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## (R)evolution? Exploring the potential of post-development approaches for reforming development cooperation

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# **(R)evolution? Exploring the Potential of Post-Development Approaches for Reforming Development Cooperation**

Francy Köllner



# (R)evolution? Exploring the potential of post-development approaches for reforming development cooperation

Francy Köllner

Bonn 2023

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## Foreword

Rethinking development policy is not a new concern. In recent years, the debate triggered by the post-development discourse has contributed to a new momentum. In the present study, Francy Köllner analyses this debate with regard to the main concerns of the post-development discourse and their possible use in development cooperation. Francy Köllner is an alumna of the IDOS Postgraduate Programme (2018/2019). Her practical, long-term experience in development cooperation as well as intensive discussions with IDOS colleagues over the past months have contributed to the emergence of an exciting discussion paper. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Francy Köllner for this. I would also like to thank – also on her behalf – the colleagues at IDOS who were available for various discussion rounds on the concept and for commenting on the drafts: Ina Friesen, Niels Keijzer, Anna Schwachula and Tina Zintl.

Stephan Klingebiel

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## Abbreviations

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| BMZ      | Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development / Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung |
| DC       | development cooperation  |
| EWG-GPI  | Expert Working Group on Global Public Investment   |
| FemDP    | feminist development policy  |
| GPG      | global public good   |
| GPI      | global public investment   |
| LGBTQIA+ | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer / Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and more  |
| ODA      | official development assistance  |
| ODI      | Overseas Development Institute   |
| PC       | post-colonial  |
| PD       | post-development   |
| SDG      | Sustainable Development Goal   |
| USAID    | United States Agency for International Development   |



## Executive summary

The concept and mainstream approaches of development cooperation (DC) have been criticised since the early beginning of their existence. The debate can be divided into a wide-ranging rejection of DC per se on the one hand, and a more liberal critique on the other, encouraging a more efficient DC, for example by adapting the methods used. Post-development (PD) scholars have been criticising international DC since 1990 for both its Western perspective and the lack of reflection on asymmetrical power structures. Whereas PD concepts question the system by criticising the structure of DC or its underlying arguments, the development effectiveness debate is more concerned with improving the system through technical modifications. This demarcation is not clear-cut since both sides have converged over the years, resulting in the general criticism of DC often overlapping with the technical discourse.

Considering that DC increasingly faces various criticisms, we use the PD concept as an approach to investigate to what extent it has the potential to reform DC. Perceiving PD approaches as a starting point for efforts towards change, we position ourselves positively towards the assumption that PD approaches are increasingly being used to systematically reform DC. Our two research questions methodologically assess PD elements and their use, as well as examine their potential for reformation. In this regard we ask (1) to what extent and how elements of PD approaches are reflected in the current policy initiatives of international DC, and (2) what potential do PD approaches have to reform DC. Thereby, we focus on the examination of policy initiatives on a discourse level. We take a closer look at three examples: German feminist development policy (FemDP), the locally led development approach and the global public investment (GPI) concept. Each case brings unique features that serve as the basis for our examination: FemDP as a relatively new idea of transformation, the localisation approach as a long-standing concept that has been implemented for several years and GPI as an approach towards a new concept of international cooperation as a response to the development-effectiveness debate, among others.

By means of a content analysis, four commonly used PD elements were selected to examine whether and how the three policy initiatives acknowledge PD aspects in order to reform DC. To make these aspects applicable in practice, they were partly supplemented with similar concepts: (1) the concept of alternatives to development, (2) pluralism of knowledge and power dynamics, (3) user-centred approaches and a critical stance towards the established scientific discourse and (4) the promotion of grassroots movements and local ownership.

We discovered a variation in the use of the different PD elements: Although aspects related to power relations, decolonial structures and knowledge management are prominent in all three initiatives, elements such as grassroots movements are given less consideration in all three cases. Even though FemDP does not focus on an alternative to development, as defined by PD approaches, it puts a strong emphasis on a transformative approach when it comes to its user-centred empowerment and tackles power imbalances by approaching decolonisation. This leads to the assumption that the efforts of German Development Minister Svenja Schulze do not just describe a rhetorical reorientation but involve actual transformative efforts, even if the actual implementation can only be further analysed with the new FemDP strategy. The locally led development approach in particular seems to be a suitable springboard for the inclusion of local knowledge and grassroots movements, although the question remains whether the transformative ambition will work in practice within the rigid structures of official development

assistance<sup>1</sup> cooperation. Whereas the locally led approach mostly uses descriptions of change as a means to reach its objectives, the GPI concept in particular uses PD elements as a reformative approach, as per the PD definition, putting the objective of the transformation of international public finance in international cooperation at its centre.

We determine that PD elements have the potential to be used as a reformative approach. Valuing PD approaches, we conclude that they do influence public initiatives in one way or another. If inner-systemic change should become an option, we see the greatest added value for the future if PD scholars succeed in underpinning their approaches with instruments that can be used as tools in DC practice.

For future research, a far-reaching analysis of the PD elements at the implementation level that goes beyond a discourse analysis would be desirable. Second, it is also encouraged to examine the implementation of the two approaches that currently only prevail as ideas or concepts (FemDP and GPI). From a scientific point of view, neither consists of a concrete action plan that is suitable for operationalisation, and neither has been put into practice.

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1 In 1969, the states of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) developed a consensual definition on how to support "developing" countries – the concept of official development assistance (ODA) came into being (Bracho, 2015, p. 4; Bracho, Carey, Hynes, Klingebiel, & Trzeciak-Duval, 2021, p. 249).

# 1 Introduction

The concept and mainstream approaches of development cooperation (DC) have been criticised since the early beginning of their existence. Opponents questioning the concept of “development” (e.g. Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 2010; Ferguson, 1994) point out the ineffectiveness, dependency and even harm created by international DC (e.g. Ayittey, 1992; Moyo, 2009; Shikwati, 2011). Some scholars additionally call for a broader involvement of local actors (e.g. Easterly, 2009). The debate can be divided into a wide-ranging rejection of DC per se on the one hand, and a more liberal critique on the other, encouraging a more efficient DC, for example by adapting the methods used.

The post-development (PD) school falls into the first group and has been criticising international DC since 1990 for both its Western perspective and the lack of reflection on asymmetrical power structures (Ziai, 2017a, p. 1). PD scholars such as Arturo Escobar, Gustavo Esteva and Vandana Shiva question the origins as well as the construction of the concept of “development”. The concept is predominantly used in DC to describe industrialised countries as “developed”, whereas other countries are perceived as “underdeveloped”. One consequence, for example, is that Western knowledge – in comparison to knowledge from the Global South<sup>2</sup> – is more likely to be perceived as accurate. Countering this one-sided perspective, PD scholars such as Escobar (1995) and Easterly (2009) call for pluralism of knowledge and a greater involvement of local actors.

PD concepts question the system by criticising the structure of DC or its underlying arguments, whereas the effectiveness debate is more concerned with improving the system through technical modifications. However, this demarcation is not clear-cut since both sides have converged over the years, resulting in the general criticism of DC often overlapping with the technical discourse. For that reason, this paper also looks at the interrelation between the PD and development effectiveness debates. Yet, it can be noted that PD approaches were initially perceived as a critique of the basic structure of the DC system that rejected the system as a whole. However, due to the fact that PD approaches have been criticised, Ziai (2004) emphasises the importance of distinguishing between two different PD approaches: on the one hand, the neo-populist approach, which is perceived as a particularly radical approach that is often addressed publicly, and on the other hand the sceptical approach, which refers to PD scholars who criticise the system of DC but do not fundamentally reject it.

We use the PD concept as an approach to investigate to what extent it has the potential to reform DC. We especially focus on the examination of policy initiatives on a discourse level,<sup>3</sup> since on a policy level the attempt of a reformation is often presented first. Perceiving PD approaches as a starting point for efforts towards change, we position ourselves positively towards the assumption that PD approaches are increasingly being used to systematically reform DC. The assumption is based on the observation of an increased acknowledgement and application of PD approaches or individual elements of the PD approach, such as awareness of the asymmetrical nature of DC, colonial and historical legacies, and political decision-making (Ziai, 2017a, p. 10).

In this context, we take a closer look at three examples in the form of case study content analyses: German feminist development policy (FemDP), the locally led development approach and the global public investment (GPI) concept. The three cases were selected because each

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2 See Haug (2022) for a discussion of the term.

3 We are aware of the fact that when analysing policy initiatives on a discourse level, we can solely analyse the efforts being made by politicians, while the examination of a policy implementation level is not part of the discussion.

case brings unique features that serve as the basis for our examination: FemDP as a relatively new idea of transformation, the locally led development approach as a long-standing concept that has been implemented for several years and GPI as an approach towards a new concept of international cooperation as a response to the development-effectiveness debate.

(1) The German federal government states in its coalition programme “Mehr Fortschritt wagen” [“Dare more progress”] for 2021-2025: “We want to overcome colonial continuities, meet in partnership on an equal footing and initiate independent scientific studies to look back on and reappraise colonialism” (own translation; SPD, Bündnis90/Die Grünen, & FDP, 2021, p. 100).

Comparable statements have been made by the current German Development Minister, Svenja Schulze, in her speech at the conference “Feminist Development Policy – Transforming International Cooperation”, where she presented the new German FemDP in September 2022.

(2) Similarly, in the 2000s, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other organisations such as Swiss Contact, partners of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the UK network Bond introduced a variety of “locally led development initiatives” in their DC programmes. These programmes aimed to enhance the local leadership and local ownership in order to tackle power imbalances (Timson, 2021) and foster sustainable results (USAID, 2022b, p. 1).

