

Commentary

Rethinking Australia's role in international co-operation for the Sustainable Development Goals: Towards transformative horizontal partnerships through triangular co-operation

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Despite progress in various areas of development, rates of food insecurity, malnutrition and poverty remain high. Additional environmental pressures such as climate change, loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation continue to disproportionately impact those who are most vulnerable. Inclusive models of co-operative action, as emphasised in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, are valued for their potential to solve development challenges, promote sustainable development outcomes, and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. International co-operation policy plays a crucial role in shaping how these international partnerships play out in practice. Over the last several decades, the international development co-operation landscape has been shifting with a push for more 'horizontal' partnerships. Triangular co-operation is a potential model of partnership that embraces inclusivity and horizontality and is seen as a means to achieve the sustainable development agenda. In Australia, the election of a new federal government in May 2022 brought with it a renewed commitment to official development assistance and development co-operation policy and partnerships. The aim of this commentary is to take stock, pause, and reflect on how Australia currently 'does development partnerships' as well as looking to the future and the opportunities for change.

INTRODUCTION

Despite progress in various areas of development, many people are still denied the fundamental rights to a healthy and long life. Rates of food insecurity, malnutrition and poverty remain high, impacting on people's health and wellbeing (FAO et al. 2022). In addition, environmental pressures including climate change, loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation continue to be a global challenge, the effects of which disproportionately impact those who are most vulnerable (McMichael et al. 2008; Abeygunawardena et al. 2009). In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were developed as a shared international action plan to achieve "peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future" (United Nations 2015b). Co-operation and partnerships are emphasised as a key enabler in this agenda, most notably in Goal 17: *Partnerships for the Goals* (United Nations 2015a). Inclusive models of co-operative action, as emphasised in Goal 17, are valued for their potential to solve development challenges, promote sustainable development outcomes, and to

achieve the SDGs (Atwood 2012; Hazlewood 2015; United Nations 2014a; OECD 2013). International co-operation policy plays a crucial role in shaping how these international partnerships play out in practice.

The SDGs and specifically Goal 17: *Partnership for the Goals* provide the backdrop for this paper: a commentary on international co-operation practice and policy in Australia from our perspective as researchers and practitioners working in international agriculture for development. In 2022, the election of a new Australian federal government brought with it an increased commitment toward official development assistance, particularly for its partners in the Pacific. The elected government also expressed their commitment to building stronger and more meaningful partnerships across the region, which was to be reflected in the new international development policy (under development at the time of this paper). The aim of this article therefore is to take stock, pause, and reflect on how Australia currently 'does development partnerships' as well as looking to the future and the opportunities for change.

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CURRENT TRENDS SHAPING DEVELOPMENT AND AUSTRALIA'S ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGION

In looking to the current trends and challenges shaping development and Australia's engagement in the region and beyond, issues such as climate change and environmental pressures continue to take centre stage. For many nations in the Asia-Pacific region, food insecurity, environmental change, and sustainability are the forefront of development challenges (Ahuja et al. 2018). Sustainable agriculture for development is one avenue that can address food security while simultaneously minimising or reducing the impact of agriculture systems on the planet (Capone et al. 2014; FAO 2012; Pretty, Morison, and Hine 2002), hence contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals. In addition, the 'blue' economy concept, which refers to the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and ocean ecosystem health, has emerged as a key priority especially for the Pacific (World Bank and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2017; UNCTAD 2014; Wenhai et al. 2019; Lee, Noh, and Khim 2020). Currently, the Australian Government provides development assistance in areas of agriculture and 'blue' development to the Southeast Asia and the Pacific regions through a mix of global, regional and bilateral agriculture for development initiatives (DFAT 2022). These investments are important not only for the development outcomes they achieve, but also for their contribution to regional security and diplomatic relations.

