

Development Cooperation: History, Strategies, Success and Criticism

The exhibition “kuska” provides an insight into the history of international development cooperation and current relevant issues in the field. It focuses on substantial success stories such as the reduction in extreme poverty, while highlighting that high-income countries still clearly benefit more from “developing countries” than they “help” them.

About the exhibition

The exhibition “kuska” about development cooperation was designed as a model exhibition as part of the project “kuska – learn to help to learn”. Assembly instructions and print templates are available at www.kuska.li.

A project by

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What is development?

Who needs to develop, and how?

The term “development aid” first appeared after the end of the Second World War. Wealthy states set themselves the goal of supporting the “development” of poorer countries and thereby put an end to worldwide poverty.

Today the term “development aid” has been replaced with “development cooperation”. The idea behind this is that wealthy countries should not set requirements for “developing countries” but rather work together with them.

The term “development” is controversial as it is based on the one-sided assumption that poor countries ought to develop, while wealthier countries are already developed. Considering that high-income countries endanger the planet with their wasteful ways of life, the question of who should learn from whom emerges.

In 2015 the UN member states adopted the “Sustainable Development Goals”. These goals are guided by the idea that all countries of the world need to make a contribution in order to improve the living conditions of the world population in a durable and sustainable way. For sustainable development is development “that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland report, 1992).

What does poverty mean?

How has it changed over the course of history?

Poverty is defined differently from country to country. Poverty in relation to a person's specific social environment is referred to as relative poverty. On the other hand extreme or absolute poverty describes the situation of people who do not have sufficient financial means to cover their vital basic needs. Absolute poverty is measured by such factors as life expectation, income per capita, child mortality or birth rate.

Although today more than a sixth of the world population live in extreme poverty the number of those people affected has been substantially reduced in the last decades. In 1960 20 million children died before the age of five, while in 2010 there were less than 8 million deaths. In the last 25 years the number of people who live in extreme poverty has been halved. The UN has set the goal to eradicate poverty and hunger worldwide by 2030.

What were the strategies to tackle worldwide poverty during the last decades?

People have always tried to find a way to survive. This was achieved through food production and commerce, but also through wars, slavery and exploitation.

It is a relatively new phenomenon in human history that rich countries want to fight poverty in other countries. One reason for this is the awareness that poverty leads to political instability and that it may have a negative impact globally and also therefore on rich countries. At the same time, with the technical advancements of the 20th century, the eradication of global poverty seemed for the first time to be possible.

For this purpose different strategies for tackling poverty have been used since the end of the Second World War. Many failed, not least because the nations giving “aid” often placed their own interests in the foreground. The conclusion is that there is no easy recipe to fight poverty and that it can only be fought in collaboration with the countries and the people who are affected.

Who benefits from whom?

For decades the Western world has been sending billions of Euros to so-called “developing countries”. If this is the case, why are most of these countries still developing countries? Has development cooperation failed?

The strategies to fight poverty are not universally agreed upon. However, one indisputable fact is that money going into development cooperation is only a small part of what actually goes to developing countries. Migrants alone who have moved to high-income countries send back three times as much as goes into development cooperation. Direct foreign investments in the economy also substantially exceed the subsidies sent by high-income countries.

All this flow of money is however outshone by the money which makes its way from developing countries into high-income countries: for example black money, business profits or money reserves in foreign bank accounts. Black money alone that disappears into Western tax havens exceeds state aid by a factor of nine.

High income countries also benefit by employing qualified workers from developing countries whose educational costs they don't have to pay for, or from raw materials which are cheaply bought and then manufactured, sold and taxed in high-income countries.

For every Euro flowing into developing countries, two Euros flow back to high-income countries. Herein the morally questionable but legal tax practices of international corporations are not yet taken into account.

Should each cent go directly to the people in need?

Between donors and beneficiaries there are usually organisations in high-income countries which collect, administer and distribute donations. They incur costs which are then deducted from the donations. Not exactly ideal, wouldn't you agree? Why is it that not every cent gets through to those in need?

The fight against global poverty is only possible if big organisations with trained professionals take part in it. These organisations are able to coordinate and monitor long-term programmes and improve them by means of evaluations. Overhead costs serve the purpose to guarantee professionalism, to allow for transparent reporting and to collect more donations.

There are small organisations who are able to pass the donations directly to people in need thanks to voluntary work. Ideally they have experts at their disposal who ensure the sensible use of funds and monitor the projects. However, the impact radius of small organisations is limited.

Future generations will not measure today's efforts by how much money we will have spent on overhead costs. On the contrary, the question will be if we have made any progress in the fight against poverty. We should therefore not only ask about the overhead costs, but rather what contribution an organisation makes to the global fight against poverty.

Why do people help others?

Why do people work voluntarily, donate money or take time for their fellow human beings? Is commitment about travelling half of the world and saving human lives? Is it useful to be engaged in a place which we do not know much about and where we have a limited ability to speak the language? Or does it make more sense to be engaged where we live and where we have a greater knowledge of the people and their needs?

Many people engage themselves on a daily basis in order to help others. It is however not always easy to decide where it makes sense to become involved. The history of development cooperation shows that deeds carried out with good intention do not always have a positive outcome and can also cause harm.

Despite this it is worthwhile to show solidarity. To be born into a rich country has nothing to do with achievement or performance but rather luck. And also within small communities we have different opportunities based on sex, ethnicity, where we were born or the educational background of our parents. These are opportunities which in high-income countries are much more pronounced than in developing countries.

How can help be provided without creating dependencies?

Unexpected natural disasters or wars can turn financially independent people into people in need overnight. Tsunamis or earthquakes can raze houses to the ground, leave people without food or electricity and paralyse public life. In most cases international emergency aid is quick to mobilise and seeks to restore the former situation as quickly as possible. In the ideal scenario people in need will become independent again in time.

Global poverty is not an unexpected situation. Many people are born into poverty and hardly have the chance to receive proper nutrition, medical care or education. Due to this a sustainable improvement of living conditions is more difficult to achieve. Through the provision of aid money or goods, there is the danger of only achieving a temporary improvement to people's lives and eventually creating dependence. The fact that the perspective on independence and self-determination might get lost is a problem for both the donors and the recipients of aid.

Since the 1990s the focus in the politics of development shifted to the idea of "helping people help themselves" and to the collaborative partnership of donor and recipient countries. What sounded good in theory has been difficult to put into practice. The principle however remains the same: the goal of development cooperation is to make itself superfluous.