

Mind the Gap

Bridging the Divide between Cooperation Providers

BEATA CICHOCKA · RACHAEL CALLEJA · SARA CASADEVALL BELLÉS · EMMA MAWDSLEY

Abstract

Despite the increasing imperative for cross-provider collaboration, the quest for a truly “global” development paradigm remains elusive, marked by persistent divides between different types of development providers’ normative frameworks, models, experiences, capacities, and institutional allegiances. This paper explores the potential role of countries to act as bridges across these varying institutional, normative, or technical “distances” between providers. We begin by examining why, when, and under what conditions countries choose to act as bridges, given their differing capacities, credibility, knowledge, and willingness to act in the role. We then identify some common types and illustrative examples of bridging countries, including “dual donors,” “development experience” bridges, “political” bridges, and “geographic or cultural” bridges, and explore some of the most common types of actions that they can undertake. While all of these actions—whether joint project implementation, hosting forums, brokering agreements, or contributing to the creation of more inclusive norms and multilateral spaces—require some level of both political and technical commitment, they vary in terms of the level of ambition and mutual trust required to undertake action and therefore provide a broad range of options suited to a variety of contexts, agendas, and actors wishing to play a bridging role. Following a brief examination of the benefits and risks associated with bridging, the paper concludes with some policy recommendations for bridging countries that wish to approach this ambitious challenge more strategically.

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Contents

Introduction	1
A growing divide and role for “bridging” countries	3
What does it mean to be a bridge? Characteristics, roles, and functions	4
What are the characteristics of a bridging country?	5
What are the main types of bridges in development cooperation?	7
The four bridging functions	10
What are the benefits and risks of acting as a bridge builder for development?	18
Why invest in a bridging role?	18
What are the risks of adopting a bridging role?	20
Conclusions and policy considerations for bridging countries	22
References	25

Figures

1. The four bridging functions	11
--------------------------------------	----

Tables

1. Summary table of benefits and risks of participating in bridging initiatives	22
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Introduction

The last two decades have seen profound shifts in the distribution of resources, credibility, and legitimacy within the global development sector. These changes include emerging new polarities (especially between China and the United States), the declining hegemony of members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) alongside a growing number of development cooperation providers, the stalling of new platforms (Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation) and sustained undermining of others (the UN), and the creativity and contestation of a multitude of more "horizontal" and/or regional partnerships. Woven through the changing geopolitical landscape of development are changes in narrative, agendas, and tools, notably in relation to the role played by finance, financial institutions, and investors. In this "multiplex" world order, where no single model has dominance and where competition and collaboration between Northern and Southern providers has led to a combination of norm diffusion, convergence, and friction, there is a need to rethink how and whether the parts of the development system can (or, indeed, should) be brought together under new and more cooperative approaches that respond to the realities of the shifting provider landscape.¹ Doing so would require—in the first instance—actors that are willing and able to meaningfully convene partners and foster dialogue across divergent preferences in order to bridge the ongoing divide.

This paper examines the idea of "bridging" in development—a concept that may seem simple but that is both conceptually and practically complex. A (development) bridging role or initiative acts to link two or more entities, across some form of difference, in the promotion of greater understanding, cooperation, effectiveness, and/or outcomes. Bridging identities, roles, and actions can be played out in different ways and at different scales and are always context-dependent and dynamic. We suggest that the idea of bridging has never been more relevant to global development, as a more plural geopolitical and knowledge era has emerged over the course of the last 20 years. In this vein, this work aims to understand the opportunities and roles associated with bridging in development, particularly across DAC and non-DAC cooperation providers. Although nonstate actors and multilateral organisations undoubtedly have a role to play in bridging across these divides, the focus of the following analysis is limited to what individual countries—and their government agencies or ministries—can do to act as bridges for international development.

At present, the bridging role in development remains understudied and lacks a clear definition and literature. Instead, references to the bridging role of countries are often found in discrete country case studies that describe how individual countries claimed to act as bridges on specific issues and at

1 Amitav Acharya, *Global Governance in a Multiplex World*, Research Paper no. 29. (Florence, Italy: Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, 2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2987838>; Paulo Esteves and Stephan Klingebiel, "Diffusion, Fusion, and Confusion: Development Cooperation in a Multiplex World Order," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Development Cooperation for Achieving the 2030 Agenda*, ed. Sachin Chaturvedi et al. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 185–215, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57938-8_9; Emma Mawdsley, "The 'Southernisation' of Development?" *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 59, no. 2 (August 2018): 173–85. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12192>.

various points in time.² In the absence of cross-comparative work to identify key trends and common principles related to bridging, there is little conceptual clarity around the bridging concept, including in relation to the factors that allow countries to act as meaningful bridges and the types of actions the bridging role typically entails, specifically for development.

To fill this gap, our study compiles experiences and examples from across a number of countries to develop an understanding of what it means for countries to act (or claim to act) as bridges for development, to explain how and why they may choose to act as bridges, and to offer recommendations for how this bridging function could be successfully leveraged to advance cross-provider cooperation for development. In doing so, we identify four main types of bridging roles, identify the key functions that bridge countries tend to undertake, and offer recommendations for countries seeking to act as bridges on issues of development cooperation.

This paper is the fourth in a series that explores the role of non-DAC actors within a changing development landscape and asks how to foster deeper collaboration for development across DAC and non-DAC development cooperation providers. The first paper in this series explored non-DAC responses to COVID-19 and the degree to which DAC and non-DAC members collaborated in response to this acute global challenge; we found limited evidence of cooperation for development across providers.³ The second conducted a broad mapping exercise designed to identify countries with an agency for managing outward—or “dual”—development cooperation, as well as their strategic interests, priorities, and “openness” to engaging in cross-provider cooperation.⁴ Ultimately, we found that income levels and political factors affect a country’s willingness to cooperate, and that most non-DAC providers are at least somewhat open to various forms of cross-provider cooperation. Our third paper explored barriers to cooperation across providers, highlighting the key challenges of aligning the content, spaces, and politics of cooperative action and calling for further efforts to “co-create” development spaces and norms that better reflect the realities of the changing provider landscape.⁵

2 Andrew O’Neil, “South Korea as a Middle Power: Global Ambitions and Looming Challenges,” in *Middle-Power Korea: Contributions to the Global Agenda*, ed. Council on Foreign Relations (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2015), 75–89; Janis Van Der Westhuizen, “South Africa’s Emergence as a Middle Power,” *Third World Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1998): 435–56; Juan-Pablo Prado Lallande, *Mexico’s Role in Development Cooperation: Bridging North and South* (New York: United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, 2015), https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:3327/unu_cpr_mexico_dev.pdf; Lesley Masters, “Building Bridges? South African Foreign Policy and Trilateral Development Cooperation,” *South African Journal of International Affairs* 21, no. 2 (2014): 177–91, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10220461.2014.942206>.

3 Rachael Calleja, Beata Cichocka, Mikaela Gavas, and Samuel Pleeck, *A Global Development Paradigm for a World in Crisis*, CGD Policy Paper no. 275 (London: Center for Global Development, 2022). <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/global-development-paradigm-world-crisis.pdf>.

4 Rachael Calleja, Beata Cichocka, and Sara Casadevall Bellés, *How Do Non-DAC Actors Cooperate on Development?* CGD Policy Paper no. 294 (London: Center for Global Development, 2023), <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/how-do-non-dac-actors-cooperate-development.pdf>.

5 Rachael Calleja, Sara Casadevall Bellés, and Beata Cichocka, *Exploring Barriers and Opportunities for Deepening Cooperation across DAC and non-DAC Providers*, CGD Policy Paper (London: Center for Global Development, 2023).

This paper is divided into four main parts. The first section introduces the rationale for this study by outlining why bridging is needed and what types of divides, or “distances,” bridge countries connect in global development. The second section explores the characteristics, roles, and functions of countries playing the bridge-building role. The third section analyses both the potential benefits and the risks that countries face when engaging in bridging initiatives. The fourth part provides some conclusions and outlines five recommendations for countries seeking to position themselves as bridges to support development outcomes.

A growing divide and role for “bridging” countries

The world has never been as simple as developed or developing, capitalist or communist, North or South. Even so, there is no doubt that in 2023, the world was significantly more pluralised and, in many ways, more turbulent, than in previous decades. A new polarity is emerging between the United States and its allies on the one hand, and China and/or the BRICS+⁶ on the other, but there are many reasons to be cautious in making predictions. In the medium term, at least, global development norms and governance are experiencing a moment of relative instability: the OECD-DAC still wields some influence over its members, but its internal coherence is weaker than in previous decades, as members grapple with new geo-economic pressures (for example, using aid and development policy to subsidise and protect national firms) and tools (for example, promoting trade and investment through various blended finance instruments in the name of development, as the debates about Total Official Support for Sustainable Development [TOSSD] demonstrate). In the meantime, efforts to build novel platforms with countries formerly deemed “recipients,” such as the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC), have run into the sand. Some view these efforts as representing the emergence of a beneficial plurality that is finally shaking off the historical structural inequalities associated with European colonialism and the post-1945 US-led hegemony. However, even critics of this regime might be concerned by the rise of authoritarian populism around the world and the instability and conflict these augurs, the critical lack of cooperation on the existential environmental and climate challenges facing the planet, and the amplifying problems of poverty and inequality. In a world of complex interdependencies, what are the opportunities, challenges, and risks in reshaping global development norms and governance?

