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# Combining the best of north-south and south-south development cooperation : the case for triangular partnerships

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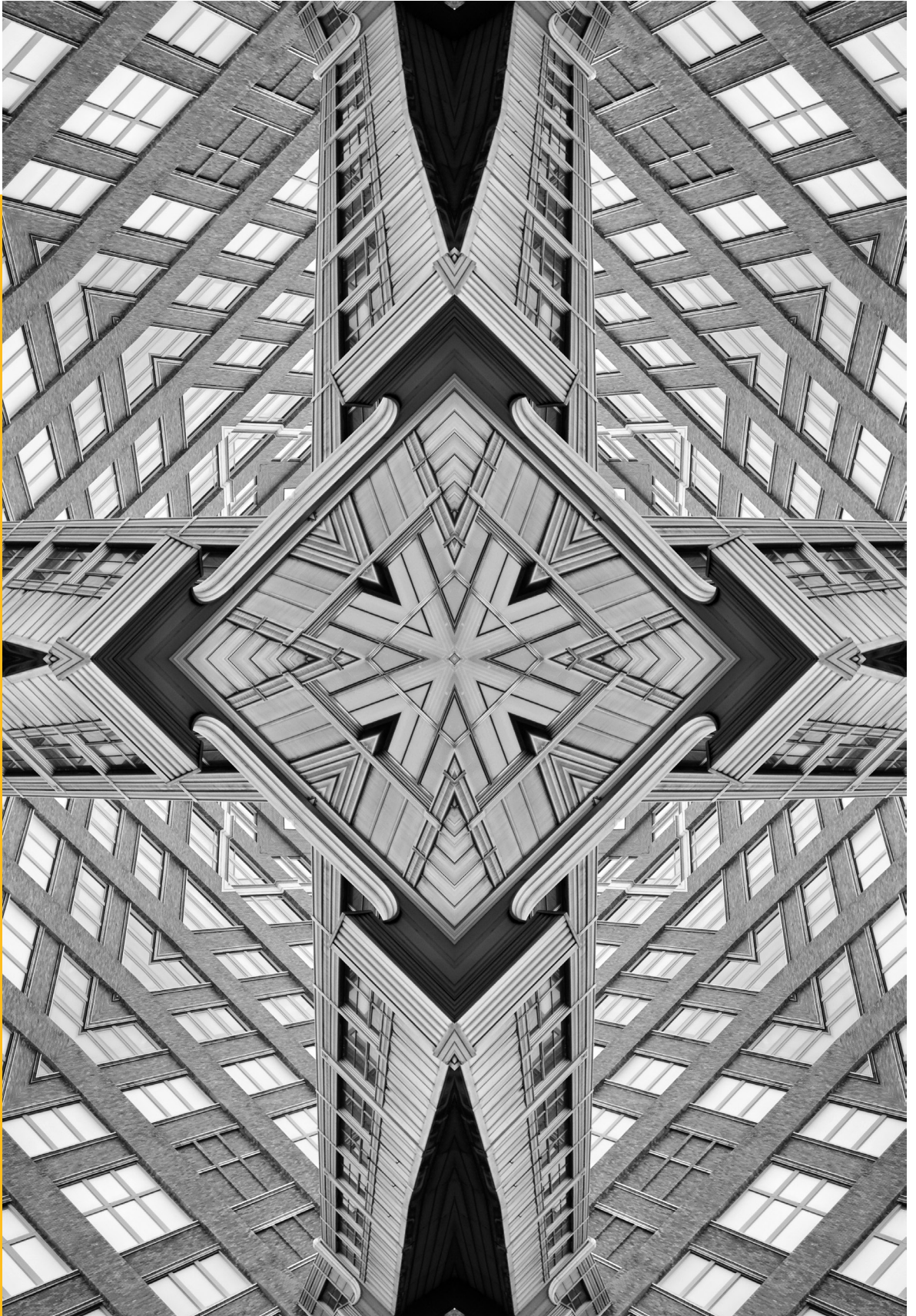
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# Occasional Paper



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# Combining the Best of North-South and South-South Development Cooperation: The Case for Triangular Partnerships

**Malancha Chakrabarty and Swati Prabhu**

## **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed most economies into recession and heightened inequalities within and across countries. Mitigating current challenges requires greater solidarity, innovative thinking, and more effective international development cooperation. This paper makes a case for triangular cooperation as an instrument of development cooperation in current times. It outlines its advantages, examines the challenges involved in such partnerships, and explores India's experience with triangular partnerships. It focuses on the physical infrastructure sector—historically characterised by lumpy investments and long project duration—and evaluates the suitability of the triangular set-up for development projects in the sector.



The immediate impacts of the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic were partially averted through emergency response measures. However, as the crisis pushed economies into recession and inequalities rose sharply, both within and across countries—new risks such as high public and private debt emerged. According to estimates by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), global debt rose by nearly 28 percentage points from 227 percent of GDP in 2019 to 256 percent of GDP in 2020, and borrowing by governments accounted for more than half of the increase in global debt.<sup>1</sup> The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 worsened the global economic prospects and presented grave challenges of hunger and food insecurity in the developing world. Indeed, the World Economic Outlook 2022 has downgraded the global growth prospects to 3.2 percent in 2022 and 2.9 percent in 2023—respectively, 0.4 percent and 0.7 percent lower than the forecast in April 2022.<sup>2</sup> The IMF also warns that the world is on the edge of another global recession.<sup>3</sup> Given the scale of the current global challenges, the world needs greater solidarity, innovative thinking, and more effective international development cooperation.

