

Rethinking Development

Four questions for a mindset change

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Abstract: The changing global context calls for rethinking development. The necessary mindset-shift can rather be promoted by asking inspiring questions than by giving the right answers. Parting from that idea, the article provides a mosaic of reflections around four questions: What shapes the concept of development? How do the actors involved understand themselves? How do they relate with each other? Which cooperation forms are applied in development cooperation? The result is not a complete picture but an invitation to explore further. Generating open spaces in the in-between of adverse positions – modernisation and dependency, planning and improvising, humankind and non-human beings, the earth’s gift and our work, given solutions and unanswered questions – creates fruitful tensions and a good basis for innovative thought and collaboration practice. It is just the in-between, where development happens and is rethought continuously.

“The [traditional Chinese] character for “in-between” ... (jian) 間: it shows, opposite to each other, the two leaves of a door 門, through which gently shining a moonbeam 月 passes” (Jullien 2011, 69; author’s translation)

One of the paradoxes of development cooperation is that it currently seems to have difficulties in developing further. While many scholars worldwide increasingly state that the “donor-recipient approach is obsolete” and the “North and South approach is used less” (Ayala Martínez et al. 2020, 133), development practice sticks to traditional paradigms² and instead tends to resolve its challenges with more effective and efficient management.

What is frequently asked for to overcome this dilemma is a mindset shift. In his master's thesis, Niklas Peters (2023) analyses the complete debate of the 2019 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) conference on triangular cooperation in Lisbon³. In this material, he found that the participants called for a mindset shift in relation to ten different types of development cooperation challenges, including how development cooperation is done, further involvement of the private sector, improving monitoring and evaluation (M&E), creating more focus on partnerships, design of projects and regulations, addressing global challenges and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and open-mindedness to bottom-up approaches. With that, the call for a mindset shift is one of the main nodes that link the different arguments used in the conference.⁴

The demand for a mindset shift is closely related to “the experience in development cooperation practice that the mere acquisition or transfer of knowledge does not guarantee change per se” (Barth, Müller, and Fiedler 2017, 77) and that “knowledge, ability[,] and attitude form central components of human capacity to act in open, complex, dynamic[,] and sometimes chaotic situations in a creative and self-organized way” (Barth, Müller, and Fiedler 2017 based on Erpenbeck and Rosenstiehl 2007, XVIIIff.).

However, a mindset change is a rather long-term endeavour and hard to achieve. “The French proverb according to which the more something changes the more it remains the same is more than a witticism. It is a wonderfully concise expression of the puzzling and paradoxical relationship between persistence and change [...] and implicitly makes a basic point often neglected: that persistence and change need to be considered together” (Watzlawik, Weakland, and Fisch 1974, 1).

Bearing this in mind, this article does not intend to add one more to the many guidelines for a mindset shift that promise a quick fix for long-term change issues. Instead, it creates a set of questions that invite staying in the tension between persistence and change, thus, opening a space for rethinking, gaining a deeper understanding of development, and questioning existing mindsets. The questions are structured in four steps that reflect four competence areas: subject area competence, personal competence, social competence, and methods competence (Krewer and Uhlmann 2015, 13).

In each of these competence areas, a question in the first person has been formulated that serves as the headline for each corresponding section of the text. Thereby, the questions refer to the individual thought processes that are the starting point for any mindset

shift. The reflection starts with a question related to subject area competence: Do I look deep enough? Behind that lies the assumption that, for rethinking development, it will not be enough to consider issues of development cooperation practice. Instead, a deeper look must be taken at the multi-faceted concept of development. From there, the way of thought moves towards the actors involved in development and development cooperation, starting with oneself in the dimension of personal competence with the question: Am I clear about myself? After that, the view is turned towards the other with the field of social competence question: Do I see and listen to the other? Finally, the methods competence question connects to cooperation forms applied in development cooperation: Do I explore new means?

Each of the sections is initiated by these questions and starts with some reflection on what might be considered as common ground, moving from there to current open and upcoming debates that may influence the future understanding of development. Without aiming to give a complete overview of different schools of thinking, the selected sources are meant rather as possibilities for a variety of inspirations and an invitation to explore further.

First question: Do I look deep enough?

This section turns attention towards a basic understanding of development, opening with some thoughts on development theory and then adding reflections on opportunities for a holistic perspective on development. Then it starts a discussion on – when dealing with development challenges – the relation between looking for solutions and bearing challenges in solidarity.

Development theory and measurement

In terms of development theory, the old antagonism between modernisation and polarisation approaches prevails (see Müller 2003, 191f. and Müller and de la Lastra 2023). When looking back to post-World War II times, it is striking how much both concepts had in common. Both were looking for universal truth. Both divided the world into centre and periphery, and both pursued the aim of the periphery becoming like the centre. However, they differed in how this goal was expected to be achieved. From a modernisation theory point of view, the most advanced societies had already laid the way and needed to be followed. From a polarisation theory point of view, the way was to overcome dependencies created by colonialism, imperialism, or uneven terms of trade.

The phase of postmodernist criticism that gained force in the 1980s questioned the shared convictions between both approaches. As far as development is concerned, is there such a thing as a universal truth? Could the world be described by a division between centre and periphery? Is it desirable that all parts of the world become alike? The merit of this thought lies in the recognition of context and diversity, the value of what is there and unique. However, it remained an illusion that the existing power differences between centres and periphery could be left behind that way. By opening many paths towards a future that could only be defined case by case, terminologies became increasingly blurred, and necessary distinctions turned out to be unclear. Critics of postmodernism (Habermas 1985, 392) saw the risk of eliminating all values to the point of losing criteria for critical thinking. In the debate on development, it could be argued that the loss of clear orientation has paved the way for the comeback of extremes that seemed to belong to the past. Old concepts of civilisation and barbarism reappeared⁵, with them the call to build walls to protect the civilised world (see, for instance, Huntington 1996). On the other hand, the concept of development itself is increasingly criticised as racist and colonial by post-development, decolonial, and postcolonial analysts (see, for example, Ziai 2016, Esteva 2018, or Hahn 2023).