Bridging does not entail the “solidity” of a platform like the GPEDC, which has proved unable to resolve issues of credibility and legitimacy or transcend the considerable differences within and between different (groups of) countries. But if bridging doesn’t imply merging or alignment towards an idea of shared norms, identities, and interests, neither does it represent isolation. Rather, bridging can demonstrate the enduring benefits of various forms of cooperation *across* differences of many sorts, including the following:

⁶ As of January 2024, the BRICS forum includes Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates.

- **Clubs, institutions, diplomatic networks**, politically aligned groupings, national and regional identities, historical positionings in the world order, and geographies.
- **Normative and ideological frameworks for development**, including variations in desired development models ranging from neoliberalism to state capitalism, but also questions over development cooperation's international governance and modalities. Ultimately, these differences include differing norms and principles regarding *what* development cooperation itself should achieve, and *who* and *how* actors should be held accountable for the results of these interventions (including how development projects should approach social inclusion, economic growth, human rights, gender equality, sexuality, and indigeneity).
- **Technologies, technical experience and knowledge**, capacities, finances, and in-kind resources.

As this list suggests, bridging might refer to the demonstration value of hybrid models (in relation to economic policy, for example), or curating constructive conversations across positions of difference (at a development or foreign policy forum, for example), or collaborating on specific projects or interventions (as with triangular cooperation, for example). All these initiatives require at least some starting point of agreement and have the potential to build trust and closer understanding for future relationships. But they can also expose the different actors to a risk of failure—of the relationship, of trust and credibility, of outcomes, and so on.

What does it mean to be a bridge? Characteristics, roles, and functions

Our understanding of the bridging function of countries starts from the assumption that bridges are *active* rather than passive entities that work both to connect across normative/substantive, institutional, and/or technical poles and to transform the thinking or approaches of the poles to varying degrees through the act of bringing countries into closer relation to each other.⁷ In this way, bridging becomes a deliberate form of action, raising important questions about why, when, and under what conditions countries may choose to act as bridges to work between poles in the development landscape.

In this section, we explore the question of what it means to be a bridge for development cooperation. To do so, we draw on available literature to develop an understanding of the characteristics that make countries able to assume a bridging role, what they do, and the key types of bridges that appear

7 Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," in *Poetry, Language and Thought*, ed. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 143–62. <https://frontdeskapparatus.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Building-Dwelling-Thinking.pdf>. For a further exploration of the value of "bridging" functions, which occur *across* social networks, and their distinction from "bonding" social capital, which occurs *within* existing social networks, see also Elinor Ostrom and Toh-Kyeong Ahn, "The Meaning of Social Capital and Its Link to Collective Action," in *Handbook of Social Capital: The Troika of Sociology, Political Science and Economics*, ed. Gert T. Svendsen and Gunnar L.H. Svendsen (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2009), 17–35.

in the development context. Seeing as many of these case studies are drafted from the perspective of the bridge countries, we acknowledge that they may reflect a positive bias towards the bridging role. While future research could seek to assess the actual impact and success of bridging initiatives, this is beyond the scope of our current analysis.

What are the characteristics of a bridging country?

Broadly, bridging countries can be understood as those that leverage a specific international position to influence the knowledge, conversations, actions, or policy positions of others on a specific issue, at a given point in time. Functionally, they serve to link two or more parties on a particular issue, initiative, or action, to bring together perspectives or positions held at either side of a given divide. Sometimes associated with being a global “middle power,”⁸ the bridging function is often undertaken by countries that possess four key characteristics:

1. **Capacity to act:** At a minimum, countries choosing to bridge development divides must possess the capacity to meaningfully fulfil the bridging role. Adopting a bridging role requires an investment of time and resources, including at the political level, which may be substantial depending on the nature and objective of the bridging function. As a result, bridging countries must realistically have the institutional, financial, or political capacity needed to convene actors and bring differing perspectives together.
2. **Credibility to act:** To meaningfully undertake a bridging function, bridging countries must also be seen as credible and trusted partners that are able to broker agreements between countries and interests. Like middle powers, some postulate that the credibility of bridging countries stems from their positioning in the international system. By virtue of being neither the most powerful nor the weakest international actors, bridging countries are often able to act as “honest brokers” working to achieve positive outcomes on niche diplomatic agendas, a role historically associated with advancing a rules-based international system or driving progress in international organisations.⁹ Similarly, the credibility possessed by bridging countries can also be linked to the possession of a “hybrid identity”: bridging countries often identify with both poles of a particular divide and are seen as honest brokers due to their ability to understand the constraints and preferences of actors on both sides.¹⁰ Given the history of injustices that colour development interactions, being an honest

8 O’Neil, “South Korea as a Middle Power”; Van Der Westhuizen, “South Africa’s Emergence as a Middle Power”; Joshua B. Spero, “Great Power Security Dilemmas for Pivotal Middle Power Bridging,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 30, no. 1 (2009): 147–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260902760355>.

9 Van Der Westhuizen, “South Africa’s Emergence as a Middle Power”; Adam Chapnick, “The Middle Power,” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 7, no. 2 (1999): 73–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.1999.9673212>; O’Neil, “South Korea as a Middle Power.”

10 R. Melis Baydag, “Middle Powers in International Development Cooperation: Assessing the Roles of South Korea and Turkey,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Development Cooperation for Achieving the 2030 Agenda*, ed. Sachin Chaturvedi et al. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021): 454–6, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-57938-8_20.

broker in the development context may also include possessing the moral authority or legitimacy to meaningfully engage diverse actors (i.e., not being a former colonial power, for instance, or being viewed as an active supporter of multilateralism)¹¹ or to act as leaders or representatives of their regions or peers.¹²

3. **Willingness to act:** If we consider the bridging function to be an active process, then serving as a bridge will require, as a first step, the *willingness* to invest in adopting a bridging role. For most bridges, the willingness to pursue this complex and potentially time-consuming function likely stems from pragmatic self-interest, whereby the act of bridging becomes a way to exert influence in the international arena and/or leadership on particular substantive issues.¹³ While great or hegemonic powers assert their interests through political, economic, or military clout, smaller or middle powers—including many bridging countries—pursue their national interest through identifying “niche” opportunities where they can use their influence to achieve desired diplomatic outcomes. In this way, the bridging function is viewed as less of a moral imperative to support positive outcomes and more of a strategic and pragmatic approach to pursuing domestic interests through targeted international action.
4. **Knowledge to act:** In order to meaningfully bridge across a given divide, bridging countries must have some form of firsthand knowledge or experience that allows them to relate to both sides of a given policy challenge and positions them as credible *knowledge* actors to support a positive outcome. This means that not all countries are similarly well placed to bridge all divides, and the actor best positioned to engage will likely change depending on the challenge, region of engagement, or historical circumstances that make some countries more credible bridges in each specific case.

Given the shifting nature of international relations, it is important to note that the characteristics that allow countries to act as bridges are not static and are likely to change over time.¹⁴ This means that the bridging role of countries could be time-bound and limited to specific contexts. For instance, while China was often referenced as a bridging country in the 2000s due to its ability to relate to both

11 Olav Stokke, *Western Middle Powers and Global Poverty: The Determinants of the Aid Policies of Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden*, Norwegian Foreign Policy Studies no. 64 (Uppsala, Sweden: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1989), <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:274163/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

12 Jorje A. Schiavon and Diego Domínguez, “Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia (MIKTA): Middle, Regional, and Constructive Powers Providing Global Governance,” *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 3, no. 3 (September 2016): 495–504, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/app5.148>.

13 Carl Ungerer, “The ‘Middle Power’ Concept in Australian Foreign Policy,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 53, no. 4 (2007): 538–51, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2007.00473.x>; Bernard Wood, “Middle Powers in the International System: A Preliminary Assessment of Potential” (WIDER Working Paper Series no. 11, World Institute for Development Economic Research, Helsinki, 1987), <https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/WP11.pdf>.

14 Russia, for instance, was described as a bridging country throughout the 2010s (see Pamela Jordan, “A Bridge between the Global North and Africa? Putin’s Russia and G8 Development Commitments,” *African Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (2010): 83–115, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A237453617/AONE?u=google scholar&sid=google scholar&xid=c9019b0b>).

