

Role of NGOs in Sustainable Development: Addressing Imbalances from the Shift in the Cooperation between Middle and Upper-Middle Income Countries (Part 1)¹

ABSTRACT

Although the European Union's priorities in the neighborhood have led to a substantial increase in aid to middle-income countries, there are large differences between different countries and between the external financial instruments of the EU. Income-based development measures leave little room for political maneuvering, but they are manifestly inadequate as a tool for policy making in a diverse world.

In highlighting how the role and involvement of NGOs and other actors could help address such imbalances through a more coherent and adapted approach that creatively combines all the means of EU implementation – as well as illustrate how better collaboration between Member States and EU institutions, as well as closer cooperation with actors beyond governments and the development community, would also help, this paper extensively contributes to the current literature in addressing some of the challenges and perspectives that are currently being planned in relation to the EU's development policy, providing different elements of analysis and reflection on its future evolution.

KEYWORDS: sustainable development, middle, and upper-middle income countries, European Union, non governmental organisations, actors, Debt for Nature Deals Swaps, Debt for Marine Preservation Program initiatives, Development Aid for Nature Preservation

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Introduction

The policies of cooperation and development aid are currently changing their approaches and practices. The main objective is aimed at ending poverty and moving towards sustainable development. In this scenario of change, the European Union development cooperation has become more selective and is concentrating more and more on the poorest countries.

The facilitation of the allocation of resources for development aid is increasingly taking place between transatlantic partnerships which comprise of non governmental organisations, agencies (NGOs) and actors. This is evidenced by the collaboration between the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) which was established in 1994 to support post-Cold War political transition in Eastern Europe - thus providing a vital link for OTI within USAID and the broader aid world as a “provider of flexible and localized political aid in conflict and transition settings” (Soria et al, 2018:8).

In 2015, in respect of climate and environmental matters and as a means of addressing climate changes in severely affected areas whilst assisting lower income based countries in reducing their debts, through manageable structured repayments, the Seychelles reached a major debt buyback agreement worth \$30 million with the Paris Club Group of Creditors and South Africa in Paris whereby the debt would be transferred to a trust which will “conserve the Indian Ocean archipelago of 115 islands’ ocean spaces”. Further, the Paris Club also offered an additional five percent debt forgiveness on the original amount.

Such arrangements between small island developing states (SIDs) like Seychelles, through non governmental agencies and organisations (NGOs), do not only serve to address vital issues such as climate change, but also mitigate the potential for differences and controversial questions that may be raised in relation to the problems of shifts in focus to lower income based countries – particularly where strategic founding EU partners feel short changed as a result of footing the bill for lower income based nations.

According to reports by the Guardian (2018), it is estimated that parks which cover 15% of the Seychelles ocean will be doubled by the government by 2021, attaining its international target of 10% by 2020 - the parks resulting from the first ever debt-swap deal for marine protection in which \$22m of national debt owed to the UK, France, Belgium and Italy was bought at a discount by The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the NGO that assisted the Seychelles.

From the “debt-for-nature” swaps which originated from the 1980s, a program which many NGOs have favored, this innovative move to “debt for marine protection” represents a means to addressing climate change issues – particularly the preservation of vital species and animal lives caught up in global climate changes, whilst also addressing some of the resource allocation argument issues associated with shifts in focus to lower income countries – even though certain problems still persist with the resource allocation through NGOs. This contribution also aims to address associated challenges faced by NGOs in effectively coordinating the distribution of resources associated with debt-for nature, debt for marine protection swaps, as well as resources for development aid.

To which it must be added that in 2015 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); In addition, in that same year, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing for development were approved. This change led to a new international scenario of differentiation and graduation for some countries, thus, the EU directs its cooperation according to a minimum approach, for middle-income countries (MICs) which may be inconsistent with the 2030 Agenda and the fight for climate change.

These new times demand that the EU adapt its policies of cooperation and development, implementing (and financing) innovative forms of association suited to the particular realities of the countries and the global challenges of sustainable development.

Given the growing interconnection of regions and new challenges around the world, it is necessary to emphasize that States alone cannot give an effective response to these global dynamics; instead, the EU together with its Member States can face these new challenges and opportunities, as well as playing a key role in the benefits of globalization to spread the values of the EU, and provide security and stability to its citizens; in all of this, the EU's external action programs represent an essential part.