Triangular cooperation, as a development modality, offers advantages. The term ‘triangular cooperation’ broadly refers to projects and initiatives that combine the comparative advantages of traditional donors and southern countries, to share knowledge and address development concerns in developing countries.<sup>4</sup> The terms ‘triangular’ and ‘trilateral’ are often used synonymously to refer to this kind of development cooperation, but Rhee (2011) makes a distinction between them. ‘Triangular development cooperation’ refers to northern and multilateral support for long-standing and continuing South–South cooperation by ‘traditional’ partners, often under the auspices of the United Nations (UN). Trilateral development cooperation, meanwhile, refers to a formalised North–South–South development relationship.<sup>5</sup> While this distinction is analytically useful, in practice they are often used interchangeably, as this paper does.



The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) names three actors in triangular development partnerships:

1. Beneficiary partner/recipient country: the developing country which seeks support to address a particular development problem.
2. Pivotal partner: the developing country which has proven experience in the concerned area and shares its knowledge, expertise and resources to address the problem.
3. Facilitating partner: the developed country which provides technical and financial support to the collaboration between beneficiary and pivotal partners.<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, triangular partnership is not a new modality and was first mentioned in the 1978 Buenos Aires Plan of Action.<sup>a,7</sup> However, until recently, triangular partnerships played a small role in international collaboration. Today, according to the OECD, 921 triangular projects are underway across the globe.<sup>8</sup>

While scholars like Fordelone (2009), Ashoff (2010) and Paulo (2018) have studied India's engagements in triangular cooperation, there is scarce literature on how geopolitics plays a critical role in these partnerships, particularly in the infrastructure sector. This paper seeks to fill the gap and examines the opportunities that triangular cooperation offers, particularly in the infrastructure sector. Section 1 discusses the factors that influence triangular cooperation; Section 2 delves into the challenges involved in such partnerships; Section 3 highlights India's case; Section 4 explores the suitability of the physical infrastructure sector for the triangular set up, offering some prominent examples; and Section 5 outlines key policy recommendations for effective implementation of triangular partnerships. The paper relies on secondary literature, and insights shared at a roundtable organised by the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in October 2022. (See the Appendix for details on the roundtable.)

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a Delegations from 138 nations adopted a Plan of Action for Promoting and Implementing Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries (TDC) on 12 September 1978 in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

# Why Triangular Cooperation?

**H** yden (2008) notes that development cooperation is not just about policy but also politics.<sup>9</sup> The rise of triangular cooperation as a development modality can be traced to two important developments in the late 1990s and early 2000s. First, the influx of criticism of Western aid, under the purview of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC)<sup>b</sup> and the parallel calls for making aid more effective. Second, the economic rise of emerging countries like China, Brazil, and India, which then began to expand their respective development cooperation programmes.

DAC donors increasingly faced criticism because their aid was not leading to poverty alleviation nor economic growth in recipient countries.<sup>10</sup> In 2005, the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness<sup>c</sup> sought to change the thinking around international development and laid down five principles to make aid more effective:

1. **Ownership:** Developing countries should set their own development agenda, improve their institutions, and tackle corruption.
2. **Alignment:** Donor countries and organisations must align their support with these strategies and use local systems.
3. **Harmonisation:** Donor countries and international organisations should coordinate their actions, simplify procedures, and share information to avoid duplication.
4. **Managing for results:** Developing countries and donors to focus on measuring results on the ground.
5. **Mutual accountability:** Donor countries and developing countries are both accountable for development outcomes of partnership projects.<sup>11</sup>

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b The Development Assistance Committee is an international forum of some of the largest donors of the world. Currently it has 31 members.

c The Second High Level Forum on Joint Progress towards Enhanced Aid Effectiveness was held in Paris in 2005. Its most relevant output was the Paris Declaration which set out the fundamental principles of making aid more effective.



# Why Triangular Cooperation?

A few years later, in 2008, the Accra Agenda for Action<sup>d</sup> recognised the importance of close partnership among different development actors and called for development of triangular cooperation for greater aid effectiveness.<sup>12</sup> Policy documents such as the Bogota Statement<sup>e</sup> and the 2010 United Nations Secretary General Report have also emphasised the importance of triangular partnerships. At the multilateral level, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Special Unit and UNECOSOC's Development Cooperation Forum promote triangular partnerships. Article 28 of the BAPA+40<sup>f</sup> outcome document observes that triangular cooperation builds trust between all partners and combines diverse capacities for the benefit of the recipient countries.<sup>13</sup>

Further, Jorge Moreira da Silva, Director of OECD's Development Cooperation Directorate emphasised that “the leaders of the North and the South must think of building synergies and complementarities between their respective models. By its characteristic, triangular co-operation is a transformative modality bringing innovative and flexible solutions to fast-changing development challenges. As such, it has proven to be a mechanism that incorporates a diverse set of development stakeholders, including the private sector, civil society, philanthropy, academia and sub-national actors.”<sup>14</sup>

## The rise of new donors

Analysts argue that the rise of non-DAC donors such as India, Brazil, and most importantly China—variously referred to as ‘emerging donors’, ‘new donors’, or ‘southern donors’—has had profound implications on the international aid architecture. By the early 2000s, the OECD countries were no longer the only donors in the international development landscape amid the emergence of non-DAC donors, particularly China, which expanded its development cooperation programme dramatically beginning in the 2000s.<sup>15</sup>

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d The Third High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (HLF-3) was held in Accra, Ghana in 2008. It encouraged broad aid partnerships based on the Paris principles.

e Held in 2010, the Bogota Statement was generated at the High-Level Event on South-South Cooperation and Capacity Development in Bogota, Colombia.

f BAPA+40 is the Second High-Level Conference on South-South Cooperation which was held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 20-22 March 2019.

