand the explanatory (and normative) framework relating to development, concerns such as poverty, inequality or sustainability have gained ground as elements that are part of the problem and that have an impact both at a local level as well as nationally and globally, and need to be addressed in a cooperative manner.

However, the fading, at least momentarily, of that dream of a neoliberal order or the growing presence of other global concerns and challenges have failed to give renewed energy to the efforts in favour of cooperation. It is increasingly displaced in the main international debates and largely constrained to the field of specialists and organizations and agencies more related to the subject. And so the identity crisis of international development cooperation is but a reflection of the inadequacy of its current design for meeting the challenges of the day (Unceta, 2013), and the failure to identify a coherent analytical framework on which to rethink it, both at the institutional as well as instrumental level.

In this context, the so-called Development Agenda is a construct that, despite being profusely alluded to in the literature on cooperation, lacks a new approach. On the one hand, this is due to the weak theoretical foundation of its explanatory framework, which does not take into account the causes and historical evolution of the problems studied (Unceta and Gutiérrez-Goiria, 2012). On the other hand, it is also due to the vagueness of its normative framework which avoids commitments and policy prescriptions and so almost always remains within the scope of recommendations.



One of the most striking elements about the complex relationship between the Development Agenda and the cooperation system is the fact that the broader and more complex the Agenda attempts to be, the more irrelevant the system appears<sup>5</sup>. Logically, after recognizing that the objectives to be pursued are broader and more complex than those set out in 2015, the 2030 Agenda should have fostered a profound reflection on the cooperation system and on the way in which it can respond to the challenges ahead. But that would have meant addressing the thorny problem of development as a process and of development policies and within these the policies of international cooperation as an instrument for transforming reality. It would also have implied the proposal of a normative framework for international cooperation that is broader and more comprehensive than that encompassed by the ODA (Alonso *et al.*, 2011) all of which is far from the concerns currently present in the cooperation system. But, as mentioned before, what has never been considered is the transformation of the cooperation system so that it becomes an operational mechanism, capable of welcoming new actors and covering different dimensions, in order to face the different challenges, not just financial, outlined in the 2030 Agenda.

Nowadays, the possibility of proposing a system of cooperation relevant to the challenges of the 2030 Agenda would go through a global normative framework that complements the national regulatory frameworks and orientated towards:

- Tackling global risks jointly; providing a framework in which each country can face its own development process which involves regulating flows and activities that cross national boundaries and that impact on a global scale on the welfare of people and on sustainability.
- Providing the means to finance coherent strategies to advance towards the stated objectives through international taxation, the universal provision of basic goods and the financing of Global Public Goods.

However, the former requires prior provision of an explanatory framework that allows a better understanding of the nature of the problems to be addressed and its dynamics at the local, national and international levels.

##### 5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This brief review of the evolution of debates on international development and cooperation over the last two decades reveals that in the absence of stronger, alternative explanatory and normative frameworks, the Development Agenda is currently the main reference in discussions on cooperation.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, allusions to the ODA (current expression of development cooperation) in the Declaration on SDGs adopted by UN in September 2015 were very scarce, circumscribing the wishes expressed in Objective 17 to strengthen domestic resource mobilization, ensure rich countries comply with the ODA commitments, mobilize additional financial resources from multiple unspecified sources or adopt unspecified investment promotion systems.

It should be acknowledged that debates on the Agenda have been useful in legitimizing action in favour of a fairer and more sustainable international order, in light of the marginalization of these concerns in the 1980s. And, at the same time, these debates offer the possibility of broadening the horizons of reflection and highlighting the need for a more solid theoretical framework. However, faced with these possibilities, making the Agenda issue the core of the discussion runs the risk of abandoning the theoretical perspective, the urgent need for historical analysis and the perception of development as a process of transformation of reality. This would lead to a melancholic view of the debate on the subject and/or an unwarranted confidence in the power of words to change reality.

In addition, one should not lose sight of the fact that the theoretical problems that exist when defining coherent development objectives and strategies have to do with the crisis of the totalizing and uniforming theories, evidenced by the post-development approaches. Faced with the idea of a grand theory, of a meta-narrative or of a single model, greater autonomy of development processes and a plurality of perspectives are required, in accordance with cultural diversity and the characteristics of each territory. As we have pointed out on other occasions, these alternative and plural developments can only be possible on the basis of cooperation and not confrontation. But this cooperation requires, in turn, defining common objectives which are drawn as a necessary condition to make the aforementioned diversity possible and joint strategies to move towards these objectives.

The way in which this unavoidable link between theoretical reflection on development and cooperation strategies is addressed will, to a large extent, condition the possibility of proposing diagnoses and alternatives capable of sustaining strategies, plural but at the same time compatible, and also in accordance with the risks and challenges that affect everyone.

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