COOPERATION BEYOND DEVELOPMENT. RETHINKING INTERNATIONAL AID FOR THE SELF-DETERMINATION OF RECIPIENT COMMUNITIES.

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Sommario

Questo articolo propone un dibattito critico e costruttivo sui temi della cooperazione negli ambienti stessi della cooperazione, soprattutto sugli obiettivi reali e apparenti, sugli effetti sortiti inconsapevolmente, e sui vincitori e vinti dell'aiuto internazionale, il tutto visto da una prospettiva socio-economica mondiale. Sono qui presentati i primi esiti di un Seminario Partecipativo tenuto proprio su tali tematiche, articolato in quattro tavoli di lavoro: autodeterminazione e reciprocità, emergenza e sviluppo, formazione, co-progettazione / progettazione partecipata.

Abstract

A critical and constructive debate is proposed on and inside cooperation, specifically on the real and the apparent goals, on the unaware effects, and on the winners and losers of international aid, framed in a global socio-economic perspective. The first outcomes of a recent participatory workshop on such themes are hereby illustrated, divided in four working tables: self-determination and reciprocity, emergency and development, training, and co-design / participatory design.

Keywords

International cooperation, self-determination, post-development, critical theory, participatory approach.

Foreword

This contribution is intended to open a critical and constructive debate on and inside cooperation. It proposes the premises, incitements, and a report of a Participatory Workshop titled "Re-thinking the idea of development in international cooperation processes", held in Turin, Italy, on June 28, 2017, and animated by nearly one hundred participants. The idea to open such a debate has its roots in the authors' study, research, and cooperation experience with the Research and Documentation Centre in 'Technology, Architecture and City in developing Countries' (CRD-PVS) at the Politecnico di Torino, specifically within the postgraduate courses in Habitat, Technology, and Development (2013/14) and in Habitat & Cooperation (2016).

Introduction

International cooperation is driven by multiple reasons and interests, sometimes naively or purposely contrasting with the priorities of the recipient communities. A globalised world undoubtedly represents a complex system, where actions to tackle undesired effects might be addressed by mitigating consequences, or – more interestingly and effectively – by preventing them to happen. The prevailing economic paradigm, based on an endless growth named development, necessarily implies winners and losers while existing, besides being destined to an end due to the finiteness of our planet. Furthermore, resource requirements to support certain forms of development often undermine peace and cause displacement or international migration, while some forms of cooperation tend to try to balance social and environmental injustices and conflicts arisen in such a framework. More in general, the locution "development cooperation" suggests that help is provided to make up for a backward position and to align onto a predetermined path. We argue that such attitude risks to neglect and prevent some possible diversity in the original and punctual aims and expectations of the recipient peoples (self-determination), albeit the siren of a mono-cultural myth is more and more present worldwide. The disadvantaged position of many recipient countries or communities is often systemically related to a favourable position of who offers international cooperation, and the boundaries between Global South and Global North appear less and less clear due to increasing geo- political and human interconnections. We therefore suggest that a critical and constructive reflection on the role and the mission of Northern cooperation in the Global South might be timely and appropriate. We propose to focus on the most authentic priorities of the recipients, on the ethical dilemmas of international cooperation, and on the sometimes difficult relations with the local stake- and shareholders. Some of our main concerns are: why, for what, and for whom cooperation is performed. We suspect that such bases influence the modes in which international aid happens: its strategies and its approaches. The evaluation of effects on local communities as well as of the effectiveness of co-planning and co-design is also addressed. Finally, some considerations are made on what we can learn from interventions in emergency, what the mutual benefits of innovatively doing cooperation in a world in transition, and – at the same time – on how we can act to both prevent causing damage and provide thorough help in a systemic perspective. A multi-disciplinary debate is stimulated inside the cooperation communities, including the academic one, in order to meditate on the ultimate role of international cooperation, while improving the relations with local communities and keeping the attention high on the priorities of the recipients in the Global South beyond the paradigm of "local development".

A participatory workshop for a fruitful debate

After months of critical theoretical elaboration, started in late 2016, a Participatory Workshop was designed and organised at the premises of the Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST) of *Università di Torino* and *Politecnico di Torino*, Turin, Italy. The workshop took place on June 28, 2017, was titled "Rethinking the idea of development in international cooperation processes", and was animated by nearly one hundred participants, representative of several categories: practitioners in the field of international cooperation, scholars, professionals (architects, planners, engineers, geographers, sociologists, facilitators, etc.), graduate, undergraduate and postgraduate students, and members of Italian associations, NGOs, and other organisations. The workshop was opened by a plenary incitement by some of the organisers and by the moderators of four working tables, with participants later spontaneously joining such tables for a focused discussion. The four different working tables were named as follows: self-determination and reciprocity, emergency and development, training, and co-design / participatory design. Besides the figure of the moderator, each working group was composed of two more predetermined roles: a secretary and a rapporteur. At the end of the four parallel working sessions, another plenary was held to share the relative outcomes, which are proposed below in a synthesis specially prepared for the present contribution.