“developed” and “developing” economies,¹⁵ the country’s rapid growth and deepening political tensions with the United States have made it less likely that China could meaningfully bridge global divides in the current era. More broadly, bridging roles should be considered dynamic, as the ability for countries to act as honest brokers can shift alongside the changing international context.

What are the main types of bridges in development cooperation?

Countries that act as bridges in development cooperation tend to do so based on several types of rationales that place them at the crossroads between other countries, including historical or cultural contexts, geographical location, or membership in particular clubs or forums. In each case, these factors contribute to a country’s credibility as a bridging actor, often through their hybrid identity and ability to navigate tensions between multiple sides of a given issue or debate.

Broadly, our reading of country cases identified four main types of bridges in development cooperation, based on the different rationales for why countries see themselves—or are seen by others—as being well positioned to play a bridging role. We caution that the four types of bridges identified below should not be seen as mutually exclusive or distinct categories.

1. **“Dual” providers and recipient countries** possess a hybrid identity that stems from the fact that they receive and provide development cooperation. It should be noted that a great many countries are dual recipients/providers, from giants like India through to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and most countries in South America.¹⁶ In development debates, dual actors willing to adopt a bridging role can play—and have played—a critical function in bringing together the differing perspectives and interests that exist across “North” and “South”. Consider, for instance, Mexico’s crucial role in negotiations between “Northern” and “Southern” providers as part of the 2011 Busan Agreement; the country’s status as an “observer” to the DAC and as a “Southern” and dual provider gave it credibility to meaningfully navigate tensions and support agreement.¹⁷ While not all dual countries aim to be bridges, those that do often view it as a strategic diplomatic move to redefine their global standing and gain acknowledgement from both fellow Global South and Global North nations, establishing a distinctive status in relation to Southern countries. Given domestic resource constraints, dual countries may not have as much financial capacity to contribute to bridging initiatives, but they may be particularly well placed to bridge over

15 Jenny Clegg, “China at the Global Summit Table: Rule-Taker, Deal-Wrecker, or Bridge-Builder,” *Contemporary Politics* 17, no. 4 (2011): 445–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2011.619769>.

16 Indeed, in a somewhat different register, many EU member states that are not “developing countries” by either OECD or UN definitions also both give and receive funding intended to boost their development or support the tackling of shared global challenges like climate change, through programmes such as the EU Cohesion Funds or the Just Transition Mechanism.

17 Rebecka Villanueva Ulfsgard and Lorena López, “In Search of Making a Difference: Mexico in the OECD International Development Co-operation Architecture,” *Development Policy Review* 35, no. S2 (2017): O287–O302, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12224>.

knowledge gaps, being able to apply their homegrown solutions towards more cost-efficient and context-appropriate approaches in other developing countries.¹⁸ This bridging role may therefore concentrate on specific technical domains where international recognition is sought, such as security for Colombia¹⁹ or agriculture for Brazil.²⁰

2. **Development experience bridges** are countries that have graduated to high-income status but have hybrid identities that stem from the recency of their own experiences in tackling development challenges. Although their credibility and rationale for why they act as bridges is similar to that of “dual” actors, they generally possess greater financial, institutional, and administrative capabilities to participate in bridging endeavours. In addition to sharing technical expertise—or, more widely, their development models as “late industrializers”—to bridge over knowledge gaps, they are often well placed to leverage their position as newer members of international clubs, forums, or organisations that are mostly composed of more “traditional” development actors, and to act as honest brokers between South and North. Key examples of countries in this position include South Korea,²¹ which was a significant recipient of international aid until 1995 but joined the DAC in 2010 and played host to the 2011 High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness held in Busan, and **Croatia**,²² which is an EU member yet “often acts like a South–South partner assisting fellow countries on the basis of mutual exchange of knowledge, solidarity and equality.”²³
3. **Geographic or cultural bridges** may perceive themselves as existing at pivotal intersections, whether physically or culturally, amid other developmental actors. These countries—which are also often considered “cusp” states, or those that strategically lie at the “edge of what

18 Jose Antonio Alonso, Jonathan Glennie, and Andy Sumner, “Recipients and Contributors: The Dual Role of Middle-Income Countries,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of International Development*, ed. Jean Grugel and Daniel Hammett (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 315–32, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/978-1-137-42724-3_18.

19 Isaline Bergamaschi, Arlene B. Tickner, and Jimena Durán, “Going South to Reach North? The Case of Colombia,” in *SSC Beyond the Myths: Rising Donors, New Aid Practices?*, ed. Isaline Bergamaschi, Phoebe Moore, and Arlene B. Tickner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 245–69, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/978-1-137-53969-4_10.

20 Iara Costa Leite et al., *Brazil’s Engagement in International Development Cooperation: The State of the Debate*, IDS Evidence Report no. 59 (Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2014), <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/3894/ER59%20Brazil%27s%20Engagement%20in%20International%20Development%20Cooperation%20The%20%27State%20of%20the%20Debate%27.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>; Sean W. Burges, “Brazil as a Bridge between Old and New Powers?” *International Affairs* 89, no. 3 (2013): 577–94, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/riia/v89i3/f_0028318_23036.pdf.

21 OECD, “The DAC’s Main Findings and Recommendations,” in *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Korea 2018* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264288829-5-en>; John Egan and Santhosh Persaud, “From Emerging Donor to Global Development Partner,” in *Korea and the OECD: 25 Years and Beyond* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021), 240–55, <https://www.oecd.org/country/korea/thematic-focus/from-emerging-donor-to-global-development-partner-66044045/>.

22 Dalibor Matić and Danijela Žunec Brandt, *Croatia: A Unique Bridge between North and South Development Cooperation*, South-South and Triangular Cooperation in Action Series (New York: UNOSSC and Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, 2018), <https://www.southsouth-galaxy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Croatia-A-Unique-Bridge-between-North-and-South-Development-Cooperation-2018.pdf>.

23 *Ibid.*, 6.

is widely believed to be an established region”²⁴—may have the potential to facilitate extra-regional actors’ access to local networks or interpret cultural norms to support development cooperation. One illustrative example is Türkiye, which, since the end of the Cold War, has leveraged its “unique”²⁵ geography—lying on two continents, between Asia and Europe—as a “discursive strategy” to support its foreign and development policy.²⁶ Mexico similarly occupies a unique geographic space between North America and Latin America. On the cultural side, countries such as Spain and Portugal often see themselves as bridge builders that aim to connect Europe to regions where they share linguistic and cultural ties (Latin America, and Africa and Latin America, respectively), including through promoting triangular exchange and facilitating dialogue and joint policy positions.²⁷ In a somewhat similar vein, the Republic of Ireland shares a history of British colonisation with many other countries around the world and is able to draw on that identity in building international development relationships.²⁸

4. **Political bridges** are countries that possess sufficient diplomatic capacities to maintain extensive networks and play an active role in multiple types of international clubs, or that hold influential positions giving them a platform to facilitate development-oriented discussions.²⁹ This bridge category can frequently align well with a “middle power” identity, as political bridges span income levels but require substantial diplomatic resources and an active interest in and commitment to promoting cooperative approaches in global relations. Moreover, bridge countries’ concurrent membership in networks that are traditionally seen as more “Northern” and “Southern” can inherently contribute to disrupting those binaries and, in doing so, offer space for others to also combine and connect different types

24 Philip Robins, “‘Cusp States’ in International Relations 1—in Praise of Anomalies against the ‘Milieu,’” in *The Role, Position and Agency of Cusp States in International Relations*, ed. Marc Herzog and Philip Robins (London: Routledge, 2014), 20, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315768472-1/introduction-philip-robins>.

25 Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Turkey’s New Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007,” *Insight Turkey* 10, no. 1. (2008): 78, <https://file.setav.org/Files/Pdf/ahmet-davutoglu-turkeys-foreign-policy-vision-an-assessment-of-2007.pdf>.

26 Erdogan Aykaç, “The Turkish Nation as a Bridge: Imagining a Nation in Turkish Parliamentary Discourse,” *Turkish Journal of Diaspora Studies* 3, no. 1 (2023): 87. <https://pure.rug.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/708371348/10.52241-TJDS.2023.0055-2930775.pdf>.

27 OECD, *Portugal Promotes Triangular Co-operation through Advocacy and Partnerships* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022), <https://www.oecd.org/development-cooperation-learning/practices/portugal-promotes-triangular-co-operation-through-advocacy-and-partnerships-0a03c06b/>; Alvaro Sanchez, “Spain Serves as a Bridge between Latin America and the EU, as Representatives from Both Regions Meet to Address Common Challenges,” *El País*, September 13, 2023, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-09-13/spain-serves-as-a-bridge-between-latin-america-and-the-eu-as-representatives-from-both-regions-meet-to-address-common-challenges.html>; Celestino del Arenal Moyúa, “La triangulación España-Unión Europea-América Latina: Sinergias y contradicciones,” *Pensamiento iberoamericano* 8 (2011): 71–101, <https://produccioncientifica.ucm.es/documentos/619ca6bda08dbd1b8fa03140>.