This brief overview of development theory already highlights a series of questions that accompanied the development discourse over the last decades: Is there, when discussing development, a truth that can be figured out and a marked pathway that needs to be followed? Moreover, if the answer to this question is negative, how can we escape a sense of randomness where anything can be justified?

Closely linked to these questions, but also astonishingly separate from them, is the long-standing practice of measuring development and classifying countries according to their development status (see, for instance, World Bank Group 2021 and UNDP 2022). There is a long list of clearly and not-so-clearly defined countries categories, such as least-developed countries, middle-income countries, emerging economies, etc. The categories are meant to reduce the complexity of different country situations, shed light on the bigger picture, and, thereby, give an orientation for action. At the same time, it can be asked how far the categories simply reflect given circumstances or if they contribute to increasing power imbalances and the lack of investments in certain groups of countries. Nevertheless, it would be an illusion to think that such country rankings could simply be abolished. Their practical need is so high that similar classes and groupings would be immediately created again. Therefore, it is better to work at least with transparent criteria that allow a critical discussion. Part of this discussion is also the years-old debate about whether development (and/or poverty)

can be quantified by one single indicator (generally, the GDP per capita) or whether multi-dimensional systems need to be followed (Constanza, Hart and Posner 2009). Reaching up to proposals of totally different categories, such as happiness (Thinley and Hartz-Karp 2019, Van Suntum 2010), requires a strong intention of rethinking development.

Analytical and holistic thinking

Another way of challenging development thinking lies in distinguishing between analytical and holistic modes of human consciousness (Kaplan 2002, 24f)⁶. The analytical mode singles out explanatory factors and “emphasizes distinction and separation,” which form the basis for the exercises of classification and measurement described above. It is closely linked to “classical science” as it has been developed in Europe and disseminated all over the world through the course of colonialism. Meanwhile, the holistic mode of consciousness represents a “new and alternative way of seeing.” The whole is not appreciated “by adding parts together” but “directly, on its own ground.” Perceiving it in that way requires learning a completely different practice of observation. Instead of taking “the activity of seeing quite passively” by simply “allowing the world out there to present itself to us,” it means “see[ing] actively by consciously reversing the action of seeing through projecting it outwards towards the phenomenon ... and in so doing enable the phenomenon to reveal itself in all its diversity” (Kaplan 2002, 33). By stating that Sustainable Development Goals are “indivisible and interlinked” (United Nations 2015), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has taken up a kind of holistic approach that is reflected in practice, for instance, in nexus approaches (Cavalli and Vergalli 2022) but remains challenging to be implemented.

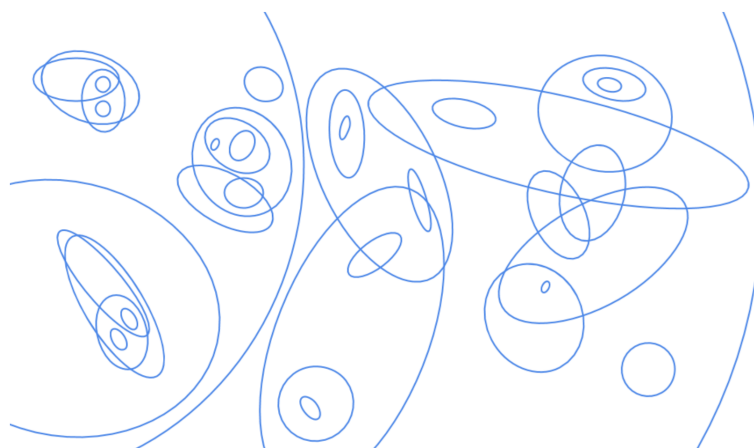


Figure 1: Holonic Structure⁷

Source: Based on Kahane 2017, 56

It should be noted in this context that “all social systems consist of multiple wholes that are parts of larger wholes” (figure 1). Therefore, claiming “to be focusing on achieving ‘the good of the whole’ is misleading if not manipulative: it really means ‘the good of the whole that matters most for me’” (Kahane 2017, 55).

Solutions and solidarity

The same caution needs to be taken with regard to supposedly optimal solutions and “only right answers” (Kahane 2017, 29). Development cooperation has become a problem-solving business, and practitioners expect themselves always to provide solutions and feel uneasy when they cannot. However, this kind of solution-providing implies a vertical relation and often creates obstructive reactions. The “fundamentally hierarchical assumption, that higher people change lower people, makes everyone defensive: people don’t dislike change, but they dislike being changed” (Kahane 2017, 28). This critical view on problem-solving does not mean the search for solutions should be totally abandoned. It is, however, an invitation to take time to understand the challenge, avoid choosing “among existing fixed options,” and “co-create new options as the work” unfolds (Kahane 2017, 28).

