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Putting Development at the Centre of Global Politics: The Role of the G77+China in Shaping the Post-2015 Development Agenda

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Introduction

The study of international relations and global politics is largely the product of attempts to understand the systemic causes of why nation states confront and cooperate with one another. Understanding the causal conditions which lead to both confrontation and cooperation makes it possible to formulate policies which create conditions suitable to the most desired type of interaction. According to a realist understanding of international relations, conflict is more a norm than the exception in global politics.

While nations rise and fall, bringing with each period different types of political and economic elites holding varying ideologies, one thing which dominant theories have noted remains constant is the incidence of conflict. This has often been explained through the condition of anarchy, which means the absence of a central authority at the heart of the international state system¹.

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According to this explanation, the absence of a central authority translates into the main units (nation states) focusing primarily on their own self interests and security. Naturally, these core assumptions of realist theory are questioned by several theorists and scholars who assert that anarchy does not automatically translate into conflict and self interest as the rationale of inter-state relations. Indeed according to Alexander Wendt², '[a]narchy is what states make out of it'.

History is full of examples which confirm the centrality of power and self interest, in what has been referred to as the principle of 'might is always right.' However, for the political elites of the great powers, this was simply the natural order of things and those who possessed more material resources and larger or better equipped armies were seen to be the natural leaders. In such a world, the bigger the gun and bank account, the louder the voice. However, a closer look at contemporary global politics shows a more nuanced world, where might is not always right. In this world, the right to development³ has been affirmed and given a limited place in the corridors of global power. This does not negate the centrality of power politics; however, it has introduced a dynamic that previously did not exist in the state centric international order. This dynamic finds expression through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) expiring in 2015 and their successor in the form of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which have been adopted in September 2015 when the General Assembly converged in New York.

Countries of the G77+China have historically and in contemporary times played a driving role in bringing development closer to the core business of the United Nations and various multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO). This has been achieved through both unilateral and collective action on the part of member states, who have consistently questioned systemic challenges to their developmental goals.

However, unlike in the past where member states primarily used declarations to influence the internal workings of the UN system⁴, the contemporary reality sees member states possessing more of the material resources necessary for fulfilling some of their national and regional agendas. The following policy brief, which arises from research sponsored by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), illustrates the growing role of the G77+China in the development landscape and what this means for the post-2015 development agenda.

2. From the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): What's Changed

At the time of adoption for the MDGs, Africa was still widely regarded as the dark and hopeless continent⁵ in need of more development assistance from the member states of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and its Development Assistance Committee (DAC), which at the time had been responsible for 95 percent of all official development assistance (ODA) according to Richard Manning⁶. Despite proclaiming the ideals of South-South cooperation, most members of the G77+China were not in a position to put substantial material resources in financing their goals and were thus largely dependent on the benevolence of traditional donors. While agreeing to the goals of the MDGs, most developing countries did not play an active role in shaping their formulation and implementation⁷.

Much has changed since then, and nation states from this grouping, often referred to as emerging powers, have already started reconfiguring the balance of power in ushering a multipolar world order geopolitically and also in terms of the development landscape. . Indeed while previously examples from the DAC dominated development thinking, today one is able to draw lessons on development from India, China, Brazil, or South Africa amongst others. While not always positive lessons, these nation states have made increasing strides through their own national policies at alleviating poverty and meeting many of the MDGs.

As nation states from this grouping have continued to rise, so has the role of the G77+China, which is able to draw on the resources and growing influence of its members to influence the development agenda.

The intergovernmental process to establish the SDGs has allowed the G77+China to have a larger influence in defining the goals than before. Experiences from this grouping, which were domestically driven, are now used to draw lessons for other developing countries with aspirations, which in itself is a fundamental change from the period which produced the MDGs. It is indeed important to note that recipient countries are not only recipients of material support, but also receive ideas on the state, the economy, society, and how to develop their countries. One should thus not underestimate the shifting mindset in developing countries where the elites are increasingly backing their own ideas while blending them with long established practices in an effort to transform their societies away from the periphery of international developments.

The rise of emerging powers and their experiences domestically have certainly given more confidence among developing countries to play a more assertive role in advocating for more policy space and reforms to the multilateral trade system. However, where reforms have been slow to materialise, as in the case of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), emerging powers have simply founded their own institutions, which is evident in the case of the Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank (AIIB), and the New Development Bank (NDB) founded by the BRICS countries.