28 Kevin O’Sullivan. “Ah, Ireland, the Caring Nation: Foreign Aid and Irish State Identity in the Long 1970s,” *Irish Historical Studies* 38, no. 151 (2013): 476–91.

29 This type of bridge also closely corresponds to Flemes’ conception of a “network” power. See Daniel Flesmes, “Network Powers: Strategies of Change in the Multipolar System,” *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 6 (2013): 1016–36, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2013.802504>.

of development practices.³⁰ Key examples of countries that may act as diplomatic bridges include South Africa,³¹ Indonesia,³² and Mexico³³—all of which are major regional powers with significant influence in their respective relevant regional organisations, as well as being part of international forums like the G20, which groups together major economies across both the Global South and North. What’s more, when these “network powers” are also “dual donors”, they may choose to selectively engage with the structures and processes surrounding the OECD (for instance, by reporting on their cooperation flows), while at the same time maintaining their memberships and networks within traditionally developing country-led clubs, such as the G77. In addition to acting within specific regional or economic “clubs”, diplomatic bridges are also well placed to “foster more effective global development governance” in forums with more universal membership such as the UN; for instance, Mexico has been key to furthering dialogue regarding “mutual adaptability” between different types of development cooperation models at the global level.³⁴ Norway could also be considered an example of a political bridge, particularly in relation to its cross-actor engagement on peacebuilding.³⁵

The four bridging functions

Having described the key enabling factors and types of bridges that exist within the development landscape, the following section delves into the distinct actions constituting bridging functions that countries can undertake. We identify four broadly categorised, diverse functions through which countries can assume a bridging role (Figure 1). While these functions all involve varying degrees of knowledge dissemination and projection of normative influence, they differ in terms of the level of ambition and trust needed to undertake action and in terms of the number of actors that need to be engaged by the bridging country.

30 Sebastian Haug, “Thirthing North/South: Mexico and Turkey in International Development Politics” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.54967>.

31 Lesley Masters, “Building Bridges?”

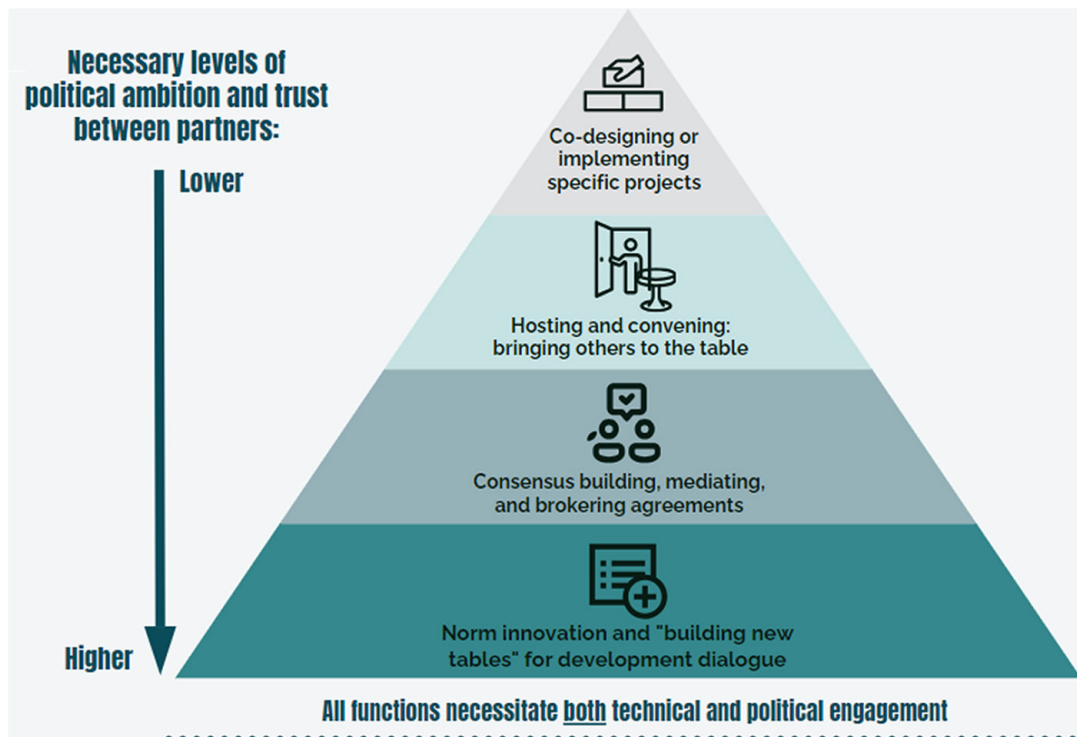
32 Hino Samuel Jose, “Indonesia’s 2020 New Paradigm of Collaborative Strategic Outlook in the South–South Cooperation (SSC) as the Bridge-Builder for the Post-pandemic Development,” *Verity Jurnal Ilmiah Hubungan Internasional* 12, no. 24 (2021): 5–20, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351023505_Indonesia%27s_2020_New_Paradigm_Of_Collaborative_Strategic_Outlook_In_The_South-south_Cooperation_SSC_As_The_Bridge-Builder_For_The_Post-pandemic_Development.

33 Ernesto Soria Morales, “El papel de México en la construcción de un nuevo enfoque de la cooperación para el desarrollo: Perspectivas para la agenda del G20 sobre desarrollo,” *Revista Española de Desarrollo y Cooperación* 28 (2011), <https://www.ucm.es/iudesarrollocooperacion/revista-espanola-de-desarrollo-y-cooperacion-1>.

34 Prado Lallande, *Mexico’s Role in Development Cooperation*, 3.

35 Øystein Haga Skånland, “Norway Is a Peace Nation’: A Discourse Analytic Reading of the Norwegian Peace Engagement,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 45, no. 1 (2010): 34–54, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45084593>; Ann Kelleher and James Larry Taulbee, “Bridging the Gap: Building Peace Norwegian Style,” *Peace and Change* 31, no. 4 (2006): 479–505, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-0130.2006.00388.x>.

FIGURE 1. The four bridging functions



1. Co-designing and implementing specific development projects

Among the array of discussed bridging functions, the project-level role stands out as perhaps the most self-contained. Where harmonising viewpoints or coordinating actions between DAC and non-DAC countries seems like an increasingly elusive endeavour in forums such as the UN or OECD³⁶—especially in light of prior attempts to bridge differences multilaterally, which have yielded mixed results³⁷—joint design and implementation of development programmes offers a more pragmatic approach, allowing for tangible progress in the realm of specific thematic areas or with selected, willing partners. Such cooperation, which tends to involve technical and focused discussions or actions on areas of shared interest, can create opportunities to build trust across partners and foster learning and mutual understanding of incentives, priorities, standards, and practices.³⁸ While these

36 Geovana Zoccal, “Sharing Responsibility: Jeopardised Multilateralism and the Growing Centrality of Triangular Cooperation,” *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 63, no. 2 (2020): e007, <https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329202000207>.

37 Jennifer Constantine, Alex Shankland, and Jing Gu, *Engaging the Rising Powers in the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation: A Framing Paper* (Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2020), https://www.effectivecooperation.org/system/files/2020-06/GPEDC-Engagement-with-BRICS_IDS-Framing-Paper_New_June2015.pdf.