(3) In addition to the implementation of official development assistance (ODA) development cooperation, new concepts of cooperation have emerged over the last decades. Such new concepts of cooperation can be interpreted, among other things, as a result of the development-effectiveness debate and its demand to go beyond aid (see e.g. Janus, Klingebiel, & Paulo, 2015; Klingebiel & Gonsior, 2020; Melonio, Rioux, & Naudet, 2022; Severino & Ray, 2009). Some new concepts assume that the global challenges of the 21st century cannot be tackled solely through ODA DC (Kaul, Grunberg, & Stern, 1999). For that reason, with the third example, we do not just focus on ODA DC, but also on a new global concept of cooperation as an alternative to improve the global system, taking up the criticism of the development-effectiveness debate. A new concept of cooperation is the GPI approach, which seeks to provide answers to the global challenges of the 21st century (Clark, s.a.). The question arises as to whether PD elements are also taken up or acknowledged in such new concepts of cooperation. For example, the Expert Working Group on Global Public Investment underlines in the recently published recommendation report: “Cocreation is at the heart of the GPI approach and must remain central as we continue to build the concept” (EWG-GPI, 2022, p. 4).

These three examples support our assumption that current policy initiatives are increasingly open and willing to acknowledge PD elements in their approach. However, this assumption still needs to be verified. This discussion paper uses the perspective of PD approaches to examine current policy initiatives (ODA as well as new concepts of cooperation) critically and to determine which recently developed policy trends take up aspects of PD approaches and, if so, how. Through this analysis, we additionally link PD approaches to the debate of development effectiveness (see Section 2.1) and discuss if an increased acknowledgment and use of PD approaches can serve as a tool to emphasise a reformation<sup>4</sup> of the DC system. Subsequently, the objective of this paper is to understand (1) to what extent and how elements of PD approaches are reflected in the current policy initiatives of international (development) cooperation and (2) what potential do PD approaches have to reform DC.

The next section introduces the main PD concepts (Section 2.1), followed by an exploration of the emergence of PD approaches and their interrelation with the debate on development

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4 With “reform” we are referring to political statements made in three different policy initiatives on a discourse level. A more detailed analysis has to be made in order to investigate how PD approaches are taken up on the implementing level in comparison to the discourse level.

effectiveness (2.2) and its contributions to DC (2.3), before concluding with a critical review (2.4). After a short methodological outline in Section 3, in Section 4 we evaluate two ODA policy initiatives (4.1: German feminist development policy, and 4.2: US locally led development initiatives) from a PD perspective using a content analysis. As a third policy initiative, we examine a new concept of cooperation (4.3: GPI), before following up with an overall discussion (Section 5).

## 2 Post-development approaches

Before we can examine to what extent and how PD elements are reflected in current policy initiatives, we need a common understanding of PD approaches, its distinction from similar concepts such as post-colonial (PC) approaches as well as a mutual understanding of its characteristics in interrelation with the development-effectiveness debate.

### 2.1 Defining post-development approaches

From the PD perspective, international DC can be criticised for the predominance of the Eurocentric, Western-modernist assumptions under which actors and institutions act. Above all, these actors and the institutions within the system can be characterised by power asymmetries and colonial continuities (Schöneberg & Ziai, 2021, p. 7). The PD critique can be summarised as conveying five points:

- (1) Development policy is structurally bound to the economic model of Western societies. The model of European or Western societies is seen as an embodiment of a “developed” society whose “development” others have to catch up with. The argumentation also addresses the criticism of striving for further economic growth in a world with finite resources (Sachs, 1993, p. 9).
- (2) Issues of socio-economic inequality are diagnosed as “development problems”, for example lack of capital, knowledge and technology. Questions of power are left out of the equation, partly because of the way the problem is constructed: The fact that the economic system itself generates poverty is excluded (Schöneberg & Ziai, 2021, p. 8). Consequently, DC depoliticises issues of socio-economic inequality and presents its own intervention as non-political (Ferguson, 1994, p. 256).
- (3) DC legitimises and reproduces power relations between Western experts and the population of a country, the latter being governed according to the principle of trusteeship for their own good. The knowledge of the rural population or also of traditional healers is often denigrated as superstition (Schöneberg & Ziai, 2021, p. 8).
- (4) The perspective of knowledge is that of the “developed” being, representing the ideal norm, whereas all other beings represent a deficient deviation that requires correction (Schöneberg & Ziai, 2021, p. 9).
- (5) Western-modern knowledge is patriarchal, referring mostly to white male knowledge, whereas emotions, empathy, relationality and female knowledge tend to be repressed (Schöneberg & Ziai, 2021, p. 9).

The PD critique is recognised by many scholars, and the documentation of the negative impacts of “development” is broadly accepted. Similarly, PD aspects such as participation, ownership and sustainability are not only part of the PD discourse, but also part of the technical toolbox in the development-effectiveness debate (Schöneberg & Ziai, 2021, p. 10). Escobar (1995)

examines the statements of a variety of PD authors with different perspectives and identifies four aspects of common PD ground: (a) the rejection of the development paradigm and the orientation towards “alternatives to development”, (b) an interest in cultural difference and local knowledge, coupled with (c) a critical attitude towards the universalisation of established science as the only form of knowledge and (d) the advocacy of local, pluralistic grassroots movements (Escobar, 1995, p. 215; Schöneberg & Ziai, 2021, pp. 10-11).

Within DC and its technical debates, the heterogeneity of development theory and the uniqueness of alternative approaches is not represented adequately (Ziai, 2004, p. 1047). The critics of the PD perspective, however, often refer to a neopopulist (rejecting) PD approach, whereas their arguments cease to be valid when focussing on the sceptical variant of PD approaches (Ziai, 2004, p. 1054): To present one critique towards PD approaches, many scholars mention that they seem to be too enthusiastic about a return to local alternatives and traditions. Nevertheless, Escobar, cited in Ziai (2004, p. 1051), clearly rejects both the uncritical acceptance of local approaches as well as their dismissal as romanticised approaches. Rahnema (1997) adds that even scholars who romanticise local communities and traditions view the return to a “state of nature” as being neither desirable nor feasible (Rahnema, 1997, p. 381).

On the contrary, the PD idea is to organise and invent new mechanisms of life between modernisation and tradition in spite of “development” (Rist, 1997, p. 244). Escobar (1995, p. 218) also points out that many traditional cultures only survive through their engagement with modern society. Instead of viewing the approach of the Western model of society as universalistic, one should define culture in a constructivist way, with respect being given to culturally different worldviews, in which Western norms do not have to be the ultimate objective (Ziai, 2004, p. 1052). PD authors also admit that each society also has the right to choose a Western approach to development, even when its objectives contain economic growth, consumption, industrialisation, etc. (Banuri, 1990, p. 96). For these reasons, the PD idea often does “present alternatives to development in the form of communal solidarity, direct democracy, informal economy, traditional knowledge, and so on [...]” (Ziai, 2004, p. 1053).

As per this distinction, the remainder of this discussion paper focusses on the sceptical PD approaches and not the neopopulist ones, since we see the sceptical approaches as having a more realistic opportunity of being integrated into the current processes that define policies.

In addition to PD elements, PC elements are becoming more frequently discussed in the public and political debates. For that reason, it is important to briefly differentiate between PD and PC concepts. Post-colonial approaches primarily examine the after-effects of colonialism. Their critique focusses on power dynamics, for example an anti-colonial positioning that takes into account the political-economic relations of exploitation (Schöneberg & Ziai, 2021, p. 10). The majority of post-colonial work is limited in scope, as scholars are primarily concerned with the effects of colonialism at the level of representation, in addition to the discursive construction of identities, concepts and practices that enables and legitimises certain practices (Ziai, 2016).<sup>5</sup> In relation to PC approaches, PD approaches can be understood as a PC critique of development policy and its underlying worldview in a broader sense. Whereas the PC approach has a stronger focus on discursive and epistemological factors, the PD approach emphasises situating the development discourse at the intersection of decolonisation and the Cold War and the effects thereof.

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5 For a detailed distinction between PD and PC approaches, see Ziai (2016).

## **2.2 The emergence of PD approaches – from traditional ODA development cooperation towards new concepts of cooperation**

To better understand the background of PD approaches, we firstly look at the concept of development and the criticism that has arisen from it, as well as where the PD debate can be located against this background.

### **2.2.1 The emergence of PD approaches**

In 1947/1948, President Harry Truman introduced the United States' first comprehensive development programme. As one component of the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan was intended to ensure the reconstruction of Europe after the Second World War. This reconstruction aid was meant as a contribution to the "development" of Europe and significantly determined the beginning of "development aid" (see e.g. Bracho, 2015, p. 3; Escobar, 1995, p. 4; Estermann, 2020, p. 28). Simultaneously, the same conditions that characterised the features of an "advanced" society of the time were to be created in targeted countries outside Europe: a high degree of industrialisation and urbanisation, mechanisation of agriculture, rapid growth in material production and living standards, and the widespread adoption of modern education. This ushered in a new era of understanding and management of international politics, particularly in relation to economically "less developed" countries (Escobar, 1995, pp. 3-4). Thus, in 1969, the members of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development created a consensual definition on how to support "developing" countries – the concept of official development assistance came into being (Bracho, 2015, p. 4; Bracho et al., 2021, p. 249). The approach was defined to differentiate DC from other instruments of international cooperation, such as official export credit or military assistance (Janus et al., 2015, p. 156), establishing a clear distinction between donor states and recipient states (Esteves & Klingebiel, 2021, p. 192).

With this conceptual development of DC, the voices critical of DC increased as well. Although some changes have been observed since the 1950s through the take-up of the critique on development effectiveness (e.g. through the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness 2005), different authors, such as Estermann, emphasised that the basic Western and capitalist orientation of DC has hardly changed up to this day (Estermann, 2020, p. 29; cf. Brohman, 1995; Demir & Kaboub, 2009; Lander, 2019). For example, within DC, the "development of a country" is still measured by economic criteria, such as a country's gross domestic product (Estermann, 2020, p. 33). However, the indicator does not capture other aspects that could describe a country's "well-being", leaving out the inequality of wealth and power, nor does it cover the structural characteristics of a country's economy (United Nations Development Programme, 1990, p. 13).