This scepticism towards solution-providing is not new. Although aid often is justified by Christian values, this view can, for instance, already be read in the New Testament, when Jesus asks (Luke 6:42): “How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye?” Similarly, St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians (6:2) calls to “bear one another’s burdens,” not to solve one another’s problems. Interestingly, it is the South-South Cooperation Principles that place, in a somehow similar way, solidarity in the centre⁸. From a solidarity point of view, persons affected by a problem may understand the mere provision of solutions as an intent to get rid of a nuisance without really considering them as persons. Meanwhile, solidarity delves deeper into the problem and intends to carry it together with those affected before eventually looking for solutions that could be found together. The focus on quick fixes may also move attention toward cases where the problem and the method are clear and uncontroversial. In contrast, there are good reasons why attention should rather concentrate on where such a common understanding does not yet exist. Finally, the orientation on given solutions and right answers may disregard the challenges of implementation that only arise once political goals have been agreed upon⁹.

Second question: Am I clear about myself?

The starting point of the discussion in this section is the concept of ownership that highlights the responsibility of those who develop. From there, the reflection moves to various questions of identity regarding modern and traditional worldviews but also touches on points such as the identity of human beings in relation to other forms of existence as well as compared with artificial intelligence.

Ownership

The responsibility for development lies in the hands of those who develop themselves. This widely recognised idea is reflected in the principle of ownership, meaning “that societies as well as individuals assume the responsibility for their own development” (Leutner and Müller 2010, 48). For those who take over a supporting role in development cooperation, this creates a — not yet so widely acknowledged — obligation to ask themselves what the cooperation means for their development. Development cooperation practitioners are frequently enquired by their partners about what aims they personally and their countries pursue in this kind of partnership. The more convincing and authentic the answers are — and a mere reference to altruistic motivations may fall too short — the more equalitarian the relationship will feel for the partners.

Taking for oneself the position of a neutral observer is often enough an illusion and, what is more, it bears the risk of spoiling the relations among partners. This is because “many of our most cherished identities — expert, professional, authority, leader, hero — impede collaboration because they place us hierarchically above or apart from others” (Kahane 2017, 96). Furthermore, it would also be naïve to believe that cooperation projects could be held apart from political controversies in the partner countries. “Donors cannot avoid being political actors in the partner country. There is no ownership-neutral external intervention, therefore any intervention should be ownership sensitive and ideally ownership enhancing” (Leutner and Müller 2010, 53).

Even when this is recognised, the fact that external partners go back home when a joint project ends, while nationals will stay and keep facing the same challenge, creates a prevailing gap between the partners. However, this gap is reduced by the fact that countries from the North have realised that vulnerability to global challenges, such as climate change or pandemics, “is not only a feature of developing countries or of extremely poor and vulnerable countries” (Scholz and Sidiropoulos 2020, 33). Paradoxically, this entails a chance

for collaboration because “if you are not part of the problem, then you cannot be part of the solution” (Kahane 2017, 95). Understanding oneself as part of the problem means engaging “fully in the situation and so being changed or hurt by it” (Kahane 2017, 95). Doing this may pave the way to asking “what [one] should do differently to deal effectively with the challenges” instead of seeking change in others (Kahane 2017, 92). Being involved so deeply means giving up control that normal practice seems to expect of everybody in today’s world. It invites one to “be surprised, moved, and inspired” by others, to reflect “critically on own experiences and truths,” to “accept ambiguities as an opportunity and take fragmentation as a chance to communicate, appreciate[,] and look in the other for what is lacking in oneself” (Müller 2017, 50). Having this openness is rather an expression of sovereignty, while the wish to keep everything under control may be a means to hide one’s insecurity.

This sovereignty also gives power not only to engage with others but also to assert one’s own positions, or as Adam Kahane (2017, 61ff.) puts it, “the polarity of love and power.” Collaboration needs both “the ability to question oneself, to loosen control and not to take oneself too seriously” as well as “clarity on [one’s] own position and the ability to defend it” (Müller and de la Lastra 2022, 165). Engaging all the time bears not only the risk of giving up one’s own values and standards but also a kind of “manipula[tion] or [...] suffocation: the kind of lifelessness that is produced through imposed peace or pacification” (Kahane 2017, 64). Permanent asserting, on the other hand, ends up one sided, defeating the other by forcing or imposing own positions and establishing “prejudice, disdain[,] and exclusion” (Müller and de la Lastra 2022, 165).

Questions of identity

Embracing conflict and connectedness (Kahane 2017, 49ff.) in such a way also involves questioning understandings of ourselves as human beings. Ownership, “with its reference to self-determination[,] [...] is deeply rooted in the ideas of modernity” (Leutner and Müller 2010, 48). Modernity is often also associated with a concept of progress in which risks are increasingly controlled, and natural and human resources serve as commodities. In this view, the human being maximises its benefits and, by doing so, is expected to also maximise benefit for all¹⁰. Many indigenous communities follow a different logic. “In the settler mind, land was property, real estate, capital, or natural resources. But to our people it was everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us” (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 17). From that perspective, development would mean, in our modern world, finding ways “to understand earth

as a gift again, to make our relations with the world sacred again” (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 31).

In science, the idea of competition for survival as the basic principle of evolution is increasingly contested. For instance, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela argue:

“We often hear that what Darwin proposed has to do with the law of the jungle because each one looks out for his own interests, selfishly at the expense of others in unmitigated competition. The view of animal life as selfish is doubly wrong. It is wrong, first, because natural history tells us, wherever we look, that instances of behaviour which can be described as altruistic [i.e. beneficial to the group as defined in the text above] are almost universal. Second, it is wrong because the mechanisms we put forward [...] do not presuppose the individualistic view that the benefit of one individual requires the detriment of another” (Maturana and Varela 1998, 197).

Later in the same book, they conclude:

“This is the biological foundation of social phenomena: without love, without acceptance of others living beside us, there is no social process and, therefore, no humanness. Anything that undermines the acceptance of others, from competency to the possession of truth and on to ideologic certainty, undermines the social process because it undermines the biological process that generates it. [...] [W]e have only the world that we bring forth with others, and only love helps us bring it forth” (Maturana and Varela 1998, 246–248).

