

The Emerging Powers and the Changing Landscape of Foreign Aid and Development Cooperation

Public Perceptions of Development Cooperation

Summary Paper 2: INDIA

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Project Background

Most DAC¹ donor governments and development NGOs have a strong interest in the public face of foreign aid and international development. Key issues include:

- Do people think foreign aid is a legitimate expenditure of taxpayer money?
- How much foreign aid do people believe is given, and to whom, in which countries?
- How effective do people think aid is in humanitarian crises, or for poverty reduction, enhancing human development or contributing to security?
- Do people believe that foreign aid provides value for money?
- What purposes do people believe foreign aid serves: moral, humanitarian, developmental, security, commercial and/or geopolitical?

DAC donor governments have to convince an array of taxpayers, voters, parliamentarians, journalists and civil society watchdogs that ODA is a just and effective expenditure. Interest in the public face of development has led to investment in a large number of national and cross-national surveys of how people perceive 'development' and how they understand the 'less developed' world more generally. Critics suggest that we need to be cautious about what these surveys actually measure, e.g., knowledge about development or commitment to aid expenditure. There are also doubts about the validity of cross-national data.

However, to date there has been little or no analysis of what various publics within the range of 'non-DAC' countries think about their foreign aid/development cooperation activities. In this project, we researched the public face of development in **China, India, Poland, Russia and South Africa**. These diverse 'southern' and 'eastern' development partners have a range of historical and contemporary development cooperation policies and practices. In each case, we examined the extent of public awareness of their official development cooperation policies and activities; how this and perceptions of the purpose and legitimacy of development cooperation varied between different segments of the public; and whether or not official development actors and agencies sought to engage with the public.

Research conduct and methodologies

Given the size of this project it was not feasible to conduct large surveys. In Poland and Russia we were able to draw upon existing surveys, but none to date exist in China, India or South Africa. We conducted interviews with government officials; academics and think tank personnel; development NGO workers; private sector interests; and journalists and editors. The balance varied between country settings because of context; for example, in Poland the very heavy involvement of NGOs contrasted to China and India, and shaped our choice of respondents. The second shared approach was print and Internet media analysis. Given the scale of the project and the very different country contexts, this was not standardized across the case studies, but shaped to the circumstances of each one. The project has benefited enormously from the discussions we have had across our five case study countries, but it was not designed to be formally comparative. All of our respondents were interviewed with informed consent, and anonymity was guaranteed unless otherwise agreed.

Full project details can be found at:

<http://www.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/foreignaidperceptions/>

This website also has details of longer academic papers

¹The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) comprises 23 industrialised countries plus the European Union. All are western other than Japan, and since 2010, South Korea.

India's development cooperation at a glance

History: India's development cooperation dates back to the early 1950s when it started providing assistance to Nepal and Bhutan. Development cooperation with Asia and Africa was strongly positioned as part of India's commitment to solidarity with other non-aligned countries and Third World politics, although by the 1980s and 1990s it had become more commercially oriented.

Institutions: The Ministry of External Affairs has traditionally been the nodal agent in India's development assistance, although many other agencies and departments also have their own programmes and interactions. In recent years the Ministry of Commerce has taken on a stronger role, together with the Export-Import Bank (EXIM). India tends not to work with or through NGOs. In July 2011 the Government announced that it was going to set up the **Indian Agency for Partnership in Development** in order to manage, streamline and monitor development cooperation projects abroad.

Modalities: Traditionally India has focused on technical cooperation, including educational and training places, as well as cultural exchanges. While this remains an important (and growing) dimension of India's development assistance, there has been a significant increase in debt relief, grants and soft loans, and in particular, Lines of Credit. Some of these flows of finance, personnel and knowledge would count as Official Development Assistance by the DAC definition, while many of the loans would be considered Other Official Flows (OOF). Much of this financing is tied to the provision of Indian goods and services. India is also a significant donor to some multilateral bodies, including UN peace-keeping forces and the World Food Programme. It is also increasing its lending to the World Bank, IMF and regional development banks.

