

# MONITOR

## DEVELOPMENT POLICY

### THE ROLE OF NON-TRADITIONAL DONORS IN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

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# The "elephant" caught in the balancing act between idealism and pragmatism

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## India's role in global development cooperation

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- › India's self-image in development cooperation is one of a needs-driven development partner.
- › Since 2003, the "elephant" has been attempting to promote the image of a self-sufficient donor of development assistance worldwide to combat the international perception of India as a recipient of development assistance.
- › A combination of idealism within the framework of South-South cooperation and pragmatism, as can be observed in various triangular cooperation initiatives, characterises Indian development cooperation to this day.
- › An increasing interlinkage of the foreign, development and economic policy agendas can be observed, which is based on India's self-portrayal as a donor.
- › The competition for influence between the Asian giants India and China is becoming increasingly apparent in the development policy arena. India's development policy activities are often geared towards curbing China's expansion in strategically important regions and increasing its own economic and political influence.
- › Since the "BMZ 2030" reform, India has been classified as a "global partner" of German development cooperation, with whom it intends to collaborate with greater intensity in order to tackle global challenges. Given mutual interests, deeper development cooperation between the two countries seems possible.

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## Introduction

The world's largest recipient of development assistance up until the mid-1980s, India, which is often dubbed the "elephant" in business magazines, is now the second-largest donor of development assistance among countries in the Global South after China.<sup>2</sup>

How did a nation that still seems to balance the fine line between being a developing and industrialised country manage to become such an important player in global development cooperation? What development policy approaches has New Delhi pursued along this road? And what influence does the "elephant" have today, not only in its partner countries, but also in multilateral forums and international debates on development cooperation?

This article aims to answer these and other questions by shedding light on the development history of the "elephant" and its evolution into a donor country. Given that these are development processes that do not seem to easily fit into the Western understanding of development cooperation, it seems all the more significant to analyse Indian development policy in order to contribute towards a nuanced understanding of the role of this non-traditional donor in development cooperation.

## India's development policy: a balancing act between pragmatism and idealism

India has established itself as and committed to being a donor of development assistance since it became an independent nation in 1947.<sup>3</sup> India's development cooperation initially focused on neighbouring countries in South Asia, whilst also supporting a number of African states during and after their struggle for independence. The support for its neighbouring countries, such as

Bhutan and Nepal, and for newly formed African states can be understood as South-South cooperation, which was marked in this initial phase by economic and foreign policy interests on India's side, but above all, a strong sense of unity and solidarity with post-colonial states.<sup>4</sup> India's own experience in building a state after gaining its independence played a decisive role in this.

The moral compass of this type of idealistic development partnership approach is based on the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, who once said, "I do want to think in terms of the whole world. My patriotism includes the good of mankind in general. Therefore, my service of India includes the service of humanity"<sup>5</sup>. It therefore will not come as a surprise that India initially formed its identity as a development partner through South-South cooperation. The 1950 Colombo Plan was both the cornerstone and the first instrument of India's South-South cooperation, which aimed to exchange knowledge and provide financial resources between economically stronger and weaker South and Southeast Asian states.<sup>6</sup>

India's self-image within this framework of South-South cooperation corresponded to that of a needs-driven development partner on an equal footing with the recipient of development assistance and therefore reflected the criticism of traditional donor states from the Western world. They were viewed as being insufficiently familiar with and attuned to the needs of developing countries and thus seen to aggravate asymmetrical relations between donor and developing countries.<sup>7</sup> Indian development policy thus expressed a rejection of the dominant traditional donor country narratives based on conditions set by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a rejection that is deeply rooted in the subcontinent's own colonial history.

This self-image as a demand-driven South-South development partner has persisted over the decades and still remains underpinned to this day by the prevailing narrative within the political establishment, regardless of any political affiliation. The incumbent Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeated on several occasions that India's development work on the African continent is based on a cooperation model that addresses the needs of African countries, namely one that is needs-based and not bound by any specific conditions.<sup>8</sup> The core mission of Indian development assistance has therefore remained almost unchanged since the 1950s, in that developing countries are to be strengthened through South-South cooperation. India continues to see itself in the role of "a partner" as opposed to that of a "donor" in international development cooperation.