International development in Australia, especially in the sustainable agriculture and blue economy context, is typically delivered as bilateral North-South partnerships. Defining North and South is not without its complications, but for simplicity's sake the terms North and South here are used in the context of the political, economic, and social differences between higher vs lower income countries (World Bank 2022; Krüger 2009; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2019). The North-South bilateral way of working has faced criticisms, with challenges associated with its 'vertical' nature (Escobar 2012; Upreti et al. 2012; Wiesmann et al. 2011; Zingerli 2010). Inequalities in partnerships can stem from unequal power relations, differing political and economic contexts, and access to knowledge and capabilities. While these inequalities can be evident in all types of partnerships, they are somewhat more apparent in North-South arrangements (Johnson and Wilson 2006). The last few decades have seen international development co-operation attempt to move away from one-way co-operation with a push for "horizontal partnerships" (Alonso 2018; Alonso and Santander 2022). In this way, international development is no longer viewed as unilateral aid driven by altruistic or philanthropic motives, but rather as driven by mutual interests and shared responsibilities. These shifts have also been influenced by the changing global landscape that has progressed from being bipolar to multipolar and has seen the rise of non-state actors such as NGOs and new global powers from

the South (Fejerskov, Lundsgaarde, and Cold-Ravnkilde 2017; Subramanian 2011; World Bank 2011).

TRIANGULAR CO-OPERATION

AN OPPORTUNITY TO RETHINK HOW AUSTRALIA DOES ENGAGEMENT – MOVING TOWARDS TRANSFORMATIVE HORIZONTAL PARTNERSHIPS

These challenges and shifts give rise to an opportunity to rethink and reshape how Australia engages in international partnerships by taking up more horizontal ways of working. Globally, one modality of partnership that is seen as a more empowering and horizontal way of working is 'triangular co-operation'. Triangular co-operation arose from the South-South paradigm, which dates back to the 1950's with the Bandung Conference (United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation 2019a) and the formalisation of South-South co-operation in 1978 with the Buenos Aires Plan of Action (United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation 2019a; UNDP 1978). South-South co-operation refers to the technical co-operation among developing countries in the Global South, founded on principles of self-determination, and South-South solidarity (UN-DESA 2019; United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation 2019a). Triangular co-operation which emerged from and complements South-South co-operation, is viewed as a way to overcome the traditional North-South division and issues of power asymmetries (McEwan and Mawdsley 2012).

The triangular co-operation model has been used over the last four decades and is a growing area of interest to achieve more inclusive and cooperative action (Haug 2021; D'Alessandro 2019; UNDP 1978; OECD 2019; United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation 2019a). While the modality is typically delivered as a North-South-South partnership, there are exceptions and a broader definition whereby the modality is described by its three roles is: one or more partners ('facilitators' / 'provider') that support co-operation that is provided by one or more developing countries ('pivots') that is orientated toward one or more developing countries ('beneficiaries' of the action) (GPI, 2019) (Figure 1).

A common feature of examples of triangular co-operation is that know-how, skills, experiences, and resources from both developed and developing countries are combined (OECD 2013) and at its heart are principles of equality, inclusivity, and horizontality. The value of triangular co-operation to deliver collaborative and innovative solutions for achieving the SDGs was emphasised by the OECD (2019) and is reflected in global thinking and commitments, including its inclusion in Goal 17 targets and a call for increased international public financing to promote triangular and South-South application and monitoring (United Nations 2014a, 2014b).

MAKING A CASE FOR TRIANGULAR CO-OPERATION FOR AUSTRALIA AND THE OCEANIA REGION

To date, triangular co-operation has been reported to occur the most in Latin America and the Caribbean followed by

