

Navigating the Conceptual Transformation of Triangular Cooperation: Emerging Trends and Strategic Values for International Development

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Abstract This study sets out to delve into the changing landscape of Triangular Cooperation (TrC) at the macroscopic level of international development cooperation by not only drawing attention to why TrC is changing and how these changes take place but also identifying what implications would be relevant in practice beyond the traditional development cooperation between the Global South and the Global North. To this end, this study seeks to draw attention to new innovative modalities of TrC via methodological pluralism by which we can collect all possible methods to identify alternative patterns of TrC under a changing landscape of international politics. Accordingly, it begins by discovering emerging trends in TrC-based development cooperation to ascertain the four key drivers fueling its transformation: ODA graduation, changes in South-South Cooperation, regionalization, and non-state actors. Following this analysis, it elaborates on how such trends have affected TrC's modalities, substantiating these findings with real cases. Upon doing so, this study configures the implications posed by the traditional TrC model, conceptually aggregating and categorizing the findings to determine shared insights. Finally, it concludes by singling out common challenges associated with the lessons learned.

Keywords Triangular Cooperation · South-South Cooperation · Non-State Actor · Global South · Global North · Geopolitical Governance

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Introduction: The Emerging Changes in Triangular Cooperation

The international architecture of development cooperation has evolved significantly in recent years. It is no longer embodied by the narrow definition of Official Development Assistance (ODA), primarily composed of grants and concessional loans. Instead, it incorporates various new actors mobilized through new partnership modalities. In a world where multilateralism is weakening, and new development challenges such as climate change and digital inequalities are on the rise, such inclusive methods, which can be funded and implemented by diverse sets of collective cooperation, are needed to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Sustainable Development Goals: SDGs).

In this context, Triangular Cooperation (TrC), which brings together various development actors from the Global North and South, has emerged as an exemplification of alternative partnership mechanisms. The modality of TrC acts as the ‘policy spaces’ that facilitate coordination between focal stakeholders who would otherwise not participate in such partnerships. Accordingly, it has led to the reciprocal North-South influences responsible for the recent development of joint principles and processes, such as the voluntary guidelines released by the Global Partnership Initiative on Effective Triangular Cooperation (Zoccal, 2021). Indeed, such contributions were recognized in Article 28 of the Outcome Report for the Second High-Level United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation (BAPA+40), which emphasized that “Triangular Cooperation is a modality that builds partnerships and trust between all partners” (United Nations General Assembly, 2019, p. 8).

However, despite the clarity of its benefits, there is still much debate regarding its conceptual definition (Haug, 2022). It can be affirmed as it is also called ‘Trilateral’ or ‘Tripartite’ Cooperation, which connotes different principles and practices (Zoccal, 2021, p. 3). Nonetheless, a certain level of common conceptual understanding is shared by most bilateral and multilateral development cooperation stakeholders, both in the North and South (OECD DCD, 2013, p. 13). It was captured by the United Nations (UN) in the Framework of Operational Guidelines on UN Support to South-South and Triangular Cooperation, which defines TrC as “southern-driven partnerships between two or more developing countries, supported by a developed country(ies)/ or multilateral organization(s), to implement development cooperation programs and projects” (United Nations, 2016, p. 5).

Within this definition, ‘southern-driven partnerships’ refer to the assistance provided by one (or more) developing countries, which possess a fair amount of development knowledge and experience, to another, which is usually at a lower level of socio-economic development. These actors are the ‘pivotal’ and ‘beneficiary’ partners. Moreover, ‘developed countries’ and ‘international organizations,’ under the title of the facilitating actor, complement these partnerships with their institutional mandates to administer high levels of financial and technical support. In other words, TrC is traditionally viewed as a partnership, based on the Northern support of the South, that combines the comparative advantages of each actor (Paulo, 2018, pp. 1-2).

Until recently, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)’s Development Cooperation Directorate (DCD) shared a similar view. This can be confirmed as it previously posited that “Triangular Cooperation needed to include (i) a provider of South-South Cooperation, (ii) a beneficiary partner and (iii) a provider of North-South cooperation or an international organization” (OECD DCD, 2019a, p. 3). However, it is currently advocating

an expanded understanding that incorporates a partnership in which “the beneficiary partner seeks support to tackle a specific development challenge; the pivotal partner often has proven experience tackling the issue and shares its resources, knowledge, and experience to help others do the same; and the facilitating partner helps connect the beneficiary and pivotal partners, supporting their collaboration financially and technically” (OECD DCD, 2013, p. 4). Based on this notion, the OECD DCD (2013, p. 5) states that “roles can change, there can be several actors at each edge of the triangle, and these actors may represent countries, international organizations, civil society, the private sector, or private philanthropies.”

Such an expanded version of TrC is much more comprehensive than the traditional definition followed by most organizations, which confines the scope and role of participants to a specific set of state-based actors at certain income levels. This can be affirmed as terms such as ‘country’ and ‘international organization,’ which the UN’s Framework of Operational Guidelines used along with those such as ‘developed’ and ‘developing,’ have been replaced with a larger and more inclusive concept in ‘partner’ and ‘actor.’ Indeed, this reflects the findings of a 2013 OECD DCD survey in which 23% of the participants had reported that variations to the traditional modality had begun to emerge due to the participation of a broader array of actors beyond state-centered TrC frameworks. By doing so, this expanded view has raised the possibility for innovative triangular modalities capable of addressing a more diverse range of development needs. In this regard, TrC can serve as the inclusive mechanism needed to overcome the ‘thinning of multilateralism’ manifesting in international cooperation toward contemporary issues.