From the PD perspective, the term "development" had already been criticised by Sachs due to industrial societies spreading the idea that they had reached the highest form of social development with economic growth, industrialisation etc., and defined states where these processes were absent as being "underdeveloped" (Menzel, 1993, p. 132; Sachs, 1993, p. 9). The traditional discourse understands development as a positive socio-economic improvement that "developing" countries need to experience just as "developed" countries have (Kloke-Lesch, 2021, p. 131). In this context, PD authors such as Ferguson (1994) critically explore how the language and practices used by experts of DC had an influence on how development was delivered. For that reason, Ferguson stresses that the "development problem" can be characterised as an extremely heterogeneous phenomenon whose origins and contexts are frequently related to relations, privileges and exclusion (Ferguson, 1994, xiii). Other well-known authors who contribute to the PD debate are Esteva (1992), focussing on development and the

debate on knowledge transfer, and Rist (1997), Sachs (1993) and Shiva (2018), who criticise economic growth as a phenomenon in itself.

## 2.2.2 PD approaches in relation to the development-effectiveness debate

After examining the term “development”, the associated criticism and the emergence of PD approaches, we take a closer look at the relationship between PD approaches and the effectiveness debate in the following. PD approaches and the development-effectiveness debate must be distinguished from each other in terms of definitions and conceptualisation: In general, it can be emphasised that PD approaches tend to criticise the structure of DC or its underlying arguments, whereas the effectiveness debate is more concerned with improving the system through technical comments. PD approaches tend to criticise the term “development” on different levels, for example as an ideology of the West, a hierarchical construct and as a failed project, among other things. However, although most of the criticism stays on a discourse level (e.g. the ideology of the West as a promise for prosperity and the hierarchical construct as a practice guided by the generalisation of the Western model of society), the critique of DC as a failed concept is oriented towards the practical level of DC (Ziai, 2014, p. 410). Subsequently, both sides have converged over the years, especially when it comes to the critique of DC failures or DC effectiveness, resulting in the general criticism of DC often overlapping with the technical discourse and tackling similar elements. We would like to illustrate such overlaps with the following example.

PD authors criticise, among other things, the ineffective use of DC funds. For example, the PD scholar Easterly (2006) underlines that in a 40-year period, USD 568 billion in DC had been spent on Africa, but African countries were no richer at the end of that period than before (Brucker & Valeyatheepillay, 2017, p. 50). A similar critique is presented in the development-effectiveness debate, where for example Moyo (2009) and Shikwati (2006) emphasise that funds are used to support unstable governments, which in turn are responsible for the violent repression of their populations in order to remain in power. Also Ayittey (1992) points out that corrupt elites in countries often do not act in the interest of their populations. More recently, de Tollenaere (2023) explained how ODA now also goes to countries that are categorised as autocratic, mainly due to the increased number of countries that have moved from the classification of “democratic states” to “autocracies” (de Tollenaere, 2023).

Empirical data shows similar results: Donors have not achieved their goals of making DC more effective and less fragmented (Janus et al., 2015, p. 166). Additionally, there is an ongoing debate on the self-interests of donor states, which are not acting solely out of altruistic motives or focussing on the recipient’s needs (see Baydag & Klingebiel, 2022).<sup>6</sup> Besides the diverse motivations of donors, the critical debate on DC has also focussed on asymmetrical power structures and problematic concepts of conditionality (Janus et al., 2015, p. 156).

To counter the criticisms concerning ineffectiveness, the approaches used by PD scholars and the development-effectiveness debate differ: PD scholars tend to formulate solutions outside of the current technical approaches in DC. For example, Escobar (1995) and Easterly (2006) emphasise in their theoretical arguments that an understanding of local conditions is essential. Especially Escobar focusses on alternatives to development, encouraging practitioners to use ethnographic methods and to find alternatives within social movements and in local and indigenous cultures (Escobar, 1992, p. 411). Meanwhile, scholars critical of the

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6 Beyond the debate on altruism and self-interest of donor states, Baydag and Klingebiel propose to extend this dichotomy, considering further categories for examining donor motivation, such as the contribution to global public goods (GPG), which may not be assigned to one but to both of the categories (Baydag & Klingebiel, 2022, p. 3).



effectiveness debate focus on the macro effects of DC, the global principles of effectiveness, the structure and the instruments of DC organisations and their effects (Janus et al., 2020, p. 2). For example, the macro effects of DC have traditionally been examined through studies in which the impacts of DC on economic growth and other development indicators were assessed to understand the contribution to socio-economic development at the country level. This narrow focus on economic growth seems to be outdated since economic analyses have shown that human prosperity increasingly depends on the provision and protection of GPGs (Janus, Marschall, & Öhler, 2020, p. 3).

### 2.2.3 Moving beyond “aid”: The new paradigm of global development

In addition to this criticism, global shifts in the rising levels of inequality put additional pressure on international DC. In the 1980s and 1990s, these global shifts were intertwined with new challenges such as the fragmentation of actors and approaches of DC (Klingebiel, Mahn, & Negre, 2016; Severino & Ray, 2009), which lead to an increasing need for coordination efforts (Keijzer, Klingebiel, Örnemark, & Scholtes, 2018). As a result, by the end of the 1990s, the concept of “beyond aid” had evolved, not to focus solely on the industrialised North and the “less developed” South as before, but to additionally look at the more complex world order that had arisen, for example, via the “emerging economies” in the 1980s (Janus et al., 2015, p. 157). This process of differentiation shaped the role of donors, decreasing their influence on determining policies in low- and middle-income countries of the Global South (Janus et al., 2015, p. 157).

Through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the shift towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there was a transformation towards sustainable development after 2015. The idea of a common understanding of global sustainability was – and still is – widely accepted by many countries worldwide. However, many scholars have been criticising the concept in a variety of ways, for example emphasising that the SDGs mostly refer to the achievements of “developing countries” while calling for action on a global level (Kloke-Lesch, 2021, pp. 129, 138).

Furthermore, due to the normative notion and the associated geographically limited focus of “development”, there are increasing calls to redefine the term and to produce solutions that abandon the two-sided perspective of the Self and the Other, or the South and the North (Kloke-Lesch, 2021, p. 131). Subsequently, if we look at the universal concept of sustainable development – including its economic, social, environmental and political dimensions – the concept should not be limited to “developing” countries. Under a new paradigm of global development, unilateral cooperation that is organised around the idea of aid should be transformed into a mutually beneficial transnational cooperation<sup>7</sup> that allows for mutual benefits (Kloke-Lesch, 2021, pp. 131-132, 148-149).

As a result, more recent approaches focus on mutual benefits between countries as well as common global challenges that need to be overcome. In the framework of a definition of “global development”, Horner identified the need to overcome the conventional measurement of ODA criteria and to establish clearer benchmarks for resources and results (Horner, 2020). Klingebiel and Gonsior also emphasise that new concepts of cooperation and cooperation formats beyond financial instruments are needed, such as knowledge transfer as well as technology and science cooperation (Klingebiel & Gonsior, 2020, p. 16).

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7 With the approach of a “transnational science cooperation”, Schwachula stresses the importance of new modes of inter- and transnational cooperation, focussing on research also between different research fields in order to address the need for transformation in all countries beyond a North-South dichotomy (Schwachula, 2021, p. 59).

As one widely accepted framework, Kaul et al. (1999) developed the GPG approach, through which, by re-focussing on international DC, the challenges of the 21st century could be tackled more effectively. Their main argument emphasises that 21st century challenges are challenges beyond borders which need to be addressed transnationally, such as the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>8</sup> migration and climate change (International Monetary Fund, 2021). In order to increase the supply of public goods, the concept of GPI evolved, describing a system of international budget allocation. In 2022, the EWG-GPI published their recommendations for developing a concrete GPI concept as a “new paradigm of fiscal policy for the 21st century” (GPI, s.a.). Such new concepts of cooperation can be interpreted, among other things, as a result of the development-effectiveness debate and its demand to go beyond aid (see e.g. Janus et al., 2015; Klingebiel & Gonsior, 2020; Melonio et al., 2022; Severino & Ray, 2009).

## 2.3 Post-development contribution to the development discourse

Considering that DC increasingly faces various criticisms in the public debate, we use the PD discourse as an approach to investigate to what extent the discourse has the potential to reform DC policy initiatives on a discourse level. In doing so, we position ourselves positively towards the assumption that PD approaches are increasingly being used to systematically reform DC. However, why is the PD approach relevant for the debate on DC? Thereby, we have to consider the following arguments.

PD approaches have the objective of making DC scholars aware of the contingency and the historical-political location of the discipline’s common assumptions. In doing so, PD approaches illustrate the potentially political consequences of theoretical decisions (Ziai, 2006, p. 194). Furthermore, Ziai argues that the use of PD approaches provides the opportunity to (a) critically examine power relations in one’s analysis and to (b) contribute to non-Eurocentric views and power-sensitive aspects for positive social change (Ziai, 2017b, p. 2550). PD approaches have already led to a more frequent and intensive reflection of development policy and cooperation, including an intensified debate on the term “development”, taking into account historical context, power and Eurocentrism (Ziai, 2017a, p. 10).

Besides the critical assessment of the term “development”, PD approaches draw attention to the hierarchisation of different types of knowledge (Ziai, 2017b, p. 2551). This is the case since they point to the failures of practical DC to engage sufficiently with pluralism (Ziai, 2017a; 2017b, p. 2552). Equally, Schöneberg emphasises that PC approaches can be used as a tool to valorise marginalised worldviews and knowledge (Schöneberg, 2019, p. 106).

As an example of the above-mentioned advantages of PD, McGregor (2009, p. 1698) focusses on practical PD experiences and clarifies that the contribution of PD approaches could lie in more performative and experimental research. For example, Gibson-Graham (2007 and 2008) illustrates the practice of ontological reframing, re-reading for difference and creativity, and bringing possibilities of hidden and alternative economic activities to light through diverse economy mapping. Thereby, a participatory approach with local communities enabled the process of defining alternative policies. Their work was received positively as a “hopeful” application of PD approaches (McGregor, 2009, p. 1698). Consequently, McGregor (2009, p.