Background to Literature and Review of Topic

From the most advanced developing countries to the poorest income based countries

The level of per capita income is the main criterion for grouping countries according to their level of development and, therefore, for the allocation of international cooperation flows. The World Bank (WB) uses gross national income (GNI) per capita to generate income thresholds and classify countries into four groups: low-income countries (LICs), middle-income countries (MICs), upper middle income countries (UMICs), and high-income countries (HICs).

The *most advanced developing countries* (MADC) include middle-income countries (MICs) and upper -middle income countries (UMICs). The technical significance and its usefulness is perceived in terms of the differentiating category from which the profile of those who are in a position to receive help is designed and those who have already passed that frontier -which theoretically- would disable them to be candidates for reception of cooperation.

As a reference of the destination of the aid in the new paradigm, the denomination and categorization of the countries is ambiguous since they are labeled as "graduated" countries, and from there, the recommendation of not being eligible to obtain development cooperation is given; at the same time, it is pointed out that they are countries that are in conditions to contribute to development.

It appears that we are facing a new category of countries that distinguish themselves thanks to certain characteristics they share but, also, they have a good number of realities that differentiate them. The paradox that leads to this simplification referred to as MIC - consistent with the indicators considered by the WB and the OECD - is clear when it is said that approximately 47% of UN members belong to this category and that almost all of Latin America would be in that condition, with the exception of Haiti, as the most emblematic case of low-income countries.

In this chapter, focus will be accorded to countries whose income levels are so low – and who are burdened by such debt levels that it would appear justifiable not only for a means or some form of arrangement to be put in place to assist such countries, but that through such arrangements, other noble and worthy causes, namely, climate change and environmental issues,

can be addressed. This is not to discount or disregard countries who are in receipt of state aids and who are considered to attain disproportionate funding assistance – that is, disproportionate to the amounts they have contributed, but also to draw from experiences through the “debt for swap” and “debt for marine protection” experiences, in applying how NGOs can effectively assist in coordinating the allocation of distribution of resources – even where confronted with certain challenges.

The “Debt for Nature Deals Swap” Initiative

- “Seychelles is a nation of 115 islands. Made up mostly of coastline, 99 per cent of its territory consists of ocean and its economy is almost entirely dependent on tourism and tuna fishing. However, these sectors don’t generate enough revenue to service the country’s national debt, which was equivalent to 60 per cent of the size of its economy, measured in terms of the Gross Domestic Product, in 2015. In light of this, the Nature Conservancy began working with Seychelles on a debt for conservation swap in early 2012. Later that year the country’s Vice President Danny Faure announced that if such swap could be agreed, Seychelles would commit 30 per cent, equivalent to 400,000 square kilometres, of its Exclusive Economic Zone (an area of coastal water under the country’s exclusive economic control) to becoming Marine Protected Areas.

Seychelles debt swap is to be overseen by the Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust. The local organisation will develop marine protected areas and fish replenishment no-take zones, implement coral and mangrove restoration projects, ensure economic diversification through sustainable fisheries and tourism, and improve social resiliency to climate change in coastal communities.” (Lifegate:2016).

Following a debt crisis which occurred in the late 2000s, the Seychelles government was left heavily indebted to several nations and the Nature Conservancy raised about \$15 million in investment, and \$5 million in grants to pay off some of that debt to a group of European creditors, at a discount (Inside Philanthropy, 2018). Other initiatives and rationales behind the deal are as follows:

- This was instigated and arranged such that the government could repay the debt at a very low interest rate, some of which goes back to TNC's lenders, and the rest toward conservation.
- Part of the deal being that Seychelles would commit to eventual protection of 30 percent of its waters (previously it was just 0.04 percent). Money the government saves via refinancing will go toward a combination of ongoing marine protection programs and an endowment for future projects.
- The rationale, here, being that Seychelles relies a lot on tourism and fishing, and needs to protect its waters to secure the future of those industries – however since it owed so much money, which it could not afford, the swap would incorporate its use of private wealth grants and low-interest loans as a means of making its debt easier to manage, if the money it frees up goes toward conservation discount (Inside Philanthropy, 2018).”

Main Issues and Focus of the Study

Cooperation between the European Union, middle and upper-middle-income countries.