This study sets out to delve into the changing landscape of TrC at the macroscopic level by drawing attention to why TrC is changing and how these changes take place and identifying what implications would be relevant in practice. To this end, this study draws attention to new innovative modalities, many of which have already been explored as pilot projects and well-established programs. Accordingly, it begins by discovering emerging trends in TrC-based development cooperation to ascertain the key drivers fueling its transformation. Following this analysis, it elaborates upon how such trends have affected TrC’s modalities, substantiating these findings with real cases.¹ Upon doing so, this study configures the implications posed towards the traditional TrC model, conceptually aggregating and categorizing the findings in order to determine shared insights. Finally, it concludes by singling out common challenges associated with the lessons learned.

Triangular Cooperation as Methodological Pluralism

TrC has been gaining relevance against major shifts in the global development landscape. The changing role of rising powers such as BRICS and other middle-income countries (MICs) as development partners has contributed to a growing diversity of development cooperation

¹ This study applies a qualitative methodology based on an extensive and critical review of recent literature. It substantiates these findings through interviews and panel debates with organizations implementing triangular modalities. In this regard, the experts interviewed for this paper were selected by a two-step process based on non-probability sampling based on convenience and snowball sampling methods. Finally, it provides evidence based on the author’s experience working in an international organization that directly implements partnerships based on the TrC modality and supports partner organizations to do the same.

approaches. In this context, TrC has gained momentum as a comprehensive modality that promises to build bridges and create synergies between North-South Cooperation (NSC) and South-South Cooperation (SSC). Although the degree of understanding of the term ‘Triangular Cooperation’ varies, it generally refers to projects and other initiatives that combine the comparative advantages of traditional donors and SSC to share knowledge and address challenges among developing countries.

Against this backdrop, it must be remembered that the cases or policies proposed in this study, which are purely exploratory, are in no way seeking to replace those mentioned above the ‘traditional’ model, which has continuously demonstrated great success. Instead, it is seeking to share innovative modalities that can be used in a complementary nature to reduce development gaps further. Also, it should be noted that this study does not seek to provide a complete and exhaustive analysis of all the potential modalities of TrC. Instead, it aims to demonstrate numerous concrete cases of TrC to which the traditional definition cannot be applied. Indeed, further research on the examples given and others would only reveal the plethora of other modalities and lessons that have yet to be explored.

The triangle is a basic shape in geometry and one of the strongest, most stable structures. They are also at the heart of innovative collaboration to achieve the SDGs. TrC is successfully forged when states, international organizations, civil society, the private sector, private philanthropy, and others work together in groups of three or more to co-create flexible, cost-effective, and innovative solutions for reaching the SDGs (Fordelone, 2009). Given the diversification of new actors involved in TrC partnerships, TrC should play a vital role as a pluralist platform on which various actors generate and reproduce alternative modalities of triangular nexuses beyond their traditional stereotypes (Prantz & Zhang, 2021). Incorporating varying characteristics of new actors into the traditional framework of TrC not only requires more openness of TrC’s boundaries to newcomers but also leads TrC players to accede to an integrated approach that combines and reconciles different perspectives taken by different actors via the nexus schemes acknowledging pluralist relationships. Such an expanded pluralism on TrC leads to the following research questions: Where do we draw the lines between triangular, regional, or multi-stakeholder partnerships?; is there a limit to the number of partners engaged in TrC?; when are international organizations involved? Are they neutral brokers or active participants in the initiative?; and how do we exercise plural methods to identify and complement different interests and demands of diverse actors?

Anchored theoretically in methodological pluralism that the English School has long counted on, TrC could be treated as an effectively integrated apparatus for juxtaposing international justice and order in a well-balanced fashion (Buzan, 2004; Little, 2009; Lasmar, 2020). Methodological pluralism in the social sciences refers to a mixed bag utilizing a wide range of methods in the same issue areas, thereby advocating flexibility in selecting social research methods. Accordingly, it allows for TrC where the multiple choices of methodological verifications can be mobilized in order to maximize the validity and reliability of new trends – actors, policy instruments, the scope of the role, etc. – of TrC operations in an uncertain world whose pendulum is swinging between international justice and order. In a nutshell, methodological pluralism marks a right approach relevant to the changing context of TrC with the belief that various approaches to conducting research on TrC have their respective strengths and weaknesses such that no one method is inherently superior to any other and no single method is best overall.

Identifying Emerging Changes in Transforming TrC Modalities

This section identifies some of the major changes affecting the international architecture of development cooperation and the implications they pose towards the triangular modality. Each section begins with a brief summary of the change and its significance to detect the current structure of global trends in TrC. Following this, it analyzes how each factor impacts TrC, supporting its findings with cases of programs that have already incorporated such changes. With particular reference to emerging changes that can transform TrC modalities, it extracts insights that substantiate the changing nature of the triangular modality.

ODA Graduation

To begin with, the recent phenomenon known as ‘ODA graduation’ is unquestionably considered one of the new critical changes in the field of international development. Defined as the transformation from a recipient to a provider of development cooperation, the process of ODA graduation officially occurs through a tri-annual review of whether a country has satisfied the conditions of a high-income country, currently marked at GNI per capita USD12,235, for three consecutive years. As such conditions are met, countries become ineligible to receive ODA, thereby beginning the transition away from it (OECD DCD, 2019b, p. 1).