38 DAC countries such as the UK, Germany, and Japan often regard partnerships with “emerging/pivotal countries as effective and efficient ways to promote development effectiveness.” See Shunichiro Honda and Mihoko Sakai, *Triangular Cooperation Mechanisms: A Comparative Study of Germany, Japan and the UK* (Tokyo: JICA Research Institute, 2014), 3, https://www.jica.go.jp/Resource/jica-ri/publication/booksandreports/jrft3q00000029ts-att/Triangular_Cooperation_Mechanisms_1_for_web.pdf.

partnerships could keep the door open to dialogue at higher levels—though there are questions about whether and how the path from technical to political exchange can function in practice—due to their largely technical nature, both sides can engage even when political trust is low, bypassing the potential political or reputational risks associated with deeper collaboration.³⁹

As a bridging function, bringing together actors for joint project implementation can help bridge differences in providers' contextual knowledge, expertise, or available resources. While many dual donors may lack the capacities to participate in development cooperation to the scale of their ambition, cooperation with other providers—including through trilateral projects (see Box 1)—can be a valuable way to gain access to the financial resources or bureaucratic infrastructure needed to scale up delivery.⁴⁰ Joint implementation or coordination in delivering specific activities can also serve as a bridge for knowledge exchange, promoting mutual learning across different types of providers. Through joint or coordinated implementation, bridges can act as knowledge brokers as well as logistical hubs, linking the supply of and demand for different types of development expertise.⁴¹

BOX 1. Triangular cooperation as a bridging modality

While countries can engage in programme co-implementation, co-financing, and co-design through a variety of avenues, trilateral or “triangular” development cooperation is often cited as a specific modality holding substantial relevance in the context of bridging the DAC and non-DAC divide.⁴² The UN defines triangular cooperation as “southern-driven partnerships between two or more developing countries, supported by a developed country(ies) or multilateral organisation(s), to implement development cooperation programmes and projects.”⁴³ Slightly diverging from this definition, the OECD describes trilateral cooperation as typically involving the participation of three actors, combining inputs from a “facilitating” partner (usually a DAC donor or multilateral agency) and a “pivotal” partner (usually a non-DAC cooperation provider) who work together within a “beneficiary” country.⁴⁴ Especially in a context in which the pivotal partner has valuable

39 Calleja, Casadevall Bellés, and Cichocka, *Exploring Barriers and Opportunities*.

40 For instance, in Colombia, triangular partnerships are seen as “technically and politically strategic” due to their ability to extend Colombia’s reach with countries in the “South”, build relations with “Northern partners”, and utilise “existing infrastructure built up by traditional donors to build up engagement” despite resource constraints. See Bergamaschi, Tickner, and Durán, “Going South to Reach North?,” 2017, p. 259.

41 Denghua Zhang, “China–Australia–Papua New Guinea Trilateral Aid Cooperation on Malaria Control,” *In Brief* (Canberra: State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, Australia National University College of Asia and the Pacific, 2015), <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/142822/1/ib-2015-14-zhang-online.pdf>.

42 Geovana Zoccal, *Triangular Cooperation: Broader, More Dynamic and Flexible*, Briefing Paper no. 14 (Bonn: Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.23661/bp14.2020>.

43 United Nations Secretary-General, *Framework of Operational Guidelines on United Nations Support to South-South and Triangular Cooperation*, High-level Committee on South-South Cooperation: Nineteenth Session (New York: UN, 2016), 5, <https://unsouthsouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Framework-of-Operational-Guidelines-on-UN-Support-to-SSTC-2016.pdf>.

44 OECD, *DAC Working Party on Development Finance Statistics: Secretariat’s Proposal to Clarify the Reporting Directives on Triangular Cooperation* (Paris: OECD Publications, 2019), [https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC/STAT\(2018\)56/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC/STAT(2018)56/en/pdf).

experience on a particular development issue, and the facilitating partner has more financial or organisational capacity, triangular projects can offer improved effectiveness at reduced costs.⁴⁵ However, while triangular cooperation presents appealing prospects as a bridging modality, prior research highlights that it also faces substantial challenges and limitations, particularly if projects are not grounded in robust preexisting partnerships.⁴⁶

2. **Hosting, convening, and facilitating: Bringing others to the table**

This bridging function involves the ability to encourage coordination and foster participation among diverse DAC and non-DAC actors involved in development cooperation, not only through formal forums but also in informal but multilateral spaces, as well as at the country level via donor coordination meetings.⁴⁷ Through their role as conveners and facilitators, these bridge countries create valuable opportunities for dialogue, knowledge exchange, and the exploration of common ground.

The engagement of bridging countries in this function is not equivalent to the goal of building consensus or shared norms; rather, by convening diverse perspectives and bringing other countries to the table, this function contributes to information sharing and knowledge exchange on issues surrounding development cooperation without the need for binding agreements; functionally, this type of convening can also contribute to trust building across actors. Even when shared initiatives or consensus do not emerge, the process itself holds value in fostering mutual understanding and generating insights. Notably, this function is not exclusive to providers; partner countries also possess a role in bridging, with their governments encouraging coordination between all providers present on the ground.⁴⁸

45 Deborah Barros Leal Farias, "Triangular Cooperation and the Global Governance of Development Assistance: Canada and Brazil as "Co-donors," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 21, no. 1 (2015): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2013.845583>.

46 Such challenges include higher transaction costs amid coordination challenges as well as difficulties with project evaluation amid a lack of clarity on what indicators to adopt to measure success. See also Huma Haider, *Donors Influencing Other Donors and Development Outcomes*, K4D Helpdesk Report (Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2018), 3, <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/13937>.

47 The literature notes that non-DAC actors have generally been reluctant to join country coordination meetings, but also that DAC actors have not been really focused on encouraging their participation beyond a narrow lens on China. See Emma Mawdsley, "Non-DAC Donors and the Changing Landscape of Foreign Aid: The (In)significance of India's Development Cooperation with Kenya," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 4, no. 2 (2010): 361–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2010.487345>; Camille Laporte, "Emerging Donors on the Field: A Study Case of China and South Korea in Lao PDR," in *SSC Beyond the Myths: Rising Donors, New Aid Practices?*, ed. Isaline Bergamaschi, Phoebe Moore, and Arlene B. Tickner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 245–69, <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/978-1-137-53969-4>; Sven Grimm, Heike Höß, Katharina Knappe, Marion Siebold, and Johannes Sperrfechter, *Coordinating China and DAC Development Partners: Challenges to the Aid Architecture in Rwanda*, Studies no. 56 (Bonn: Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, 2011), <https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/199181>.

48 See, for instance, Niels Keijzer, Stephan Klingebiel, and Fabian Scholtes, "Promoting Ownership in a 'Post-Aid Effectiveness' World: Evidence from Rwanda and Liberia," *Development Policy Review* 38, no. S1 (May 2020): O32–O49, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/dpr.12469>. The authors write, "Rwanda's government essentially approaches development co-operation in an instrumental manner, systematically scrutinising whether a development co-operation activity supports the realization of Rwanda's own development strategy. If this is the case, there is automatically a strong case for ownership of activities supported by donors. Therefore, ownership of development co-operation in Rwanda implies a strong leadership role for Rwandan actors" (p. O39).

Examples of bridging initiatives that involve this function could include Türkiye's hosting of a series of forums related to Least Developed Countries and humanitarian issues, including the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit and the 2016 Least Developed Countries midterm review in Antalya;⁴⁹ Portugal's role in the Lisbon summits on triangular cooperation under the OECD, which serves as a platform for discussions and exchanges on triangular cooperation approaches involving DAC and non-DAC actors;⁵⁰ or Mexico's role in hosting the Monterrey Summit on Financing for Development. In hosting these conferences, bridge countries have not only provided a venue or framework for others to meet but have often taken a more explicitly involved stance. For instance, ahead of hosting the World Humanitarian Summit, Türkiye leveraged its existing networks and embassies to ensure broad participation at a high political level from 55 heads of state and additionally provided funding to ensure broader participation from Least Developed Country representatives, local communities, and youth delegates.⁵¹

3. **Consensus building, mediating, and brokering agreements**

Countries engaged in this function possess the legitimacy and credibility to facilitate consensus building and mediate disputes surrounding development cooperation norms and practices. Leveraging their established diplomatic networks, they play a crucial role in assisting various stakeholders to find common ground, negotiate agreements, and settle conflicts. By fostering trust and mutual understanding, these bridges can promote cooperation and harmonisation of diverse approaches. This function relies on a country's image as a legitimate and neutral actor as well as its existing relationships with diverse countries—often the result of membership in multiple regional and international forums that other countries might not have access to.

Notable examples of this bridge-building function include South Korea's diplomatic efforts in forging agreement at the Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in 2011 (see Box 2).⁵² A notable example of this function is also Mexico's "Friends of Monterrey" initiative, which builds on Mexico's previous role in hosting the International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey in 2002, via hosting an annual retreat since 2016 to encourage joint action and coordination on the follow-up to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, including through "advancing the debate on contentious issues and strengthening linkages" between actors in an informal setting, in the hope that this contributes to the success of other, more formal, negotiations.⁵³

4. **Norm innovation and building "new tables" for development dialogue**

The fourth bridging function represents perhaps the most ambitious form of bridging: aspiring to bring about transformative change by constructing shared cooperative norms,

49 Haug, "Thirthing North/South."

50 OECD, *Portugal Promotes Triangular Co-operation*.

51 Haug, "Thirthing North/South," 107.

52 Eun Mee Kim and Jae Eun Lee, "Busan and Beyond: South Korea and the Transition from Aid Effectiveness to Development Effectiveness," *Journal of International Development* 25, no. 6 (August 2013): 787–801, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.2938>.