The EU and its member states consider MICs and UMICs as allies in combating global issues and as important counterparts for building leadership in different regions. The possibilities for cooperation include global collective action and mutually beneficial partnerships that go beyond the classical scope of development cooperation. The debate on the most advanced developing countries focuses on two points (ecdpm, 2018: 1):” *a) How to improve collaboration with upper-middle-income countries and some low-middle-income countries with which the EU wishes to forge partnerships in favor of sustainable development, based on common interests. b) How to guarantee the continuity of relations and the validity of the lessons learned in the field of cooperation when countries cease to be eligible to receive ODA; according to the list of the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD”.*

MICs are classified as such according to a single indicator (per capita income) which is limited in scope and does not reflect the diversity and complexity of the development challenges facing these countries, such as poverty, inequality, vulnerability to economic setbacks, climate change or natural disasters, lack of innovation and competitiveness in dynamic economic sectors, the risks of falling into the "middle income trap" and institutional weaknesses. Together these countries have the largest number of poor people in the world, so we run the risk of global development cooperation no longer being effective if support given to them is suppressed.

The MICs also have certain subnational structural inequalities, which means that the growth of the average income of the population alone does not necessarily translate into an effective reduction of poverty or a better distribution of wealth, thus, the label "more advanced developing countries" could be a conceptual innovation that better reflects the reality of some MICs. This category includes countries as diverse as Argentina, Mexico, Kenya or China.

In view of this diversity, the use of categories based on average income for the construction of development policies and, in particular, to determine the withdrawal of development aid has been criticized from various sides. The 17th goal of the 2030 Agenda sets the aim of developing indicators that "measure progress in sustainable development and complement gross domestic product". This can be considered as a basis for constructing more appropriate sustainable development measures.

The EU's development policy seeks to eradicate poverty, promote the sustainable development of developing countries, defend human rights and democracy and promote gender equality and overcome environmental and climate challenges.

Development aid is a limited resource. For this reason, the Union is committed to the effectiveness of aid and promotes close relations with partner countries in terms of programming and implementing development actions. With this perspective, the "EU Code of Conduct on the division of labor in the field of development policy" was adopted in 2007, and the "Operational

framework on the effectiveness of development aid" was adopted in 2011. These measures are consistent with the international measures undertaken in response to the 2005 Paris Declaration of the OECD, which promotes ownership, harmonization, alignment, results and mutual responsibility in development assistance.

Years later, new agreements were adopted to improve the impact of cooperation for development, based on the principles of the Paris Declaration. The Declaration of Bogotá (2010) commits the partners to exercise South-South cooperation in order to deepen the exchange of knowledge and mutual learning. The Declaration of Dili (2010) proposes to counteract conflicts and the fragility of the State through processes directed by the countries themselves, towards the consolidation of peace and the construction of the State. Finally, the Istanbul Principles (2010) have been established with the aim of providing guidance to civil society organizations on how to become effective development actors.

Role and Involvement of NGOS and Other Actors

This compensation could be smoothed out by a more coherent and adapted approach that creatively combines all the means of EU implementation. Better collaboration with the Member States and in all EU institutions, and closer cooperation with actors beyond governments and the development community, would also help.

Effective coordination between non governmental organisations, actors and member states involved in resource allocation, be it from a development aid perspective, or otherwise, continues to constitute a recurring issue in terms of information sharing – as well as the type, adequacy and quality of information that is at hand. Based on reports from the International Institute for Sustainable Development (2011:7,8), as well as extant literature on the topic, “a number of important ways in which this cooperation can be fostered, including: data and information sharing (knowledge exchange), benefit sharing (understanding trade-offs), dispute resolution (both mechanisms and negotiations), institutional architecture (appropriate scale and design), financial mechanisms (including private sector involvement), adaptability (flexibility of institutions), and stakeholder engagement.”

Adopting Climate Initiatives Similar to those of the **Debt for Nature Deals Swaps and Debt for Marine Preservation Program Initiatives**

Implementing development schemes and initiatives for low-income countries (LICs), middle-income countries (MICs) which are synonymous to those climate initiative programs that have been instigated by the Paris Club Group of Creditors and The Nature Conservancy would be a plausible and effective means of addressing concerns related to justifications of resource allocation – as well as concerns of the limited availability of development aid as resource. In this regard, applicability of resource allocation – as implemented from the sphere and perspective of very low income based countries, could also be translated to effective resource allocation arrangements from within the context of development aid, as well as to low income and middle income based countries. In so doing, concerns related to the size and amounts of development aid being currently allocated, could be addressed by focusing on areas and sectors – particularly the tourism sectors, which could be enhanced as a means of addressing matters relating to climate change, as well as preserving valued areas of natural beauty, marine life – whilst mitigating concerns relating the amounts that may be allocated in terms of development aid.