This process is an inevitable part of development, representing its ultimate purpose. Subsequently, today’s middle-income countries would eventually become tomorrow’s high-income countries. Such assertions can be affirmed as over fifty countries have ‘graduated’ in the past forty years.² Among them, the Republic of Korea (hereafter, Korea) can be exemplified, as it was the first to develop from a least developed country to a member of the OECD-DAC. As the membership of OECD-DAC is exclusive to ‘developed countries,’ it is worth noting that six other countries have recently joined the inner DAC group of advanced economies.³ As the number of OECD-DAC observers is also expanding,⁴ this accession process is most likely expected to continue in the future. This is particularly true because countries such as Chile and Uruguay have already transitioned away from ODA, while other twenty-seven countries with a combined population of two billion are expected to do so by 2030.⁵

However, it is notable that not all the countries undergoing ODA graduation can automatically become members of institutions, such as the OECD-DAC, traditionally associated with the ‘Global North.’ Certain countries may explicitly refuse to do so due to the obligations associated

² <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/far-fewer-countries-will-be-eligible-receive-oda-future-means-problems-sdg-finance> (accessed on 16 April 2023).

³ <https://www.oecd.org/dac/dac-global-relations/joining-the-development-assistance-committee.htm> (accessed on 16 April 2023).

⁴ As of April 2023, DAC has six international organizations as observers: Asian Development Bank, African Development Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, International Monetary Fund, United Nations Development Programme, and World Bank. It also has the seven non-DAC countries as participants: Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Kuwait, Qatar, Romania, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/development-assistance-committee> (accessed on 16 April 2023).

⁵ <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/far-fewer-countries-will-be-eligible-receive-oda-future-means-problems-sdg-finance> (accessed on 16 April 2023).

with possessing organizational membership of the DAC. Hence, it would become arduous to classify these countries exclusively into the Global North or South, mainly because the Global South is becoming increasingly heterogeneous (Gonsior & Klingebiel, 2019). Regardless of how these countries are classified, the result is an increase in potential partner nations with the knowledge, experience, and resources needed to participate in providing international public goods.

Such a new trend of the ODA graduation accentuates the importance of devising mechanisms to collaborate with these countries. To this end, many development entities have begun utilizing TrC to incentivize their participation as ‘contributors’ to, rather than just recipients, sustainable development. Many of these countries are relatively inexperienced in providing development cooperation and thus often seek the technical expertise of traditional donors (Lopez & Muñoz, 2014, p. 152). Subsequently, it becomes possible to overcome the “arbitrary boundaries that hamper cooperation,” which is currently the case in an ODA system that does not provide incentives to cooperate in a manner that is outside of the scope of its North-South structure (Gonsior & Klingebiel, 2019, pp. 18 – 22).

In this vein, the increased inclusion of such partner countries has made it difficult to abide by the traditional delineation between the pivotal and facilitating actors, originally based on the comparative advantages of a certain income status. The dilution of the traditional boundaries stems from the fact that many of these actors now have the development experiences of the Global South, along with the financial resources and technical expertise of the Global North. Such an emerging mixed bag has introduced a hybrid approach that integrates the purported benefits of both actors, thereby leading to a new modality that expands the mandate of the pivotal actor in accordance with its enhanced capacity as a donor. This was undoubtedly the case for Korea, which is crucial in funding and advising its TrC projects. Moreover, this also holds for facilitating actors, as countries previously classified as developing countries have accumulated the financial and technical capacity needed to play this role. The hybridity of actors and their functions affirms even as there have already been reported instances of ‘South-South-South’ TrC facilitated through countries such as India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) (UNDP, 2017, p. 13).

The Transformation of South-South Cooperation (SSC)

It also is necessary to deliberate the increasing magnitude of SSC as a sea change in transforming TrC. South’s enlarging competence as a development partner can be attributed to the ongoing Southern aggregation of successful development policies and practices – the so-called ‘rise of the South’ – which has enabled Southern countries not just to provide resources but also share its knowledge and technical expertise (Narlikar, 2013; Quadir, 2013; Gray & Gills, 2016; Kim & Lee, 2022). Subsequently, although emerging economies, particularly BRICS countries, traditionally dominated SSC, actors across the income classification spectrum have started engaging in this modality. It is in this sense to note that Rwanda recently established the Rwanda Cooperation Initiative in order to share its development experience with neighboring countries through its ‘Home-Grown Solutions’ approach (Klingebiel, 2019), while Bangladesh took similar steps to institutionalize its national method of knowledge sharing with other Southern partner countries (Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). It is even being provided by the least developed countries (LDCs) severely afflicted with fragility and conflicts (United Nations Office

for South-South Cooperation, 2017, p. 14). Such cooperation initiated by LDCs is viewed as an alternative backbone for SSC, as 80 percent of the world's extreme poor will be living in such areas by the year 2030, thereby underscoring the need to identify the lessons applicable to these LDC-based contexts (OECD DCD, 2018, p. 9). These trends in both the practice and policy of SSC make available new and various opportunities for collective engagement in TrC schemes.

As an Indian think tank – Research and Information System for Development Countries (RIS) (2018) – revealed in the 5th Delhi Process, SSC plays a decisive role in mobilizing all Southern countries, including those receiving aid, and marks an era in which countries move from a vertical approach, based on donorship, to a horizontal approach built on partnership and solidarity. Incorporating vertical and horizontal approaches into a single framework for better quality of implementation, it is evident that TrC can serve as an integrated platform for many Southern donors, who often have a more contextualized and specific understanding of the contemporary challenges faced by developing countries, to engage in the multi-stakeholder partnerships needed to achieve the SDGs (RIS, 2019, p. 37). Such an integrated approach leads us to reconfirm why the *BAPA+40 Outcome Report* emphasized the significant role that TrC has played in empowering SSC (United Nations General Assembly, 2019, p. 8).