# Why Triangular Cooperation?

According to Mawdsley (2015), the notion that the South is the ‘disciplinary subject’ and the North is the ‘benevolent provider’ was challenged with the rise of the southern donors.<sup>16</sup> Initially, Western scholars and commentators criticised the growing influence of non-DAC development actors and their approaches to development cooperation. It eventually became clear, however, that OECD countries cannot proceed without allowing developing countries an equal voice.<sup>17</sup> Some scholars assert that despite years of contributions by non-DAC donors, DAC donors ignored their efforts. The rapid expansion of China’s development cooperation programme unsettled the DAC donors as they stopped enjoying the same leverage in developing countries which now had access to Chinese finance.<sup>18,19</sup> Further, Mawdsley argues, DAC donors initially expected that the southern donors would adapt Western norms and practices. However, at the 2011 High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, the OECD-DAC donors had to persuade Brazil, India, and China to come to the discussion table and were willing to make concessions for a global agreement.<sup>20</sup>

Southern donors have largely resisted efforts to bind them in shared targets and obligations and most recipient countries have welcomed development partnerships from the southern countries. Unlike partnerships with many western donors, those with countries like India, Brazil, and China did not carry colonial baggage, thereby making south-south cooperation a viable feature of globalisation where developing countries were treated as equal partners rather than recipients of charity from the West. These countries challenged the prescriptive donor-recipient model espoused by the traditional donors and laid emphasis on mutual benefit, and “no-strings”, demand-driven development with respect for sovereignty. The competition from southern development partners led to friction initially but also created space for policy coherence and convergence.<sup>21</sup>

Mawdsley (2015) says that many of the DAC countries and international development institutions are now trying to collaborate, co-learn, and partner with southern actors.<sup>22</sup> In other words, DAC’s position on southern donors changed from suspicion to openness and willingness to partner. Therefore, bolstering the idea of a ‘demand-driven’ partnership between



# Why Triangular Cooperation?

the North and the South, triangular partnerships can infuse more of the solidarity, reciprocity, and respect for sovereignty that were lacking in the traditional model of development assistance led by the West.

## The China factor

Of the current southern donors, China holds a special position because none of the other countries match its financial and military capacity and thus do not really threaten to dislodge the DAC donors from their position as top sources of aid. China's dominance in the international infrastructure market has unnerved western countries because its infrastructure lending programme plays an important role in shifting the global strategic power in its favour. In the last two decades, the infrastructure financed by China and the planned network of infrastructure under the flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been unprecedented. These projects are coming at a time when the West is largely missing from the global infrastructure scene. Bataineh, Bennon, and Fukuyama (2018) argue that the Western institutions have ceded leadership in the infrastructure sector to China because of their risk averseness and over-emphasis on environmental and social safeguards which made lending for infrastructure almost impossible, while China typically overestimated the benefits from large infrastructure projects and are not risk-averse.<sup>23</sup>

Concerns around growing Chinese footprint, particularly in Africa and the Indo-Pacific region, are causing heightened interest in triangular partnerships between the West and India. According to one of the experts at ORF's roundtable discussion,<sup>g</sup> "We need trilateralism because we need to counter China and its value system. None of the countries can do it alone so we need to come together to do it."<sup>24</sup> Trilateralism is an important way to counter Chinese influence in Africa and the Indo-Pacific—two regions where China dominates the infrastructure sector.

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<sup>g</sup> The ORF roundtable was held under Chatham House Rules, and therefore this expert, and others that will be quoted in this paper, cannot be named.

# Why Triangular Cooperation?

Some scholars have also argued for greater partnership between the West and India. For instance, Mawdsley (2015) has criticised DAC donors for ignoring the role that India can play in international development given its positive contribution in areas like microfinance, slum upgrade, and mass provision of low-cost drugs.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Waisbach (2022) posits that Europe’s triangular partnership with Africa and India will help Europe benefit from the demographic power of the two, towards building a polycentric world—as opposed to a diarchic world with China and the US at the helm.

India’s position on triangular partnerships (discussed in detail in Section 4) has also undergone a transformation in recent years and India is more willing to partner with some of the DAC countries to counter China’s growing influence in Africa and the Indo-Pacific. Paulo (2018) echoes similar sentiments. He argues that India’s negative perceptions of China’s global engagement is slowly replacing the country’s past criticism of traditional donors.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, many traditional donor countries are now ready to work with India to balance China, especially in the Indo-Pacific region.

“Concerns around growing Chinese footprint are causing heightened interest in triangular partnerships between the West and India.”



# The Merits of Triangular Cooperation

## **Combines the best features of North-South and South-South Cooperation**

Triangular cooperation can be an effective means of delivering aid as it combines the comparative advantages of both traditional DAC donors and the southern donors. Due to the similarities between development challenges in pivotal and beneficiary countries, pivotal countries can contribute expertise that is adapted well to the needs of the beneficiary countries. Experts, services, and technologies from pivotal countries cost less than in developed countries, and triangular partnerships are likely to be cost-effective, too. Moreover, working with different partners can enrich development cooperation and enhance co-creation of solutions to development challenges.