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8 With the aim of approaches that serve the global public good, Calleja, Cichočka, Gavas and Pleeck analysed whether and how responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have led to a transition from an international to a global development approach. Unfortunately, their examination highlights that, although the need for cooperation was high, the development of a common GPG approach did not move forward. Instead, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a clear shift, reinforcing national interests instead of leading to a collaborative approach (Calleja et al., 2021, pp. 36-37).

1696) endorses development interventions that create new spaces for alternative policies. Additionally, McGregor emphasises the value of participation, which should not be measured by the efficiency of the process, but by the political gains that can be achieved through participation. In this context, the protection and promotion of local cultural priorities and beliefs are also seen as crucial, since alternative ideas and counter-hegemonic beliefs can be explored (McGregor, 2009, p. 1697). As a critical argument in relation to the development of “alternative solutions”, some authors point to the danger of over-determination, through which PD arguments become tautological: If the concept of development is reduced to a debate about discourse, there can be enormous difficulties in moving beyond the critique and focussing on productive pathways of change (Gardner & Lewis, 2000, p. 1).

From a methodological perspective, research on development and PD approaches have a common subject (relations between the Global South and the Global North). However, they differ in three aspects: their (1) application orientation, (2) theoretical objective and (3) methodological focus. First, whereas knowledge in development research is usually subject to the applicability in practical problem-solving, in post-colonial studies knowledge is often limited to a critique of representations. This difference is related to the fact that development research is influenced by economics, whereas post-colonial studies have been influenced by literary studies. Second, research on DC is classically concerned with the transformation of a society along guiding principles, whereas post-colonial studies question the guiding principles themselves with regard to Eurocentrism. Third, the difference in the orientation and the objective leads to a different methodological focus: Development research is primarily concerned with measurable socio-economic changes, mostly at the macro level. Post-colonial studies are more concerned with cultural issues such as representations and identities, but also with experiences and processes on the micro level (Ziai, 2016, pp. 406-408). This ideal-typical presentation certainly does not apply to all authors, however it serves as an orientation with regard to the PD scholars mentioned (Ziai, 2016, pp. 406-408).

These differences result in the different use and application of the two concepts – this should also be taken into account when critically assessing one or the other concept. Subsequently, the different methodological approaches bring their own advantages and disadvantages, as each criticises the other approach for its weaknesses. In this context, Ziai underlines that PD approaches are especially productive and helpful when combined with empirical investigations (Ziai, 2016, p. 423).

## **2.4 Critical review of post-development approaches**

Since we position ourselves positively towards the assumption that PD approaches are increasingly being used to systematically reform DC, we also have to consider the voices of scholars standing critically towards the discourse. However, most of the voices critical of PD approaches refer to the neo-populist approach. In order to present the differentiation, the two PD strands were explicitly taken up in Section 2.1. In Section 2.2 we located the PD debate in its general context and distinguish it from the effectiveness debate, while in Section 2.3 we briefly mentioned the methodological implications that must also be considered when criticising PD concepts. Consequently, the aspects mentioned in previous chapters are not addressed here except for critical considerations that go beyond the points mentioned.

(1) PD theory is criticised for its assumption that development is something imposed by the West, although this is also requested by many countries of the Global South. Thereby, even PD theory draws on a duality, “the North wants development”. However, it cannot be denied that the countries themselves also might want to improve their living conditions (Edelman, 1999, p. 10).

Scholtes agrees with this argumentation and emphasises that the discourse on development in DC is also more diverse and controversial than the PD debate portrays. Not only is Western

development thinking challenged by partner governments, but Western scholars and practitioners do not have a consensus on how to deal with development (Scholtes, 2011, p. 3).

(2) Most PD approaches hold the idea that cultural beliefs and practices can only be evaluated by those who practise them. With this idea, however, PD approaches practise cultural relativism, as all cultural behaviours and beliefs are accepted as valid. Critics of PD therefore argue that PD scholars practise the opposite extreme of universalism, which could also lead to dangerous consequences, such as weaker state structures due to stronger autonomous groups (Rapley, 2004, p. 352).

(3) Kiely notes that PD thinking carries forward neoliberal ideals by rejecting a top-down approach to development and promoting development through local means. He emphasises that the PD argument which assumes that the Global South and North would be equally positioned when playing together on a football field advocates a neoliberal assumption. Going even further, when PD approaches sought to support traditionalists, they might be supporting people who hold non-progressive or even oppressive values (Kiely, 1994).

In addition to a large number of PD criticisms, Ziai (2017a) examines an interesting development: When studying the relationship between research on DC and PD approaches, he illustrates that the central arguments of PD approaches have often been criticised. However, the arguments are then accepted in texts and implicitly endorsed, leading to a mixture of rejection and integration (Ziai, 2017a, p. 11). For example, the PD critique of the Western perspective of the development discourse has widely been acknowledged, whereas the promotion of alternatives to development finds less support. However, Ziai also mentioned critically “the challenge is to translate [PD approaches] into practices” (Ziai, 2017b, p. 11).

Another strand of critique comes from a technical perspective, arguing that PD scholars develop their perspective from an elitist ivory tower (McGregor, 2009, p. 1693) and are caught in rhetorical stagnation (Pieterse, 2000, p. 187) instead of empirical research. This is noticeable, for example, due to the fact that mostly problems are listed instead of solutions (McGregor, 2009, p. 1693). McGregor underlines that the future of PD approaches depends on how researchers are able to move beyond deconstruction to make an active contribution to solutions for the empirical level<sup>9</sup> (McGregor, 2009, p. 1699).

### **3 Methodological framework: The PD perspective defined according to four criteria**

In order to discuss if and how recently developed policy trends respond to the PD critique, we have to define how the influence of PD approaches is examined. Using a content analysis, we specifically look at four different aspects, following Escobar’s (1995) defined main features of PD approaches: 1) an interest in alternatives to development, 2) an interest in local culture and knowledge, 3) a critical reflection of established scientific discourse and 4) a promotion of local, pluralistic grassroots movements (see Escobar, 1995, p. 215; Ziai, 2006, p. 197). By anchoring the theoretical framework in the empirical data, Escobar’s theoretical approach was opened up, adding some conceptual aspects after the policy initiatives were examined. Consequently, the criteria can be defined as soft and not rigid criteria. As two examples, user-centric factors were added to the scientific discourse (criterion 3) due to a strong interlinkage of the two aspects. The

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9 In this context Ziai (2014) emphasises the practical efforts PD scholars make, investigating more and more on an empirical level. See for example Gibson-Graham (2005), Curry (2003), King (2007), Gilgenbach and Moster (2012), Hamdi et al. (2012) (cited in Ziai, 2014, p. 417).

fourth criterion includes the concept of grassroots movements as well as the focus on ownership approaches.

As a methodological consideration, we cannot automatically conclude a PD influence from the presence of PD arguments. Even further, policy writers might be influenced by PD approaches but not acknowledge it consciously, which makes their influence hard to prove. Ziai (2017a) also argues that scholars tend to criticise PD approaches but implicitly take up their argumentation (Ziai, 2017a, p. 7). However, the focus of this paper is not to prove that PD approaches are explicitly acknowledged, but to examine the extent to which the line of argumentation of PD approaches is taken up on a discourse level. Thereby, we would like to examine to what extent and how elements of PD approaches are reflected in the current policy initiatives of international DC, and also what potential they have to reform DC in the policy discourse. In the following, the four adapted aspects are presented in more detail.

### **3.1 Alternatives to development**

Traditional PD scholars such as Escobar (1995) emphasise the use of “alternatives to development”, referring to the search for a “development pluralism” (Ziai, 2017a, p. 9). While modernisation theory assumed there was one goal of “development” and one road towards it (economic growth, industrialisation and technology, modernisation), dependency theory and alternative approaches have introduced alternative ways to reach the same goal (Ziai, 2017a, p. 10). However, traditional PD scholars such as Esteva reject such “alternative development” pathways, denying the underlying worldview, which still focusses on “development” as the goal (Esteva, cited in Pieterse, 2001, p. 181). Subsequently, sceptical PD scholars pursue the idea that there are multiple goals and multiple roads that can lead to “alternatives to development” (Ziai, 2017a, p. 10). Thereby, PD scholars often present alternatives to development in the form of communal solidarity, direct democracy, informal economy, traditional knowledge and similar concepts (Ziai, 2004, p. 1053). Furthermore, in search of these alternatives to development, it would be desirable to avoid the term “development”. Instead, one should favour a more precise expression of what is meant, such as the desire for social change, longer life expectancy, a higher gross national product, etc. (Ziai, 2014, p. 423).

### **3.2 Pluralism of knowledge and power dynamics**

The definition of development has been shaped in the Global North since colonial times. As a consequence, an asymmetrical distribution of power has also formed the understanding about which knowledge is accepted in DC (Schwachula, 2021, p. 62; see also Escobar, 1992; Esteva, 2010; Pieterse, 2011). For example, development and modernity were mostly perceived as contributing to economic growth and introducing Western values and norms. Thus, non-Western knowledge was mostly ignored and devaluated (Schwachula, 2021, p. 62). As a result, the interlinkages between knowledge production and power have to be taken into consideration. In DC, Northern “experts” and scientific knowledge of the North are favoured, which in consequence underpins inequalities as well as dependencies (Schwachula, 2021, p. 64). The *Times Higher Education* (2017) also displays such global asymmetries in its World University Ranking: Not one single African university was presented in the top 100 in 2017 (Melber, 2019, p. 269). However, it would be wrong to assume that African scholars do not engage in knowledge production (Melber, 2019, p. 270).

When it comes to knowledge construction, strong asymmetrical power structures demand closer self-reflection by scholars in search of an honest assessment of the Northern role in development studies and forms of interaction with scholars from the Global South (Melber, 2019, p. 267). Whereas a stronger focus on theories from the South is required, we additionally have

to move the debate beyond Western vs. local knowledge and a North-South dichotomy, aiming at a plurality of knowledge (Melber, 2019, p. 281; Schöneberg, 2019, p. 97).