Indeed, such emerging enabling environments for SSC to attract and reinforce Southern partners' engagements in development cooperation with other Southern actors would continue to grow for the following three reasons (Cheru, 2011). First, SSC providers are continuing to proliferate in number (Beshherati & MacFeely, 2019, p. 3). Second, the operational capacity of Southern providers would continue to improve as they begin to find more efficient and effective means of fulfilling their institutional mandates for development. A plethora of relevant agencies to SSC has been still in their initial operational stages and thus still have additional room for further improvement by modifying and revising the dysfunctional parts of SSC. Finally, the number of recipients eligible for ODA continues to decrease, increasing the demand for alternative forms of development finance beyond conventional patterns rooted in NSC and SSC (Calleja & Prizzon, 2019, pp. 8-9).

SSC efforts with the potential to promote TrC are materialized distinctively in the 'Fragile to Fragile (F2F) Cooperation' initiative supported by the g7+, which is a group of twenty countries that are currently undergoing or have recently overcome fragility with the motto of 'Goodbye Conflict and Welcome Development.' Through this network which builds upon the New Deal for Engagement in the Fragile States, one fragile country would request another for assistance, particularly regarding context-specific needs such as post-war reconciliation and transitional justice (United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation, 2017). In response, a fragile state would deliver financial or technical assistance to other fragile states with the support of the g7+. Such support includes (1) providing institutional guidance towards policies and practices, (2) advocating relevant facts and priorities, (3) facilitating peer learning, research, networks, and coordination, (4) conducting capacity building, and (5) integrating group priorities with that of the international sense.⁶ Based on these areas of expertise, the g7+ is currently exploring methods to engage in TrC by cooperating with actors such as multilateral organizations and developed countries through a modality in which it would play the pivotal actor. Since 2017, the Korean government, as a facilitating partner, has supported the New Deal implementation

⁶ <https://www.g7plus.org/> (accessed on 23 April 2023).

in the Democratic Republic of the Congo via UNDP, where F2F initiatives for peer learning on voluntary national review, aid coordination, and transparency have been organized in 2018-2020. The F2F-based SSC/TrC also has been developing its expanded version to assist non-g7+ Southern partners with common challenges (United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation, 2017, p. 41).

Such changes in the landscape of SSC illustrate implications for the shifting roles of all three actors involved in TrC (De Renzio & Seifert, 2014; Kim & Lee, 2022). Concerning the pivotal actor, it is clear that its function is no longer confined to just emerging economies; even fragile states have begun to take the role of the pivotal actor. In addition, while it is taken for granted that Northern donor states normally pursue the TrC initiatives, international organizations need to be counted as effective organizers to promote knowledge sharing in place of state actors. Given that international organizations demonstrate the high potential for collective knowledge-sharing opportunities in thematic areas of shared experience, the qualification of pivotal actors is required not to adhere to emerging Southern donors only but to open its conceptual border to all partners of TrC.

Regarding facilitating actors, it is worth noting that the g7+ validated its qualification as a facilitator status of support that Northern donor states have traditionally given. Although the financial and technical capacity of g7+'s member states explicitly enables them to reject the Northern connotations linked to the role of facilitating actors, they are still no more than capable of fulfilling similar functions rather than replacing Northern partners completely. However, the conceptual identification of a facilitating actor should be flexible to embrace new players who want to complement or collaborate with Northern efforts to enhance the TrC effectiveness as even a pseudo-facilitator who cannot compete with Northern counterparts due to the lack of financial and technical capabilities.

On the beneficiary actor, advanced economies in the Global North can receive various forms of assistance from states at a lower level of development. It implies that even Northern donor states may be on the receiving end of TrC, given that the Southern or even fragile country in question can have the necessary insights that Northern actors are urgently looking for. Indeed, the potential for South-North Cooperation (SNC), as demonstrated by Southern engagers such as Cuba during the COVID-19 Pandemic, does not be a far-off possibility, particularly in a crisis-stricken world threatened by immediate emergencies such as health epidemics that previously affected only developing countries (Gosovic, 2014; Kim, 2023).

Regionalization in Development Cooperation

The regionalization in development cooperation is another critical global trend that has instigated much change in the internal mechanisms of the TrC implementation. With particular reference to the newly founded manner in which development cooperation is increasingly being coordinated at the regional level, such regional prescriptions to the demand of development cooperation provide strategic advantages to all actors involved in SSC and TrC. The regional consultation to seek ethical and practical considerations among Southern partners and Northern donors results in the effectiveness of regional solutions prepared by regional specificity and knowledge sharing coated by regional localities. Therefore, the growing presence of regional alternatives to global development cooperation leads to the inquiry about whether regional powers, including Northern

hegemony and emerging economies – for example, BRICS – engage in power politics within regional organizations (Lim & Vreeland, 2013). As Japan has been long dominating the Asian Development Bank (ADB) as a regional facilitator, being prompted to use the ADB for laundering its dirty historical records by distributing ADB-funded infrastructure investments to regional beneficiaries (Kilby, 2006), China also launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015 with the strategic aim expanding its regional hegemonic power against the ADB via the new narrative of SSC (or TrC) whose values were added under China's strong presence (Etzioni, 2016; Ye, 2020). Consequently, the rise of regionalization would potentially change the landscape of development assistance programs. Emerging Southern donors can play a significant role as facilitating actors through regional organizations and even compete with traditional Northern donors for that position.