Questions on self-determination regarding development continue with different world-views of different groupings of human beings and with different conceptions of knowing and seeing the world. It is increasingly asked, as well, if we should limit development to human development. This openness towards other beings as actors with equal rights is already very present in indigenous cosmovision, which always knew that “plants and animals have their own councils and common language” and recognises, for instance, trees as teachers (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 18).

Figure 2 exemplifies artistically how human beings can be set in line with other beings on Earth by a mere process of copying, in which “the result of one copy is used as a model to make the following copy” (Maturana and Varela 1998, 61). This thus produces a “progressive transformation of [...] copies into a lineage or historical succession of copied unities. A creative use of this historical phenomenon is what is known in art as anamorphosis [...] an excellent example of historical drift” (Maturana and Varela 1998, 61).



Figure 2: A case of copy with replacement of model

Source: Maturana and Varela 1998, 62–63

As Bruno Latour (2015) explains in his introduction to “Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime,” social scientists and philosophers were still discussing possible links between humans and non-humans, the role of science in the production of objectivity, and the possible meaning of coming generations. However, “in the meantime[,] (natural) scientists were inventing a multitude of ways to talk about the same thing, but on a completely different scale: the ‘Anthropocene’, [...] ‘planetary limits’, ‘geohistory’, ‘tipping points’ [...]” (Latour 2015, 3)¹¹. From there, a way opens — as Latour demanded and experimented together with Laurence Tubiana in the negotiation theatre, *Les Amandiers*, in May 2015 — towards listening and entering in consultation with elements that are not even generally considered as human beings, such as “land,” “oceans,” or “atmosphere” (Latour 2015, 262).

Another identity-related question is the influence artificial intelligence may have on development and development cooperation. Machines with the ability to perceive, synthesise, and infer information are currently advancing rapidly. (Ola 2023) The question is how this new form of intelligence relates to the intelligence of human and non-human beings and how it influences them. What kind of development will it bring, and how can it be understood in categories such as modernisation and dependency? In fact, “[d]igital machines [...] are equipped with a completely different operating system (digital vs. biological) and with correspondingly different cognitive qualities and abilities than biological creatures, like humans and other animals” (Korteling et al. 2021, 2). Compared to humans, computers make decisions based on the evaluation of an entity of data. This process of decision-making is often considered to be more rational and less emotional. However, this assumption poses the risk that computer-made decisions are taken as truth and free from subjectivity. Since algorithms are programmed by humans, “biases are likely to be transferred and adopted” (Ullman 2022, 128) and therefore have the “potential to perpetuate society’s inequalities and injustices through implicit biases due to race, gender, and sexual orientation” (Gupta, Parra and Dennehy 2021, 1456). Taking responsibility for these biases is needed to avoid the “desire

to outsource blame, culpability, and responsibility to technology” (Schwartz 2022, 88). It is crucial to be clear on who is responsible for how artificial intelligence works (Floridi et al. 2018, 692), how much responsibility we give it (Schwartz 2022, 88), and where its limitations are.

Such reflections on the identity of human beings imply a series of questions on the understanding of development. If love rather than competition forms the relationship between different beings, can development still be understood as one type of beings (humans) using other beings as a means for their development? If trees are our teachers, what kind of development do they transmit? If humans are just part of a living planet, are we talking about human development only or about development of the planet and all the different beings on it? Here again, by connecting goals of human development with environmental goals, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development makes a small but significant step towards such a different way of thinking. When discussing these questions, it should be kept in mind that while a personal understanding of oneself is changing, it may enter into conflict with the expectations of partners based on what they learned in previous cooperation experiences. Identities are constantly changing and, therefore, will remain a potential source of irritation in partnerships.

Third question: Do I see and listen to the other?

Concerning relations with others, this section discusses the role of binaries to structure and ease communication and collaboration in addition to the role of strangers, or those do not fit in such binaries. The section also provides an excursion through the concepts of communicative reason and the in-between as expressions of relatedness in social philosophy.

Binaries and strangers

In development cooperation, relations among partners from different backgrounds that do not necessarily know each other well are made easier through the binary of the donor-recipient relation (Müller and de la Lastra 2022, 162). It creates clarity on what partners can expect from each other and gives security to act. So, when agreeing on a project, many fundamental questions do not need to be discussed. There are basic agreements between countries on which single projects can be built with limited effort. However, clarity is won with the price of creating a vertical relationship between the partners. This verticality and one-sidedness are seen as increasingly critical in the context of rising awareness of colonial legacies (see

Hahn 2023). Nevertheless, the same type of relationship still prevails because partners became accustomed to it, and it needs determination to step out of the usual habits. Often verticality is hidden in simple and mostly well-meant expressions such as “give a voice to the voiceless” or “leave no one behind.” Persons or groups who need to be given a voice do not naturally occupy the room, and those who are in danger of being left behind see others in front turning their heads, creating a hierarchy through this movement.



Figure 3: *Becoming a foreigner*

Source: Bhajju Shyam

Meanwhile, those who step out of their usual habits and patterns find themselves encountering a weird experience: becoming a stranger. Strangers are those who do not fit into the binary pattern. This creates insecurity and also paralyses action (Bauman 1990, 148). In a way, strangers are even more threatening and unsettling than enemies (in the binary of friends and enemies) because they question the basic principles of orientation that guide action (Müller and de la Lastra 2022, 162 based on Bauman 1990, 143–145). Stepping out of usual habits is like crossing a border. When traveling from central India to London, where he was invited to paint a restaurant, Bhajju Shyam, an artist from the Indian Gond tribe, described his experience in the following way: “Everyone was a foreigner — all kinds of skin colours and all kinds of hair. I had seen foreigners before — some of them had visited my village to look at our paintings, but now I realised that something strange had happened. My colour was different, my language was taken away from me [...] I myself had become a foreigner” (Shyam 2018)¹².