In spite of this idealistic approach to development cooperation, which is widely referred to as "southern solidarity", the subcontinent has also made itself a pioneer of triangular cooperation and has worked alongside Western donor countries such as the USA. The initial triangular cooperation projects between the two countries date back to the 1950s, when the USA and India worked alongside one another on building roads and other infrastructure projects in Nepal, for instance, and jointly funded these projects. India was therefore already exploring the potential of this form of development cooperation when only a few Western nations were using this mechanism.<sup>10</sup> It is only over the past few years that people have become more focused on this type of development cooperation on a global level. The combination of idealism within the framework of South-South cooperation and pragmatism, as can be observed in various triangular cooperation initiatives, characterises the nature of India's development policy to this day.

Cooperation with traditional donors did diminish significantly, however, over the next few decades. For a start, the wars with China in 1962 and with Pakistan in 1966, the struggle to establish Bangladesh in 1971, the oil shocks of 1972 and 1979, and India's first nuclear tests in Pokhran in

1974 shifted the focus onto domestic politics and the objective of becoming economically self-sufficient.<sup>11</sup> Changes in Indian foreign policy during the Cold War period and India's active involvement in newly formed initiatives in the Global South, such as the 1961 "Non-Aligned Movement" and the Group of 77 in 1963, also meant that it focused almost exclusively on bilateral South-South development cooperation with countries on India's doorstep.<sup>12</sup>

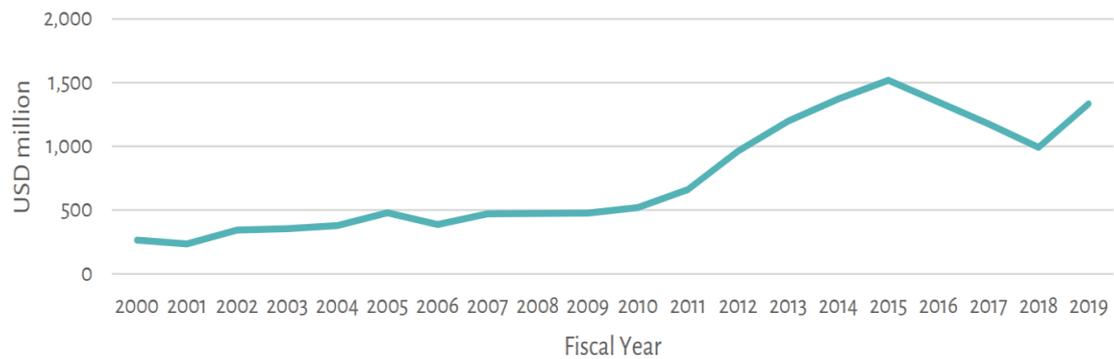
### **From recipient to donor: a change of course in New Delhi's development policy**

It was not until 1998 that Indian triangular cooperation efforts slowly gathered pace once again, not least through the introduction of far-reaching economic reforms by the Indian government, which liberalised foreign trade policy and foreign direct investment, as well as deepened the sub-continent's involvement in foreign trade. These economic reforms led to extremely high economic growth rates averaging more than 14 percent per year in the late 1990s, which were only exceeded by China.<sup>13</sup> This economic growth increased India's self-confidence, which renewed New Delhi's willingness to work alongside OECD-DAC members on a case-by-case basis and on an equal footing. This for example included India's agreement in 1999 to cooperate with Japan on a series of development initiatives in Africa.<sup>14</sup>

After this initial opening in the late 1990s, the 2003 budget speech signalled a fundamental change in policy with regard to India's donor activities on the one hand and for India as a recipient of official development assistance (ODA) on the other. New Delhi announced that they would no longer accept development funds from donor countries at the government level.<sup>15</sup> Formal guidelines were issued in that sense, stating that any ongoing programmes should be finalised, but that no new programmes would be accepted. The government also announced that donors should be sending their aid to other countries that "require public development funds more urgently" and that any development programmes in India should only be implemented through civil society organisations or via multilateral channels.<sup>16</sup> Specific clauses within these guidelines, however, do allow state actors who provide more than 25 million USD per year of ODA to continue to provide such aid in India as part of their development cooperation. This includes the USA, Germany, Great Britain, Russia, Japan and the EU.<sup>17</sup>