Such a competitive process at the regional level has recently undergone a noticeable institutional progression worldwide (Quadir, 2013). This can be attributed to the fact that many new organizations have been emerging while pre-existing organizations have expanded in the scope of their membership and institutional mandates. The regional leadership, demonstrated by emerging powers and their desire to deal with the emerging issues that concern them in a manner that is more independent from the current global governance system, facilitates them to concentrate on regional issues with their problem-solving development projects (Behr & Jokela, 2011). Subsequently, this regional approach would only become more predominant as Southern powers continued to develop and use the political opportunities to reform the global agenda for sustainable development further.

As a result, such regional development dynamics can be implemented through an 'outflux' or 'influx' modality. To elaborate, the difference between these two modalities is the geographical location of the beneficiary partner. In the outflux model, the beneficiary partner is located within the regional organization's membership scope. In contrast, the beneficiary partner in the influx model is located outside of it. Concerning the outflux modality, it is the most well-observed in the European Union (EU). It has traditionally used its 'Joint Programming' modality to establish a joint regional analysis and response strategy for a specific partner country. Following the institutional guidance given by such in-country strategies, bilateral donors can implement their own independent or joint initiatives based on the aid modality of their choosing.⁷ Likewise, another case of the outflux modality is emerging in Northeast Asia, even if there is not yet an institutionalized unitary regime. Some multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), located in Korea, coordinate joint projects and facilitate relevant policy dialogues in the region of Northeast Asia.⁸ Recently, the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, for the first time, emphasized the possibility of a 3+1 development cooperation modality in the Joint Declaration of the 2018 Trilateral Summit,⁹ reaffirming this in its 'Trilateral Cooperation Vision for the Next Decade.'¹⁰ However, the prospect for such regional cooperation in Northeast Asia has become sensitive to

⁷ <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/joint-programming/minisite/what-joint-programming> (accessed on 23 April 2023).

⁸ <https://www.unescap.org/subregional-office/east-north-east-asia> (accessed on 23 April 2023).

⁹ https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/tp/page4e_000817.html (accessed on 23 April 2023).

¹⁰ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000552950.pdf> (accessed on 23 April 2023).

and fluctuating with the resurgence of historical conflicts and political contentions between China, Japan and Korea. Without considering the international state system and global society, there would be no political opportunities for regional cooperation to pursue TrC in Northeast Asia.

On the other hand, the regional development supported by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), adopted by African Heads of State and Government of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 2001 and ratified by the African Union (AU) in 2002, demonstrates a good practice of the influx modality addressing pan-Africa's development problems within a new paradigm and beyond the African continent for the external partnership. The NEPAD is mandated to facilitate and coordinate the implementation of development projects, as well as to promote partnerships, resource mobilization, research, and knowledge sharing within the African region.¹¹ In a similar vein, the Ibero-America General Secretariat (SEGIB) operates the 'Ibero-American Programme for Strengthening South-South Cooperation' in the region of 'Iberian America' - the Americas comprising countries which are former colonial territories of Spain or Portugal. This Programme is operated based on four main tasks with a specific focus on TrC: (1) facilitating training, capacity building, and structured changes, (2) developing methodologies, tools, and documents (3) providing support for the recording; analysis, systematization and generation of knowledge, and (4) engaging in strategic relations and dialogue with other actors and regions.¹² Consequently, the Ibero-American region has become one of experimental laboratories in using the influx modality for TrC. Another regional cooperation working based on the influx modality can be discovered in the case of the ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue (ACSDSD), which the Association for South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) launched in 2016. In doing so, the ACSDSD sought to create a platform to "encourage research and studies as well as build capacities of ASEAN member states, and promote dialogue and cooperation within ASEAN, and between ASEAN and external partners."¹³ The NEPAD mentioned above, SEGIB, and ACSDSD are just some of the selected cases of regional development cooperation that is becoming more institutionalized, thus accentuating the potential for new partnerships.

It is important to note that most of these regional organizations are mandated to engage in the external coordination that serves as a basis for TrC. Such triangular modalities are easily materialized since they are essentially regional hubs of technical expertise and contextual understanding, and their regional initiatives are more than capable of fulfilling the traditional facilitating role. The mixed bag of triangular and regional cooperation can be unearthed under the two scenarios mentioned above, differing upon the cooperation modality of the organization. Regional organizations practicing the influx approach would work with donors to assist beneficiary states located in the outer area of the region. Similarly, organizations accentuating the outflux modality would collaborate with donors to support beneficiary states within the region. In this process, the regional homogeneity and heterogeneity of the donor agencies may be of lesser importance, provided that the needed comparative advantages are in place.

¹¹ <https://au.int/en/nepad> (accessed on 23 April 2023).

¹² http://cooperacionsursur.org/images/2019/folletos/Brochure_CSS_ingles_paginado.pdf (accessed on 23 April 2023).

¹³ <https://asean.org/storage/2019/11/FINAL-Press-statement-ACSDSD.pdf> (accessed on 23 April 2023).

Such modalities have already been documented in the EU's flagship program, the Adelante EU-LAC Triangular Cooperation Facility, launched in 2015. This TrC partnership focusing on horizontal relations between Latin America and the Caribbean countries consists of "a pivotal partner that serves in coordinating the project and administering its results, one or several beneficiary partners who share their knowledge and expertise, and the EU which facilitates the cooperation" (Piefer-Söyler & Pelechà, 2020). To further delve into the role of the regional organization, it can be observed that the EU finances approximately 80 percent of the Programme and is therefore recognized as a regional facilitator for TrC. Along with the financial provider, the EU provides technical assistance by backing project management, supporting the identification of synergies with key actors in the region, and aiding the communication and visibility of projects.¹⁴ To consolidate the foundation of TrC within the boundaries of EU's public authorities, the EU is exploring the inclusion of other regional actors and non-state actors into this triangular modality.