## **Contribution to sustainable development goals**

Triangular partnerships, at least in theory, strive to be a modality of cooperation among equals that seek to provide solutions to the most pressing contemporary challenges of climate change, environmental degradation, poverty, and lack of climate-resilient infrastructure. In turn, positive outcomes in these domains can help achieve the sustainable development goals—the global quest for which has experienced a severe setback due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine-Russia war. At the Second United Nations High-Level Conference on South–South Cooperation (BAPA +40) held in Buenos Aires in 2019, participants reiterated that triangular cooperation contributes towards the sustainable development agenda. Given the multidimensional and crosscutting nature of the SDGs, the versatile model of triangular cooperation responds well to their requirements.<sup>27</sup> With an annual fiscal gap of more than US\$4 trillion needed to achieve Agenda 2030,<sup>28</sup> triangular partnerships become relevant in finding solutions to the multiple crises by expanding funding sources and making progress on SDGs.<sup>29</sup>

# The Merits of Triangular Cooperation

## **More efficient and effective development delivery**

Participants in ORF's roundtable agreed that triangular cooperation, as a multi-stakeholder approach, brings benefits such as resource-pooling, co-creation, and aid-effectiveness. Such partnerships also offer low-cost development solutions that contribute to better and more efficient development delivery.<sup>30</sup>

## **Building the capacity of developing countries as providers of development cooperation**

Certain developing countries like India may have decades of experience in development cooperation, but the size of their development budgets and the scale of their development programmes increased rapidly only in the recent years. By working with DAC donors, developing countries can learn certain best practices while building their own capacity, thereby helping improve the delivery of their development cooperation programmes. Working with traditional donors can also contribute to human resource development and administrative capabilities in developing countries as more developing countries don the role of providers of development cooperation.

## **Strengthen relations between DAC donors and southern development actors**

Triangular partnerships can contribute to building closer ties between DAC donors, providers of south-south cooperation, and recipient countries. Working together on development projects can enhance regional integration.

# Challenges to Triangular Partnerships

## **Need for a “triple coincidence of wants”**

Triangular partnerships can only succeed when all the three partner countries agree to work on a development project. This, however, is often difficult to achieve because countries have different priorities and sectors where they want to engage.

## **Implementation delays**

Most of the participants at ORF’s roundtable agreed that implementing triangular projects is difficult and development projects often get delayed because of differences in the bureaucratic structures of the three partner countries.<sup>31</sup> Studies also suggest that lack of coordination between partner countries impedes the successful implementation of development projects in a triangular format.<sup>32,33</sup>

## **Lack of clarity/agreement on procurement rules, financial structure, and legal framework**

Participants at ORF’s discussion shared the notion that lack of clarity or disagreements over procurement rules, financial structures, and legal frameworks impede triangular partnerships. This observation has been made in existing literature. According to Fordelone (2009), for instance, the varied procedures in institutions from different countries often make it difficult for the partners to agree on common standards and procedures.<sup>34</sup>

India is a case in point. As a developing country, India emphasises the principle of mutual benefit in its development partnerships with other countries. India’s lines of credit programme,<sup>h</sup> a pillar of the country’s development cooperation, also serves as an entry tool and a means of market diversification for Indian companies. Under the Indian lines of credit programme, 75 percent of the inputs are procured from India, and Indian companies implement the projects. Other countries participating

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<sup>h</sup> A Line of Credit is a financing mechanism through which the Exim Bank of India extends support for export of projects, equipment, goods, and services from India. The Exim Bank extends lines of credit on its own and also with the support of Government of India.



# Challenges to Triangular Partnerships

in the triangular project find disagreements with the Indian system and want to give preference to their own companies. Some of the experts at ORF's roundtable said that it was possible to give preference to Indian MSMEs, but not to large Indian companies.<sup>35</sup>

## **Hesitance of recipient countries**

At ORF's roundtable, participants agreed that recipient countries are often reluctant to engage in triangular partnerships. Scholars like Fordelone have written on the subject, too.<sup>36,37</sup> Developing countries, for instance in the African continent, find it cumbersome to adhere to all the norms and standards required by developed country partners<sup>38</sup> and are even more reluctant to participate in triangular partnerships that entail two partners. Recipient countries also fear losing agency and their ability to negotiate with two partners. For instance, the African Union, and specific countries in the continent, have shown little inclination to take up the EU's offer of a trilateral approach.<sup>39</sup>

Several studies also point out that while triangular partnerships are intended to end the differences between the North and the South, they may end up re-inscribing the North-South hierarchies.<sup>40</sup> Many years ago, McEwan and Mawdsley (2012) already wrote that uneven power relations between the three actors pose political and economic issues that are difficult to resolve.<sup>41</sup> Although proponents of triangular partnerships often assert that the presence of a southern partner increases the bargaining power of the recipient country, there is little evidence to prove it. Indeed, studies indicate that the recipient countries' interests are often subordinated to donor priorities and structures. Ashoff (2010), for instance, has argued that collaboration between the traditional donor countries and pivotal countries often takes centre stage while the recipient countries' concerns are subordinated.<sup>42</sup> This is primarily because traditional donors are mainly interested in engaging more closely with emerging donors. Similarly, the pivotal country may also prioritise developing closer ties with the traditional donor for various political and economic interests. Also, there is little empirical evidence to prove that triangular partnerships work well for recipient countries.<sup>43</sup>

# Challenges to Triangular Partnerships

## **High administrative and transaction costs**

The presence of multiple stakeholders in triangular partnerships hampers harmonisation and increases administrative and transactions costs.<sup>44,45</sup> This is true particularly in the initial phases of the project when development partners negotiate the activities and procedures of their collaboration. Longer and more complex negotiations and discussions increase the costs. For recipient governments with scarce human and administrative capacities, triangular projects may be particularly hard to manage. The higher administrative and transaction costs also need to be weighed against the saved costs resulting from less expensive services and technologies. As a result, it is difficult to have a clear conclusion about costs in a triangular project.

