

COMMENTARY

Development Cooperation as a Tool of International Engagement: The Distinctive Case of Türkiye

**M. Cüneyd Düzyol*

Development problems have been at the center of efforts to eliminate the development gaps that emerged in different parts of the world after the Industrial Revolution. In addition to being one of the important agenda of international organizations, the elimination of development problems also concerns the relations between states and has become an important foreign policy objective. The efforts of states to address development challenges are conceptualized as international development cooperation.

International development cooperation refers not only to the unilateral aid activities of donor countries but also to long-term cooperation based on mutual benefit and partnership. Such cooperation allows for deepening political dialogue between donor and partner countries, institutionalizing economic relations and promoting regional stability. International development cooperation (IDC) projects to support the development efforts of developing countries are no longer just related to providing technical assistance or humanitarian support,

* M. Cüneyd Düzyol (born September 19, 1964, in İzmir, Türkiye) is a seasoned Turkish bureaucrat and politician with extensive expertise in development policy. A civil engineering graduate of Middle East Technical University (1988), he joined the State Planning Organization the same year, later specializing in development economics through postgraduate studies in the UK and the US. Düzyol held several high-level positions, notably serving as Undersecretary in 2014 and as Minister of Development in 2015.

but have also become an important instrument for building political, economic and diplomatic spheres of influence. By bringing together the normative and strategic dimensions of foreign policy, development cooperation mechanisms enable countries to become more effective actors in global governance. Indeed, development cooperation demonstrates that foreign policy can rely not only on hard power instruments but also on soft power strategies based on shared development visions. Development cooperation policies, shaped by security and foreign policy priorities during the Cold War, have become a field in which some countries have distinguished themselves. The countries which started to be called traditional donors are largely OECD members and members of the Western world. These countries have developed their activities around certain principles and have become the norm-setters in this field. In the post-Cold War period, countries that have made a level of progress in the race for industrialization, albeit lagging behind, have also started to provide development assistance, and thus a new approach and new actors have emerged in the field of development assistance. Türkiye is considered among such emerging donor countries.

Against this background, Türkiye's development cooperation practices offer an approach that is different from traditional donor models; flexible, highly visible and based on historical ties. In recent years, Türkiye's development cooperation activities have become an important tool reflecting the humanitarian and multidimensional character of Turkish foreign policy. Development projects carried out through various institutions, notably TİKA, not only support economic and social development, but also enhance Türkiye's diplomatic influence, strengthen political dialogue and reinforce its foreign policy objectives. Development cooperation, especially in the Balkans, Central Asia, Africa and the Middle East, is shaped by cultural affinity, historical ties and shared values, and strategically strengthens Türkiye's soft power capacity at the regional and global levels. In this respect, development cooperation is a holistic instrument that carries both normative discourse and pragmatic interests simultaneously in Turkey's foreign policy.

The Structure and Actors of the IDC Mechanism

International development assistance is carried out through the institutional structures of donor countries. USAID of the USA, JICA of Japan, DANIDA of Denmark and TİKA of Türkiye are examples of these structures. These

organizations do not only provide financial assistance, but can also operate in different areas such as technical knowledge transfer, provision of experts, in-service training projects, scientific and cultural cooperation, capacity building, social support, education, training and research scholarships, and emergency humanitarian assistance. Although traditional and emerging donors focus on different aspects of these topics, they are seen as common areas of activity as they are the leading development challenges.

IDC projects serve as a means of expanding the political, economic and diplomatic influence of donor countries while supporting the development processes of developing countries. The target areas of these projects can be summarized as follows: Social problems such as poverty, unemployment and crime; environmental crises such as drought, climate change and disasters; epidemics and public health threats; political instability and institutional weaknesses. In this context, IDC is not just a development tool; it is a foreign policy method that can intervene in issues that are part of the international agenda. The transboundary nature of these issues in a globalizing world makes international cooperation even more important in solving these problems.

Türkiye's Approach to IDC

In the last two decades, Türkiye's understanding of development cooperation has undergone fundamental changes. New economic dynamics and a growing sense of responsibility for promoting world peace and stability through contributing to global sustainable development have enabled Türkiye to emerge as a new and dynamic actor in the international development cooperation structure. Another important change is that in the early 2000s, TİKA-led projects in Türkiye's multilateral aid have been moving on a different axis from the classical donor-practices.

The differentiated dimensions can be broadly categorized under four headings. In line with the brotherhood and common history articulation, Türkiye emphasizes the discourse of "equal partnership" by emphasizing common religious, cultural or historical ties, especially in regions such as the Balkans, Central Asia and Africa. Hence, Turkic-speaking and culturally/ethnically close regions are more prominent. In fact, this is in line with the general trend in the world. Countries providing development assistance primarily focus on geographies with cultural affinities, which are regions with greater soft power potential.