The experience of becoming a foreigner (or a stranger) may be the starting point for the recognition of “the other as a legitimate other” (Maturana and Bunnell 1999, 59). From there, a lot has to be learned about intercultural communication. It cannot simply be assumed that words mean the same to all parties involved, and it becomes an interesting experience discovering the different nuances of meaning connected with what is said. In a chapter of the study “Potentials for trilateral cooperation between African countries, China and Germany,” a team of scientists from China, Ethiopia, and Germany started to exchange their views on key terminologies of development, finding, for instance, the following on sustainability:

“The three partners coincide regarding the importance of sustainability in general and its dimensions. However, each of them highlights different aspects of it. Germany puts the global goal of sustainability in the centre and the interdependence of environmental, economic, social, and institutional goals. Meanwhile, China seems to look more towards the sustainability of development investments. From an African perspective, the term sustainability creates the fear of being used as a new type of excuse for depriving the continent once again [of] its development potentials. On the other hand, there is the hope that by acting in a more sustainable way many potentials and opportunities for the people in Africa can be set free. It is the merit of this African point of view that it questions the often very easily accepted harmony between sustainability and development” (Müller et al. 2020, 27f.).

However, there are far more things to discover in intercultural communication. Erin Meyer (2014), in her book *The Culture Map*, describes eight dimensions in which cultural differences affect communication:

- *Communicating*: low-context vs. high-context
- *Evaluating*: direct negative feedback vs. indirect negative feedback
- *Persuading*: principles-first vs. applications-first
- *Leading*: egalitarian vs. hierarchical
- *Deciding*: consensual vs. top-down
- *Trusting*: task-based vs. relationship-based
- *Disagreeing*: confrontational vs. avoids confrontation
- *Scheduling*: linear-time vs. flexible-time.”

Together, these eight dimensions create a great variety of cultural profiles in which the relative positions of each other may become more important than the absolute positions on the eight scales. Very often, expectations on what has been previously learned about other cultures are met with surprise, for instance, when noticing “the gap between our stereotyped assumptions about certain countries and their placement on the [e]valuating scale” (Meyer 2014, 70). Meyer concludes that “the way we are conditioned to see the world in our own culture seems so completely obvious and commonplace that it is difficult to imagine that another culture might do things differently. It is only when you start to identify what is typical in your culture, but different from others, that you can begin to open a dialogue of sharing, learning, and ultimately understanding” (Meyer 2014, 244).

It is important to note in this context, that different ways of being and expressing oneself are not only a source of misunderstandings but also of discrimination and exclusion on the one side and privilege on the other. According to research on intersectionality, factors like gender, caste, sex, ethnicity, class, religion, disability, weight, or physical appearance form advantages and disadvantages (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016, 12; Himmelstein, Puhl, and Quinn 2017; Harris and White 2018). Discrimination is a way of dealing with the insecurity created by otherness. However, the challenge is not limited to discriminatory practice itself but also includes the recognition of discrimination and its visibility in public discourse (see Crenshaw 2019, 27 and Gartrell et al. .2015).

Communicative reason

The ability to make intercultural and intersectional differentiations becomes even more important when realising that “learning always takes place ‘through’ the ‘other’ ... ‘[n]ovelty’ and ‘otherness’ provide the inspiration to learn. Sensing a disparity from oneself (often represented by people) and having to adopt a position towards it sets in train a learning process for the learner” (Krewer and Uhlmann 2015, 15). This experience is reflected in the idea that “knowledge sharing is the way partners, who all have something to contribute and something to learn, find the necessary innovative solutions” (Müller, de la Lastra, and Kolsdorf 2020, 184). The learning and innovation potentials through others, and especially those that are unfamiliar and unlikely, outweigh the necessary initial investments in getting into relation.

The philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1987, 314f). has proposed to go beyond “subject-centered reason” by creating the concept of “communicative reason”¹³. “Subject-centered reason” understands “knowledge exclusively as knowledge of something in the objective world”. The “isolated subject [...] finds its criteria in standards of truth

and of success". It uses knowledge and pursues its purposes looking at the world as a set of "possible objects and states of affairs." Acting becomes rational in the way through which the subject represents itself and achieves its goals. Meanwhile, "communicative reason" understands knowledge as the result of the interaction between "responsible participants." Their acting becomes rational through the "intersubjective recognition" of "validity claims," different world views, "forms of argumentation" and attributions as subjects or person. Rationality here is the result of a social process based on "a noncoercively unifying, consensus-building force of a discourse." Participants "overcome their at first subjectively biased views in favor of a rationally motivated agreement." This agreement is not simply "instrumental" to individual goals but becomes "richer" by incorporating "moral practical" as well as "aesthetic-expressive" dimensions in a "decentered understanding of the world."

Development through this understanding means stepping back from individual views and purposes and questioning if its protagonists (and those participating in development cooperation) communicate thoroughly enough to meet, creating room where modern and non-modern thinking find chances to come together and exploring the potential for mutual understanding and inspiration. This may even require finding another language, a language that allows speaking "of the universe that is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects" (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 56, citing ecotheologian Thomas Berry), a language in which "rocks are animate, as are mountains and water and fire and places" using a "grammar of animacy" (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 55), instead of making "a living land into 'natural resources'." This obviously contains the potential for a mindset shift, because "if a maple is an *it*, we can take up the chain saw. If the maple is a *her*, we think twice." (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 57).