Challenges Faced by NGOs in their Involvement with Debt for Nature Deals Swaps and Debt for Marine Preservation Programs

According to reports by “Inside Philanthropy”, such challenges, related to criticisms associated with Debt for Nature Swaps, include the following (2018):

- There are concerns that enough money is not generated to carry out conservation goals without sufficient additional support from donors and government.
- Concerns that success of the Debt for Nature Swaps initiatives hinges on whether the plan is well-aligned with the country’s policy, systems, and local residents, as opposed to coming mainly from the outside NGO.
- Such deals have also raised questions about what control nations retain during the initiatives, with past swaps drawing labels of “eco-imperialism” or “eco-colonialism.”

- There's an argument that the conditional nature of debt-for-nature swaps may be morally questionable or even impermissible.
- Concerns about the extent of the role which NGOs and their donors can play in a country's economy - raising further concerns about their compatibility with democracy and sovereignty, or more generally, national ownership over conservation goals.

The principles of adaptation and graduation: gradation

The European Consensus for Development (2017) is based on the EU's Change Program (2011), which establishes the principles of differentiation (concentration in the countries that need it most) and graduation (the end from bilateral aid to some UMIC). For some actors, the principle of adaptation means adapting the commitment to European interests. For others, "adapt" is about supporting the results of a political and policy dialogue, between the EU and partners based on mutual interests. The interest in specifying a specific policy for the more advanced developing countries or establishing a list of more advanced developing countries in practice is low. This gap in the discussion could be detrimental to the definition of a more coherent, effective and innovative approach.

The step from graduation to gradation² could allow continued participation in a new international cooperation.

Because of this, the new paradigm of development and cooperation for development requires designing a set of effective instruments for developing countries. All these tools of the set follow a gradation approach that allows continuing to support countries that stop receiving development assistance. (ECLAC, 2018: 41).

In the current set of EU external financing instruments (EU's EFI) and their underlying policies, countries with similar challenges can be treated differently due to the configuration of the EU, rather than their needs or even its relevance to the EU. An example is a way in which the Agenda for Change, a policy aimed at focusing EU assistance on the poorest countries, has resulted in different EU EFIs. Under the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI, hereafter),

² The graduation mechanism is based on countries passing from one income level to the next and no longer qualifying for assistance sources to support their development.

the richest countries are excluded from the bilateral aid of the Union. The external financial instruments of the EU that cover the MICs and more advanced developing countries differ in the justification of the collaboration, their geographical coverage and the size of their budgetary allocations to the middle-income countries. As a result, countries that face similar problems can be treated differently depending on the instrument used, instead of being considered according to their needs or even their relevance to the EU.

Recommendations and Future Considerations

The toolbox of the European Union

The EU's toolkit for political relations, financial resources and expertise is an important asset in its collaboration with middle-income countries and more advanced developing countries.

In the context of the presentation of the EU budget after 2020, the debate on medium and high MICs risks being affected by the change of priorities and focusing on the concern to protect the resources already allocated to the MADCs, and its neighboring countries. The compensation is real and must be observed carefully. But the debate on the EU's commitment to the MICs is much broader.

A vast range of tools is available to the Union, including political and policy dialogue, policy coherence for development, knowledge exchange and technical exchanges between public administrations, fusion and others. In this sense, the EU should make use of its financial, political and technical toolbox as a package, where several tools can be adapted to different circumstances. However, this must happen under the umbrella of clear and shared objectives in the Union and in dialogue with third countries. A better division of labor and greater collaboration among the EU Member States, whenever possible, could be a win-win option for an EU more in tune with the times. It could also help solve some of the anxieties of those Member States that are concerned about protecting funds for their priority areas.

The EU's toolkit for political relations, financial resources and expertise is an important asset in its collaboration with middle-income countries and more advanced developing countries. The effective use of tools would be a means to better address the inevitable contradictions that result from limited political and financial resources. Contradictions exist, for example, in finding the balance between the EU's commitment to the least developed countries and cooperation with

middle-income countries; or between the focus in neighboring countries and the global ambitions of the Union.

The current emphasis on combined funding and peer-to-peer exchanges of public administrations may work in some contexts, although it does not provide a solution to all problems. The granting of resources will continue to be fundamental to, for example, supporting the civil society of a country or financing experimental initiatives. In addition to making more effective use of certain tools, EU institutions also need to adapt to new times and new challenges.

This implies the need for improvement of coordination, beyond the general directorates of the European Commission with an exclusively external mandate, and the assignment of a more relevant role to the EU delegations.

