

What future for International Development Cooperation?

Four Scenarios


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Scenario 1: Trouble Ahead



The impact of COVID-19 deepens the gap between rich and poor countries. Some richer nations manage the crisis fairly well and get their economies up and running quickly. But many poorer countries suffer even heavier than before, leading to several sovereign defaults. Even some former donor countries are now in need of IDC as a consequence of bad crisis management. The EU and western economies focus on national politics only and divert funds from international institutions to domestic matters. As a consequence, multilateral institutions lose their importance as political platforms. Partner countries have to position themselves towards either China or USA as a consequence of the ongoing trade war between. Being subjected to the corresponding advantages and disadvantages imposed by their choice, partner countries only can expect help or investments in exchange for resources or land. Most African countries choose China while quite a few countries in the Asia-Pacific are more hesitant and try middle ways. In East Africa, a famine pushes millions of refugees north and around the continent.

Scenario 2: Turn Green

The background image shows four wind turbines of varying sizes positioned across a rolling green landscape. The turbines are white with three blades each. The foreground is filled with dense, green foliage, possibly trees or bushes, which are slightly out of focus. The sky is a pale, clear blue, suggesting a bright, sunny day. The overall scene conveys a sense of clean, renewable energy in a natural setting.

The COVID-19 crisis provokes a broader awakening that man is subject to nature, not its master. As a result, several groups of states and organisations push much harder to create a better and healthier environment, which is thus more resilient in the future. This spurs a renewal of multilateral structures, and greater coordination in IDC, as collaboration is considered essential to reach more equal and long-term mutually beneficial structures. All build on mechanisms that start to develop in the shadow of the COVID-19 crisis, where close cooperation and exchange was vital to defeating the disease. Technology is pushed hard as a way to level the global playing field, and technology and global free internet access allows some countries to leapfrog forward. The same technologies allow for more decentralised approaches and solutions in IDC. Civil Society and NGOs in partner countries are empowered by new tools to be more vocal in communication and in monitoring what happens to funds spent. The development of tools for remote management of projects goes at a fast pace, and this has a side effect of fostering greater south-south cooperation. Smaller interventions are now more "profitable" and feasible; new banking and finance opportunities (FinTech) bring new sources of financing for partner countries; good and best practices spread faster; decentralized governance structures partly also gain ground.

Scenario 3: China Leads



China comes out of the COVID-19 crisis in a much stronger position than other major players, and aggressively pushes out the US and EU member states in international institutions, also in IDC. The West is unable to mount a coordinated response and is increasingly helpless and fragmented, especially as waves of migration hit from the global South. As a result, China and its views on how to pursue development effectively begin to gain more and more ground also in international organizations and institutions. Many poorer countries follow China's lead or just simply remain silent – the principle of no foreign intervention in sovereign states affairs once again becomes the basic rule and the "responsibility to protect" is buried. In any case the Chinese principle of designing IDC with one's own interest also clearly in mind – with a view to seeing IDC as a win-win deal, becomes much wider spread. The rapid rise of digital technology increases the ability to process massive data sets, and privacy protection concerns fade for sake of public health. The result is a demand in many countries for technology that can be both used to solve real problems, but which can also be used for surveillance of political opponents. China plays an ever-larger role, especially utilizing its skills and even supplies its technology as part of its IDC package.

A Black woman with short braids, wearing a green jacket, is smiling broadly and holding several white papers in both hands. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green foliage and a brick wall.

Scenario 4: No thanks, white man

As a result of the national focus of the donor countries struggling with COVID-19 and of the racial tensions in the USA, African and Asian countries increasingly refuse interventions from the West and especially from former colonist countries. Especially in Africa the West has lost its credibility after whistleblowers uncovered corruption and power abuse cases in several IDC projects. In the same time, more and different players entered the IDC scene and partner countries have more choices of with who they would like to work with – and how. Decentralized NGOs and private operators offer more effective and innovative approaches than the classic IDC institutions and governmental organizations. Therefore, only little of the bilateral cooperation projects are continued and all big governmental IDC organizations face severe problems in acquiring new projects. One of the reasons is their slow and bureaucratic structure, another is the lack of credibility and impact of former projects. Governments of African countries demand changes in trade structures and economic cooperation before any other cooperation can be discussed. In the same time, south-south collaboration increases rapidly and successfully - the general demand for advice from the West diminishes.