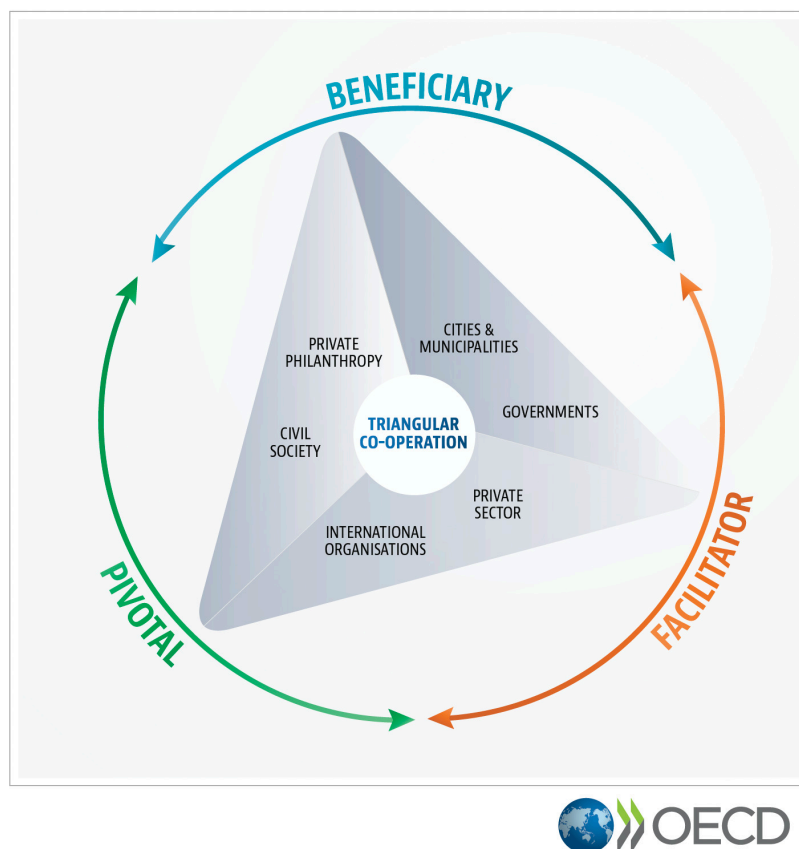


Figure 1. Roles in triangular co-operation (OECD 2022)

Africa, Asia-Pacific, and the Middle East (GPI, 2019). While it is a model that has been used across Asia-Pacific, it has not been formally adopted by the Australian Government as a way of working in partnership (Haug 2023 (forthcoming)). However, the modality shows potential to support Australia's development assistance agenda and contribute to sustainable development outcomes for both Australia and its partners.

How can triangular co-operation add value to Australia's international co-operation landscape? Firstly, we argue that triangular co-operation as a modality offers a genuine role for the Australian Government within the South-South ideals across the Oceania region. The South-South approach is not new for the countries in the Pacific and is well supported. Across the Pacific region, there has been a strong drive by Pacific Island leaders to engage in South-South co-operation for sustainable development (United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation 2019b), as evident through the policies and work of the Pacific Island Development Forum (Borg 2019). Supporting triangular co-operation in the Pacific would also be consistent with the commitments Australia has made through its endorsement of the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (OECD 2011). One of the principles of the Busan Partnership is "Ownership of development priorities by developing countries: Countries should define the development model that they want to implement." Therefore, we suggest that triangular co-operation as a modality of partnership may help support and harness the South-South co-

operation ideals and meet the expectations of South partners in the Pacific whilst also meeting the commitments of Australia.

Secondly, just as South-South co-operation is not 'new' for the Pasifika peoples, we also need to acknowledge the history and knowledge of the First Nations peoples in Australia, who have practiced international relations for over 80 thousand years (Blackwell and Ballangarry 2022). The uptake of triangular co-operation and South-South models of partnership between Australia and the Pacific region would not only provide a greater recognition of this history, but would support and facilitate the collective and collaborative practices of First Nations ways that worked so well and effectively long before colonisation. Furthermore, the similarities and synergies between the polities, history, and cultural and social values of Australia's First Nations peoples and the indigenous peoples of the Pacific would allow for more authentic and culturally appropriate engagement – the triangular co-operation model could offer a modality to support the realisation of this strength (Kumar 2009). The application of triangular co-operation in this way also draws on indigenous traditional knowledge systems and places value on First Nations approaches including strength-based ways of working and caring for Country. This facilitates the ability to tackle environmental issues such as climate change, enhance adaptation and mitigation action, as well as contribute to social outcomes such as livelihoods and development (IASG 2014; Reyes-García et al. 2022).

In short, triangular co-operation could offer a value add to Australia's international co-operation approaches by embracing the South-South ways of working, valuing traditional knowledge and culture, and providing much needed and often 'scarce' financial resources by a facilitating partner (such as the Australian Government), all within a model of inclusive and cooperative action that emphasises mutual benefits for all partners (Alonso and Santander 2022; Kumar 2009; Piefer-Söyler and Pelechà Aigües 2020).