Workshop outcomes

Self-determination and reciprocity

With the goal of critically tackle the current approach to international cooperation actions, this working group focused on two main aspects: self-determination and reciprocity, jointly meant as the right of recipient communities to express their own needs[1], and their compatibility with the international cooperation actions. Important starting questions of the table were represented by *Who needs whom?*, *When and how to intervene?*, and *Who learns from whom?*. The group was composed of experienced practitioners in the field of international cooperation, including scholars and instructors training cooperation figures, PhD students, representatives of NGOs and cultural associations. The debate started from the analysis of the historical, political and economic conditions that defined the framework within which international cooperation usually happens. A critical approach to the idea of development, especially when considering that the locution

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[1] While the authors are aware of the fact that - just like "development" - "needs" is a toxic word, as proposed by Sachs, Illich, Shiva, and others (cf. Sachs, 1997), such word was used by many participants to the Participatory Workshop at issue. In this contribution, we keep such word to refer to the most authentic priorities and requirements of a recipient community, possibly free from the influence of the Northern imaginary.

"development cooperation" is most often used when talking of international aid. The debate is articulated in readings (Harry Truman's 1947 State of the Union Address, cf. Truman 2004; the description of the figure of the explorer by Michel De Carteau, 1980; the economics of the "develop-man" by Marshall Sahlins, 1992) and shorter quotations (e.g. from Italian anthropologist Remotti or Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen), to which each participant replies with his/her opinion, often bringing practical examples coming from his/her professional experience. A key point of the discussion was the need to identify third-party's needs; in fact, the Global South - eloquently defined by many as *developing* countries - is too often not seen as alterity, but as a late version of ourselves (the North): something that Fabian (1983) calls *allocronism* (i.e. the habit of not recognising the contemporaneity of the object of an ethnographic observation), and that lies at the basis of the ethnocentric concept of backwardness, or - indeed - underdevelopment. Such ethnocentric judgement - be it implicit or explicit - has activated in the Global South a mechanism of internalisation of the other people's look over oneself, averagely leading a Global Southern person to feel inadequate, to deplore oneself, and to sometimes even repudiate his/her own culture to open to modernisation. The working group wondered how cooperation contributes to reinforce such sense of backwardness, arguing that this might happen in two ways: on the one hand, at a level of imaginary, since the very presence of cooperation agents lets suppose the existence of a problem to be solved; on the other hand, at an economic level, both through the introduction of money to solve the aforementioned problem (e.g. for local collaborations to a project) and through the transfer of the idea of poverty, which is a relative concept and depends on monetary economic models. In so doing, cooperation often forgets that, if necessary, many populations traditionally satisfy the primary needs of their members through solidarity and social cohesion, something less and less present in the Global North instead. In addition to the discussion of the problems, the working group at issue also defined some possible strategies and solutions, starting from the proposal to remove those obstacles already observable in the political-institutional attitude of Global Northern countries - such as the ethnocentric arrogance - as well as to stop the narrative according to which cooperation bases on third-party's misfortunes; among the other proposals: to act at an equal level, by focusing on the other's subjectivity and providing tools so that this becomes able to satisfy his/her own needs according to his/her own values; to valorise the building up of relations, not limiting to perform a great action, thus avoiding to import (or export, depending on the point of view) a model. To remove the obstacles, both cultural and political actions are needed; at the same time, cooperation agents can still find out - before a real and full change is achieved - other ways of interacting with "the other", hopefully able to favour the ability of

recipient communities to set their own needs and then take actions to pursue them, while allowing for their right to self-determination to be autonomously chosen as a priority.

Emergency and Development

The group that discussed the topic "*Emergency and Development*" was formed by NGO's operators, professionals, students with different background and representatives of decentralised cooperation player based in Turin, Italy. These are the most important questions of the discussion:

- How much the emergency can teach in terms of development?
- How to manage the emergency not in punctual way but with a middle-long period approach? Which kind of development?