There have also been significant developments in India's own donor activities. Among other things, India announced a debt relief package for heavily indebted poor countries during its 2003 budget speech as a sign of solidarity with other former colonies. The debt relief package amounted to around 13 million USD and included Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, Guyana, Nicaragua, Ghana and Uganda.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the India Development Initiative (IDI) was set up by the Ministry of Finance in order to provide grants, as well as project-related technical and material assistance in developing countries, mainly in both Africa and Asia. The objective of these grants as announced officially was to market and establish India over the long term as an investment and production hub, as well as a reliable economic cooperation partner in these developing countries.<sup>19</sup> And finally, the Ministry of Finance's facility for providing credit lines was integrated into a new programme, which became known as the Indian Development and Economic Assistance Scheme (IDEAS). These changes in development policy and the emphasis on India's role as a donor ensured that the "elephant's" development assistance pledges increased more than five-fold between 2001 and 2019, from 264 million to 1.32 billion USD.<sup>20</sup>

**Fig. 1: Indian development assistance pledges 2000–2019 (in millions of USD)**



Source: Rani D. Mullen 2019: Indian Development Cooperation Regains Momentum: 7 Main Take-Aways from India's 2019-20 Union Budget, Indian Development Cooperation Program (Centre for Policy Research), in: <https://bit.ly/3Gw9qg7>.

These profound changes in Indian development policy show just how careful Indian decision-makers were to dismiss the subcontinent's international image as a recipient of development assistance in order to replace it with the image of an aspiring and self-sufficient donor of development assistance. Among others, India rejected any form of international aid in the immediate aftermath of dramatic natural disasters such as the 2004 tsunami, the earthquake in Kashmir in 2005, and the floods in Kashmir in 2014, which left an enormous trail of destruction and human suffering. This clearly demonstrated the scope of India's efforts to change its image and the attraction of the narrative of self-sufficiency, which also started to gather substantial support among the population of the subcontinent.<sup>21</sup>

The "elephant" attempted simultaneously to further strengthen its own regional and global relevance as a development provider, for example when it founded the BRICS alliance with the emerging national economies of Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa.<sup>22</sup> Since 2009/10 and throughout subsequent BRICS summits, new types of cooperation with developing nations have emerged, for example through the establishment of the New Development Bank in 2014 by the BRICS states. These new fora were intended to create new opportunities for shaping global development cooperation.<sup>23</sup>

These alternative types of development cooperation can also be understood as a challenge and a step-by-step attempt to replace the traditional notion of what were predominantly vertical donor-recipient relationships as shaped by the OECD development committee with more complex horizontal cooperation agreements. In line with the principles of South-South cooperation, these agreements involve the mutual exchange of experience as equals, the complementarity of approaches, the sharing of networks and knowledge, as well as concrete advantages for all of the development partners involved.

However, there were also a number of more pragmatic reasons for these drastic reforms within Indian development cooperation: the objective was to increase India's influence on an international level, to secure its own economic integration and to establish itself as a regional power alongside China.<sup>24</sup> In this regard, India's image as a development partner for small African and South Asian states should not be underestimated, since these are exactly the political allies required for India's consolidation as a global player.

Moreover, the competition with the other Asian population giant, China, became visible as far back as the early 2000s not only on a regional but also on an international level. China and India were and remain until today among the largest global oil and gas importers in the world. Africa, with its eight percent worth of global oil reserves and its enormous market potential, as well as similarities in terms of consumer behaviour, income levels and lifestyle, appeared to be the perfect economic partners.<sup>25</sup>

It is thus no coincidence that the increasing volume of Indian development assistance for the African continent went hand in hand with an almost exponential increase in Indian and African trade relations in the early 2000s.<sup>26</sup> It is now clear that India has dovetailed its development, foreign and economic policy agenda, which is based on the newly propagated image of India as a donor of development assistance and with which India wishes to come across as a trustworthy and well-meaning investor, trading partner and often even political ally.