Through better coordination and preparation for international negotiations, members of the G77+China have managed to successfully lobby for the inclusion of development in the Doha round of trade talks, leading to initiatives such as aid for trade, which are aimed at improving the domestic capabilities of developing countries to trade and negotiate more effectively.

They have also managed to play a critical role in the shaping of the report of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development established within the United Nations. Indeed the very idea to work on concrete sustainable development goals arose in the preparations for the Rio+20 Summit when Colombia⁸ proposed the adoption of a new set of sustainable development goals.

The inclusiveness of the process in comparison with the manner in which the MDGs were formulated created more complexity through the intergovernmental negotiation process, which is far more complicated than bilateral negotiations, especially given the consensual manner in which decisions have to be made⁹. However, it may also lend more legitimacy to the process and possible outcomes. While essentially a voluntary exercise, the manner in which resources were galvanised for the MDGs suggests that this exercise is not simply in vain.

The report presented by the OWG¹⁰, and the 17 SDGs in the report represented a fine balance which according to the G77+China did not need any tinkering in the lead up to the UNGA meeting in September 2015, which adopted a post-2015 development agenda aimed at completely eradicating poverty by 2030. If implemented, one might ask what the post-2015 global development landscape will look like and what impact this will have for the aspirations of millions of people globally who seek to lift themselves out of their dire social circumstances.

3. The Post-2015 Development Agenda: Heralding a More Diverse Development Landscape?

An overview of the report by the OWG, which had the support of the G77+China, shows that many of the goals are not only relevant for developing countries, but applicable to developed countries alike.

They also show that the priorities of developing countries have been incorporated, ensuring that while members of the OECD DAC are still expected to fulfil their obligations and pledges, a greater focus would be placed on ensuring that developing countries are in a better position to implement and mobilise domestic resources for their own development plans. Besides domestic resources, they would also be in a position to draw resources from new institutions such as the AIIB and the NDB. This will not automatically translate to benefits, and it is still up to the individual countries and regional groupings to harness this changing development landscape to their advantage.

One cannot speak of a particular development model advocated by members of the G77+China. Instead, what one sees are growing calls for policy space to enable nation states to decide for themselves the appropriate development path to take. The importance of this should not be understated as developing countries have consistently complained about the lack of policy space in their domestic affairs. Taken to their logical conclusion, one could expect to see a more diversified development landscape in the post-2015 development period. We are also more likely to see a growing diversity in global politics, where common global principles are agreed to, yet interpreted differently in various domestic settings. Ideas on the state, society, the economy, development models and systems of governance will certainly not be off limits after the decades dominated by the intellectual input of the OECD.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Having established the centrality of the G77+China in putting development closer to the core business of the United Nations, one will now outline a few recommendations for member states in the G77+China, which are especially applicable for South Africa as the current chair of the grouping. The first pertains to the data shortage in terms of South-South cooperation, whereas the second relates to efforts among some member states of the grouping

to establish more coherent agencies and departments to drive their development cooperation projects abroad. The third recommendation pertains to the new institutional frameworks being set up by member states of the G77+China such as development banks, whereas the fourth relates to the role of civil society in shaping the development agenda in member states of the G77+China.

- Addressing the data shortage should remain a priority for nation states and research institutions in the global south, which allows all interested stakeholders the ability to objectively assess development targets. This will form part of the work of the UN Statistical Commission and various national statistical offices. Those nation states not able to collect and organise data on key development trends will have to get the necessary support through capacity building from northern and southern providers of development cooperation and UN programmes. Academic institutions and think tanks in the global south should play a leading role in defining key concepts and operationalising them in order to better organise key data.
- With the larger member states of the G77+China looking to better organise their institutional frameworks for outward bound development cooperation, it is imperative to ensure that the new agencies and departments are given a clear mandate in order to prevent any interdepartmental conflicts that may hinder the work at hand.
- Given the strategic role of new development banks from the global south, it is important for their respective governing bodies to immediately recognise that they will be more than just sources of funding, but fill an important gap as knowledge banks of the global south.

While rejecting a one size fits all approach to development, an important contribution would be to allow recipients of their financing an opportunity to experiment with more appropriate development tools.

- The growing role of the G77+China in the post-2015 development agenda would be incomplete without the inclusive role of civil society. Institutions of the global south must demonstrate through actions that their earlier critiques of the exclusive nature of institutions of the global north were not just all talk and no action.

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