## **Limited scale and scope**

Evidence suggests that the scale and scope of triangular cooperation initiatives remain limited. Moreover, most of these initiatives adopt a project-based approach, which the Paris Declaration warns may result in a disconnect with broader development goals established by beneficiary countries. Fordelone (2009) has also argued that multiple triangular projects may generate duplicated efforts, dispersed resources and incoherence among different initiatives.<sup>46</sup>

# India's Experience with Triangular Cooperation

**C**haturvedi and Piefer-Söyler (2021) note that India engaged in a number of triangular partnerships in the early years after independence.<sup>47</sup> One of the first examples of India's participation in a triangular partnership was with Nepal and the United States, in infrastructure projects, in the 1950s.<sup>48</sup> However, after the initial years, India's participation in triangular projects declined as it focused more on bilateral partnerships. Instead of partnering with traditional donors, India concentrated on shaping its own development cooperation model along the lines of 'Third World' solidarity, no conditionalities and non-prescriptive partnership, and respect for sovereignty. These principles of India's development cooperation set it apart from the OECD-DAC donors. However, beginning in the 1990s, India gradually changed its stance on triangular cooperation. Its engagement in multilateral initiatives directed at other developing countries also increased. For instance, in 2003, India joined hands with the World Food Programme to provide supplies of nutritious biscuits for Afghan children.<sup>49</sup>

In more recent years, India has become more open to entering into triangular partnerships. From 2014 onwards, India's engagement in triangular partnerships picked up, largely as a consequence of its increased engagement with the OECD-DAC member countries initiated by visits of heads of state.<sup>50</sup> In 2014, India and the United States signed the Statement of Guiding Principles on Triangular Cooperation for Global Development.<sup>51</sup> The Indian Ministry of External Affairs and the erstwhile Department for International Development (now Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office), UK signed the "Statement of Intent on Partnership for Cooperation in Third Countries," which reaffirmed their commitment to jointly support other countries in development initiatives.<sup>52</sup>

In the fourth Inter-Governmental Consultations held between India and Germany in 2017, the two agreed to cooperate to assist other countries and encourage their businesses to explore collaborative activities in Africa.<sup>53</sup> In 2017, India and Japan launched the Asia Africa Growth Corridor Programme (now the Project for Free and Open Indo-Pacific) to jointly support African development. Thus, high-level political will to engage in triangular partnerships is evident from the Indian side. Chaturvedi and



# India's Experience with Triangular Cooperation

Soyler (2021) observe that traditional views of donor-recipient relationships are being slowly replaced with more complex horizontal partnerships that rest on complementarity of approaches, mutual learning, and benefits for all.<sup>54</sup> Indian officials have also acknowledged the difficulties of bringing together two different systems of development assistance but they are now willing to overcome the technical hurdles for the larger goal of benefiting the South.<sup>55</sup>

Paulo (2018) asserts that becoming a net provider of development cooperation put India on a more equal footing with traditional donors and helped it change its stance on triangular partnerships.<sup>56</sup> However, until recently, there were no clear incentives for India to engage in triangular partnerships.<sup>57</sup> Mawdsley (2015) also contends that non-DAC donors can gain through dialogue and communication with DAC donors but there is little incentive for them to merge with DAC donors.<sup>58</sup> As discussed in Section 1, India's need to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in light of the recent border standoff, is one of the main motivations behind India's renewed interest in partnering with OECD countries.<sup>59</sup>

While the unique feature of India's triangular partnerships in recent years is its strategic orientation, supported by high-level political agreement, its experience in the triangular format has been mixed. A participant at ORF's roundtable pointed out that successes in India's triangular projects have been incidental in nature.<sup>60</sup> Those projects were not triangular by design.<sup>61</sup> There are also examples where triangular projects did not materialise at all, for instance, the India-UAE-Ethiopia partnership for an ICT Centre for Excellence in Addis Ababa. Under the project design, the Ethiopian government was going to provide the land while UAE was responsible for the physical building, and India would have taken charge of the hardware and software. The project failed to take off because the Ethiopian government could not provide land for the project.<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, most successful triangular projects have been led by the non-state actors. Both Paulo (2018) and Chaturvedi and Soyler (2021) stress that the distinctive feature of India's current model of triangular partnerships is leveraging the strengths of India's non-state actors such as

# India's Experience with Triangular Cooperation

civil society organisations.<sup>63,64</sup> Many Indian NGOs have gained development experience and their innovations are easily adaptable in other developing countries. As a result, countries like the UK and US have supported Indian NGOs in Africa and Asia. Some notable examples are Jaipur Foot (Bhagwan Mahaveer Viklang Sahayata Samiti), Barefoot College, and The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI).<sup>i</sup> The government-to-government link in triangular partnerships with countries like the UK has been weak, primarily because of the vast difference between the approaches to development cooperation in India and the UK.<sup>65</sup> This void can possibly be filled by civil society.