The in-between

The philosopher and sinologist François Jullien unites very distant ways of thought in himself as a "hybrid being" (Jullien 2011, 13). Instead of marking difference, a "classifying operation" that assumes claiming an "elevated or at least external position" from where an order between the identical and the different is created, he proposes creating a distance, a room that "opens, by separating cultures and ways of thinking from each other, a reflexive space between them, in which thinking unfolds" (Jullien 2011, 23, 27, 31). "This thinking of distance offers a way out from the all too simple universalism as well as the shabby relativism: The one projects its own worldview on the rest of the world as if it were self-evident, and the other locks every culture in its bubble and isolates it" (Jullien 2011, 44). These reflec-

tions of François Jullien also lead back to the question of whether we are clear about ourselves.

Creating a distance may also allow one “to bring out in the mirror of the other the original thinking, the suppressed ... what has been left in the darkness or neglected” (Julien 2011, 43), thus perhaps coming to a point where “in indigenous ways of knowing, we understand a thing only when we understand it with all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion, and spirit” (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 47, citing Native American scholar Gregory Cajete).

Fourth question: Do I explore new means?

This section finally moves closer to the practice of development cooperation. Here, the SDGs and alternative forms of cooperation, such as knowledge sharing, and triangular cooperation are discussed. These are meant as examples and not intended to exclude other ways of moving forward in development cooperation.

SDG 17 and knowledge sharing

Sustainable Development Goal 17 is directed towards the strengthening of “means of implementation” and the “revitalisation of the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development” (2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development). Multi-stakeholder partnerships (Goal 17.16), South-South and triangular cooperation (Goal 17.6 and 17.9), as well as the mobilisation of additional financial resources (Goal 17.3) from multiple sources are mentioned explicitly as promising ways for the achievement of all Sustainable Development Goals.

In the book *Transforming International Cooperation* (Kolsdorf and Müller 2020), 31 scholars and practitioners, 18 women and 13 men from 15 countries and five continents explore thoughts and perspectives on moving beyond aid. The discussants and authors describe a global system in transition, provide an overview of the traditional development cooperation system, and finally, envision a new partnership in which “the primary practice through which the implementation of the global goals is expected to be fostered is knowledge sharing” (Müller, de la Lastra, and Kolsdorf 2020, 183ff). However, “the discourse around new forms of cooperation is too often limited to mere rhetoric, while practices remain the same. Not everything that is called knowledge sharing meets the expectation of collaboration among equals and co-creation. Knowledge sharing is demanding because it means more than just the application of a new formula that can be transmitted easily and then replicated on a

massive scale” (Müller 2017, 43f.).

Questioning the means for development has also been the topic of the 2023 OECD Development Co-operation Report titled “Debating the Aid System” (2023). The report indicates four ways out:

- Meet finance commitments (27): Here, the report proposes to improve targeting towards needs and use implementation plans to unlock progress. It also gives special attention to climate funding and humanitarian funding.
- Support locally-led transformation (30): In this part, the report calls for listening to country and regional advice on added value and tailoring objectives to local partners. System-wide capacities should be reinforced and risk approaches for local partners should be updated.
- Modernise business models (32): Specific action in this part include enhancing transparency and predictability and harnessing portfolio approaches. It envisions also boosting coherence of aid actions and linking domestic and external policies.
- Re-balance power relations (34): This point closely relates to current debates on feminist development cooperation (BMZ 2023). It seeks to combat paternalism and racism in partnerships, enhance voice and influence in global decision making, and build common ground for collective action. It also puts special emphasis on the inclusion and use of Global South research.



Figure 4: *Tidying up Beethoven’s “Für Elise”*

Source: Wehrli 2003

From practice, many questions on forms of cooperation emerge that may inspire further reflection and innovation. The following is just a very subjectively chosen set of such questions:

- How can the unforeseen connect with the intentional for something new to break free?
- How can a balance be found between the planning of goals and indicators and the necessary flexibility and improvisation facing changing circumstances?
- How can different cooperation activities be orchestrated in a way that — instead of mere organizing and streamlining — brings different instruments to play together, creating harmony and productive tensions (figure 4)?¹⁴
- How can the always existing differences in power and knowledge become fruitful for mutual benefit, allowing each other to occupy a central position temporarily and stepping back for another to take over, thus creating a dynamic sense of equality?
- How can, instead of “authors searching for messages,” messages and solutions “find people who — beyond intention and dogma — let them flow and develop” (Müller 2017, 43)?
- How can institutionalised formats and standard processes give clarity and orientation without entering in the trap of time- and resource-consuming bureaucracy?
- How can projects be made big enough to promote change and yet small enough to be jointly steered by the partners?
- How can the success of cooperation be measured in ways that likewise convince funders and promote learning among the partners involved?

One way for development cooperation organisations to find answers to such questions is the creation of internal structures for innovation. For instance, the German implementation organisation for sustainable development, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), launched the GIZ Innovation Fund (GIZ 2023) that invites all employees around the world to participate in an ideas competition, preferably in teams from different countries and backgrounds. The GIZ community and an expert jury select 25 teams for participation in a virtual learning journey . Based on the updated applications, six teams are invited to participate in a six-month accelerator programme with professional coaching and funding support. After the final pitch session, the two best teams are chosen to receive further funding and coaching to pilot and scale their ideas. One of the 2018/19 winning teams was the Voice Project which tackles the issue that many local languages are not supported by voice-based technologies because the voice data sets these technologies require are lacking in content. In the piloting country Rwanda, the project provides an open-source voice data collection service that allows the preservation of underrepresented languages in the digital world and makes technology more inclusive.