Partners: Traditionally India has focused on its regional neighbours, and Afghanistan is now a major partner country. Many African countries have also been long-standing partners, dating back to the 1960s. Here a notable shift in regional focus in recent years has been from southern and eastern Africa, to central and west Africa. Resources are the principle driver of this geographical reorientation.

Recent debates: India is adamant that it is not a 'foreign aid donor', given the associations with western interference in sovereign affairs. Its development partnership remains strongly couched in the language of third world solidarity, asserting mutual benefits and shared experiences. However, India's booming economy and global political agenda are leading to changing strategic imperatives. Diplomatic solidarities are still important, but these are increasingly centring on trade and investment opportunities, leading to changes in the patterns, modalities and agendas of India's development cooperation. Security issues are also evident, including in Afghanistan and Indian Ocean Rim countries. With some exceptions, India has tended to remain aloof from (so-called) 'traditional' donor forums and initiatives.

Project findings

What do the public know about India's development cooperation?

There are a number of barriers to wider public awareness of India's development cooperation activities. These are:

- Poverty estimates vary from 25-40%, while 25% of the population are illiterate. The energies of this substantial population are largely focused on making a livelihood.
- Newspaper readership is substantial, but India's sheer sub-continental size means that print, web-based and visual media have a huge range of domestic politics on which to report, with Bollywood and cricket just two of the other contenders for space and attention.
- Development cooperation volumes are relatively small compared to other expenditures in most contexts.
- Historically foreign policy affairs have tended to be rather 'insulated' from the domestic arena. While India's outward looking public diplomacy activities are growing (including a greater projection of India's development cooperation activities), there is currently no coordinated engagement with domestic audiences in this area. This may start to change.

However, **India's development cooperation is not invisible**, and there is considerable public awareness of specific aspects, even if it is rarely framed or discussed in these terms.

- Specific interventions have had considerable media attention (e.g., funding the Afghan Parliament building; humanitarian assistance to Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami; blankets to Japan after the 2011 tsunami; the pan-Africa e-network, etc.).
- There is a strong 'background hum' of general public awareness of India's cooperative relations with other states based on the decades long history of solidarity and development assistance, and it is a significant contributor to the image that many Indians have of India in the world (e.g., scholarships and training to African and Asian students). This is allied to a growing sense that India is and should be an outward looking regional and global player.

Who are 'the public(s)'?

Most respondents argued that income/class was the most salient public segmentation in the context of this project. While to some extent speculative, there was considerable agreement on the following views:

Top 20%: from the wealthy to the lower middle classes. This is the ebullient face of rising India. This constituency largely embraces the idea of a more assertive, strategic and commercially oriented foreign policy, and thus the leveraging of development cooperation to this endeavour. Notwithstanding considerable private giving and charity to particular causes, the majority tend to have limited sympathy for India's poor. Development cooperation is or would be supported because it is officially articulated as a **win-win relationship**, and especially because of the strong, stated relationship between official development cooperation and support for the Indian **private sector** as producers, market-seekers and investors. However, at the same time, this constituency have a strong sense of **India as a principled player in world politics**, and the language of solidarity and justice for poorer countries is important to this self-image. Criticism of development assistance would focus on potential problems of corruption rather than whether or not it is a legitimate foreign policy expenditure.

Next 40%: aspirational up and comers. This category comprises economically marginal, small town, peri-urban, informal settlements. This constituency has high hopes but is currently on the fringes of the feast. For most, the pursuit of wealth and power is desired and to be emulated, and similar to the top quintile, they are likely to support development cooperation that explicitly claims mutual benefits for India, contributing to national wealth and prestige.

Bottom 40%: the poor. Perhaps counter-intuitively, respondents also felt that the poor do or would support development cooperation. They felt that they would share a degree of **empathy** for the poor of other countries, and would also share the **pride** in India's emerging power status. Even if poorer groups or advocates did feel that this external expenditure was unjustified, it is likely their energies would stay focused on trying to improve distribution of the Government of India's significant internal resources.