Given that other regional organizations can take a similar approach, the traditional definition of the facilitating actor is subject to critical challenges. This is because most regional institutions do not have the technical expertise needed to be considered a facilitating actor even though they are 'international organizations' *per se*. Apart from the EU and AU, most emerging multilateral agencies have only recently begun their development cooperation functions. Indeed, outside of these two entities, the organizations mentioned above were not seen yet as the primary facilitating actors in TrC (OECD DCD, 2013, p. 15). In addition, much of the support given does resemble the modality of the SSC, particularly because most of the states constituting these regional agencies are from the Global South and are therefore supposed to follow similar principles and practices that SSC affords. As such, it is reaffirmed that some states from the Global South can serve as the facilitating actor for TrC through the regional platform.

At the same time, regional organizations play the traditional pivotal role in organizing TrC. This is possible because these institutions can serve as a regional hub of aggregated knowledge by integrating the development experience of various states in areas of convergence. Implied in the Northeast Asian model mentioned above, regarding Asia's multilateral platform as a pivotal actor bringing together both developed and developing countries, as well as private sector players and civil society organizations (CSOs), to enrich shared solutions and discuss opportunities for innovations was highlighted as the core consequence by UNESCAP's 2019 Northeast Asia Development Cooperation Forum in Tokyo.¹⁵ At this Forum, it was suggested that Korea, China, and Japan could utilize their ongoing transitions to a hydrogen economy by creating an integrated knowledge sharing module with the support of regional multilateral platforms. Such collective

¹⁴ <https://www.adelante-i.eu/en/about-us> (accessed on 23 April 2023).

¹⁵ <https://www.unescap.org/events/north-east-asia-development-cooperation-forum-2019> (accessed on 29 April 2023). Researchers and field experts of East and Northeast Asia region development cooperation, mainly from China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the Russian Federation, launched the Northeast Asia Development Cooperation Forum in 2014. The partner institutes take turns co-hosting the Forum, which discusses multilateral cooperation and the roles of Northeast Asian countries in achieving SDGs. The Forum is a partnership effort among the UNESCAP East and North-East Asia Office, the China International Development Research Network (CIDRN), the Japan Society for International Development (JASID), the Korea Association of International Development and Cooperation (KAIDEC), and Russian Association of International Development Assistance Experts (RAIDAE).

efforts of Asia's regional platforms, in turn, could benefit interested states around the world beyond the region of Northeast Asia. In this regard, the possibility of other regional organizations initiating such collective knowledge-sharing initiatives, potentially in conjunction with other development partners, is another point to consider.

Mobilization of Non-State Actors

The last observation of new changes in transforming TrC modalities pertains to the recent mobilization of non-state actors who can be recognized as alternative sources on behalf of traditional states. Based on the understanding that gaps in international finance cannot be filled by government actors alone, the intrinsic significance of non-state actors is symbolically affirmed by SDG 17, which accentuates multi-stakeholder partnerships, including CSOs, private sector initiatives, and the like. The instrumental strength which non-state actors encompass and equip is already verified by the fact that approximately 80 percent of international development is financed by non-state actors.¹⁶

In this regard, TrC has become increasingly a modality of partnerships to collaborate with non-state actors. Such a triangular partnership enables non-state actors to access various financial and technical resources while offering them the opportunity to contribute to the provision of global public goods. In January 2020, the Global Partnership Initiative on Effective Triangular Cooperation (2020, p. 17) reported the vital contribution of triangular cooperation by emphasizing that “while governments and international organizations are still the main actors, the engagement of non-state actors is on the rise. Almost half of the projects reported to the OECD (47 percent) are supported by partners beyond governments and international organizations, with 36.5 percent of these involving academia and research institutes, closely followed by CSOs (30.6 percent), the private sector (20.3 percent), philanthropic institutions (6.5 percent) and sub-national actors (6.2 percent).”

A recent example of cooperation with non-state actors can be found in the case of UNDP's Accelerator Labs (ALs) for achieving SDGs, which does not directly refer to itself as a form of TrC, but views the modality of pluralist partnerships with non-state agencies to be a crucial input and output for ALs' programs.¹⁷ Through the operation of ALs, UNDP with the support of government partners essentially seeks to test and scale the solutions of local partners such as Small to Middle Enterprises (SMEs) within and across states through its global network of partner labs.¹⁸ In this model, UNDP and its government partners could be regarded as the traditional facilitating actor, as they provide their local partners with financial assistance and technical support through means such as innovating solutions, assisting in communications, and mainstreaming sustainability (UNDP, 2019, p. 6). Instead, the local partners participating in this initiative could be viewed as having the traditional pivotal role, given that they provide the innovative solutions or 'development experience' needed to address the complex development

¹⁶ https://public.tableau.com/views/Bigpictureoftotalresourcereceiptsbyyear/Byyear?:embed=y&:display_count=yes&publish=yes&:showVizHome=no#1 (accessed on 30 April 2023).

¹⁷ <https://info.undp.org/docs/pdc/Documents/IND/Accelerator-Labs-Multicountry-Project-Doc.pdf> (accessed on 30 April 2023).

¹⁸ <https://acceleratorlabs.undp.org> (accessed on 30 April 2023).

challenges other communities worldwide face.