### **The role of development policy in the struggle for influence between Asia's giants**

The pragmatic and strategic background of the "elephant's" development cooperation has become almost unmistakable since at least 2014 when Modi took office as India's Prime Minister: India's government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), saw an increasingly hostile Communist Party of China slowly but surely increase its sphere of influence over India's immediate neighbours as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), thus undermining India's influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region.<sup>27</sup>

In recent years, New Delhi's development policy, which was set against the backdrop of this competition for spheres of influence, has also been characterised by expansion and has shown the characteristics of a responsive foreign policy geared towards the securing of decisive geopolitical influence. This means that New Delhi has used its development assistance over recent years as a political incentive, if not explicitly then implicitly, to obtain favourable foreign policy results from recipient countries, or as a bargaining chip, should these positive results fail to materialise. The "elephant" for instance increased its aid to the Maldives after a pro-India government took office in 2018 in order to create additional economic incentives for closer foreign policy cooperation and alignment, which are both in the interests of India.<sup>28</sup>

An analysis of the development assistance budgets in the financial years from 2014/15 to 2019/20 not only reveals existing but also new trends for the allocation of development funds along these lines. A majority of the funds were allocated to neighbouring countries, as has been customary since the 1950s. New Delhi also provided targeted support for countries in the wider region, such as the Seychelles and Mauritius.<sup>29</sup> A common thread can be spotted here with regards to India's attempt to forge partnerships with important maritime hubs around the Indian Ocean. This remains consistent with the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) policy introduced by the BJP government in 2015, with its main objective of halting China's growth in this strategically important region.<sup>30</sup> It is against this backdrop that the BJP government cut the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, a long-term bilateral financial aid programme, out of the budget. New beneficiary countries have instead been added, and allocations to existing countries have increased, which suggests that development funds under the ITEC have been split in order to allow more targeted support in strategically important countries.<sup>31</sup>

These new development partnerships are also based on India's development assistance concept, which focuses on the needs and priorities of the recipient countries. This can also be witnessed in Africa, where India presents its development assistance model in direct competition and often in

direct contrast to that offered by China, whereby the "elephant" promises, for instance, not to attach certain conditions and requirements to its lending, while promoting high levels of transparency.<sup>32</sup> India is also involved in areas of development cooperation in Africa that have largely been neglected by China, which focuses primarily on large-scale infrastructure projects. India is therefore striving to become a major player in regional development cooperation in the fields of human resource development, education and healthcare. India donated a total of 11 billion USD in concessions for the continent from 2002 up until early 2020.<sup>33</sup> There are also funds in the hundreds of millions and hundreds of thousands for scholarships for African students.<sup>34</sup>

It does seem doubtful, however, in today's climate as to whether the subliminal goal of this increased development assistance, which aims to exert more influence in foreign policy and to lure partner countries away from China, has actually been achieved. China's influence in South Asia and Africa remains almost unblemished. The monetary dependencies that have arisen between many African countries, as well as India's South Asian counterparts and China seem too deep rooted for India to actually pinch any partners from the Middle Kingdom with this development policy strategy. It was only this year that India's orchestrated image of a self-sufficient country, which does not need any foreign assistance, also had chinks in its armour. The BJP-led government, which had always advertised its own economy with the slogan "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (self-sufficient India)<sup>35</sup> had no choice but to accept help from over 40 nations during the second devastating COVID-19 outbreak, mainly in the form of oxygen equipment and medication.<sup>36</sup>

### **The "elephant" on the lookout for strategic partners**

The previously discussed increasing development from an idealistic to a pragmatic approach in Indian development policy is clearly evident under Modi's government, which is utilising development cooperation as a foreign policy instrument to support its own political and economic advancement on the global stage. This development has once again opened the door for increased engagement with Western donor countries as part of development cooperation. As such, increased Indian engagement with OECD-DAC member countries has been seen over recent years.<sup>37</sup>

Development cooperation in this context was often initiated by the political will of high-ranking heads of state, as the meeting with former French President François Hollande at the 2015 Paris Climate Change Conference demonstrated, when Modi and Hollande announced the founding of the International Solar Alliance (ISA). The ISA, which now unites 124 countries under Indian leadership, has the primary objective of promoting the use of solar energy in developing countries and to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels.<sup>38</sup> Cooperation and efforts of this type show how India, due its development policy partnerships, could be in a stronger position than before to become a major player in international development cooperation and to make important contributions towards achieving sustainable development worldwide in line with the 2030 Agenda.