The debate on knowledge production and power dynamics is closely linked and cannot be examined independently from the third category, which focusses on the actual “users” or target groups of interventions as well as the underlying scientific knowledge.

### **3.3 User-centred approaches and a critical stance towards the established scientific discourse**

**User-centred approaches:** The European studies scholar Orbie (2021) has investigated EU development studies from a post-colonial perspective. By using a PC perspective, he focusses on provincialisation, engagement and reconstruction<sup>10</sup> in order to examine the implications for EU development studies. In that context, he, for example, underlines that the buzzword “partnerships” is not new to development policy, and that it has to be questioned what this concept actually means in an asymmetric power context (Orbie, 2021, p. 597). If partnerships were indeed to be considered from a critical power perspective, it would be welcome to focus not only on states and governmental institutions in Africa, but also on “users” of development and international cooperation who are not political elites. Consequently, it would also be necessary to refer to individual groups or specific groups of people from the Global South. In the same manner, Dimier makes an important distinction between the “African elite” and the “African” people (Dimier, 2021; Orbie, 2021, p. 604). In that context, the research on the Global South is largely dominated by European scholars, due to the fact that also interviewees are European diplomats and practitioners. Instead of engaging with European perspectives, one should search for and engage with the “pluriverse” of views from people and groups who do not have a voice (Orbie, 2021, p. 603).

**Scientific discourse:** This user-centred approach goes hand in hand with the resulting scientific data used for DC. On the one hand, direct target groups should be involved in the implementation of, but also in the generation of data in the scientific context, and on the other hand, reference should be made to the knowledge generated in the Global South.

Additionally, this hurdle could be overcome through the discussion on “beyond aid”. Here, the future of DC is debated, for example through the establishment of new concepts of cooperation, such as the potential of transnational research cooperation. Thereby, transnational research cooperation for sustainable development could serve as an instrument to help move away from a North-South dichotomy, generating cooperative transnational and transdisciplinary research that produces solutions which are both relevant for stakeholders on a global level and can be adapted to local contexts (Schwachula, 2021, p. 60). It should be noted that through such a change of perspective of the scientific discourse, criticisms of the development-effectiveness debate, such as the accusation that DC tends to benefit elites, would be addressed (see Section 2.2).

Besides the mentioned aspects such as asymmetrical power structures when it comes to knowledge production and the lack of exchange between Northern science and Southern contributions, Gulrajani and Calleja underline the lack of coverage and availability of data of South-South DC providers. Part of the challenge in measuring Southern providers’ financial flows is related to the difficulties in defining South-South cooperation (see Section 2.2). In this respect, Southern providers could work towards a clear definition of their DC activities and make them publicly available. Without such data, it is neither possible to bring more attention to

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10 See Section 2.1 for the differentiation between PD and PC approaches.

Southern scientific contributions nor to empirically assess the full range of DC (Gulrajani & Calleja, 2021, p. 283).

### **3.4 Promotion of grassroots movements and local ownership**

The promotion of local, pluralistic movements is related to both the debate on knowledge production and power (PD criterion 2) as well as to the user-centric approach and the definition of a suitable scientific discourse (PD criterion 3).

The concept of **grassroots movements** is closely linked to the idea of alternatives to development and serves as an innovative approach that supports the creation of a plurality of alternatives to development or a transitions towards sustainability (Escobar, 1995; Maldonado-Villalpando, Paneque-Gálvez, Demaria, & Napoletano, 2022). Thereby, the pluriverse refers to the possibility of alternatives that exist in order to achieve a certain goal, particularly referring to knowledge of the Global South in comparison to the development project of the Global North. When focussing on grassroots movements, some areas of the social life and culture might be explored, which could be the key for new approaches towards popular education and collective learning, conviviality and communality, political autonomy or also ontologies linked with indigenous worldviews (Maldonado-Villalpando et al., 2022).

Closely linked to that concept but defined more broadly, the concept of ownership is also relevant from the PD perspective. Ownership can be defined as both “the process of cooperation in terms of determining its direction and design, as well as the substance of cooperation itself in terms of determining the inputs and distribution of responsibilities” (Keijzer, Klingebiel, & Scholtes, 2020, p. 35).

Ownership can be perceived as a means for achieving effective DC, being embedded in the broader debate of DC effectiveness. Strongly connected with concepts such as capacity, sustainability and trust, the concept of ownership focusses on problems for which solutions are developed and owned on a local level (Keijzer et al., 2018, p. 10). A meaningful promotion of ownership contains inclusion, vis-à-vis learning, and considers transparency, capacity and power relations (Keijzer et al., 2018, p. 10).

In this context, Melber (2019) points out that structural dependencies become visible especially through the missing ownership within the process of DC. He argues that, despite some efforts, ownership remains mostly outside the African continent or under the control of government institutions. Southern partners remain at the receiving end as implementing agencies, often added after decisions have been taken with a unilateral understanding of ownership. As a result, the power to define a country’s problem remains with the definition of a problem and a solution proposed by Western science, while local definitions of problems and solutions remain undetermined (Melber, 2019, pp. 277-278).

## **4 Analysing current policy initiatives from the PD perspective**

In order to look at specific initiatives from the PD perspective in order to decide if PD approaches are taken up and, if so, how, three cases are examined. The three cases were selected because each case brings unique features that serve as the basis for our examination: FemDP as a relatively new idea of transformation, the localisation approach as a long-standing concept that has been implemented for several years and GPI as an approach towards a new concept of international cooperation. At the same time, both cases can be located in traditional ODA DC.

The third case, the GPI approach, on the other hand, was selected as a new concept of international cooperation as a response to the development-effectiveness debate, among other reasons.

As a recently developed idea, it should be mentioned that the German FemDP initiative was chosen because, in her speech on FemDP, Schulze especially critically questions continuing colonialism as well as existing power structures (Schulze, 2022) – aspects that are also taken up and relevant from a PD perspective. However, up until now, no FemDP or feminist foreign policy has expressed a post-colonial approach (Friesen & Wisskirchen, 2022, p. 5). As a third case, we examine the GPI concept as a multilateral case and a more innovative concept, which is also in line with the “beyond ODA” debate, since it focusses on transnational solutions to tackle transnational challenges. All three cases are examined from the PD perspective in order to understand if (and if so, how) these policy initiatives include reformative aspects of development policy on a discourse level.

## 4.1 German feminist development policy

Although DC actors want to increase the effectiveness of DC, they are at the same time under increasing pressure from the public, since for example DC is increasingly perceived to be a result of colonial heritage (Büschel, 2020). Subsequently, with the 2021-2025 coalition programme of the German Federal Government, a new era is to be ushered in: “We want to overcome colonial continuities, meet in partnership on an equal footing and initiate independent scientific studies to look back on and reappraise colonialism” (translation; SPD, Bündnis90/Die Grünen, & FDP, 2021, p. 100).

Going even further, this statement on the German FemDP initiative represents an especially interesting case in relation to the research question for two reasons: First, the German government indicates a commitment to an especially reformative approach, attempting to “increasingly work transformatively in our projects” (Rosigkeit, 2022) and to “transform DC by specifically focussing on gender equality” (Kofler, 2022). Even further, Schulze targets an end of colonialisation, asking “how can we – finally – reach the decolonialisation within cooperation?” (Schulze, 2023). Using PD elements such as a critical questioning of continuing colonialism as well as existing power structures (Schulze, 2022), the announcement of the new policy raises the question of whether the initiative is actually as transformative as it attempts to be and, if so, if these reformative aspects are related to PD elements. These questions sought to be answered. Second, when defining the policy initiative from the PD perspective and development-effectiveness debate, one will notice that the approach and its transformative commitment is taking place within the framework of ODA DC. Therefore, it could be assumed that it might be more difficult to produce a transformation within the system of traditional ODA, also in light of criticism of the development-effectiveness debate. However, this depends on what kind of transformation is being sought.

In line with the three Rs guiding the Canadian feminist foreign policy, German FemDP<sup>11</sup> defines its core demands as the three “Rs”: a) Rights: Promotion of all women’s and girls’ full enjoyment of human rights, b) Resources: Ensuring the adequate allocation of resources to promote gender equality and equal opportunities and c) Representation: Encouraging women’s participation and influence in decision-making processes (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development [BMZ], 2022).

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11 The establishment of a German feminist development policy (apart from a feminist foreign policy) is mainly driven by the fact that, in Germany, DC is the responsibility of a separate development ministry, whereas in other countries DC is administered by the foreign ministries and is part of their feminist foreign policy strategies (Friesen & Wisskirchen, 2022, p. 1).



However, to what extent and how are elements of PD approaches reflected in the initiative, and what potential do they have to reform DC? In order to answer those questions, we address and examine the speech at the conference “Feminist Development Policy – Transforming International Cooperation”, which presented the new German FemDP (Schulze, 2022) and was held by the Development Minister, Svenja Schulze, in September 2022. The content of the keynote speech as well as other publications by the German government referring to FemDP are addressed in more detail from a PD perspective in the following.

#### 4.1.1 Alternatives to development

To apply the PD aspect of alternatives to development to FemDP, we must first distinguish between different ideas of reformation or transformation in PD and FemDP. From a PD perspective, alternatives to development (as defined in Section 4.1) strive towards a pluralism of development that includes a variety of roads and objectives. As a slightly different approach towards reformation, from a FemDP perspective, a distinction can be made between two different categories: the “mainstream” approach and the “transformative” FemDP approach. The mainstream approach aims at the increased integration of individuals in existing political and economic structures, perceiving gender equality as one step. This could be achieved, for example, by quotas or targeted programming. Going further, the transformative approach takes into account structures of existing power relations and aims to address harmful structures and practices that marginalise groups in a society, addressing structural change to reduce structural differences as well as gender gaps and inequalities (Friesen & Wisskirchen, 2022, p. 9).

