Development, Solidarity and the Mutual Interest

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The international conference „Development, Solidarity and the Mutual Interest“ (2–3 December 2016, University of Vienna), organized by Berthold Unfried and Eric Burton, constituted the last event in a series of three workshops regarding the history of development cooperation between „East,“ „West“ and „South“ – a topic which the organizers have been exploring as part of their ongoing research project entitled „Personal cooperation in ‘development aid’ and ‘socialist aid’ in the context of system competition."

The final conference aimed to discuss to what extent solidarity and mutual interest emerged as specific types of Eastern development aid during the global Cold War. It sought to address the differences and similarities of Eastern solidarity and Western development aid. BERTHOLD UNFRIED (Vienna) emphasized in his opening remarks the relevance of comparative perspectives to study interactions, entanglements and transfers in this field.

The introductory lecture was offered by DAVID ENGERMAN (Brandeis) who suggested three frames for analyzing development: He stressed that development was and is, firstly, a rhetorical strategy, allowing interested parties to make claims and to advance specific agendas. Secondly, it is a set of practices involving negotiations between different actors and often contradicting the official rhetoric. Thirdly, Engerman recommended widening the perspective on actors of development. He pointed out, has been an actor as much as an instrument of development.

SIMON GODARD (Paris) asked how the very concept of development became applicable also to socialist countries. In the 1950s and 60s, discussions about economic differences among the COMECON (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) member states were impossible. Socialist ideology deemed underdevelopment a part of the Western world only. Debates changed in the 1970s, however. Poorer Eastern countries like Romania used the admittance of Third World states to COMECON to firmly place the issue of economic inequalities within the bloc on the agenda. This opening in the 1970s enabled, on the one hand, various COMECON members to access development funding on global financial markets. On the other hand, it also facilitated collaborative projects between COMECON and UN ECE in the area of measuring socio-economic development indicators. BERTHOLD UNFRIED (Vienna) examined the mutual interests in the East-German cooperation with Ethiopia, Cuba and Angola. By investigating different development instruments like preferential prices, barter trade as well as transfer of personnel and goods he showed that the cooperation brought about a massive circulation of people, resources and ideas. Challenging the results of earlier research he argued that the East-German interest in mutuality, especially in economic backflow, grew during the 1970s – even though the GDR rarely succeeded to put these intentions into practice. In her commentary, Alexandra Sindrestean (Vienna) invited both presenters to reflect on the 1970s as a critical historical conjuncture that can allow us to observe how processes of neoliberalization in Western states converse with the transformative developments socialist economies undergo around the same period. The following discussion concentrated on the role of the less developed socialist countries. What could states like Romania gain by defining themselves as developing countries? Why did the Romanian government at the same time present itself as a developed industrial country in African newspapers? These questions led to the conclusion that quite often multifaceted roles were adopted in development politics.

INGRID MIETHE (Gießen) portrayed an
example of socialist globalization by showing how workers’ faculties, an educational institution, spread globally during the 20th century. By presenting four different case studies (the GDR, Vietnam, Cuba and Mozambique) Miethe traced common characteristics of socialist globalization. She stressed the role of an overarching ideology as a unifying factor, leading actors in different circumstances to make similar decisions. Nevertheless in all cases the workers faculties were adapted to local necessities, despite the Soviet Union’s efforts of centralization. Direct influence of the Soviet Union, however, vanished in the 1950s. VERENA KRÖSS (Bremen) examined the shifts of ideas within one of the main Western development institutions by sketching the World Bank’s changing concepts of agricultural and rural development. She made clear that this was a story of continuity and change at the same time. While the instruments and doctrines of agricultural and rural development predominantly remained the same until the late 1980s, the relevance of agricultural and rural development in the overall development strategy of the World Bank did change, as did the Bank’s self-perception. The discussion centered around the issue of ideology, concluding that in the socialist world it had unifying as well as dividing effects. The Western world’s shared ideology, in contrast, has rarely been analyzed by scholars.

