

## The Politicization of International Development Studies and Practice

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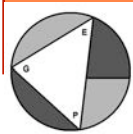
The very concept International Development suffers from ambiguity. Firstly, it is not clear what is meant by “development”. Is development the same as economic development or does it also include other dimensions, such as social and cultural modernisation? Secondly, if we assume that it includes humanitarian and economic aid from the “developed” countries towards the “developing” countries, it still remains unclear who the developed and developing countries are.

Even if we assume that the concept of development encompasses an integral and broad notion of development, still the second question cannot be answered satisfactorily by it.

To begin with, the very assumption that the receivers of aid or partners of development should be the poor countries is a wrong one. The targets of real development are human beings and not countries. Millennium Goals do not attribute these goals to particular countries, but to the world population. Nevertheless, the dominant discourse and practice of International Development still regards developing countries as the main subjects of development and receivers of aid and assistance. Please note that in practice also the post-communist, even European, countries do get aid (particularly from the European Union), but in academic and journalistic discourses the “developing countries” are the main subjects of aid programs.

The designation “Developing Countries” traditionally refers to, and is traditionally linked to another designation: the “Third World”. The latter designation was used during the Cold War era for countries which did not belong either to the West or East (i.e. Socialist) blocs. Yet many countries, belonging to the Third World were either allied with the West or with the East. Traditionally, the Third World referred to the poor, underdeveloped countries, yet many (ultra) rich countries such as Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia were also frequently—and thereby confusingly—counted in this category.

After the collapse of the East bloc and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the dominant discourse has replaced the concept of the Third World by with that of the “Global South”, yet the problem remains and has become more complicated: what to do with the former Second World, i.e. the East Bloc? Do these countries belong to the North or South? Many formerly communist or socialist countries were and are not rich, yet they score very high on certain indicators of the human development index. For example, many post-soviet republics such as Armenia, Georgia and particularly Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan do not have a high GDP, but their rates of literacy are very high—between 98% and 100%. The modernisation (or Europeanisation) of Georgia, at least in its urban centers, is rather profound and goes back to the 19th century. Moreover, the position of women in these countries is far superior to many “rich” countries.



However, despite rather successful “Soviet” style development in the 20th century, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, there are now large segments of the population in these countries who live in dire poverty. Finally, the situation of peace and security is precarious in many areas (e.g. North Caucasus) in these countries.

In addition to the ambiguity with regard to the Second World concept, another problem arises: that of the “adversary”, or “unloved” countries, which the West often calls rogue states or even the “Axis of the Evil”.

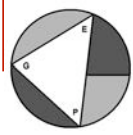
There are many signs and indications that the field of International Development Studies and Practice (IDSP)—broadly regarded—does not wholly depart from altruism, but serves certain geopolitical goals. It is often declared that the Millennium Goals form the basis upon which the IDSP is formulated. The Western world is the champion of the IDSP. In these Western or “developed” countries, often a part of their GDP and national income is reserved for “help and assistance”, and they often have a ministry or under-ministry of International Development cooperation.

But do these governments really, altruistically care for poverty reduction, health etc. in other parts of the world? Of course many initiatives have offered relief for a part of the population in the poorest countries. At the same time, however, the Western polities have put countries such as Iran, North Korea and Cuba under severe sanctions. These sanctions have deteriorated the livelihood and even livability of innumerable civilians in these countries, often the poorest segments of the society.

For example, flying in Iran has become a risky enterprise because the Iranian civilian air companies cannot obtain new airplanes and technical accessories. As a result hundreds of people have died from the consequent lack of air-travel safety. Owing to the sanctions there is a shortage of medicaments and the most vulnerable have paid the price. These are usually babies, elderly, and the seriously ill who cannot afford to buy medicaments from foreign countries by their own means. Similar cases can be reported from North Korea, Cuba, etcetera. It is important to say that also—predominantly Western—NGOs have not been engaged in relieving the situation in these countries; perhaps because of fear of losing subsidies or being prosecuted if they try to do so.

Western Europe is involved in three, perhaps overlapping, kinds of “economic cooperation”:  
1- aid to the classical Third World, particularly Africa.  
2- aid to East and Southeastern Europe.  
3- Geopolitical aid (see Reddy & Mioiu 2006; 2007; 2009), couched as humanitarian or development aid to the countries which are of strategic importance to the West and where it often has military presence, such as Iraq and Afghanistan. It is important to note that not all money labeled as “aid” goes to alleviate the citizen’s livelihoods, but to buildup armies, and assist the governing regime.

Talking about the Intra-European economic development, one can notice that the flow of West-European money to Eastern and Southeastern Europe improved the local infrastructure. However, it is not necessarily true that the EU incorporation of these countries has only brought benefits to the people in these countries. A case in point is



Greece. It is similarly doubtful, whether this pro-capitalist and neo-liberal policy would really benefit countries such as Romania and Bulgaria. And the emphasis on Africa indicates a deep-rooted mentality of (neo-)colonialism in West-European countries.