Within her speech, Schulze calls for the questioning of existing power structures and discriminatory norms. In doing so, she emphasises that we should also question our own structures, including structures of misogyny, colonialism and racism. This critical reflection of one’s own position in the system is in line with the demands of PD approaches, and therefore can be perceived as an important factor. However, we would like to underline that Schulze does not mention real “alternatives” to development, according to the definition of PD. Instead, it becomes evident that she focusses on the economic growth of countries, which could be linked to the idea of “development” in its traditional meaning. As an example, she emphasises that the exclusion of women from the economies of the Middle East and North Africa region might lead to economic losses for the states. When presenting German FemDP, also Kofler (2022) states that, due to the structural inequalities in many countries, many women remain disadvantaged, lacking access to capital or agricultural funding. However, these statements lead to the assumption that empowerment should primarily take place in terms of economic participation. Nevertheless, the alternatives to development, as they are defined by Escobar (1995), are not explicitly taken up.

Particularly interesting in the context of the alternatives to development aspect is that Schulze, instead of localising the FemDP approach in the spectrum of ODA cooperation, emphasises that “a feminist policy is characterized by international cooperation and broad and strong alliances” (Schulze, 2022). From this argumentative interplay, it can be assumed that although she locates the FemDP approach in the currently existing system of ODA DC, she actually aims at initiating a reformative approach.

#### 4.1.2 Pluralism of knowledge and power dynamics

Some aspects of the policy initiative can also be assigned to the second PD aspect. Thereby, Schulze underlines the fact that there exist unequal power structures that need to be tackled (Schulze, 2022). In this context, she specifically stresses two aspects: firstly, the knowledge women carry into a society that the society benefits from (Schulze, 2022). In this context, Rosigkeit elaborates further:

Women play an important role as knowledge carriers and actors in energy use, natural resource management and agriculture. The majority of small farmers, market traders and food producers in our partner countries are female. [...] We therefore need women to make agricultural and food systems more solidary, sustainable and just. They can drive the necessary change and benefit from it at the same time. (Rosigkeit, 2022)

With this statement, it becomes clear that women play a crucial role as knowledge carriers. Thus, the suggested knowledge transfer is intended to combat inequality. However, at the same time, it becomes evident that with the same means, the objective of an economic benefit is being emphasised. The argument can further be strengthened by Schulze's message that "economically and socially empowered women benefit their entire families" (Schulze, 2022).

Interestingly, when presenting the Africa strategy of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Schulze additionally targets a "decolonialisation of cooperation". In her speech, she emphasises the explicit attempt of tackling current power structures through "real partnerships that really sustain" (Schulze, 2023). Thereby, tackling current power imbalances and focussing on empowerment as a goal in itself moves to the centre of attention.

Secondly, Schulze emphasises that we cannot only bring knowledge to other regions, but that the Global North must also learn from other regions. In this regard, she attempts both to tackle current power structures and to campaign for a mutual knowledge exchange, moving away from only using knowledge of the Global North. This argument is also strengthened when stating that one can only be successful if one engages with all population groups. We see this argumentation as an updating of the PD discourse on knowledge, since Schulze additionally advocates a pluralism of knowledge in her speech (Schulze, 2022).

#### 4.1.3 User-centred approaches and a critical stance towards the established scientific discourse

With regard to a user-centred approach, Schulze refers to a stronger inclusion of people at the local level. As one example, she mentions the "empowering of girls and women" and the "indigenous women of Sierra Leone", who must also take part in the discourse to reflect the actual users of DC (Schulze, 2022). Also, with the definition of the third "R" for "representation", BMZ (2022) states:

Improve representation: All groups that have not been adequately represented so far should be able to participate and influence political decision-making processes at all levels. Women, LGBTI [...] persons and other marginalised groups must participate equally in international negotiations, in government agreements, in the development of new strategies or in the conception of new projects.

However, it remains unclear how the influence of the different user groups will be designed. Schulze describes the empowerment strategy as both the attempt to decolonise on a macro level through strong partnerships (Schulze, 2023) and by including civil society and groups in vulnerable contexts, such as indigenous peoples (Schulze, 2022).

When we are looking at PD theories and feminist theories in general, we find a few overlapping characteristics: First, both perspectives focus on an "alternative" or a striving towards "transformation"; second, both approaches share an interest in the debate on knowledge and power (McGregor, 2009, p. 1689). However, it becomes evident that their focusses differ: Whereas from the PD perspective, the debate on "alternatives to development" is linked to a critique of capitalist structures and subsequently linked to a debate on power structures, from a FemDP perspective, one finds that the transformative approach relates to a critical reflection on

power structures with regard to certain user groups. A critical reflection on economic structures or the objective of an alternative to development is not included in the FemDP initiative.

This is a quite interesting finding since, for example from a feminist PD perspective, Shiva (1992) underlines that the term “development” is not gender neutral but stands for rationality, productivity, technology and domination of nature, which implies masculine connotations. Such a statement could indicate that, from the PD perspective, a gender-transformative approach should always take into account a critical reflection of the economic component. Based on this assumption, we can conclude that German FemDP and the PD perspective do not overlap with regard to their expectations of an economic transition.

#### 4.1.4 Promotion of grassroots movements and local ownership

Schulze discusses the strong role of social and feminist movements in her speech, giving examples such as the women’s movement in Chile, which stood up against economic exploitation, and another example of indigenous women in Sierra Leone who fought for voting rights in the 18th century. Furthermore, she proudly stated that she was a part of the SheDecides champion movement herself, advocating the rights of women and girls (Schulze, 2022). However, apart from mentioning these positive examples, it is striking that no further reference was made about how to cooperate with social or local movements. Going even further, neither Schulze nor recent publications on FemDP by the German government specifically address grassroots movements or the concept of ownership. This is another finding that indicates that the strategic basis for the actual implementation of the strategy is still missing. Consequently, German FemDP needs to draw on the expertise and advice of local organisations and individuals who have knowledge of gender inequality in partner countries and understand the local context and cultural barriers in the context of inequality (Friesen & Wisskirchen, 2022, p. 10). Gill-Atkinson and Ridge furthermore recommend working with civil society organisations, which possess the advantage of having a progressive and different “best practice” approach in place for feminist policies than government stakeholders (Gill-Atkinson & Ridge, 2021, p. 24).

Finally, the question remains whether the FemDP approach is actually as “transformative” as it attempts to be. In this context, Zilla critically illustrates a missing consensus under which the conditions of a transformational change could be achieved. Additionally, she points out that nothing is now known about the implications of such a transformational change (Zilla, 2022, p. 3). At the same time, we have to underline that, currently, we cannot yet debate the future implications since current approaches to FemDP and foreign feminist policy are very diverse, ranging from emergent ideas to transformative theoretical approaches. Consequently, concerning the evaluation of feminist policy initiatives and their actual implementation on the ground, further data needs to be collected. As a result, there exists a gap between the rhetoric and practice of FemDP, tensions between FemDP and other policy areas, as well as discrepancies between the heterogeneous demands of different feminist perspectives (Zilla, 2022, p. 5).

## 4.2 Locally led development – local capacity-strengthening

During the George W. Bush administration, the performance of USAID and the US development community was perceived as not having met expectations (Ingram, 2022, p. 5). Due to this opinion in the US development cooperation community, a new focus on “local ownership” was presented. The new approach matched the idea of best practice in development cooperation (local ownership, transparency, accountability, rigorous use of data and evidence, independent evaluation), which was correspondingly adopted in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2006 (Ingram, 2022, p. 5).

By now, and already for decades, more international agencies and organisations have adopted similar locally led approaches, such as Swiss Contact (s.a.), ODI (Booth & Unsworth, 2014), the UK network Bond (Gioacchino, 2021) and the partners of Ireland’s Dóchas (s.a.). Due to the high uptake of the approach, the concept is – and in distinction to German FemDP – well-established on a world-wide level. Different organisations have had the chance to gain extensive experience, not just on a discourse level, but also in practice. In this case, we chose to specifically focus on the US approach, since it offers a chance to review numerous documents in order to elaborate on the use of PD elements on a discourse level.

In the United States, under President Joe Biden and Samantha Power as head of USAID, the approach targets 25 per cent of assistance for local partners by 2024; by 2030, 50 per cent of the programmes should place local communities in the lead of project co-design, priority-setting and the evaluation of the impacts of US programmes (Ingram, 2022, p. 5). In 2014, USAID published 10 principles for “engaging with local systems” (USAID, 2014, v). In 2021<sup>12</sup> and in 2022, these principles were adapted to seven principles of “local capacity-strengthening policy” (USAID, 2022a). With this approach, US institutions define “local capacity-strengthening” as a “strategic and intentional investment in the process of partnering with local actors – individuals, organizations and networks – to jointly improve the performance of a local system to produce locally valued and sustainable development outcomes” (USAID, 2022a, p. 2).

The implementation of US local capacity-strengthening<sup>13</sup> consists of the following seven principles: 1) start with the local system, 2) strengthen diverse capacities through diverse approaches and 3) plan for and measure performance improvement in collaboration with local partners. These three principles especially address the effective programming of the approach. The four additional principles are subcategorised under the principles for equitable partnerships: 4) align capacity-strengthening with local priorities, 5) appreciate and build on existing capacities, 6) mitigate unintended consequences of US support for local capacity-strengthening and 7) practice mutuality with local partners (USAID, 2022a, p. 3). The content of the seven principles will be addressed in more detail in the following paragraphs while examining them from the PD perspective.

#### 4.2.1 Alternatives to development

From the PD perspective, the idea of alternatives to development describes the inclusion or updating of new or alternative goals in comparison to the “development” term. What becomes noticeable in this policy initiative is that any alternatives or hints towards alternatives are not mentioned. We can therefore only consider minor aspects, which may or may not indicate a possible desire for transformation. Looking at the description of the local capacity-strengthening policy, firstly it becomes evident that the seven principles are categorised within two clusters. Principles one to three fall under “effective programming”, and four to seven are placed within “equitable partnerships”. From a semantical perspective, these two categories already offer a hint towards the defined goal, which is described as: “sustainable development depends on local actors” (USAID, 2022a, p. 4). In this context, USAID recommends that the local capacity-strengthening approach should start “with the local system” in order to reach “sustainable outcomes” (USAID, 2022a, p. 8). Similarly, the key insight from one of the online consultations in 2017 was to promote a structural reframing in order to support effective and sustainable development (USAID, 2018, p. 4). However, neither sustainable development nor the sustainable outcome are defined further within the description of the approach. Analysing the

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12 See “7 principles to guide effective local capacity development” (USAID, 2021, p. 2).