In recent years, connectivity and infrastructure development have emerged as important themes in triangular partnerships. For instance, the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor was a milestone because of its strategic and infrastructure focus and the scale of the project. The project has had limited progress so far. Moreover, the EU-India Connectivity Partnership adopted in 2020 underlines the importance of sustainable connectivity that considers issues of social, economic, fiscal, climate and environmental sustainability. In 2022, India and the UK launched the Global Innovation Partnership to support Indian innovators trying to scale up their innovations in third countries,<sup>66</sup> and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) launched the Trilateral Development Cooperation (TDC) Fund to support private sector enterprises in big-ticket investment projects in the Indo-Pacific region and other geographies. India is likely to commit US\$ 19.9 million to the India-UK Global Innovation Partnership through the TDC Fund.<sup>67</sup> In a crucial shift, the UK adopted the British Investment Partnerships (BIP) as a new development strategy earlier this year. It aims to mobilise up to 8 billion pounds a year, along with the private sector.<sup>68</sup> Importantly, many analysts interpret this new development strategy as the UK's attempt to advance its geopolitical interests in the development landscape.<sup>69</sup>

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i Bhagwan Mahaveer Viklang Sahayata Samiti (BMVSS) is the world's largest organisation devoted to disability. The institute has rehabilitated over 2 million disabled people and operates in India and 27 other countries of the world. The Barefoot College is an Indian grassroots organization which works towards making rural communities sustainable and self-sufficient. The institute works in the areas of solar energy, water, health, environment, and education in 96 countries. TERI is an Indian institute which works in the energy, environment, climate change, and sustainability space. Under its Lighting a Billion Lives (LaBL) initiative, it has provided 1,70,000 solar lanterns and 60,000 clean cook stoves to 4.5 million people in 13 countries.

# Triangular Partnerships in Infrastructure

The infrastructure sector is often regarded as being particularly suited for triangular partnerships given its lumpy investment requirements, long project duration, and the requirement for technical capabilities. There is also a need to prioritise investments towards the infrastructure sector which is a key input to growth and development. According to Rozenberg and Fay (2019), low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) would have to spend anywhere between 2 percent and 8 percent of their combined gross domestic product (GDP), i.e., US\$ 6.3 billion to fill their infrastructure deficits.<sup>70</sup> Studies from the G20's Global Infrastructure Hub, the United Nations, and McKinsey & Company give evidence of this huge financing gap.

According to the World Bank, there is an infrastructure investment deficit of US\$ 1 trillion a year—i.e., 1.4 percent of global GDP.<sup>71</sup> It also estimates that developing countries need to invest around 4.5 percent of their GDP to achieve infrastructure-related SDGs and stay on-track to limit climate change by no more than 2 degrees Celsius.<sup>72</sup> According to OECD estimates released in 2020, green infrastructure can be achieved by an increase of 10 percent in yearly investment—i.e., from US\$ 6.3 billion to US\$ 6.9 billion.<sup>73</sup> The imperative, however, is timely investment in sustainable infrastructure. Given the scale of financial requirements, it is difficult for individual developing countries to meet their infrastructure needs. A comprehensive plan where countries pool their financial, technical, and human resources is likely to be more effective.

As discussed earlier, China currently dominates the global infrastructure landscape. Triangular partnerships offer an opportunity for other countries to expand their presence in the global infrastructure sector and counter the Chinese infrastructure model. China's aggressive strategic intent and its BRI has already led many countries to explore opportunities for triangular partnerships in the infrastructure sector. In 2019, the US-Australia-Japan trilateral launched the Blue Dot Network to “advance high-quality, trusted global infrastructure development standards bringing together governments, private sector and civil society in an open and inclusive framework.”<sup>74</sup> In June 2022, US President Joe Biden along with



# Triangular Partnerships in Infrastructure

the G7 countries launched the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) to “deliver game-changing projects so as to narrow the infrastructure gap in the developing countries by mobilizing \$600 billion by 2027.”<sup>75</sup> Under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), India, Japan, Australia, and the US are seeking to collectively extend more than US\$50 billion to catalyse infrastructure investments in the Indo-Pacific over the next five years.<sup>76</sup> In October 2021, India, Israel, the US and the UAE, formed the I2U2 for “mobilizing private sector capital and expertise to help modernize the infrastructure, low carbon development pathways for industries, improve public health, and promote the development of critical emerging and green technologies in their respective regions and beyond.”<sup>77</sup>

Despite the suitability of the infrastructure sector to triangular development formats, physical infrastructure projects are typically fraught with delays, cost overruns, and problems related to land acquisition, and environmental and social clearances. Also, triangular projects typically have a smaller scale (Fordelone 2009).<sup>78</sup>

“There is a need to prioritise investments towards the infrastructure sector which is a key input to growth and development.”

# Recommendations for India's Triangular Partnerships

India's development cooperation programme has grown rapidly since the 2000s and its current development cooperation commitments are comparable to many developed countries. According to Mullen et al (2014), India's development cooperation budget in 2013 was higher than the foreign aid budgets of six of the 23 OECD-DAC donors.<sup>79</sup> In purchasing power parity terms, India's development cooperation allocation in 2019 was larger than those of high-income countries like Canada.<sup>80</sup> Infrastructure is a key area of engagement in India's development cooperation and the country is building a number of infrastructure projects in Asia, Africa, and Latin America under its lines of credit programme. However, India has struggled with the delivery of its development projects and utilisation rate of its lines of credit programme is low.<sup>81</sup> Although significant efforts have been made by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs to improve the efficiency of its lines of credit programme, the country needs to invest more resources and efforts on delivery and outcomes.<sup>82</sup>

