Imagine: The common good

In recent years, Canada, Australia and the UK have merged their independent aid ministries with their foreign ministries. Germany and other countries are also considering such a merger.

Increased efficiency and cross-government coherence are the typical reasons adduced for such a move. But, to me, it is clear that what injures such a merger is the implicit acceptance that aid is an instrument that serves the national interest, much as defence and foreign policy do.

Some countries, like the US, France and India, have always accepted that development-cooperation spending furthers their international country objectives. But these objectives are framed to pursue normative values that the country believes will result in a better world — freedom and free enterprise under Pax Americana, enhanced prosperity in the Global South (India), increasing prosperity in the Francophone sphere, regulating globalisation (France).

There is an important difference between framing aid as altruism and as an instrument that furthers a country’s ability to pursue its ideological objectives for the greater good. In the early 2000s, many aid agencies altruistically took on the role of “saving” poor countries from the consequence of being poor — poverty reduction was the objective of aid and actions that reduced poverty, as defined by aid donors, were to be aid-financed. Such actions came under the broad umbrella of “improving lives and livelihoods” which allowed for such aid to be delivered in small packages with no need to investigate whether these bite-sized interventions would make a dent in the larger problem. Bizarrely, such aid was also to be “nationally owned”, allowing donors to recuse themselves from the consequences of its ineffectiveness. Such aid focused on alleviating poverty deflected attention from the larger problem — the drivers of poverty, notably inequality, in an era of globalisation where within country inequality was rising steeply.

An industry of consultants and researchers from the donor countries, and their counterparts in recipient institutions, was created where career progression through advocating for more on altruistic grounds became the norm. Multilateral aid disbursement through the United Nations was frowned upon, as it meant dealing with pesky recipients on a somewhat more equal and transparent footing. Altruistic donors preferred the World Bank, whose quota system ensured that developing countries had little say in decision-making. Interestingly, some other kinds of aid — humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, combating HIV — were framed beyond altruistic objectives in mind, though the altruistic rhetoric did spill over into these sectors. Ultimately, they sought to provide global public goods. They continue to be administered in large measure through the UN system.

If the merger of foreign and aid ministries were to rid the world of the altruistic hypocrisy that underpinned the creation of aid ministries, then that is a welcome thing. However, now that the cloak of altruism is discarded, the question to ask is: What are the national interests that these unified ministries seek for the common good?

These mergers disappoint in their answers, because they are motivated by parochial considerations and stuck in outmoded notions of national interest. What they “offer” as a replacement for the claim to altruism is mean-spirited and Hobbesian.

This failure is tragic, given the huge potential of such a joined-up interface to provide an alternative to the discredited patronising altruism of aid. The global consensus umbrella of “improving lives and livelihoods” and crisis-ridden times provide an alternative raison d’être for global cooperation and foreign policy engagement, which would address the seemingly insuperable failure to act collectively in the public interest, and direct resources to more effective ends than are secured through pointless mutual attrition.

I propose a common “offer” to countries that are engaged in imagining a joined-up foreign, trade, defence and development policy framework. Postulate three overarching objectives for development cooperation — defence, foreign trade and, if necessary, other external policies; respond effectively to the global scarring caused by the pandemic; address the decarbonisation imperative; and reverse the decline in peace and security as manifested by the refugee crisis, the proliferation of fragile states in conflict situations and the rise of domestic authoritarian racist and communal forces.

The three areas of action to secure these objectives would be:

(1) Promote multilateralism: The abysmal global cooperation failure to provide sufficient and equitable vaccines during the recent pandemic and the successful multilateral effort to combat and overcome HIV/AIDS demonstrate the importance of reclaiming multilateral action and initiative. Multilateral action would have considerably reduced the impact of the crisis two years after it commenced. It is therefore in the national interest to go multilateral on this scale at a scale and scope that has not been seen since the end of the Second World War.

(2) Global public finance for global public goods: Learn from the relative successes of global disaster management initiatives and the positive experience with naval cooperation in combating piracy in the Indian Ocean, that global public goods must be provided using global public finance. There are many ways in which public spending and resource deployment can be globally mobilised to generate adequate and universal access to global public goods. Focus on this, not aid, as the public financing imperative.

(3) Enhance global security through collective action: To address state fragility and environmental and other insecurities, through investments in conflict resolution. Use the resultant savings in coercive conflict management spending to reduce security expenditure. Invest with the same enthusiasm as countries do in trade cooperation through the World Trade Organisation and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, to create a globally agreed framework of human rights and global justice.

A world beset by pandemics, refugees, conflict and fragility, is a world ripe for populism, authoritarianism, racism, communalism and bullying to be defined as national interest. An enlightened mutually beneficial vision of national interest is the only credible alternative. Altruism and philanthropy will not do the trick. Imagine if President Joe Biden’s conference of democracies were to propose such an affirming agenda for common action?

Imagine.

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