13 There exist further and overlapping approaches of locally led development principles, for example the Global Mentoring Initiative (2020) developed seven dimensions of locally led development to illustrate the most important aspects in collaborations between international and local agencies.

principles, we find a reference to the concept of sustainable development as defined with the aid effectiveness global summits and the SDGs (see e.g. USAID, 2022a, p. 4). Subsequently, we conclude that the idea of alternative development specifically is not taken up. Therefore, we find ourselves in the current understanding of the “development” term, which has been defined by the international community (economic values and SDG focus).

#### 4.2.2 Pluralism of knowledge and power dynamics

With the first principle (“start with the local system”), it is emphasised to understand the local system and to learn from it beyond one-sided data collection (USAID, 2022a, p. 8). In order to comprehend the local system, the “5Rs” need to be focussed upon: results, roles, relationships, rules and resources of the population. Similarly to FemDP, it is also suggested that people from marginalised and underrepresented groups be included (see principle two: “strengthen diverse capacities through diverse approaches”). Furthermore, and surprisingly, within principle five (“appreciate and build on existing capacities”), it is stated that even “indigenous knowledge, practice and beliefs” should be included when building on existing capacities (USAID, 2022a, p. 17). Similarly, Farzana Ahmed notes that power imbalances remain an issue in DC, questioning if there has been a decolonisation of “aid” and an attempt to enable local actors to lead the development agenda (USAID, 2018, p. 6).

Principle four aims at using a “network approach” instead of a linear approach for local capacity-strengthening. The explicit presentation of the network approach is intended to show the creation of a mutual system that serves everyone on an equal footing, especially with regard to roles and partnerships (USAID, 2022a, p. 10). This finding can be linked to principles four (“align capacity-strengthening with local priorities”) and five (“appreciate and build on existing capacities”), which explicitly mention critically reflecting on power dynamics (USAID, 2022a, p. 17). This aspect is quite interesting, since in this case, the policy points out that US power (as an institution) could explicitly influence power imbalances: “[W]hen USAID recognized inequality or the exclusion of particular groups of local actors, we can use our power intentionally to include, elevate, and empower them [...]” (USAID, 2022a, p. 16).

The statement entails a normative decision-making approach compared to the PD approach or the FemDP initiative, since here the issue of “how to tackle power imbalances” is explicitly mentioned and answered – whereas with PD or FemDP approaches, the question of how to balance power remains unanswered.

#### 4.2.3 User-centred approaches and a critical stance towards the established scientific discourse

While principle two considers marginalised and underrepresented groups, principle three emphasises the inclusion of the local community – even from a scientific point of view – through its intent to “plan for and measure performance improvement in collaboration with local partners” (USAID, 2022a, p. 13). Thereby, performance is described as the extent to which the subject is able to accomplish the envisioned objective, whereas performance improvement is defined as a “programmatic approach” that attempts to “improve an actor’s realization of their goals” (USAID, 2022a, p. 13). In this context, three different tools are presented through which the local actor demonstrates the achievement of its own development priorities. In addition, the principle points towards a “theory of change” in terms of monitoring. This is justified through the explanation that incentives are often set whereupon short-term instead of long-term results are measured.

At first glance, the inclusion of the local community looks interesting. However, if we turn to the aspect of “user-centred approaches and science discourse” more closely, this PD criterion is aiming at something greater than what is described in this principle – namely at the critical

reflection of one's self and the critical reflection of the actual user of the tools. However, in the description of the USAID principle, a rigid framework is given through the clear definition of performance and performance measurement, as well as the clear specification of tools to be used to reach the "goal defined by the local community". Nevertheless, reflection of the PD aspect aims towards a critical reflection of the given framework in order to have the possibility of using other methods of measurement. Accordingly, due to the already given framework, the user group is only partially included here.

What is emphasised strongly in this policy is that the approach does not target a "partnership for" but a "partnership with" a local actor (USAID, 2022a, p. 15). The mutual understanding with local partners is reflected in principle seven. Thus, the recognition and valuation of different ambitions, objectives, capacities and resources in partnerships are underlined (USAID, 2022a, p. 19). Furthermore, partnerships should also hold one another accountable when it comes to local capacity-strengthening programming (USAID, 2022a, p. 20). With these two statements, on the one hand, the positive appreciation of partnerships is emphasised, while on the other hand, the obligations that go along with it are deliberately disclosed.

#### 4.2.4 Promotion of grassroots movements and local ownership

Within the policy initiative policy document, terms such as "grassroots", "movements" and "ownership" are not mentioned. However, in the USAID online consultation, it was noted by stakeholders taking part in the consultation that "local" and "local ownership" share the same definition. Locally led development is defined as a "partnership, with people receiving aid as participants within the process, rather than objects of the process" (USAID, 2018, p. 17). Thereby, de-objectification plays an important role in the process of decolonisation (USAID, 2018, p. 17). Furthermore, locally led is defined as "local communities [...] have a leading role in assessment, planning, implementation [...]". (USAID, 2018, p. 18). In this context, also Westoby et al. point out that locally led adaptation can reduce dependency and promote diverse capabilities and creativity, which is why grassroots initiatives in particular should be strengthened (Westoby et al., 2021, p. 1). Likewise, the Global Knowledge Initiative focusses on a similar approach by using the locally led approach to demonstrate how local networks can be promoted (Global Knowledge Initiative, 2017).

In chapter four of USAID's policy paper, the initiative describes how change management could be used to implement the seven principles. The paper states that USAID staffing levels are currently inadequate and that there may not be enough incentives for staff to partake in a long-term engagement with local partners (USAID, 2022a, p. 21). Nevertheless, the policy entails four priority areas, through which possible reform should take place. They address a) institutionalised accountability, b) the prioritisation of accountability of USAID to local capacity-strengthening stakeholders, c) the integration of effective local capacity-strengthening practice into USAID guidance and resources and d) the development of tools and resources to incentivise USAID staff (USAID, 2022a, pp. 22-24).

On the positive side, USAID is striving for an operational framework for the approach. However, the operational framework reaches its limits when it comes to implementation, as shown by Ingram (2022). To present a few of the issues, firstly, there is the **lack of capacities**: Usually USAID funds are given to organisations through large contracts and grants, often starting with USD 10 million. Working with smaller and less-experienced organisations from the local context would require redesigning USAID funds and employing more staff in order to track the numerous smaller funds (Ingram, 2022, p. 7). Secondly, the localisation of funds shifts the risk calculation, since local organisations might be more inexperienced, have less experience when it comes to programme difficulties or might lack knowledge of compliance and reporting requirements. Thirdly, the rigidity of the budget makes it more challenging to adapt to local priorities and frequently changing local dynamics since the budget is dependent on a variety of institutional

factors, for example prescribed sector-funding categories or presidential initiatives (Ingram, 2022, p. 8). Fourthly, as part of a long-standing organisational culture, it could be quite challenging for USAID staff to step back into a supporting role with local organisations, which may be less technically experienced (Ingram, 2022, p. 10). Another important aspect stressed by Ingram is the importance of tackling power dynamics (Ingram, 2022, p. 11), since changing the power relationship is at the core of promoting local ownership (Ingram, 2022, p. 16).

Ingram (2022) concludes with the argument that effective development entails localisation – however, this requires flexibility. In this context, Booth and Unsworth (2014) elaborate that the key to locally led development success includes iterative problem-solving, stepwise learning and brokering relationships to discover common interests. Furthermore, one should focus on locally salient issues and harness the local capacity (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). Bond (Gioacchino, 2021) offers similar recommendations but goes even further, suggesting that development should be considered an organic process and that risk should be embraced as a relevant element of social change in order to recognise that knowledge is power, thereby revealing the power imbalances (Gioacchino, 2021, p. 5).

It becomes clear that the attempt to localise is given by the policies developed by USAID in recent years. However, the descriptions of the respective policies from a semantic level – as well as the challenges presented by Ingram (2022) and the recommendations described by Booth and Unsworth (2014) and Gioacchino (2021) – can lead to the conclusion that, although efforts are being made to bring about change within the system, the US development cooperation system might be too large and rigid to bring transformative change. Looking at the semantics of USAID’s policy initiative, it also remains questionable to what extent transformative change is actually desired, or whether it is not a deliberate goal of emergent change so that the United States can shape the conditions and framework at the same time.

### 4.3 The need for global public investment

As a third case, the GPI concept was selected as a multilateral case and a more innovative concept since it goes in line with the “beyond ODA” debate, focussing on transnational solutions to tackle transnational challenges. Addressing the need for going “beyond ODA”, scholars in the development-effectiveness debate are looking at possible solutions to recent conflicts on a global level (Reid-Henry, 2019, p. 174). The reasons for this lie with the global challenges that cannot be solved through traditional ODA DC,<sup>14</sup> such as the impacts of climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic or tensions between states with large-scale power, for which the war in Ukraine and its effects serve as a vivid example (EWG-GPI, 2022, p. 5).

In order to tackle such global challenges, a few scholars and institutions have already developed ideas on how GPGs could be implemented through a GPI approach (see e.g. Glennie, 2019, 2020; Reid-Henry, 2019; UN Foundation, 2022). In 2022, the EWG-GPI – comprised of experts and practitioners from around the world – published their recommendations for developing a concrete GPI concept as a “new paradigm of fiscal policy for the 21st century” (GPI, s.a.). The concept is described as a system for an international fiscal budget, into which all nations would contribute and receive as needed in order to increase the supply of public goods, services and infrastructure (Reid-Henry, 2019, pp. 171-172). The concept is detailed in a recent publication that delineates eight recommendations, in which the EWG aims to present concrete suggestions for implementation from the representative and robust concept (GPI, s.a.). When examining this approach, we ask **to what extent and how are elements of PD approaches reflected** in the initiative and **what potential do they have to reform DC**.