53 Haug, "Thirthing North/South," 212.

practices, and spaces between DAC and non-DAC providers. This function transcends merely offering non-DAC countries a place at the table of predominantly Global North-led institutions or initiatives or bringing them into the fold and “merging” with existing development cooperation models. Instead, it involves metaphorically forging entirely new tables that are characterised by distinct rules, norms, or objectives distinct from existing structures. This involves countries taking on the role of champions and advocates for specific agendas related to “good donorship,” development effectiveness, or establishing new mechanisms and standards—be they more thematic or methodological in nature. Moreover, to truly constitute bridging, initiatives in this category should encourage, or, at the very least, be open to, broad participation of countries from across both the DAC and non-DAC groups and so do not include the creation of platforms like the BRICS or IBSA (India, Brazil, and South Africa) forums. As a result, we understand this function as requiring the most political input and buy-in to support the development of “new tables” and the co-creation of shared development norms.

Yet, executing this role poses significant challenges, and successful instances have been rarer, with many attempts in this category being subject to intense geopolitical pressures that have ultimately limited the ability of any new norms or institutions to gain more universal buy-in. An example of a bridge-building function that established a new table, or institution, is Mexico’s role in initiating the Global Partnership Initiative (GPI) on triangular cooperation in 2016.⁵⁴ Through its establishment of the GPI, Mexico demonstrated its commitment to promoting and expanding triangular cooperation as a development approach and involved both DAC and non-DAC providers in the process. Another relevant case study comes from the involvement of several European states—almost all DAC members—as founding members within the Chinese-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Although, largely due to geopolitical tensions, countries such as the United States chose not to sign up, Europe’s involvement in the Bank’s foundation has widely been heralded as a success in ensuring that the Bank’s standards adhere to best practices as established by other multilateral development banks.⁵⁵ Beyond the creation of new institutions, this function was evident in Mexico’s efforts in advocating for new quantification mechanisms and standards for South–South cooperation, supporting the creation of a new norm that could enhance the transparency, accountability, and effectiveness of not only its own South–South cooperation initiatives but also those of other Southern providers.⁵⁶ In a somewhat similar vein, efforts by both DAC and non-DAC countries to establish the TOSSD initiative—and especially the co-hosts of the TOSSD Task Force, based in the EU and South Africa—provide another example of a new norm in development

54 Villanueva Ulfgard and López, “In Search of Making a Difference.”

55 Giuseppe Gabusi, “Global Standards in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank: The Contribution of the European Members,” *Global Policy* 10, no. 4 (November 2019): 631–38, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1758-5899.12738>.

56 Ibid.

cooperation being established.⁵⁷ As might be expected of this deepest and most potentially transformational bridging function, there are perhaps more false starts than clear examples of success. Indeed, the growing China–United States rift points to declining opportunities to enable more universally shared forums and initiatives. With little likelihood of collaborative norm advocacy emerging, positive examples become ever more important in this context.

BOX 2. South Korea’s perspectives on its role as a bridge country

By Yuri Yoon and Joongmin Shin⁵⁸

South Korea’s position as a bridging country

South Korea’s capacity to act as a bridge between DAC and non-DAC providers is often understood to stem from two key factors. First, South Korea is one of a few countries to fully transition from “recipient” to “donor,” and the recency of its development experience allows it to understand and mediate the divergent perspectives of countries across the income spectrum.⁵⁹ Second, like other middle powers, South Korea can leverage its diplomatic capacities and international standing to act as a political bridge through involvement in international forums or clubs—such as the Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Türkiye, and Australia (MIKTA) group—that allows for cross-actor development discourse.⁶⁰

What types of bridging roles does South Korea play?

Broadly, the academic literature notes that South Korea is often considered to perform three types of bridging functions:

1. **Knowledge broker and co-implementor:** South Korea aims to bridge knowledge divides by sharing its development experiences and lessons with others through initiatives such as the Knowledge Sharing Program⁶¹ and the Saemaul Movement,⁶² including on agendas

57 Laurent Sarazin and Risenga Maluleke, *TOSSD Strategy Paper by the Co-Chairs of the International TOSSD Task Force* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021), <https://www.tossd.org/docs/strategy-paper-by-co-chairs.pdf>.

58 The authors of this box are researchers working in the Korea International Cooperation Agency’s ODA Research Center. The contents of the box reflect their view on Korea’s bridging role.

59 While in 1945 Korea was one of the poorest nations in the world, Korea experienced rapid growth and graduated from the OECD’s ODA recipient list in 2000.

60 O’Neil, “South Korea as a Middle Power.”

61 The Knowledge Sharing Program is Korea’s representative knowledge-sharing initiative seeking to support the development of partner countries by sharing Korea’s development experience. See also Yulan Kim and MoonJoong Tcha, *Introduction to the Knowledge Sharing Program (KSP) of Korea* (Washington, DC: Korea Economic Institute, 2012), <https://keia.org/publication/introduction-to-the-knowledge-sharing-program-ksp-of-korea/>.

62 The Saemaul Movement is a national political initiative launched on April 22, 1970, in Korea, that aims to accelerate national development by promoting the basic spirit and practice of hard work, self-help, and collaboration. It began as a unique Korean rural integrated development movement that expanded across the country, with the full support of the government, into a modernization movement for all of Korean society, including factories, cities, and workplaces. See DJun Kil Kim, *The Saemaul Undong Movement in the Republic of Korea* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2012), <https://www.adb.org/publications/saemaul-undong-movement-republic-korea>.

where South Korea has a comparative advantage, such as information technologies and green technologies.⁶³ In addition, South Korea participates in triangular cooperation—a key bridging modality—that brings together multiple actors to co-design and implement specific projects.⁶⁴ In this vein, the Korea International Cooperation Agency recently established its Third Strategy for Triangular Cooperation (2023–2026)⁶⁵ and works as part of the MIKTA Development Cooperation Institutions Network, which aims to promote cooperation through dialogue, peer learning, and joint activities.⁶⁶

2. **Facilitator and convener:** South Korea acts as a convener and facilitator of development-related discourse through organising workshops, seminars, and forums that aim to foster the dynamic exchange of ideas and best practices.⁶⁷ These activities include hosting the biennial Busan Partnership Forum, which provides a space for diverse actors to exchange ideas on the implementation of effectiveness principles.⁶⁸
3. **Mediator between DAC and non-DAC providers:** South Korea has acted as a mediator, particularly leveraging its bridging role to bring together perspectives from DAC and non-DAC cooperation providers, most notably in the context of the 2011 High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (HLF-4) hosted in Busan. Specifically, during negotiations as part of the HLF-4, the South Korean government has been credited with bringing China and other BRICS to the table, as well as “negotiating behind the scenes to obtain their endorsement of the outcome document.”⁶⁹

South Korea's future role as a bridge country between donors

Despite some successes as a bridge for development—most notably in the context of the effectiveness agenda—it is unclear how and to what degree South Korea will leverage its bridging role in the future. A potential challenge is that the hybrid identity arising from its recent development experience is likely to wane over time—i.e. South Korea has now been a DAC member

63 Kyung Ryul Park, “Science, Technology, and Innovation in Sustainable Development Cooperation: Theories and Practices in South Korea,” in *International Development Cooperation of Japan and South Korea: New Strategies for an Uncertain World*, ed. Huck-ju Kwon et al. (Singapore: Springer, 2022), 179–208; Deok Soon Yim, Eun Joo Kim, Ji Hyun Kim, and Seona Lee, “A Study on the Sustainability of Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) Official Development Assistance (ODA) Projects,” in *2022 Portland International Conference on Management of Engineering and Technology* (Portland, OR: IEEE, 2022), 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.23919/PICMET53225.2022.9882608>.

64 The OECD notes that in 2021, Korea disbursed US\$13.7 million for triangular cooperation, primarily in Asia and for energy-related projects (“Development Co-operation Profiles: Korea,” OECD, accessed September 2023, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/d919ff1a-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/d919ff1a-en>).

65 Korea International Cooperation Agency, “KOICA TrC Strategy” (internal document).

66 “Joint Statement on the Launch of the MIKTA Development Cooperation Institutions Network,” MIKTA Development Cooperation Institutions Network, January 29, 2021, <http://mikta.org/document/joint-statement-on-the-launch-of-the-mikta-development-cooperation-institutions-network/>.

67 Including the annual Seoul ODA Conference, for example.

68 The latest iteration was held in December 2023. For more information, see “About the 2023 Busan Forum,” Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation, accessed December 2023, https://www.effectivecooperation.org/system/files/2023-11/UNDP_GPEDC_Busan%20Forum_Flyer%20DIGITAL_241123_KW.pdf.

69 Kim and Lee, “Busan and Beyond,” 798.

for more than a decade, raising questions about whether it can still identify with the challenges facing non-DACs to the same degree as in prior years. In this context—and understanding that bridging roles are dynamic and subject to change—there is scope for South Korea to reconsider the type of bridging role it is best positioned to play in the years ahead.