Public understandings and perceptions will also differ by **regional and ethno-linguistic identity**, for example:

- Tamils/Tamil Nadu media are likely to have a stronger interest in development cooperation activities in Sri Lanka; and Bengalis/West Bengal media with Bangladesh;
- *Divyabhaskar* (the largest circulating daily Gujarati newspaper) has published more articles in the last five years mentioning development cooperation than Hindi ones in the North Indian region. The *Divyabhaskar* articles tended to have a strong focus on the business dimension of development cooperation, possibly reflecting Gujarat's profile as an economic powerhouse within India, and the connections with the global Gujarati diaspora.

Critical responses. Most of the project respondents felt that domestic criticism of India's development cooperation activities would be muted, even if the subject did come to wider public attention. This was accurately born out in July 2011 when the Government of India announced that it was going to establish the Indian Agency for Partnership in Development. There was rather limited press coverage, and articles and editorials were supportive. Criticism was expressed through reader responses on blog sites, but this overwhelmingly had a party political edge (that it was a Congress ploy and/or would be a vehicle for corruption) combined with anti-Muslim sentiments. There is no evidence on the extent to which these are representative views. There was no criticism that India was spending resources abroad when it has many poor people itself, and the tone of the articles and the commentaries are congruent with the observations made here: namely that development cooperation was a legitimate way of

securing benefits for a rising India, while asserting that it was acting together with other developing countries in global politics.

The omnipresence of China. Everyone talked about China (even if to deny that China was an issue). There was a powerful sense of the effort to 'boundary make' with China, including by comparing the motivations and conduct of development cooperation. China was widely portrayed as being only interested in itself; having exploitative relations with its recipients/partners; comprising cold, impersonal people; being short-termist; and conducting distorted and unfair relations through state-owned enterprises. All of this was claimed firmly to contrast with India's identity and activities. China was the dominant 'imagined' comparator, more so than the DAC/western donors.

Virtue is projected onto Africa. While the elevated language of fraternity, solidarity and cooperation was used in relationship to all 'partner' countries, this was muted or sometimes absent in relation to Asian neighbours, with which India has at times had tense and/or complex relations. However, it was the discourse that invariably framed any discussion of development cooperation in Africa.

The emphasis is growth. Development cooperation is unproblematically constructed in terms of modernist ideals of high technology and industrially-based economic growth with little or no reflection on relationships between domestic dissent, politics and debates over development models, such as struggles over Special Economic Zones, the agrarian crisis, the scale of India's poverty and so on.

Conclusions: More public awareness of India's development cooperation activities will certainly result in some criticism. However, public opposition is unlikely to run deep. For the majority of the more influential and voluble top 20%, there is limited concern with India's own poor (except as a problem), so there is very little sentiment that, 'we have to deal with the poor in our own country first'. India's 'national good' is likely to be seen as a higher priority – an attitude that has long roots. The language of mutual benefit guarantees returns to India; development cooperation doesn't claim to be charity to the less fortunate but based on 'win-win' relationships. However, the language of mutual benefit also resonates with a proud tradition of the Non-Aligned Movement and 'third worldist' solidarity (even though practices and priorities have shifted substantially). This gives India's development cooperation an ethical ballast and purchase on the public imagination that goes beyond materialist understandings of 'win-win' alone. It fits with a prevailing national pride about 'rising India', which is constructed as different and superior to China and the West.

Notes: This research was conducted through a modest media analysis and 40 interviews (March-April 2011, Delhi) with major newspaper editors and journalists; senior civil servants; academics and think tank personnel; business people at the 7th CII-EXIM Bank India-Africa Conclave; and NGO personnel. The research findings must be understood as reflecting the cautious opinions and projections of the research respondents. There was, however, a notable consensus of opinion on most of the issues, and support for the conclusions was drawn from the media analysis. I am extremely grateful to my respondents for their generosity in granting me time and sharing their views.

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