ERIC BURTON (Vienna) dealt with two most important groups of development actors on the ground: expatriates and counterparts. Adopting the Tanzanian perspective he examined the changing counterpart relations between East and West German expatriates and their Tanzanian counterparts from the early 1960s to the late 1980s. The presence of expatriates was a matter of severe concern in Tanzania. Three different points of criticism were related to that issue: first of all there was the “Africanist” view demanding that the number of foreigners especially in important positions should be reduced. The second concern was about the political stance of the expatriates: how could foreign experts, particularly from capitalist countries, help in building African socialism? Finally there were worries about economic aspects such as the higher living standards and the work attitudes of the expatriates. At the same time, foreign experts were urgently needed for development projects leading to an ambivalent relationship. Taking this situation as a starting point Burton showed how worsening material conditions and falling real wage levels of the counterparts affected their relations to German expatriates. Access to economic privileges like fringe benefits or per diems gained importance and became a matter of constant negotiation. CONSTANTIN KATSAKIORIS (Bayreuth) investigated the training of African students in the USSR. The Soviet Union was one of the five most important countries that offered studying abroad for Africans. Katsakioris stressed the relevance of Soviet educational aid to Africa as one major part of development aid but also as an ideological tool in times of global Cold War. Soviet politicians hoped to strengthen ties to socialist-friendly governments and were keen to influence future African elites. As the latter turned out to be more difficult than expected, the Soviet Ministry of Education introduced political indoctrination as part of foreign students’ curricula at the end of the 1960s. Even though the main goal of widespread political effects in Africa through the training of elites failed, Soviet educational cooperation had a variety of direct and indirect impacts. Indirectly, the Soviet enterprise led to an enhanced American commitment to educational aid by both government and private actors. The most important direct effect, Katsakioris concluded, were thousands of former students trained in the USSR, including 5000 physicians, working in different African countries.

ALENA ALAMGIR (Atlanta) shifted attention to another aspect of the flow of people: labour migration. She observed that migrant labour, in contrast to domestic labour, involves not only one but two states. Hence, she posed the question, if migrant workers have to be seen as double oppressed. By analyzing a strike of female Vietnamese workers in Czechoslovakia she made clear that the sending government retained significant control over the workers. The sending state adopted an ambiguous role, by on the one hand helping to end the strike and to support their workers’ interests on the other. Ask-
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ing for double oppression therefore falls short. Alagmir concluded that labour migrants in capitalist states never enjoyed equal rights. In the socialist world, however, the inseparability of politics and economy as well as the emphasis on solidarity opened up opportunities for negotiation and a potential improvement of living conditions for the migrant workers. ARTMEY KALINOVSKYs’ (Amsterdam) traced the role of Central Asian experts in Soviet development policy towards other Asian and African countries. From the 1960s onwards, the USSR presented Central Asia as a model for fast and successful development. Specialists from Central Asia were sent out to support projects in the post-colonial world, while they themselves also embodied Soviet development. Thus, Kalinovsky concluded, Soviet cooperation with Asian countries not only ran through Moscow. Over time, this strategy did not pay off for the CPSU. The experiences Central Asian experts made abroad led them to notice problems and shortcomings at home quite more. Hence, some of them turned against the regime by demanding economic independence in the 1980s.

The conference showed how fruitful it is to bring macro- and micro-perspectives of development policies together. Development aid was a field of fierce negotiations, on state-level as well as on the ground. The different contributions illustrated how deeply entangled development policies and power interests were, and that the „receiving states“ often had a wide scope of action. But the results of development cooperation were not always up to the policy makers in South, East and West – unintended effects were quite common and lead to unpredictable outcomes. An important insight was also that development aid and solidarity brought about a close connection of different states by flows of people and objects as well as by the transfer of ideas. Returning to the specific particularities but also similarities of Eastern solidarity and Western development aid: What distinguished Eastern and Western development policies? What did they, however, have in common? How did the policies of individual socialist states differ from each other? How did different national strategies emerge? These questions were touched upon, but still remain to be answered in detail by future research.

Conference overview:

Berthold Unfried (Vienna): Opening Remarks

Introductory Lecture

David Engerman (Brandeis): The Politics of Development Aid: Three Frames of Analysis

Commentary: Petra Dannecker (Vienna)

PANEL I: Mutuality/Reciprocity in the transfer of resources: Trade, Aid, Solidarity

Chair and Commentary: Alexandra Sindreastean (Vienna)


Berthold Unfried (Vienna): Uni-vectoral transfers and the mutual interest: Solidarity, Trade and Migration in the Socialist World System

PANEL II: Travelling Concepts

Chair and Commentary: Michael Zeuske (Cologne)

Ingrid Miethe (Gießen): Workers’ Faculties globalizing

Verena Kröss (Bremen): The World Bank’s changing agricultural and rural development approaches, 1960s–1980s

PANEL III: Flows of People in the Development and Solidarity Sector

Chair and Commentary: David Engerman (Brandeis)

Eric Burton (Vienna): Expatriates and counterparts: Politics and per diems in Tanzanians’ relations with East and West German development workers during ujamaa


PANEL IV: Development Encounters: Facing Inequality in a Universalist Perspective

Chair and Commentary: Berthold Unfried (Vienna)

Alena Alamgir (Atlanta): „They Knit Sweaters and Refuse to Follow Foreman’s Or-
ders”: Vietnamese Workers’ Labor Disputes in 1980s’ Czechoslovakia

Artemy Kalinovsky (Amsterdam): „A Torch Lighting the Way to Progress and Civilization:” Soviet Central Asian Experts and the Developing World

Final Discussion, Round Up and Perspectives for Research