What are the benefits and risks of acting as a bridge builder for development?

If bridging is an *active* function that requires an investment of resources to undertake, then there are important questions about *why* countries may seek to act as bridges in the cooperation landscape and about the potential risks associated with such action. See Table 1 for a summary of the benefits and risks associated with bridging.

Why invest in a bridging role?

Broadly, there are three main reasons why countries would invest limited human and financial resources in adopting various bridging functions in the international arena. These include potential direct benefits to the bridging countries as a result of adopting a bridging role, as well as the second-order benefits of strengthening global cooperation for development through successful initiatives.

First, for many countries, the incentive to invest in adopting a bridging function for development is likely linked to the pursuit of wider national interests, including building their soft power and international standing. Similar to the rationale for providing development cooperation itself, countries willing to devote limited human and financial resources to various bridging functions or activities likely do so with the expectation that such initiatives will, at least to some degree, advance their interests or help project their values in international forums.⁷⁰ Indeed, to the degree that bridging countries are also middle powers—which many are—the incentive to invest in bridging functions can be linked to the logic of middle-power diplomacy, whereby bridging or mediating functions, through multilateral forums in particular, can be seen as a way to leverage their international positioning to exert global influence and project their values. Many have argued that by virtue of being neither too large to present a “threat” to others nor too small to lack the capacity to act, such middle powers are well positioned to project influence or international leadership in multilateral forums on specific areas of interest, often leveraging this comparative advantage through bridging functions.⁷¹ When successful, bridging efforts—particularly those that take place

70 For a review of the literature on donor motivations, including in relation to self-interest as a driver of development cooperation, see Nilima Gulrajani and Rachael Calleja, “Understanding Donor Motivations: Developing the Principled Aid Index” ODI Working Paper 548 (Overseas Development Institute, London, 2019), <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/12633.pdf>.

71 Wood, “Middle Powers in the International System.”

through international development forums—can advance the international standing, reputation, or “brand” of bridging actors through strengthening or demonstrating soft power.

Second, investing in bridging functions can also advance a country’s interests through expanding networks, knowledge, and partnerships. This is perhaps particularly true when bridging through interventions designed to foster working-level relations to either do, coordinate, or discuss development activities or issues in smaller-scale forums, which require less political heft and provide less international visibility.⁷² While these activities occur at a different level from mediating functions capable of advancing global influence, they can contribute to partnership building and trust across a range of actors, either in country contexts or on key issues of mutual interest with select actors. Ultimately, such activities can contribute to positioning bridging partners as key interlocutors while building trust across actors from smaller-scale engagement. Such initiatives can, in theory, eventually provide positive spillovers for multilateral bridging efforts by leveraging the relationships and trust built through smaller initial actions, though in practice, it is unclear how well technical exchanges translate into political action.

Third, at a broader, or systemic, level, investment in bridging can contribute to strengthening the global development system through bringing together actors with different positions, interests, and backgrounds to overcome persistent divisions and create a more inclusive system that matches the realities of the shifting development landscape. The global value of bridging initiatives stems from the understanding that the challenges currently faced in the international system—including achieving the 2030 Agenda and responding to ongoing global challenges—will require cooperation and collective action in order to support meaningful progress. Investing in bridging roles and functions—at various scales—can support the strengthening of the global development system in many ways. For instance, there is scope for bridging actors to consider initiatives aimed at bringing together the knowledge and resources that exist across the increasingly diverse development landscape to improve development outcomes through pooling resources and utilising the skills and expertise found throughout the development system. The goal of these initiatives would be to improve results and efficiencies by better leveraging cross-actor knowledge and assets to support shared goals. At the same time, there is recognition that part of the challenge facing the development system, and the future of cooperation for development, is the understanding that the principles, norms, and spaces that govern cooperation fail to reflect the preferences of current development actors.⁷³ Initiatives aimed at bridging this divide—much of which continues to exist across North–South divisions—can be used to make progress not only towards developing shared standards or spaces but, ultimately, towards shifting the development paradigm to reflect the current and global cooperation landscape.

72 Calleja, Casadevall Bellés, and Cichocka, *Exploring Barriers and Opportunities*.

73 Ibid.

What are the risks of adopting a bridging role?

Similar to the benefits of bridging, adopting and pursuing bridging functions incurs risks both for the bridging country and for the global system.

Perhaps most notably, a key risk to countries adopting a bridging role—at any level of engagement—is reputational, whereby the failure of bridging initiatives could undermine the bridging country’s reputation as a meaningful convener, mediator, or consensus builder, and potentially limiting the willingness of others to support future bridging actions. Based on the understanding that past actions influence how audiences, both domestic and international, view the likelihood of future successes, reputational costs from potential failures could ultimately affect both the *credibility* of actors to execute bridging roles as well as the *willingness* of countries to act going forward. Bridging failures could arise from a range of factors that undermine the ability to sustain the levels of effort necessary to achieve the desired results, including internal domestic issues related to the realities of political cycles or bureaucratic overstretch from actors trying to project influence over multiple policy areas. Particularly for bridges that occupy multiple or liminal identities in the global system, attempting to practise “simultaneous belonging” to both sides of a given identity can stretch the capacity of staff that are expected to “serve both roles with quality, coherence and consistency.” The risk here is that bridging actors may ultimately spread themselves too thin to be able to fulfil these criteria, leading not only to a lack of meaningful results but also to reputational damage, with failed bridging efforts being seen by others as, at best, naive or superficial, or, at worst, as “somewhat desperate attempts to claim relevance.”⁷⁴

External events beyond the bridging actor’s control, including the escalation of geopolitical tensions amid a widening “trust deficit,” could similarly reduce the likelihood of success in bridging initiatives. For development-related bridging initiatives in particular, even successful efforts could come with reputational costs due to the realities of tense North–South relations, which occur against a backdrop of long-standing historical injustices, power imbalances, and a track record of broken development promises.⁷⁵ For bridges based within the Global South, for instance, it is well documented that perceptions of closeness with the North can be seen to undermine a country’s credibility as a Southern actor,⁷⁶ meaning that efforts designed to bridge a North–South divide could unintentionally cause reputational damage through efforts to facilitate cross-actor engagement. Meanwhile, for other bridging countries—primarily those based in the Global North—engagement on development with actors that are perceived as not sharing certain fundamental values, including support for human rights, gender equality, or democratic governance, can also be seen as politically risky.

Alongside reputational damage, the realities of an *active* bridging process mean that bridging failures may represent a loss in terms of the financial and human resources invested in building partnerships or consensus. While we suggest that all bridging actors must have, as a basic

74 Haug, “Thirthing North/South,” 117.

75 Calleja, Casadevall Bellés, and Cichocka, *Exploring Barriers and Opportunities*.

76 *Ibid.*

requirement, the *capacity* to adopt a bridging function, this capacity is not uniform across bridging countries and will differ alongside income level and/or economic clout. This means that the costs of failure are likely to differ based on the scale of resources available to pursue bridging actions. For those at the lower end of the capacity spectrum, the cost of failure could be high, as failures represent not only the wasted expenditure of relatively more limited capacities, but also the relatively higher opportunity cost of investing in a failed process versus a potentially lower-risk development action.⁷⁷

From the systemic standpoint, the reality of the current development landscape is that failed bridging initiatives—particularly broader multilateral initiatives aimed at developing consensus around key standards, practices, or norms across DAC and non-DAC actors—could not only fail to create shared cooperation principles but could also unintentionally weaken preexisting standards and norms. Part of the challenge is linked to competitive pressures that exist across the development system, where increasingly diverse cooperation actors have brought new norms and standards that better reflect their capacities and constraints.⁷⁸ With the range of preferences and practices growing, reaching consensus is more difficult in an absolute sense—as development norms are now negotiated across a wider array of actors than the relatively like-minded grouping that historically set development norms—and it can also lead to the watering down of existing commitments or standards in order to reach agreement. For bridging countries, the risk reflects not only the question of whether or not agreement is reached, but also whether the content of the agreement is able to unite positions without weakening standards overall.