It is also important to mention that NGOs get involved only in certain countries. They rarely go to the most poor and most help-demanding countries, such as Somalia. Moreover, NGOs consume a considerable part of their development-aid budget by and for themselves. The so-called “overhead costs” are often higher than the delivered aid. In addition, not all “aid” the NGOs offer is measurable in economic terms.

Many NGOs have their own ideological agenda (e.g. supporting a political ideology or faction, or self-described democratisation, liberalisation, emancipation, etcetera) and count these as “developmental cooperation and aid”. Admittedly, these neglected countries are too unsafe for NGO members—but then the latter should admit more openly that their personal safety is a crucial criterion for their (non-)involvement. They often go to countries with a weak state. Worryingly, the NGOs interference in these weak states tends to take the form of deliberately or effectively sidelining or even further weakening the state and thereby serve global capitalism and neo-liberalism. Therefore, it is doubtful if this practice will serve the people in these countries too.

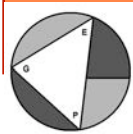
### Criticism, Answers and Discussion

This article is based on a presentation at the Ceres (Research School for Resource Studies for Development) Summer School 2013 (see Summary of EGP’s Foundation and Activities). I received many questions, criticism and remarks afterwards. Gratefully, and consistent with the transparent and discussion-encouraging nature of *Forum of EthnoGeoPolitics*, I would like to address these criticism and questions, mentioned below as statements.

*Not only the Western countries but also China and other non-Western countries are involved in “development” cooperation in the “South”.*

This is true. Not only Western countries, but also many other countries such as China, Russia and the oil-producing countries are involved in developmental cooperation in the global “South”. Each country pursues its own interest. It should be noted, however, that the Chinese endeavor in these countries does not weaken the local state structure, but, in fact, often strengthens it as the Chinese usually prefer the states and governments as their primary partners. Analyses and criticism should focus on modes of actions and results rather than on the geographic origin of the actors.

In any case, the Western sanctions against countries such as Iran and North Korea is in sharp contrast with the Millennium Development Goals and more so with the Human Rights treaties and conventions, for they destroy once well-functioning economies and health-care systems and increase poverty and the mortality rate, particularly among the most vulnerable segments of society. It is important to note that these sanctions are mainly there because of strategic reasons rather than human rights concerns, for most African countries receiving developmental aid have a poor human rights record.



*This study is a positivist one. One should engage more in interpretative studies. One should rather engage in case studies rather than large N studies.*

I, as someone who has taught research methods, do recognize the usefulness of different methods of research. Each method has its own strengths and weaknesses. However, one should note that not all case studies are interpretative in nature. More important is to be aware of the scale of analysis: different case studies may show positive results of different projects over a certain period of time—say between 2000 and 2010—but quantitative large N studies may show negative result over the same period. For example, different case studies may show that poverty reduction programs in certain cases has yielded positive results, while at the same time the overall poverty has increased in those countries.

*NGOs do a good job with positive results.*

This is true. Many NGOs are doing a good job. Thanks to their efforts the situation of healthcare has improved in many parts of the world and many more children go to school. However, there is a general discrepancy between the performance of different NGOs. In addition, their attention is only focused on certain segments of the society—usually not the poorest segments.

*It is unfair to state that NGOs are agents of neo-liberalism, because not all of them hold a neo-liberalist ideology.*

It is true that different NGOs have different ideological underpinnings and ways of conduct. They are not all pursuing a neo-liberal agenda. However, they would not get so much room to operate and circumvent, and in many cases even replace, the state structures without the global hegemony of capitalism and neo-liberalism.

States may be authoritarian and even dysfunctional, yet they can be held responsible for good governance. On the other hand, business corporations and NGOs, as non-state actors, are not democratically accountable (at least not beyond their own members). The state-building process has been rudimentary in many “Third World” countries. These are usually countries which are repeatedly affected by many types of internal conflict. The best remedial strategy would be to strengthen state structures and to encourage good governance and democratisation at the same time. A regime should be developed in which NGOs and business corporations hold accountable for their performance and consequences of their policies, and aid programs should fit each country’s and society’s needs. There is not a single best practice for all countries.

*This paper was discussed at a Roundtable organised by EGP at the 2013 CERES Summerschool (see ‘Summary of EGP’s Foundation and Activities’ in this issue, p.7).*

### *Reference*

S. Reddy, S & C. Minoiu, *Development Aid and Economic Growth: A Positive Long-Run Relation* United Nations., 2006. Available from: [http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wess/wess\\_bg\\_papers/bp\\_wess2006\\_reddy\\_odaandgrowth.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wess/wess_bg_papers/bp_wess2006_reddy_odaandgrowth.pdf) (Accessed 23 June 2013; versions also from 2007, 2009).