Taking our cue from a reflection emerged at the end of the debate, the risk incurred by international cooperation is that of "simplifying the complexity", going to identify nearsighted and not farsighted solutions to respond to cyclical or predictable matters: diffused self-absolving actions yielding addiction to aid without addressing an issue systemically, standardised management of the emergencies, scarce care of the follow-up. The debate ocused on the meaning of some words such as *cooperation, emergency*, and *development*. As a result of this consideration, it has been useful to recognise a common dictionary throughout the entire debate in order to represent the difference between the plurality of meanings. The word *development* is known as a word full of controversies. Yet, in this working group, many experts in development cooperation found it difficult to look critically at this word: as usual in similar circumstances, some said that it can be used in different ways and contexts (asking e.g."which kind of development?"); some other suggested that the term *development* is not only referred to a negative sense that involves the "imposed prototype", while defending debated agendas such as the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The term *emergency* was also object of analysis. It was proposed that it is dangerous to define the word *emergency* to refer to a situation that was not attended and could not be prevented. Some international policies can evolve into local actions and can be a solution for emergency situations only following a punctual way of action and not a strategic point of view: emergency is a phenomenon that has to be governed first of all with prevention. An approach which only considers the resolution of a conflict can bring a lack of consideration of conditions and specific cultures that can be involved. The main question is: who can define what is an emergency? And which conditions can characterise an approach oriented to a development of an emergency context? It is possible to act by doing some " ordinary actions in a non-common context", for example in an emergency situation which has been protracted for a long time or it can be repeated in a cyclical

way. So what can be done? Lots of experiences and ideas were shared and can be resumed in an attitude that can involve directly people in a situation of emergency during the planification of "new methods", with the possibility to applicate qualitative standards and mixing them with the solution of local experiences. New kinds of experimental approaches can transform some standards into "useful and good" solutions individuated in the context. The responsibility of these solutions is always to find an "escape way": the community might be able to be self-sufficient by sharing objectives ad autonomies with the operators and the internationals organisations. local actors might be able to receive a politic and contractual recognition (*accountability*). Due to its current favourable position, it is up to the cooperation to "remove the obstacles" that determine positive intervention directly to the *empowerment* and to generate resilience with slow approaches and cooperative methods that can conduct to the autonomy of the community involved.

Training

In the general debate outline, the Training working table focused its discussion on the connections between the academia and the cooperation field as well as on the current state of on-field players training. It came clear how an *exante* knowledge can sometimes be a limit in being opened to natural dynamics and processes. All the participants at the table had previous personal experiences into cooperation besides the professional ones: there were delegates from the academic world devoted to International Cooperation, NGOs, private foundations and cultural associations workers, and a delegate of the appointed department of Turin-based regional administration *Regione Piemonte*. The discussion started through some open questions, which the participants answered to through examples from their own direct experiences as well as by raising other consequent doubts and questions: "Why training, for which and whose needs?"; "Training to be able to train or to be able to exchange?"; "In this process, how much permeable are we to the people we are supposed to train?". During the debate, the crisis of the academic world came out regarding the ability to offer an adequate approach to the on-field training. Those who have academic competences are often affected by a conditioning that leads them to consider their learned knowledge as the only valid method that needs to be taught and they tend to forget how the basis of the scientific method is the continuous checking of the method itself and its questioning following direct field experiences. By proceeding with the current dynamics, the risk is to trigger a new kind of colonisation, as an imposition of models decided *a priori*. The acquired method is instead a starting point to be integrated, modified, and - possibly - also overturned. It came out that a fundamental point is represented by mutual exchange as well as by the need to lower the expectations to "control", which

we usually carry with ourselves. This could be achieved e.g. by thinking we already know all the possible mistakes and evolutions, and the knowledge and skills that need to be taught. It is crucial to listen open-mindedly and establish bonds based on trust, to use models that may be unusual to us, to create a syncretism that develops a more virtuous and inclusive process that will have results on the long run and that will be more structured and settled in. A discussed example that proved these points was the case of a Togolese agronomist who studied his science in France and, as he was working in the International Cooperation, he proposed an occidental cultivation method in Burkina Faso. After one year, he went back and he found out that it was like nothing happened and the method had not been acquired. The main problems were the lack of an authentic exchange and of the creation of strong relations. Training, be it academic or self-made, for people who work in the cooperation field or who are involved by it should be based on the construction of exchange relationships with those who are the beneficiaries and with possible partners from other professions. In the end, talking about training means talking about co-training: to combine the personal expertise with those of others to complete each other's knowledge and to generate new methods and overturn the usual approach by ensuring that the beneficiaries can teach their knowledge.