ENABLERS TO SUPPORT AND EMBED TRIANGULAR CO-OPERATION IN POLICY AND PRACTICE ACROSS THE OCEANIA REGION

Enablers to support triangular co-operation have been identified from the academic literature and from input by fellow practitioners during sessions we (the authors) presented for the World Public Health Nutrition Association (WPHNA) and at the recent Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) Conference.¹ Firstly, having an enabling national ecosystem for triangular co-operation is considered key. An enabling national ecosystem is characterised by the presence of a high-level political will and a related policy, strategy, or guiding document as well as structures, resources, and procedures at the country level to enable engagement in and management of triangular co-operation activities (Piefer-Söyler et al. 2019). Our colleagues from WPHNA and ACFID also suggested that an enabling ecosystem is one that reflects the time needed for establishing effective partnerships. This includes dedicating time during the design phase for authentic co-design based on triangular co-operation principles; and recognising long-term partnerships as an asset and continuing to invest in relationships to maintain trust and communication. Investing in capacity building of staff for implementing and delivering triangular co-operation arrangements is also key, particularly for emerging donors who take on the role of pivotal partners and have increased or new responsibilities in the project or partnership (Ashoff 2010). Sufficient skills and capacity of the facilitating partner is equally important, to enable them to take on the role of supporting the various agencies and institutions in these pivotal partners (Ashoff 2010).

Another enabling factor is in ensuring endeavours are community/beneficiary driven, and solutions are needs-based, contextual and founded in local knowledge. In principle, triangular co-operation interventions should be led by the 'beneficiary', but given the existing power asymmetries among countries, care needs to be taken to ensure that it does occur in practice (Alonso and Santander 2022). To be effective, existing power relations need to be acknowledged

to ensure the design of triangular co-operation initiatives do not solely reflect the experiences and preferences of the facilitating and pivotal (emerging donor) partners and hence overlook or misalign with beneficiary needs and priorities (Ashoff 2010; OECD 2013). For Australia, building international triangular partnerships that are alert to these power asymmetries might be facilitated by applying an Indigenous lens to foreign policy and relations. In addition, a national strategy or framework would support the uptake of this type of international co-operation by Australia, and we acknowledge that genuine participation and engagement of First Nations people in shaping Australian foreign policy and practice is needed (Blackwell and Ballangarry 2022).

A third enabling factor would be a mindset change, not only to engage more effectively in partnerships for the 2030 Agenda but in triangular co-operation more specifically (Piefer-Söyler et al. 2019). This mind-set change encompasses a shift from 'aid' or 'assistance' to 'partnership', and requires a level of reflexivity whereby the expert mindset is let go and all partners accept that "they can learn from each other, rather than relying on North-South flow of expertise and experience" (Piefer-Söyler et al. 2019). These mindset changes are needed at all levels (political through to practitioner) and from all partners (providers through to beneficiaries) (Piefer-Söyler et al. 2019), and can be enabled by giving value to the partnership itself beyond the project outcomes usually measured (Alonso and Santander 2022).

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The ideas presented in this paper are the start of a conversation on what is possible in international co-operation to achieve the sustainable development agenda. The value and place of triangular co-operation within the Australian international development landscape and the Oceania region in which Australia is situated warrants further exploration and discussion. The conceptualisation and application of triangular co-operation needs to be shaped within the unique and diverse context of the Oceania region. This firstly requires further research on triangular co-operation to understand what does and does not currently work for countries and cultures in this region, as well as its application in the agriculture sector and the blue economy context. Following this, a shared narrative and vision for Australia's international co-operation agenda can be created. This could be achieved through a domestic process that engages all relevant stakeholders, including Australia's First Nations peoples, to align around a coherent framework and understanding of what triangular co-operation is and aims to achieve (Piefer-Söyler et al. 2019).

¹ Session presented at the ACFID 2022 conference "Reconceptualising international partnerships to tackle climate change and the SDGs" 26 Oct 2022 and as a webinar for the World Public Health Nutrition Association "Reconceptualising international partnerships to tackle the SDGs" 30 Nov 2022. Delegates present at these sessions provided input during an interactive discussion, where we asked 'What are the enablers for triangular cooperation in Australia and the Global South to support the SDGs and what is needed to support us to work in this way?'

In conclusion, triangular co-operation is a modality founded on principles of mutual trust, respect, fairness, and equality and offers Australia a new way to conceptualise international co-operation and partnerships within the Oceania region. In taking stock of how Australia currently engages in international co-operation, we suggest further consideration be given to triangular co-operation as

a means to support transformative horizontal partnerships for the SDGs and beyond.

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