Triangular cooperation

Since the second High-level United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation, held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on 20-22 March 2019 (UNOSSC 2019), much attention has shifted towards the modality of triangular cooperation. In the final declaration of this conference (UN General Assembly President 2019), triangular cooperation was mentioned 73 times, generally in the combination “South-South and triangular cooperation.” Triangular cooperation can be seen as a kind of “experimental multilateralism”¹⁵ in which a beneficiary partner, a pivotal partner, and a facilitating partner work together on a jointly defined development challenge (BMZ 2022, 6)¹⁶, often and increasingly involving non-governmental partners from civil society, private sector, academia, and others. Thus, triangular cooperation underlies in practice what is discussed in political dialogues in a kind of technical diplomacy¹⁷. Experience shows that the three roles used in triangular cooperation shift so frequently between the partners that some speak about dual or circular cooperation (Seaman Cuevas and Kern 2020).

This role shift creates a level of horizontality among the partners that is also recognised in the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development’s (BMZ) strategy on feminist development cooperation¹⁸. In her 2023 master’s thesis, Verena Hahn analyses triangular cooperation as a modality for postcolonial development cooperation. She concludes that even though power imbalances exist in the partnership, they are “counteracted due to the horizontality, processes, instruments[,] and roles of the partnership”. Due to “its approach of learning [...] and knowledge sharing” they “offer [...] the opportunity to find a political space to share mutual understanding and start a first discussion” around postcolonial development (Hahn 2023, 76). She uses the example of the project “Triangular Cooperation Afghanistan-Indonesia-Germany for the Economic Empowerment of Women (TriCo): Sharing good practices of women engaged in the home industry sector,” which has the main aim of creating economic opportunities for women. It is a project in which “Afghan partners were particularly interested in experience from Indonesia, as there were certain questions on fundamental social values that did not require any negotiations or discussions, as both countries’ cultures have been shaped by Islam” (BMZ 2022, 13). In a number of interviews, Hahn recognizes the need for intercultural exchange between actors from the countries involved on concepts like “feminist development cooperation.” Consequently, to strengthen mutual understanding on what it means to support the position of women economically, the three partners exchanged their definitions in a series of workshops (Hahn 2023, 71).

The following example of a research work presented by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2020, 156-166) on the indigenous use of sweetgrass (*Hierochloe odorata*) shows the shifting of roles in triangular cooperation in an out-of-the-box way. It considers issues of identity discussed under overarching question two (“Am I clear about myself?”) that also see non-human beings as actors. There are three partners: the grass, the indigenous basket-makers, and the researchers. At first sight, their roles seem to be clear: the grass, wanting to grow better, is the beneficiary partner. The indigenous basket-makers, with their centuries of experience, take on the pivotal role, and the researchers serve in the facilitating role by providing their methods. However, the process reveals that, in the end, all three partners benefit, all three provide pivotal knowledge, and all three facilitate. The researchers benefit because they learn harvesting of the grass has a positive effect on the grass population, while leaving the grass undisturbed reduces its growth. Their pivotal knowledge lies in their analytical practice of defining research plots, marking grass leaves, and counting new shoots. The benefit for the basket-makers lies in learning that two controversial ways of harvesting — with or without the root, while always preserving half of the grass — have no effect on the growth of the grass. Their facilitation consists in the provision of harvested and untouched areas of sweetgrass. Finally, the grass provides its “knowledge” on how it grows best in a relation of reciprocity with the harvesters. It facilitates by allowing the observation without greater difficulties. In that way, the whole process creates a win-win-win situation, connecting traditional indigenous knowledge and modern science while respecting the three partners as subjects in their own right. The application of the three roles of a beneficiary partner, a pivotal partner, and facilitation partner, together with the shift of roles between the partners, provides an interesting way out from the donor-recipient dichotomy.

Towards the future development of triangular cooperation, BMZ, among others, indicates the following steps (BMZ 2022, 15-16):

- “Link triangular cooperation more closely with other development projects”
- “Create incentives for triangular cooperation”
- “Give a stronger role to multi-stakeholder perspectives”
- “Report triangular cooperation more fully”
- “Enhance the measuring of the results and impacts”
- Strengthen “mutual learning” by considering more the “potential for Germany in learning from partners from the Global South”

- Exchange and adapt “technologies that foster development”, including “digital solutions”

Despite such promising notes, the share of alternative cooperation forms remains rather limited. While this might be partly due to incomplete data¹⁹, it is connected with the fact that stepping into other work modalities produces, at least initially, additional costs. This is because given standards and procedures do not necessarily fit well, and long-established convictions might be questioned. However, from a resilience point of view in a fast-changing global context, it appears wise not to build on single solutions and approaches but allow a certain level of variety. It may also be the time to rethink efficiency concepts and which efforts are worth taking. Indigenous teachings invite us not to follow an approach of maximum leisure time because it is only “one half of the truth ... that the earth endows us with great gifts.” However, “the gift is not enough. [...] The other half belongs to us [...] It is our work, and our gratitude, that distills the sweetness” (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 69). Following this logic, what might be more worth investing in than partnerships?

Conclusion

The reflections presented in the article show that a mindset shift has many dimensions and depends on multiple factors that are difficult to steer and control. A mindset shift cannot be produced by applying the right solution or strategy. It is a process of each individual and cannot be induced from the outside. However, it is possible to create a favourable environment for mindset shifts, which emerges by asking questions that invite further thought rather than by giving answers. A way of thinking that tries to fix things may be an obstacle for the mindset shift, while accepting the challenge and recognising the difficulty of changing one’s mind may open space for new thought and new forms of acting.