India has devoted nearly six decades to building its image as a development partner with a difference, and significantly expanded the scale of its development programme in recent years. To play a greater role in the international development scene, the country should now focus on improving the delivery of its development cooperation. Scholars like Passi (2021) also argue that India's development cooperation should now move from demand-driven, 'no-strings' attached assistance to a more strategic development agenda that will seek to fulfill broader development objectives in line with its growing global ambitions.<sup>83</sup> Passi suggests that India tap into its bilateral and multilateral partnerships to strengthen its credentials as a provider, especially in the Indo-Pacific. Triangular partnerships with like-minded countries that bring in cutting-edge technology, finance, and expertise will facilitate Indian infrastructure companies to improve their competitiveness and help the country establish itself as a credible provider. As mentioned earlier, India's historical hesitancy to triangular partnerships has been overcome but cooperation in the infrastructure sector is limited. The country should strive for more effective triangular partnerships in the infrastructure sector which are beneficial for the recipient nations.

# Recommendations for India's Triangular Partnerships

The following paragraphs outline specific recommendations for successful triangular partnerships:

## **Need for more dialogue between partner countries**

Most of the participants in ORF's roundtable observed that the differences in the legal, regulatory, and bureaucratic structures in the three partner countries often lead to lack of coordination and delays in the implementation of projects.<sup>84</sup> For triangular partnerships to succeed, partner countries should engage in effective dialogues, right from project conceptualisation, to facilitate joint-decision making and smoother implementation. Repeated rounds of dialogue, though time-consuming, can help build trust among partners and contribute to the process of co-creation.

## **Need for flexibility**

Partners in a triangular project should refrain from using a one-size-fits-all model replicating it everywhere. In most triangular projects, it is difficult to find common ground on issues of procurement, implementation, risk, and dispute resolution. For instance, most recipient countries, particularly in Africa, find it cumbersome to abide by the European notions of sustainability, and their required norms and standards.<sup>85</sup> This is a main reason why Chinese projects are favoured. Moreover, some developed countries prefer to work with only investment-grade countries in Africa, not the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries<sup>j</sup> (HIPCs); India, meanwhile, has development relations with all countries of Africa. Countries should try to be flexible in their approach and make implementation easier for the recipient countries.

## **Make a list of bankable projects**

One of the participants suggested the creation of a fund that will facilitate between five and 10 bankable project reports in each eligible sector every year. This is particularly important for the African continent, where there is a dearth of bankable projects.

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<sup>j</sup> HIPCs are a group of developing countries with high levels of poverty and debt which are eligible for special assistance from international institutions like the IMF and the World Bank.

# Recommendations for India's Triangular Partnerships

## Financial architecture

One of the participants suggested a hybrid financial model for triangular cooperation as opposed to one that is purely based on loans because much of the developing world is already suffering under enormous debt burdens.<sup>86</sup> A hybrid financial model is likely to be more appropriate for triangular cooperation. One of ORF's participants suggested that once the three partners agree on a project, a special purpose vehicle<sup>k</sup> (SPV) should be formed to implement the project.<sup>87</sup> The SPV should be professionally managed and the procurement rules of the SPV should be applied, rather than the procurement rules of India or the developed country partner. There can be various forms of partnerships, such as GGG, GGB, BBG, or BBB,<sup>l</sup> depending on the suitability of the project.<sup>88</sup> A useful example is the Global Innovation Fund between India and the UK.

## Focus on the recipient country's needs

As mentioned earlier, most recipient countries do not favour triangular partnerships. On the other hand, successful triangular partnerships entail active participation from recipient countries, as well as national ownership. Therefore, significant efforts should be made to convince the recipient countries and gain their trust. Recipient countries can gain from triangular partnerships if they take on the agenda-setting role in such formats. Developing countries also have more to gain if they focus on bringing out the complementarities and synergies between development partners rather than pitting one donor against another.

Recipient countries must be encouraged to set their development agenda in triangular formats. One of the best ways is to focus on their development priorities. Every recipient country has its own set of demands and development needs. It is important that the partner countries tailor the project design according to the needs of the different recipient countries and projects should be demand-driven. Partner countries should refer to the priorities listed in the Master Plan on ASEAN (Association of

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<sup>k</sup> A special purpose vehicle is a legal entity which is established to separate an asset, subsidiary, or financial transaction from a larger corporation or government agency.

<sup>l</sup> GGG refers to government-government-government partnership. GGB refers to government-government-business partnership. BBG refers to business-business-government partnership. BBB refers to business-business-business partnership.



# Recommendations for India's Triangular Partnerships

Southeast Asian Nations) Connectivity 2025,<sup>m</sup> African Investment Forum,<sup>n</sup> and the Agenda 2063<sup>o</sup> for appropriate projects in the ASEAN region and Africa, respectively.<sup>89</sup> Local laws and systems must also be respected and beneficiary country capacity should be enhanced during the development process.<sup>90</sup>

This is an area where China's BRI falters. In the absence of a proper business plan, BRI is designed to provide an impetus to the Chinese economy rather than the recipient economies.<sup>91</sup> India's triangular partnerships with like-minded countries should avoid the Chinese model and try to address development deficits and build capacities in third countries.