The "elephant" seems to have found its own way of working with DAC member states on development policy issues over recent years, and thereby is helping to shape the global discourse and practice of development cooperation on key issues such as renewable energies.<sup>39</sup> This type of Indian development cooperation model is characterised by three features: firstly, India is seeking to capitalise on local development innovations and the strengths of India's diverse development policy landscape by expanding both bilateral and multilateral cooperation through the creation of various multilateral forums and alliances, such as the BRICS and ISA. Secondly, these types of multilateral initiatives are supported by agreements at the highest political level, with the main focus being on strategic partnerships that are intended to be equally beneficial for all participating

states and which therefore break the traditional donor-recipient mould. And finally, the development policy decisions made in these forums and organisations are implemented primarily through non-governmental channels, in particular through civil society organisations, the private sector, research institutes and other non-governmental institutions.<sup>40</sup>

### Enhancing German-Indian development cooperation

This strong emphasis on building strategic partnerships as part of India's ever-changing development policy can also be seen as making it easier to access new forms of cooperation with donor countries such as Germany, which already have a tradition of close development cooperation with India. The strategic interests of the two countries seem to be increasingly converging on the basis of mutual interests when it comes to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region and a rules-based international order, especially in light of increasing Chinese resistance to such principles.<sup>41</sup>

Indo-German development cooperation currently focuses on three areas: environmental and resource protection, energy, and sustainable economic development.<sup>42</sup> The German government promised India a record sum of 1,614 billion EUR for 2019.<sup>43</sup> Such amounts and development cooperation initiatives with India could, however, certainly increase even further, given that both the German and Indian governments seem to have a mutual geopolitical interest when it comes to developing initiatives to expand regional and cross-border cooperation with neighbouring countries.

The success of this type of future development cooperation between Germany, India and third-party countries will ultimately depend on whether it is possible to find a suitable common basis on which all of those involved can achieve their desired advantages on an equal footing and on the basis of their respective strengths and complementary knowledge. Hereby, the search for such commonalities between Berlin and New Delhi's development policies should be much more straightforward due to common global challenges such as the climate change crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as mutual geopolitical interests.<sup>44</sup> Together with other emerging countries, India has been listed under the "Global Partner" category since the "2030 reform" of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The BMZ considers these countries to be key partners for facing these types of global challenges. It is therefore not too difficult in view of these recent developments in relations between Germany and India, which have turned into a serious dialogue between two equal development partners, to imagine that development cooperation could be further extended.

### Conclusion

India began its commitment as a donor of development assistance when it became an independent nation back in 1947. India's development cooperation initially focused primarily on neighbouring countries in South Asia, whilst supporting a number of African states during and after their struggle for independence. To this day, India has always seen itself in the role of a "partner" as opposed to that of a "donor".

India added another concept to this "southern solidarity" approach in the early 1950s. Hereby, the "elephant" proved itself to be a pioneer of triangular cooperation. India's involvement in triangular cooperation did, however, reduce enormously during the Cold War. The country concentrated almost exclusively on bilateral South-South development cooperation from that point onwards. India also placed more of an emphasis on domestic issues throughout this period and made economic self-sufficiency its central political objective.

Subsequently, in 2003, there was a fundamental policy change in the field of Indian development cooperation. In addition to the Indian state's refusal to receive development assistance, albeit with a handful of exceptions, economic interests also resulted in more in-depth development cooperation with African states that were of economic interest to India. Development policy was also becoming increasingly concerned with counteracting China's growing influence.

These tendencies have intensified over recent years. There has been a trend towards a less idealistic and thus a more pragmatic approach under Modi's government, which is using its development policy as a foreign policy instrument to support its own political and economic advancement on the world stage. This has also increased interest in a higher level of cooperation with Western donor countries in development cooperation, which is reflected in India's increased engagement in partnerships with traditional donor countries. India's development cooperation with Germany has also intensified in this context. Both countries are increasingly pursuing similar strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. Global challenges such as the climate change crisis could further accelerate such processes in the near future.

The journey of the "elephant", which is on its way to becoming a key player in international development cooperation, does not seem to be over just yet; joint strategic interests with Western donor countries could provide an important opportunity for cooperation where this is concerned, and under Modi, India is becoming more and more willing to increase international cooperation within the context of development cooperation based on the Indian model.

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