Poor communication and weak coordination: Why is the development cooperation fragmented and international commitments to make it more efficient not working?[1]

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Development cooperation has gradually evolved since the Second World War. Since then several international development organisations have emerged, such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP/1966), Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD/ 1961) and regional banks, namely the Asian Development Bank (1966) and the African Development Bank (1964). Many other organisations have progressively included development cooperation into their agenda, such as the World Bank or the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Many rich and developed countries have established national development agencies and have opened development projects in many underdeveloped countries (in contemporary terminology 'partner countries'). During the 1950s and 1960s development agencies were established in West European countries, and in the 1960s in North America – the United States in 1961[3] and Canada in 1970.[4] In the 1970s, development agencies also emerged in several countries of the Arab Peninsula (e.g. the Saudi Fund for Development[5] in Saudi Arabia) after these countries were able to cumulate financial

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3 USAID, www.usaid.gov

4 CIDA existed until 2013 when the Conservative government of then prime minister Stephen Harper merged the agency into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/funding-financement/funding_development_projects-financement_projets_developpement.aspx?lang=eng

5 Saudi Fund for Development, ww.sfd.gov.sa/en/

resources because of oil shocks in 1973 and rising oil prices. After the Cold War ended and countries of Central and Eastern Europe joined the OECD and the European Union (EU), they also established development agencies and development policy, respectively. Today, however, development agencies are not only in rich, developed industrial countries in Europe or North America, they have also emerged in countries that alone are development assistance recipients (e.g. China[6]). Since the beginning of the 1990s, development cooperation (in different terms 'official development aid' and 'development assistance') is not only the domain of state or international organisations; important actors and big donors have become non-governmental organisations, such as the Christian charity World Vison, British-based Oxfam International or the Swiss-based Doctors without Borders to name a few (more see Banks 2021, or OECD 2020). Since the 1990s, development funds and projects financed by individual persons or companies such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation or Grameen Bank,[7] a microfinance organisation and community development bank, have also appeared. This multiplicity of actors and their relations have been called 'New Aid Architecture' (Klingebiel 2014). In short, since the Second World War, thousands of development actors have carried out thousands of development projects and development agenda has become an important part of international politics.

Since its beginning, development cooperation projects have been generally classified as bilateral or multilateral based on 'who the donor is'. Bilateral development cooperation is assistance where the donor is one country; multilateral development cooperation is assistance where the donor is an international organisation. States – when granting development aid – use bilateral as well as multilateral channels, or they use both channels at the same time. A good example of such a complicated system is the European Union. The EU itself has development policy and EU member countries pay an annual contribution to the development fund.[8] European Union development projects are carried out by EU bodies or in cooperation with international or local NGOs and governments of partner countries. At the same time, all EU member countries are OECD members and OECD members annually pay a contribution into the OECD development budget. Outside of this multilateral participation on development cooperation, most EU and OECD member countries pay a contribution to the UNDP and other international bodies that participate in development action such as the World Health Organization or the FAO. Based on OECD data, today, the United Nations, the World Bank and another two hundred multilateral agencies and

6 China International Development Cooperation Agency, en.cidca.gov.cn

7 Founded by Bangladeshi professor M. Yunus, grameenbank.org

8 EU International Cooperation and Partnership, www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/international-cooperation-partnership_en

global funds receive about one third of the total ODA.[9] However, EU member countries also have their own development policy and development agencies. In such an extensive system, it is not rare that projects of different organisations and agencies in partner countries overlap or even double. This situation was termed 'the fragmentation of aid' (Klingebiel – Mahn – Negre 2016).[10]

> My aim here is not to make an introduction into development assistance and donor institutions, but to outline how complicated the system of development cooperation is and how many different state and non-state bodies participate in it.

The reviewed book, written by Michael Strautmann, belongs to those which aim to analyse why the contemporary system of development cooperation is so complicated, how actors participating in development cooperation (donors as well as recipients) communicate across the system and why the efficient delivery of development cooperation is increasingly difficult. Strautmann writes that his research interest is to discover (p. 19): 'in what ways do national interests and bureaucratic regulations impact on the behavior of development organizations (DOs) – and to what extent do they allow for interorganizational coordination and cooperation?' Strautmann argues that fragmentation of development assistance (p. 20) 'carries a substantial burden for partner countries'. Development cooperation fragmentation is not a new problem; it was already mentioned in the so-called Person Report (1969) and the Brandt Report (1989), and repeatedly accentuated in the 1990s and 2000s (OECD 2009). The milestone in the debate on fragmentation of development cooperation and its harmonisation was the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005. In the declaration, donors committed to harmonising their development cooperation activities to increase the influence, efficiency and effectiveness of development projects. Strautmann writes (p. 23) 'despite all the international commitments… fragmentation is rather increasing than decreasing… therefore this research focuses on the more pressing issue of interorganisational coordination and cooperation among DOs – and how overlap and duplication of their work can be reduced'. To explore the issue and to find answers Strautmann used two case studies of partner countries, specifically Indonesia and Madagascar (why these two countries were selected in particular is explained on page 110 of the book). In both cases the author – based on the evidence from field research, interviews with local development officials and qualitative content analysis – scrutinises

9 OECD, Multilateral Development Finance, www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-topics/multilateralaid.htm

10 Klingebiel, Mahn and Negre (2016) explain fragmentation as 'the phenomenon of a multiplication of actors and growing atomisation, affecting goals, modalities and instruments as well as numerous operational and non-operational activities'.

the experience and lessons learned from development cooperation in the environment and education sector. To that point, the author and his book are clear and the aim of the research understandable. However, what takes place in the pages following is a bit chaotic, complicated and sometimes even confusing.