## **Demonstrate successful triangular partnerships in small-scale projects before attempting larger and riskier projects**

One of the experts at ORF's roundtable noted that the countries should try to implement small-scale pilot projects in a triangular format with minimum ambitions while maintaining basic standards and ensuring quality. The partner countries must also assess the recipient's needs while creating a pilot. This would help keep the transaction costs low while reaping results, albeit modest. The success of small projects will also help build trust amongst partners, thereby overcoming psychological resistance to triangular cooperation of the recipient countries.

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m The Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 was adopted by the ASEAN Leaders at the 28<sup>th</sup> / 29<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summits in Vientiane, Lao PDR, in September 2016 with the objective of achieving a connected and integrated ASEAN that will promote competitiveness, inclusiveness, and a greater sense of Community. It comprises 15 initiatives in the five strategic areas of sustainable infrastructure, digital innovation, seamless logistics, regulatory excellence, and people mobility.

n Africa Investment Forum is a multi-stakeholder, multi-disciplinary platform supported by the African Development Bank with the aim of closing the continent's investment gap. It is dedicated to advancing projects to bankable stages, raising capital, and accelerating the financial closure of deals.

o Agenda 2063 is Africa's master plan for transforming the continent into a global powerhouse. It aims to deliver on its goal for inclusive and sustainable development and is a concrete manifestation of the Pan-African drive for unity, self-determination, freedom, progress and collective prosperity pursued under Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance.

# Recommendations for India's Triangular Partnerships

## **No pressure to align to OECD-DAC standards**

Trilateral cooperation is a useful testing ground for how emerging and traditional donors can work together to benefit developing countries. However, the pressure to align to their OECD standards and practices is likely to be a source of contention as some emerging donors are likely to resist frameworks that undermine their neutrality. According to Ashoff (2010), triangular cooperation risks lowering of quality standards if emerging donors do not have the experience and capacity to provide high-quality development assistance. Standards and compliance are likely to be a bone of contention.

## **Prioritise coordinated vis-a-vis collaborative approach first**

Triangular projects run into delays because of confusion over roles and responsibilities. Partners must divide responsibilities according to their comparative advantage. One of ORF's roundtable participants posited that there are two models or approaches to triangular cooperation—namely, coordinated and collaborative approaches. In the case of a coordinated model, the partners identify a project and divide the tasks between themselves; in a collaborative model, all the partners work together from the project inception stage. The coordinated approach should be prioritised in the initial years as working together at all steps will lead to confusion and delays in the initial years. After the successful implementation of a few triangular projects under the coordinated model, countries and companies will learn to work with each other and the collaborative model may be applied then.

## **Involvement of Civil Society Organisations, start-ups and the private sector**

One of ORF's participants stressed the role of India's civil society organisations and technology start-ups in development cooperation. Triangular partnerships can be applied beyond Government to Government (G2G) engagements to include the community, civil society

# Recommendations for India's Triangular Partnerships

and the private sector. A number of experts like Chaturvedi & Piefer-Söyler (2021) and Suri and Reddy (2021) also assert the importance of spotting innovations of Indian CSOs with a view to share them in tackling similar developmental challenges faced by the world.<sup>92,93</sup>

## **Risk assessment and mitigation is key**

Among the obstacles impeding successful triangular cooperation is high transaction costs. Since there is no commonly agreed financial structure of triangular partnerships, it is important that the partners assess the level and amount of risks involved in a particular project. A proper risk assessment would also help in risk apportionment, arising in case of a dispute. One of the roundtable participants also suggested that to mitigate risks, only tried and tested innovations should be implemented in third countries.<sup>94</sup>

The current global imperative is effective development cooperation. Triangular cooperation, as a partnership modality, has much to offer. It better reflects the complexities of the development cooperation landscape which can no longer be divided neatly into ‘north’ and ‘south’. The international development landscape has changed dramatically and the north is no longer the financial and technological leader of the world. Many developing countries like India are at the cutting-edge of technology in a few sectors while addressing significant challenges domestically. India and other developing countries also increasingly aspire to play a greater role internationally.

As more countries take on the dual role of providing development cooperation and benefitting from them, triangular cooperation may emerge as the preferred development modality between like-minded countries. Successful triangular partnerships combine the best features of the northern and southern development cooperation models and can ensure better delivery of development outcomes, thereby making an effective contribution to the achievement of the SDGs.

Triangular partnerships can also be a constructive way to work towards a polycentric world by providing an alternative to China’s development financing. The infrastructure sector is also especially suited to the triangular format. New financial models under the triangular format can also help address the infrastructure crisis in developing countries without adding to their debt burden.

However, there are several challenges to the successful implementation of triangular partnerships as recipient countries are largely reluctant to enter into such a setup. Moreover, implementation emerges as the massive challenge because of lack of agreement on procurement rules, financial structure, and legal framework.

# Conclusion

In the case of India, a late entrant into triangular partnerships, the results have not been encouraging so far. While there are some success stories where civil society organisations have participated, most of the triangular projects have not achieved targets. The benefits of triangular cooperation lie in combining the best features of both the traditional and non-DAC southern donors. However, if partners fail to cooperate, triangular partnerships in practice may only end up combining the worst features of both. This will further complicate the international development scene and slow down the development process in developing countries. Some scholars have also cautioned that triangular partnerships can perpetuate hierarchies between countries.

This paper finds triangular cooperation as an important instrument of development cooperation for India. It suggests, among others, that partners engage in more dialogue, find new financial models, and work according to the interests of the recipient nations, to make this modality work. [ORF](#)

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## **ORF Roundtable Discussion**

“Triangular Cooperation in the Infrastructure Sector – Opportunities and Challenges”

13 October 2022 / Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.

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# Appendix

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