Discussion of the four framing questions showed that many of the ideas presented relate to several lines of enquiry. The thoughts are interconnected and refer to each other in many ways. When looking for a common denominator between them, this might be François Jullien’s concept of creating open spaces in the in-between of often adverse positions that create fruitful tension and thus inspire thought (Jullien 2011, 68)²⁰. Then, the distance between the antagonist positions — modernisation and dependency, planning and improvising, humankind and non-human beings, the earth’s gift and our work, and given solutions and unanswered questions — would create the in-between where development can grow. The mindset change — which Adam Kahane (2017, 2f.) calls stretch collaboration — refers to the training of a muscle not used so much up to now. Perhaps the direction towards which

this stretch should occur is precisely the “in-between.” This might be the place where development happens and is rethought continuously. The mosaic initiated with this article is still incomplete. Readers are invited to add more sources, ask more questions, and create spaces in the “in-between” for further reflection and starting new collaboration.

An international conference held in 2017 in the city of Gießen, Germany, somehow summarises what has been said before, concluding that

“today’s challenge is less to transmit knowledge but to share it. In order to achieve this, we must overcome the question of who is ahead, who is further developed. All experiences are good and valuable. [...] When sharing and exchanging with others, especially from country to country, continent to continent, I see a reflection of myself and learn new things about myself. [...] We empower ourselves and each other for dialogue and the sharing of knowledge, experiences, abilities and attitudes. Empowerment is the responsibility of each individual. However, we can create an ambience together that makes empowerment easier. This also means abstaining from creating dependencies, such as through the provision of aid. [...] We need more and different practices of global dialogue and new forms of cooperation. [...] Language does not need to be a barrier. A lot can be transmitted without words. [...] We have a chance to redefine what development means. We step back from long-standing convictions. We talk about it, sing about it and dance our successes.” (Ayala Martínez and Müller 2017, 175f.)²¹

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Notes

¹As Senior Advisor at Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, GIZ GmbH, and Honorary Professor at Technical University of Darmstadt, the author is practitioner and researcher at the same time. The text presents personal reflections and no institutional positions. The author thanks Elena Heller for her support in the redaction of the text.

²There is a broad range of arguments that criticize the current development practice, ranging from the 2023 OECD Development Co-operation Report “Debating the Aid System” to, just to give an example, post-development perspectives such as Ziai 2016 or Esteva 2018.

³Fifth International Meeting on Triangular Co-operation, 17-18 October 2019, at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon

⁴Material directly provided by the author.

⁵A typical argument of 19th century debates, for instance, lies in Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s *Facundo, o, Civilización y Barbarie*, initially published in 1845.

⁶All quotations in this paragraph have been taken from this text unless otherwise noted.

⁷According to Arthur Koestler (cited in Kahane 2017, 55), a holon is something that is simultaneously a whole and a part.

⁸“South-South cooperation is a manifestation of solidarity among peoples and countries of the South that contributes to their national well-being, their national and collective self-reliance and the attainment of internationally agreed development goals, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The South-South cooperation agenda and South-South cooperation initiatives must be determined by the countries of the South, guided by the principles of respect for national sovereignty, national ownership and independence, equality, non-conditionality, non-interference in domestic affairs and mutual benefit.” See “Principles of South-South Cooperation,” UNOSSC.

⁹On the challenge of implementation, see, for instance, Ayala Martínez and Müller 2014, 40ff.

¹⁰“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner but from their regard of their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love ... “(Adam Smith 1983, 119).

¹¹To clarify, in the difference between social scientists and natural scientists, the author added “natural” to the citation. This addition is not found in the original text.

¹²Zygmunt Bauman and Bhajju Shyam use different terms, “stranger” for the one and “foreigner” for the other. However, they speak about a more or less similar experience of not-belonging and insecurity.

¹³All quotations in this paragraph have been drawn from this text by Habermas.

¹⁴The figure is cited in Leutner and Müller 2010, 57, where the authors uses the analogy of development cooperation as an orchestra or a jazz combo, an idea that “refers to a partnership ideal of development cooperation that corresponds to the concept of ownership.”

¹⁵Term coined by Stefano Manservigi at Paris Peace Forum 2021. See *Triangular Cooperation: Fostering partnerships between the South and the North — PPF2021* – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luWkzpc5UgY>

¹⁶Germany uses the definition put forward by the Global Partnership Initiative on Effective Triangular Cooperation (GPI). See GPI 2019, 15.

¹⁷A form of diplomacy defined in the forthcoming OECD flagship report on triangular cooperation.

¹⁸“Das BMZ setzt verstärkt das Instrument der Dreieckskooperation ein, um horizontale Partnerschaften aufzubauen. In Dreieckskooperationen wird der Ansatz einer feministischen Entwicklungspolitik in eine konkrete Struktur überführt, in der gemeinsam gelernt und gemeinsam Verantwortung übernommen wird.“ <https://www.bmz.de/de/aktuelles/aktuelle-meldungen/ministerin-schulze-stellt-feministische-strategie-vor-146202>”

¹⁹For this reason, Germany has introduced a triangular cooperation marker.

²⁰Francois Jullien, as cited above, argues that the way to deal with otherness lies in opening a distance rather than categorizing differences. This distance opens an in-between where unlikely partners and opposed positions can meet.

²¹ “Gießen local-global: Nine theses for worldwide partnership and justice,” cited in Ayala Martínez and Müller 2017,175f.

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