Co-design / participatory design

This fourth working table focused on the concept of *co-design (participatory design)* as an important tool in the hands of professionals and institutions. The participatory approach grounds its roots in the conviction that the design processes, originated by mobilisation of individual and collective energies, leads to the creation of better environments and spaces that are a truer expression of the local culture. Participatory design is, also, a topic that has been used more and more in recent urban planning history and even more recently in the field of international cooperation. This recurrence and its importance as a tool are the reasons why the organising committee decided to introduce this theme into the debate. The working group "co-design", was composed of people who deal with international cooperation as either volunteers or professionals for NGOs, NPOs, associations, or institutions. Throughout the entire debate, the discussion revolved around two specific concepts: role and active listening (cf. Sclavi, 2003). If we refer to the classic WH-questions, the first concept - role - answers at the same time to who and which. Who are the actors? Which role does each actor fulfill in the participatory process? Which are the ultimate aims of the process? The group identified three different realities within the cooperation field that have to work together to reach common aims: institutions, NGOs, and civil society. In particular, in conflict contexts, the role of school as institution emerged as fundamental to guarantee

a more honest and balanced process. In this frame, a professional fulfills the role of facilitator, without pre-established design plans. The project is, and should stay, an open even where he/she brings his/her perspective, on the same level of the other actors, avoiding modernist and colonialist approaches that arise from the belief in some kind of hierarchy and superiority of somebody. The second concept - active listening - answers to the question of *how* and is strictly related to this professional's role of facilitator. To be a good facilitator, the professional needs to gain a deep knowledge of the local context and at the same time be able to listen to all its actors. Only by implementing the tool of active listening it is possible to find creative and innovative solutions, and only through the definition of shared aims it is possible to obtain real outcomes, paying attention not to confuse the aims with the values. Values are always in the running during discussions, but are hardly changeable or truly shareable, and - because of that - cannot represent the object of negotiation. The discussion at the working table ended with the assumption that co-design practices can be innovative and groundbreaking only if their tools are institutionalised as part of an officially shared "way of doing", i.e. they no longer depend on the deal of initiative of isolated individuals Only through the formalisation and recognition processes we can achieve durable and effective results.

Conclusions

At the end of the working sessions of the Participatory Workshop, a need is confirmed for a critical and constructive debate on and inside cooperation. For many aspects and for many people, it was hard to put one's habits and beliefs into question, as if one would prefer to keep making mistakes (and damages to the recipients) instead of no longer being sure about how to act. However, several interesting considerations came out of the workshop. First of all, speaking of self determination and reciprocity, the need to reject an anthropocentric approach by importing/exporting a model, and insteadto act at an equal level, to focus on the other's subjectivity, and to provide the recipient with tools to satisfy his/her priorities according to his/her own values; the importance of valorising the building up of relations was also reported. The removal of obstacles needs cultural and political actions. In this framework, before a real and full change is achieved at a systemic level, cooperation agents can nevertheless start finding out alternative approaches to interact with the other. As per the considerations on emergency and development, solutions to face emergencies have responsibility to let the recipients be self-sufficient, including granting local actors some politic or even contractual recognition. Even in emergency situations, removing the obstacles to the recipients' autonomy will yield improvements in their empowerment, and ease their resilience e.g. through slow and

cooperative approaches.Training should be based on relations of exchange, in order to mix knowledge and skills that are not necessarily "better" and "worse" *a priori* in the cooperation agent and in the recipient, respectively: local knowledge in the Global South might be of great help to Northern actors, both for local cooperation projects and maybe even for the rethinking of Northern habits and policies too. As to co-design practices, these should be encouraged, maybe becoming an "official" approach for cooperation projects, and not just an insolated initiative. Although the debate could go further and deeper following the introductory incitement, thus challenging the very role of cooperation and its function within a complex globalised socio-economic system, the discourse seems quite satisfactory if we consider that – to the best knowledge of the author – this represent the first collective attempt to address similar issues through a very participated participatory approach.

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List of acronyms

CRD-PVS   *Centro di Ricerca e Documentazione Tecnologia, Architettura e Città nei Paesi in Via di Sviluppo* (Research and Documentation Centre in Technology, Architecture, and City in Developing Countries), Politecnico di Torino, Turin,Italy.

DIST   *Dipartimento Interateneo di Scienze, Progetto e Politiche del Territorio* (Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning), Università di Torino and Politecnico di Torino, Turin, Italy.

NGO   non-governmental organisation

NPO   non-profit organisation