Lastly, to the degree that bridging efforts prioritise building relations across cooperation providers, there is a risk that the bridging initiatives could reinforce global power imbalances in two ways. First, efforts to consolidate a new consensus between different types of providers could fail to sufficiently account for partner countries' preferences and could instead “perpetuate, deepen and reinvent” existing global hierarchies between those who primarily “provide” and those who primarily “receive” development cooperation.⁷⁹ Indeed, some previous bridging initiatives have received criticism for not being sufficiently demand-driven or responsive to partner country needs.⁸⁰ Second, past bridging efforts between DAC and non-DAC providers have sometimes suffered from perceptions that instead of agreeing to new approaches, cross-actor bridging aimed to de facto co-opt and “socialise” Southern partners into DAC-led standards, norms, and practices in a way that ultimately “preserves and enhances” the influence of Northern-based development actors.⁸¹ This perception not only risks undermining bridging efforts by

77 Haug, “Thirthing North/South,” 117.

78 Paulo Esteves and Stephan Klingebiel, “Diffusion, Fusion, and Confusion.”

79 Laura Trajber Waisbich and Emma Mawdsley, “South-South Cooperation,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Global Development*, ed. Kearnin Sims et al. (London: Routledge, 2022), 82–92, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781003017653-9>.

80 Adriana Erthal Abdenur and João Moura Estevão Marques Da Fonseca, “The North’s Growing Role in South–South Cooperation: Keeping the Foothold,” *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 8 (2013): 1475–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.831579>; see also Nadine Piefer, “Triangular Cooperation—Bridging South-South and North-South Cooperation” (presentation, Workshop on South-South Development Cooperation, University of Heidelberg, September 26–27, 2014), 19, https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/md/awi/ssdc_piefer.pdf.

81 Abdenur and Marques Da Fonseca, “The North’s Growing Role in South–South Cooperation.”

limiting consensus but can also reduce the incentives for cooperation though eroding trust across actors and harming the legitimacy of spaces where such conversations occur; for instance, the perception that the GPEDC is a “DAC-led” forum has been blamed for reduced participation by non-DAC providers.⁸² Relatedly, some have argued that the inability of DAC members to use the UN’s Development Cooperation Forum to socialise their norms led to similar disengagement from this forum,⁸³ highlighting risks to the willingness of countries to cooperate on all sides. To overcome such risks, bridging efforts must start from the expectation that actors on both sides will need to be willing and able to meet in the middle.

TABLE 1. Summary table of benefits and risks of participating in bridging initiatives

	Benefits	Risks
For the bridging country (domestic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advancement of self-interest through exerting international influence and promoting values to build soft power • Deepened international networks, knowledge, and partnerships, and building of trust across actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reputational damage from potential failure that could undermine credibility and willingness to act in the future • Potential loss in terms of human and financial resources; potentially high opportunity costs
To development cooperation results (systemic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribution to global good through leveraging more diverse knowledge and resources to support collective action on shared goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watering down of previous commitments and norms for the sake of more universal consensus • Reinforcement of power imbalances across providers and with partner countries

Conclusions and policy considerations for bridging countries

The last two decades have witnessed a dynamic shift in the geopolitical context within which development cooperation efforts are undertaken, marked by emerging polarities, the dissolution of previous hegemonies, and a weakening of the multilateral system. More positively, there has been some degree of challenge to historical Northern hegemony; new solidarities and diversifying forms of partnerships; and innovations and the opening-up of the development sector to different voices, experiences, and knowledge. This multiplex world order, where existing norms and models for cooperation are being challenged, demands a re-evaluation of how various elements in the development system can be brought together to foster appropriate cooperative approaches to advance a global development paradigm. This does not imply shared or merged positions, but rather the productive coming together of particular actors or approaches in specific contexts that are synergistically positive. Yet such a paradigm remains elusive,⁸⁴ fraught with the very real and persistent gaps, or distances, between traditional development binaries—including Global North and South, DAC and non-DAC,

82 Debapriya Bhattacharya and Sarah Sabin Khan, *Rethinking Development Effectiveness: Perspectives from the Global South*, Southern Voice Occasional Paper Series no. 59 (Lima: Southern Voice, 2020), <https://southernvoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Rethinking-Development-Effectiveness-Summary-2020.pdf>.

83 As explained by interviewees 14 and 15 from Calleja, Casadevall Bellés, and Cichocka, *Exploring Barriers and Opportunities*.

84 Calleja, Cichocka, Gavás, and Pleeck, *A Global Development Paradigm for a World in Crisis*.

or developed and developing—which stem from fundamentally different histories, allegiances, norms, knowledge, and standards that (so far) have hindered opportunities for collective action for development.

In this complex reality, bridging countries have the potential to stand as pivotal players, with a practical role in facilitating the transition towards a more global development paradigm. Yet, to date, bridging has tended to be discussed in the context of specific countries, without an overview of the types of roles and functions that typically encompass what it means to be a bridge in a development context. This paper aims to fill this gap by collating experiences from across the literature to identify factors that enable countries to act as bridges, the types of bridges typically found in development, and the different roles or functions bridging countries can carry out. Indeed, we determined that a number of countries are already—at least in rhetoric—willing to step into this role, having applied the label to their foreign and development policy efforts, and that many examples of bridging initiatives already exist. Through assessing these examples, we have identified four main types of bridging roles, which differ in terms of the level of ambition and trust needed from other actors in order to undertake action (see Section 2.3). This classification presents a menu of options for countries seeking to engage as bridges, from, at the less ambitious end, engaging in joint projects or programme implementation, including through triangular cooperation, to, at the most ambitious, proposing new normative frameworks for building novel international spaces that hold the potential for more transformative and inclusive dialogues on key development and governance issues. Finally, we have mapped out some of the main benefits and risks associated with engaging in bridging, both for the countries undertaking action and for the wider development cooperation system itself.

We propose five policy recommendations for countries aspiring to position themselves as development bridges, as they consider how they can best enhance the impact, effectiveness, and long-term sustainability of their efforts:

1. **Find your niche:** To maximise the impact and influence of the initiatives, bridging countries should focus their efforts on areas where they have sufficient *knowledge* and *capacities* to make a real difference, and where they can display a comparative advantage—or *credibility*—based on their existing thematic expertise, networks, and diplomatic capabilities. Doing so can simultaneously limit the risk of bureaucratic overstretch and maximise the potential for building a more coherent and legitimate “brand” for the bridging country as an international champion of a particular development agenda.
2. **Invest within your means:** Based on the understanding that bridging is an active function and will require an investment of human and financial resources to undertake, bridging countries—which can vary in terms of economic size and income level—should ensure that the ambition of their initiatives matches the *capacities* available, in order to avoid overstretch and increase the chances of success. This means both being selective about the content of bridging functions—focusing limited resources where effort could have the greatest impact—and at the same time being cautious to ensure that the pursuit of multiple or liminal identities does not overstretch capacities or undermine coherent action.

3. **Encourage true co-creation:** At its core, bridging implies an effort to bring together the perspectives, knowledge, norms, or resources that exist across a given divide, suggesting that a degree of compromise will be needed on both sides to make progress. Indeed, past efforts have often stalled due to perceptions that co-option, rather than co-creation, was the true aim. In order to generate long-lasting and sustainable results from bridging engagement, it is critical that all sides are not only heard, but that their views are reflected in a consensus, project, or activity that develops from a bridging action.
4. **Avoid an unintentional “race to the bottom”:** In a context in which one singular set of norms around development cooperation is increasingly unlikely to be accepted, actors seeking to initiate new bridging efforts should be careful to avoid weakening existing standards which are still desirable at the cost of failed but more universal consensus that may not actually materialise. Given the existing deficit of trust between global actors, alongside a history of diplomatic friction and contention on certain key issues, such as burden sharing or accountability, bridging countries might be tempted to avoid difficult topics and keep the language of shared agreements vague to accommodate varying interpretations on thorny issues. While these choices may work in the short term, they come at the cost of a shared initiative’s clarity and its ability to keep actors committed and engaged to pursue a shared vision in the long term.
5. **Keep development outcomes and partner countries in focus:** At the end of the day, bridging countries and the providers they seek to engage should remember that they share a common goal of strengthening development outcomes in support of a common development agenda. To achieve this aim, bridging countries should resist the temptation to “instrumentalize” development dialogues for wider political or diplomatic goals and ensure that any *shared* consensus reflects the positions and realities across both providers and partner countries, where development outcomes ultimately coalesce.

At a time when it is most needed, trust—both towards other providers and within the multilateral system at large—is at a low ebb, casting doubts on the prospects for the vital cooperation needed to deal with amplifying global threats and problems, and leaving behind a vacuum in global leadership, with no single actor or institution possessing the power or legitimacy to convene all relevant stakeholders and facilitate agreements. This vacuum opens up a space for countries willing and able to undertake a bridging role to support cooperative action to lead efforts to overcome persistent divides across actors. Building on their credibility as (relatively) neutral players able to act as honest brokers, leveraging their existing networks and diplomatic capacities for cooperation, and utilising their own knowledge of different types of development contexts as part of their own hybrid identities, bridging countries are strategically positioned to navigate these challenges. While the bridging efforts championed by individual countries or groups will necessarily be more provisional and context-specific than global cooperation, these initiatives offer a potential pathway for fostering cooperation and overcoming persistent divides across diverse actors.

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