In the context of promotion and public diplomacy, TİKA projects are not limited to technical assistance, but are also supported by ceremonies, media visibility and visits by heads of state. In state-society cooperation, civil society organizations, universities and private sector actors are also actively involved in development cooperation projects. In terms of flexibility and rapid response, Türkiye's development assistance is often more flexible and quicker to organize than that of Western donors.

Türkiye's development cooperation is generally demand-driven in the context of ad-hoc projects, in the belief that it is more responsive to the needs of beneficiary countries rather than being a deliberate project covering specific issues and countries. This approach involves risks alongside a positive outlook. While prompt response to demand and flexibility in spending bring favorable perception among local communities and administrators in recipient countries regarding the Türkiye's image, this approach may miss the opportunity to address the needs of the recipient country within the framework of holistic development objectives. Moreover, the demand-driven approach carries the risk of deviating from Türkiye's long-term foreign policy plans and of inefficient use of resources. In order to minimize such risks, the demands of the beneficiary countries on a programmatic basis that takes into account Türkiye's experience in various fields. In doing so, Türkiye should ensure a transition to a long-term strategy and program-based cooperation model, taking into account Türkiye's comparative advantage. Thus, the principle of mutual benefit, Türkiye's comparative advantages and multidisciplinary political, economic and social analysis should be taken as a basis. Similarly, while responding quickly to the needs of the beneficiary countries, the alignment with Türkiye's foreign policy priorities for that country and the region should also be kept in mind.

One of the most important thresholds in the implementation of these projects is the permanency of their effects, in other words, the sustainability of the positive results. Failure to carefully examine sustainability measures from the outset may lead to a failure to create a lasting impact on the beneficiary countries, as well as a waste of donor country resources. To address such issues, it is useful to organize in-service trainings and to take measures to ensure the permanence of the personnel trained in these programs, to maintain their competencies and to transfer them to the next generation of staff. This kind of participatory approaches play a major role in projects of such quality. Clarifying

the problems, needs, expectations and objectives of the project through direct communication with the beneficiary is crucial for the ultimate success and sustainability of the project. Since capacity building is a crucial aspect in ensuring sustainability, strengthening the qualities of participants in projects is a complementary element in achieving lasting results.

Conclusion: Türkiye's Development Cooperation as an alternative

The field of international development cooperation is usually defined by normative frameworks historically institutionalized by Western donors and implemented through platforms such as the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC). However, Türkiye operates outside this established donor paradigm within a development cooperation model that is both historically, geographically and politically differentiated. Türkiye's approach in this area differs from traditional donors on three fundamental levels: normative motivations, operational flexibility and regional focus.

Whereas Western donor countries usually base their aid mechanisms on normative "liberal development values" (democracy, market economy, governance), Türkiye's discursive framework is based more on concepts such as equal partnership, religious and cultural affinity, and historical responsibility. This discourse facilitates its perception as a soft power alternative to Western aid actors, especially in regions such as Africa, Central Asia and the Balkans.

While OECD-DAC donors often operate with complex bureaucratic processes and conditional aid mechanisms, Türkiye's development cooperation is relatively more flexible, fast and demand-driven. TİKA mostly conducts projects in line with the recipient country's request and without technical conditions. While this provides Türkiye with pragmatic advantages in the short term, it leads to structural problems in terms of long-term impact measurement and accountability.

Unlike Western donor countries, Türkiye's development cooperation map is shaped by geographical proximity, cultural ties and geopolitical priorities. This makes Türkiye a "neighborhood-based donor". The intensity of its engagement in the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and the Balkans coincides not only with its development objectives but also with its foreign policy strategies.

Türkiye's approach to development cooperation is bilateral and often involves limited integration with multilateral development organizations. While this allows Türkiye to be a more independent development actor, it can create disadvantages in terms of global norm production and visibility.

While Türkiye's discourses such as "unconditional aid" and "anti-colonial development" emphasize equality in the donor-recipient relationship, in practice, the integration of aid into foreign policy objectives creates an area of tension between discourse and implementation. While Türkiye's visibility has increased in certain regions, the level of institutionalization or transparency of aid remains questionable. This is also an important issue in terms of efficient use of resources.

Türkiye's development cooperation model is remarkable to the extent that it offers an alternative to the classical Western aid approach. However, the sustainability of this model should be supported not only by humanitarian aid in times of crisis, but also by institutional capacity, long-term strategy and impact measurement. While offering an alternative approach in these respects, Türkiye should also seek to engage more with global norms and diversify multilateral cooperation mechanisms.