The format of the book review gives me only limited opportunity to discuss Strautmann's book and its problems in detail, which is why I will concentrate on the two main problems of the present book: firstly, the research question, particularly its formulation, content and understandability; and secondly, the conclusions presented.

Comments on the research question

Each academic research starts with a research question/problem. For example, as written by Bryman (2007) or (earlier) by Guba and Lincoln (1994), a research problem is a definite or clear statement about an area of concern, a condition to be improved upon, a difficulty to be eliminated or a troubling question that exists in scholarly literature, in theory, or within existing practice that point to a need for meaningful understanding and deliberate investigation. A problem statement has to be, among other things, clear and precise, it must identify what will be studied as well as key concepts and terms. A problem statement shall be followed by identification of an overarching question or a small set of questions accompanied by key factors and variables. The problem of Michael Strautmann's book is that there are many research questions scattered throughout the book and more than twenty research hypotheses which the author plans to test in the case studies.

A research interest is formulated on page 19 (for citation see above), on the following pages, the author evolves several sub-questions and sets up further steps:

- (p. 23) 'Therefore, this research focuses on the more pressing issue of interorganizational coordination and cooperation among DOs – and how overlap and duplication of their work can be reduced.'
- (p. 62–63) 'This study seeks to develop and conduct a more elaborate theory--led investigation of interorganizational cooperation mechanisms at the partner country level.... Lead research questions: How do different frames of reference conflict on different levels and affect DC organization's behavior towards cooperation? How do informal structures and incentives impact on cooperation among organizations?'
- Based on the information from the conclusion (p. 207) Strautmanns' 'study set out to investigate in what ways a) national interest and b) bureaucratic regulations affect the behavior of development organizations and to what extent these two allow for interorganizational coordination and cooperation'.

– As mentioned, several hypotheses have been formulated which can be found between pages 95 and 98; the author offered 25 hypotheses 'conflated into five different causal process hypotheses'.
– On page 115 dependent and independent variables, and mechanisms are introduced.

As a reader, I have to say that the way the research problem and research questions are presented and how the research questions, hypotheses and variables are scattered throughout more than a hundred pages is confusing; the reader can hardly remember all the questions and sub-questions. Nevertheless, the problem is not only research questions spread out over more than a hundred pages, but is is also missing identification and operationalisation of key concepts and terms used in the research questions and variables: (p. 115) 'development organizations/Dos' and 'donor countries' national interests'. From the context, it seems that by DOs the author means the national development agencies such as USAID, but what is meant by 'the national interest" is not even clear from the context (see pp. 145–146). The definition of DOs is necessary because if by Dos the author means not only national development agencies, but also bodies such as the UNDP or OECD, then the term 'national interest' is hardly relevant. That the author means by DOs a wider group of bodies and not only national development agencies supports the paragraph from the conclusion (p. 209) which evaluates 'the role of multilateral Dos'. However, as mentioned above, multilateral development organisations can hardly be in the national interest. Because the book is about 'development cooperation', I would also expect the definition of the term and an explanation of how the term differs from 'Official Development Assistance', which is the official term used in development agenda and defined by the OECD.[11]

To sum up all observations about the research questions, the problem is that they are not explained and key terms are not operationalised, and there are too many hypotheses. These all result in a very complicated text that is hardly followable.

Comments on the conclusion

The conclusion has several problems as well, but the most burdensome is the tendency to generalise the evidence from two case studies. Even though Michael Strautmann correctly mentions in the first part of the book that the two case studies, though representing 'the most different cases', cannot bring forth enough evidence to generally think of the problems of development pro-

11 OECD, definition of ODA, www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-standards/officialdevelopmentassistancedefinitionandcoverage.htm

jects' fragmentation and interorganisational communication, it seems that this commitment was forgotten in the conclusion. What the author writes between pages 207 and 210 comes under general statements: (p. 207) 'In most cases (and what is meant by cases? SW), DOs have been incapable of developing and implementing projects and programs jointly', (p. 208) 'DO employees at partner country level do not only contribute to increased aid effectiveness.' The author also concludes on what he probably did not even analyse – the role of multilateral DOs (p. 209).

To sum up reflections of Michael Strautmann's book 'International Coordination in Development Cooperation', I have to admit that even though both case studies – Indonesia and Madagascar – are very interesting and every researcher who spends time and enthusiasm with field research is enriched by an importantly academic work, the book or the construction and logic of the text is too complicated so that even a reader with development studies experience has problems getting through the text. However, the most pressing problem of the book is the absence of operational definitions of used terms and concepts. Without it, the book rather remains an interesting but not academic debate and a presentation of personal experience of the development workers from two partner countries and of the author himself. And this is a pity because the general idea of the book, that poor communication, weak knowledge diffusion and bad coordination are barriers to the harmonisation of development cooperation, and making international development commitments more efficient, is relevant and more than interesting. Because of the COVID pandemics and the Russian war against Ukraine, the prices of food and many other commodities are rising (The Economist 2022) and in the year 2023 many more people in partner countries will need the support of development agencies and effective development cooperation is an absolute prerequisite to save people's lives.

Michael Strautmann, International Coordination in Development Cooperation. How Communication at the Country Level Transforms Fragmentation into Coherence and Complementarity, 2022, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden Baden, 231 p.

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