As such, the traditional role of TrC has changed and expanded to meet more contextualized needs of multiple stakeholders of non-state actors. The customized support, for instance, aimed at local SMEs, would be more business-centric, and TrC-based support for faith-based CSOs would be more religion centric. Accordingly, such expanded support could be given to other non-state actors engaging TrC along with the spectrum of varying issue areas, depending on their difficulties in supporting the SDGs. TrC with philanthropic institutions could entail connecting them with local value chains. In contrast, partnership modalities with academia and research institutions could take place in a manner that strengthens the credibility and visibility of their research publications.

The presence of non-state actors in the landscape of TrC-based partnerships has prompted the traditional functions played by the pivotal actors to be modified for better adaptations. This can be attributed to the fact that the primary type of assistance is no longer simply in the form of knowledge sharing or project implementation; instead, it can be provided through inclusive services and technologies. CSOs have already played a significant role in political advocacy as a watchdog, while academia has already contributed to furthering the understanding of local needs and challenges. The increasing positioning power of non-state actors within the framework of TrC enables them to fulfill a similar role of pivotal agencies, which would have been conventionally taken by one of the emerging donor states in the Global South. Thus, these comparative advantages in collaboration with or beyond the traditional players of TrC are unexplored areas that could be further explored.

Re-conceptualizing Strategic Values of TrC for Geopolitical Governance: Actor, Function, and Policy Instrument

Considering the four new trends – ODA graduation, changes in SSC, regionalization, and non-state actors – described the above as critical factors affecting the landscape of TrC, the conceptual contour of TrC would be accordingly transformed under the following three dimensions: actor, function, and policy instrument.

New Actors: Pluralistic Expansion but No Core Bonds

This study found various key insights regarding the transformation of TrC. The first refers to the emergence of new actors participating in it. At the non-state level, relatively new platforms have enabled various actors such as SMEs, philanthropic institutions, academia, and CSOs to participate more actively in TrC. Subsequently, actors for implementing TrC are no longer limited to just ‘state-level’ actors; their qualifications must be open to other potential multi-stakeholders beyond the state’s criteria. At the multilateral level, many regional or thematic organizations and constellations can become potential partners for the upgraded version of TrC. The fact that many of these groups possess Southern – not Northern – characteristics would contribute to the mobilization of Southern partners in a more convenient way. Notably, this is all occurring while state-level actors from across the income spectrum also demonstrate increased

interest in this modality. This poses the need even to rethink the characteristics of the state-level actors taking part in the process.

However, such a pluralistic expansion of actors involved in TrC does not necessarily guarantee the existence of authoritative core bodies at the global level, which invite, bond, orchestrate, and regulate non-state actors to enhance triangular effectiveness and accountability (Kim & Lim, 2017). Further discussion on how to incorporate non-state actors into a single framework for mutual collaborations at both individual actor level and global level would be necessary for TrC to minimize the negative effects of the pluralistic expansion of non-state players (Scholte, 2005).

Expanded Scope of Roles: The Concession of Role Reversal

The second observation is that the three functions – beneficiary, pivotal, and facilitating actors – associated with TrC have expanded beyond its original scope and unit of activities. Regarding beneficiary actors, they no longer play the role of mere recipients of knowledge or resources. The exchange often becomes more mutual, thus blurring the distinction between facilitator and recipient. As a result, this disproves the idea that such assistance is provided unilaterally, thereby approving that any states involved in TrC could receive assistance from states with a lower socio-economic classification, such as those from fragile contexts. Indeed, the increasing potential for South-North Cooperation demonstrates that the assumption that recipient countries are on the lower end of a vertical relationship is no longer the case (Gosovic, 2014).¹⁹ For this reason, this leads to the conclusion that the criteria for beneficiary countries should not be limited to the those unilaterally receiving assistance in the lower echelons of the Global South. Instead, it should be viewed as a symbiotic role that is not restricted to a country's level of development.

Concerning pivotal actors, diverse stakeholders, which are not necessarily confined to 'emerging donors,' have begun to reveal their capabilities qualifying for the pivotal functions. To begin with, states who have reached a higher income status, such as recent graduates, could fulfill these functions through a hybrid approach that capitalizes on its enhanced technical and financial capacities. On the other hand, states from lower income statuses, such as those in fragile contexts, could also be eligible to take the lead in liking facilitating actors with beneficiary actors, as they have accumulated the necessary experiences needed to address similar development needs in other Southern states (Kim & Lim, 2017). Analogous changes are also observed in many international organizations, both in the thematic and regional sense. It is possible because many of these multilateral stakeholders have demonstrated that they can be the sharers of development experiences. Furthermore, this also holds true for non-state actors, who have shown that they can provide a different form of 'experience' through innovative local solutions (Lewis et al., 2021). Hence, it is evident that the country-based limitations and the strict Southern nuances associated with it no longer restrict the scope of actors that can play this role.

Given facilitating actors, many states and international organizations currently taking part in TrC cannot be characterized by the Northern connotations only associated with this role. It is

¹⁹ <https://www.devex.com/news/south-north-cooperation-is-next-logical-step-in-international-development-76129> (accessed on 1 May 2023).

true that states transitioning away from ODA-receiving status, such as Chile, and Southern actors, such as IBSA or BRICS, demonstrate that they are also ready to act as facilitators. In addition, this is true for thematic organizations, such as the g7+, along with regional groups, such as the Ibero-America General Secretariat, primarily composed of Southern states. The Northern nuances associated with this role should be replaced by one more inclusive of actors from across the development spectrum. The 'role reversal' between traditional and new actors must be taken for granted as a common factor in planning, operating, and managing TrC (Weisband & Ebrahim, 2007).