According to the Executive Report of Convergence, “the conservation investing unit of The Nature Conservancy” (TNC), similar debt conversions in the future should incorporate the following considerations (2017:5):

- Debt conversions are complex and require several preconditions for success: The complex process of structuring the Seychelles debt conversion took approximately four years and required extensive negotiations with multiple stakeholders.
- The complexity and high transaction costs of the structure can be justified by the outsized investment and policy commitments from the participating government.
- Early funding commitments can have a large impact on pushing a debt conversion forward.
- Debt conversions could be explored for other development areas.

Hence, other development aid programs which target and facilitate entrepreneurship schemes are noteworthy of mention in this respect. The recommendation of Development Aid for nature programs (Debt for Nature Deals Swaps) is therefore to be considered against the background of

other criteria which relate to state aids – particularly, their application in exceptional and emergency cases. Further considerations, as provided for in the Treaty of Lisbon, as well as Article 210 of the TFEU which states that in order to promote the complementarity and effectiveness of their actions, the Union and the Member States shall coordinate their policies on development cooperation and shall coordinate their aid programs, also require consideration.

In the same vein, initiatives have already been undertaken by the European Union in respect of development aid schemes – particularly geared at entrepreneurs and enterprise start up schemes – notably through the European Social Fund. Debt development aid swaps are also being facilitated whereby arrangements are made between parties involved to repay loans for commensurate contribution to community services, development – be in at national level or globally.

Final considerations

As it has been observed in these pages, the European Union must accompany the middle and upper-income countries to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

In order to do so, better cooperation between the EU and the middle and upper-middle-income countries, which requires change in the ways of working of the EU, far beyond the design of its external financing instruments, is necessary.

For this, there is better cooperation between the EU and the middle and upper-middle-income countries, which requires change in the ways of working of the EU, far beyond the design of its external financing instruments.

The EU needs to find new forms of cooperation with middle and upper-middle-income countries, based on joint programming and the creation of common agendas at a global and regional level,

and, in addition to the diversity and richness they generate, to establish close relations between countries and with institutions.

The EU must adapt to the new needs of the partner countries and leave traditional vertical cooperation and adopt - the new paradigm on international cooperation for development in transition - a horizontal cooperation more in line with the new and old development challenges that have than facing the middle and upper-middle income countries.

Conclusion

The new European Consensus on Development tries to adapt the development policy of the EU to the new emerging world order, in which the EU considers these middle and upper-middle income countries as key actors for the achievement of the objectives of the 2030 Agenda and allies in the EU's objective of reducing and, ultimately, eradicating, poverty. From now on, the negotiated normative guidance could be combined with operational flexibility by adapting the action to the specific objectives of the EU and to the requirements of the partner countries. The collaboration with different actors both inside and outside the EU, the private sector, local authorities, and civil society would also bring specific advantages. However, it is necessary to continue using the toolbox that the EU already has to apply them to each country in order to set out to make development aid effective.

To conclude, it should be noted that the EU must develop the partnership with its strategic partners, since the EU alone cannot comply with the 2030 Agenda without the collaboration between its member states and other public-private actors. In addition, the EU must adopt new instruments of development cooperation different from the traditional ones - subsidies, concessional loans or special trade measures such as development aid. Among the alternative measures are: the strengthening of capacity, the transfer of technology and the exchange of knowledge, regional sector policy dialogues, among others.

One may consider the costs and price of turning down lucrative oil deals and contracts, as well as refraining from activities which not only contribute to air and water pollution, but also endanger the lives and livelihood of valuable, endangered wild life and species, however when the benefits of sustaining the natural beauty, quality and livelihood of sectors and industries on which many economies also depend, then it is not so difficult to understand why it is worth preserving the natural habitats in these areas.

Development aid swaps for nature preservation would be particularly applicable, beneficial in those areas which not only depend on the tourism sector and industry for their livelihood, but

which also can be regarded as economically more capable of refraining from accepting incredibly lucrative contracts as a means of preserving their natural habitats – in terms of economic sustainability. This however, is not as clear cut and conclusive as it may seem. Whether a country is regarded as low-income countries (LICs), middle-income countries (MICs), upper middle income countries (UMICs), and high-income countries (HICs), should not ultimately and solely determine its eligibility for programs and initiatives related to debt or state aids for nature or preservation of marine life objectives.

In engaging in Debt for Nature Deals Swaps and Debt for Marine Preservation Program initiatives one very vital consideration to be had is the quality of certain touristic areas, the value placed on preserving priceless species – as well as the impact of the loss or deterioration in quality of such habitats.

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