Diverse Policy Instruments: New Experiments of Triangular Dialogues

Finally, more diverse forms of development assistance have been observed in the triangular modalities engaging new actors at both the state and non-state level. More attention should be given to the fact that knowledge sharing could take place in a collective nature, converging on a set of common experiences. By doing so, it becomes much clearer that triangular supports can be provided in a more contextualized manner, based on the diverse experiences needed to empower the process in accordance with various contexts and backdrops where TrC is forged. This is intensely demonstrated through the example on Fragile-to-Fragile Cooperation, which involves a collective approach towards sharing the lessons learned on various themes such as post-conflict policies and good governance. Moreover, this is also found in one of the recommendations for Northeast Asia's emerging development cooperation system, which posits that the three nations could create a knowledge sharing programme regarding their recent transitions to a hydrogen economy. In this regard, such modalities for other thematic or regional groups may be a potential approach to consider as new experiments of triangular dialogues in the future.

Likewise, the cooperative modalities involving non-state actors revealed that support could be provided in a much broader manner. The innovative solutions provided by local actors such as SMEs emphasize an approach based on inclusive and sustainable services and technologies, rather than just projects-based or policy-oriented approach. As such, it is clear that other non-state actors, ranging from academia through the private sector to faith-based philanthropies, could also contribute to delivering the broad range of solutions needed to promote sustainable development. In response, international organizations mobilize and develop diverse forms of technical assistance that are more oriented towards the unique needs of specific actors, as demonstrated by UNDP Accelerator Labs. Correspondingly, this new hybridity of triangular players equipped with diverse policy instruments has been expanded to meet the exclusive needs of other non-state partners and diversified demands of triangular partner agencies.

Concluding Remarks

The traditional understanding of TrC, embodied by the Northern support of Southern partnerships for development cooperation, has transformed into a broader concept reflecting the changing landscape of global governance for the new generation of TrC. Navigating the new trends of

TrC, we come up with the conceptual emergence of critical factors such as ODA graduation, SSC, regionalization in development cooperation, and the mobilization of non-state actors. Based on exploring conceptual platforms embedded in TrC's transformation, TrC has begun to exhibit the participation of new actors, the expansion and reversal of roles, and the diversification of policy instruments. It is thus worthwhile to endorse that the triangular modality now has the high potential to serve as a truly innovative method of cooperation that can fully maximize the comparative advantages of all partner stakeholders.

In this regard, it seems that the current operational definition utilized by most development actors does not allow for the fulfillment of the modality's full potential. The limited aspect of TrC's definition highlights the need for an alternative universal definition or at least an explicit and updated view of shared principles. This study welcomes the work of the Global Partnership Initiative on Effective Triangular Cooperation (2020, pp. 6-8), which elucidates upon the comparative advantage and challenges of TrC, along with the best practices and lessons learned throughout various case studies. However, even with such comprehensive analysis available, the Global Partnership Initiative acknowledges a lack of common understanding of the conceptual composition of TrC. Such conceptual discrepancies in handling the emerging changes in TrC-related global landscapes may worsen the monitoring challenges that are already inherent prior to the drivers mentioned above of change.²⁰

For this reason, numerous cases of development cooperation fit the general description of TrC but are not independently classified as such. However, further endeavoring to imply that these cases are a form of TrC is fated to encounter skeptical feedback that a larger room for discretionary interpretation would lead to more difficulties in classifying them. Such a dilemma would aggravate the disclarity of the flows to be tracked, thereby exacerbating the inaction of stakeholders involved in TrC. Similar concerns have already been raised as it is reported that, despite the increasing high usage of the triangular modality, the availability of relevant information has grown slowly.

The stakeholders accountable for this process would further influence the conceptual discrepancies. This is the case because many of them still need to have institutional apparatuses needed to track their contributions systematically and the capacity to establish them. Many newer actors participating in the process may need the technical, human, and financial capacity to maintain the continuous collection, management, evaluation, and dissemination of relevant data. The lack of intent is another factor to consider, as the voluntary nature of the database managed by the OECD-DCD does not stipulate an obligation to report relevant flows. Hence, political considerations and transaction costs may deter further active participation. A detailed analysis of the data repository reveals an asymmetric situation of information sharing, given that a large majority of the stored information is provided by the traditional OECD-DAC donors who are institutionally obligated to do so. Considering this, the issue of monitoring is an upcoming challenge that should be further discussed soon.

Overall, the benefits outweigh the costs, as the new TrC trends offer innovative and inclusive mechanisms for collectively solving development challenges. In particular, properly combining traditional and emerging cooperation modalities for the effect of complementation enables the

²⁰ http://www.oecd.org/dac/dac-global-relations/HLM_Triangular_Co-operation_Feb_2013.pdf (accessed on 1 May 2023).

fulfillment of additional development gaps. Therefore, for both development cooperation actors from the North and the South alike, TrC deserves particular attention when designing, setting, and implementing strategic objectives for tackling the emerging global agendas formed with complexities.

While fully recognizing TrC's restructuring processes in policy areas, the field of international development has established little on this phenomenon, and what has been established in academic industries seems to be in residual form. Along with increasing expansion and diversification of actors, policy instruments, and functions, all of which contribute to enhancing the value of efficiency for TrC, development studies should pay more attention to TrC's other value – 'accountability', which leads all stakeholders to hold each other to be responsible for their performances (Kim, 2011; Woods, 2007). By balancing the efficiency and accountability of TrC's transformative initiatives, more rigorous studies should pursue a holistic approach, not only integrating comparative advantages of new components enriching TrC for generating synergy effects but also galvanizing a legitimate system to link the positive engagement of multi-stakeholders with more accountable results of their commitments.

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