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14 In addition to the criticism of DC per se.

#### 4.3.1 Alternatives to development

The EWG introduces its concept of GPI with strong words, giving emphasis to an outdated and ineffective system of international cooperation (GPI, s.a.). The use of words already indicates that the EWG is seeking a transformative approach to the system of international cooperation and its funding. By supporting the voices advocating decolonisation and localisation, the argument is strengthened by emphasising that a shift towards a new fiscal policy is needed (EWG-GPI, 2022, p. 6). Also Glennie (2019) stresses the need for support for a structural transformation in which the focus lies on green growth instead of on economic growth only. He argues that the acceptance of the SDGs has led to a paradigm shift from growth to sustainability, which has created a demand for international financial funding (Glennie, 2019, p. 16). It is noticeable that, in his line of argument, the shift towards sustainability has already taken place. This argument does not become apparent in the EWG's report, which focusses more on an on-going transformation.

Additionally, Reid-Henry presents his ideas on a global concept of GPI. He underlines that development can no longer be understood as the gross domestic product of a country alone, but that other aspects must be taken into account. Interestingly, he highlights the concept of social cohesion as a GPG that must be made available (Reid-Henry, 2019, p. 171).

Compared to the FemDP initiative and the US localisation policy, it becomes clear that, from a PD perspective, the GPI approach most clearly aims at reforming the existing system of international cooperation or targets "alternatives to development".

#### 4.3.2 Pluralism of knowledge and power dynamics

At the core of the GPI approach stands the co-creation of the concept. With the development of the EWG recommendation report, the experts attempt to ensure representative participation, reaching out to a variety of different stakeholders in order to create a concept that is not based solely on knowledge from the Global North. Thus, the integration of grassroots organisations is an attempt to include the diverse realities of people (EWG-GPI, 2022, p. 2). Furthermore, it underlines that the idea of developing good policy draws on experience and knowledge as well as the legitimacy of all stakeholders (EWG-GPI, pp. 9, 16). This approach goes hand in hand with the idea of a pluralism of knowledge, as with the PD perspective mentioned by Schöneberg (2019). Furthermore, the GPI report addresses the aspect of power dynamics in a special way:

[G]iven the tendency of those with power to try to maintain it, proponents of GPI need to consider what incentives would attract different countries to take part in the co-creation [...] and what tactics to employ to make the benefits obvious to them. (EWG-GPI, 2022, p. 9)

What is noteworthy about this description (also in comparison to the other two policy initiatives) is that first, the power dynamics are addressed from an "external" perspective instead of "those with power", although the EWG could explore its own power dynamics in a critical reflection. Second, the mention of power dynamics is directly linked to a solution-oriented approach, in that strategies of incentive-creation are to be disclosed so that as many states as possible become interested in co-creation.

#### 4.3.3 User-centred approaches and a critical stance towards the established scientific discourse

By focussing on the process as much as on the outcome, the authors propose an inclusive representation of all the engaged parties that can be reached. Thereby, they underline their own



efforts to engage with a variety of stakeholders in the near future, including governments, multilateral organisation, civil society and social movements (EWG-GPI, 2022, p. 10).

During the development of the report and throughout the consultation rounds with different participants, the importance of regional bodies was discussed. Such regional entities should complement national or global formatting of a fair and accountable governance structure. Thus, all regional entities are empowered to exercise control over their own futures when necessary (EWG-GPI, 2022, p. 14).

We have to underline that the report does not specifically address certain groups, such as more vulnerable persons: Groups such as women, youth, the LGBTQIA+ community or persons with disabilities are not referred to. In this sense, the report can be clearly distinguished from the FemDP initiative, as the focus there lies explicitly on this group of people. This can be explained by the fact that the GPI concept deals with the issue of transformation more broadly than the FemDP initiative. We conclude that the explicit focus on certain groups of people – as in the FemDP initiative – is more likely to lead to the advantage that their perspectives, needs and objectives will not be forgotten, which leads to a higher chance that a de facto inclusive approach can be created.

Scientific discourse: The GPI network attempts to link with major sector initiatives and global campaigns. For example, links should be established with institutions working on specific issues such as health and climate change. At the same time, however, specific institutions from the Global South should be involved as well, such as the Network for Empowered Aid Response and the Kampala Initiative (EWG-GPI, 2022, p. 13). From a PD perspective, this would be a positive development, as on the one hand, knowledge and science from the South would gain more weight, and at the same time, added value could be created through transnational research cooperation establishments.

If we observe the GPI approach from the PD aspect of “scientific discourse” as a whole, we discover that the GPI concept – in contrast to traditional DC concepts – can cover bilateral ODA as well as funding from South-South cooperation (Glennie, 2019, p. 4). From a data-gathering perspective, this would be an improvement towards gaining more data on South-South cooperation – even if, through the rise of global concepts, the dichotomies of North-South or South-South would be defined differently in the future.

#### 4.3.4 Promotion of grassroots movements and local ownership

As the first of the three policy initiatives, the promotion of the grassroots movement is explicitly highlighted here. The report emphasises that grassroots movements have been involved in the EWG and that they should also be included in decision-making processes (EWG-GPI, 2022, pp. 2, 10). It would be interesting to know to what extent the EWG itself is comprised of people from grassroots movements, or whether they are only consulted during the concept development.

When analysing the report of the EWG-GPI (2022), it becomes evident that the document consists of an initial proposal of principles and recommendations, but not yet a practical framework. Co-creation attempts are needed to reach the ambitious goal of transformation while also requiring a strong coordination process – whereby not only the goal, but also the process must be defined jointly. Additionally, Reid-Henry identifies five challenges associated with the GPI approach that must be addressed in the future: (1) the fiscal sovereignty of nations, which presents the most enduring problem in any form of international budget allocation, (2) selection problems: Which outcomes are provided and how are they prioritised?, (3) What happens to free riders or states that form the “weakest link”?, and (4) How will problems of political feasibility be solved, especially when formal structures of a global cooperation have to be administered and implemented at the same time? Last but not least, (5) noticeable effects: How can

contributors be shown that they get back what they have given to the system (Reid-Henry, 2019, pp. 182-184)?

## 5 Discussion

The concept and mainstream approaches of development cooperation have been criticised since the early beginning of their existence. Opponents questioning the concept of “development” point out the ineffectiveness, dependency and even harm created by international DC. The debate can be divided into a wide-ranging rejection of DC per se and a more liberal critique, encouraging a more efficient DC. As one strand of disapproval, the PD school has been criticising international DC already since the 1990s for both its Western perspective and its lack of reflection on asymmetrical power structures. By encouraging a more efficient DC and as a response to the general debate on development effectiveness, a variety of scholars question the system of traditional ODA DC, demanding new concepts of DC to tackle the global challenges of the 21st century.

Focussing on different concepts of international cooperation – namely two traditional ODA DC policy initiatives and a new concept of international cooperation, such as the GPI approach – this paper analysed three different policy initiatives to determine to what extent PD aspects have been taken up by policy stakeholders and, if so, how. Thereby, two policy initiatives within the ODA framework and one global cooperation format of international cooperation were selected. Subsequently, the objective of this paper was to understand (1) to what extent and how are elements of post-development approaches reflected in the current policy initiatives of international (development) cooperation, and (2) what potential they have to reform DC.

The PD aspects were distributed into four criteria based on the categorisation defined by the PD scholar Escobar. These criteria were then slightly adapted for their practicability: 1) the concept of alternatives to development, 2) pluralism of knowledge and power dynamics, 3) a user-centric approach and a critical stance towards the established scientific discourse as well as 4) the promotion of grassroots movements and local ownership. The content analysis of the three policy initiatives on a discourse level revealed the following.

### 5.1 Alternatives to development

- The concept of alternatives to development is not reflected in the FemDP initiative nor in the local capacity-strengthening principles. The FemDP initiative addresses the desire for transformation. However, this aspiration is closely linked with a user-centred approach, which builds upon the common understanding of “development” and growth. It would be interesting to analyse future implementation on a practical level beyond the discourse level.
- The locally led development initiative similarly does not aim at a better alternative, since it refers to localisation mostly in order to improve the effectiveness of cooperation. In that context, alternatives to development were not mentioned at all. Consequently, one can assume that reformative change is not necessarily desired. Instead, adaptation can take place within the framework of US development cooperation, but not beyond it. Thus, both approaches are classified as an evolution rather than a revolution.
- However, compared to the FemDP initiative and the localisation policy, it is clear that, from a PD perspective, the GPI approach aims more strongly at transforming the existing system of international cooperation or targets “alternatives to development”, as per the definition of PD. This is the case since the GPI approach clearly aims at a transformative outcome. However, its objective of globality, in which all stakeholders are to be involved through co-

creation, remains a challenge and makes the transformative intention difficult to implement. Further questions remain as to whether the concept will serve as an “alternative development” (arriving at the common goal through different means) or as alternatives to development (using multiple means to arrive at multiple goals), and how and under which timeframe the approach will be implemented.

## **5.2 Pluralism of knowledge and power dynamics**

- The aspects of knowledge and power are the elements that appear most frequently in all three initiatives, leading to the assumption of broader acceptance and acknowledgement of these aspects. Although all three policies aim at a pluralism of knowledge, the presentation of power dynamics varies from case to case: The FemDP initiative focusses on asymmetric power relations and the inequalities that go along with them, which is why it is necessary to resolve them. Thereby, the suggested knowledge transfer is intended to combat inequality. Interestingly, when presenting the BMZ Africa strategy, Schulze additionally targets a “decolonialisation of cooperation”. In her speech, she emphasises an explicit attempt to tackle current power structures through “real partnerships that really sustain” (Schulze, 2023). Thus, tackling current power imbalances and focussing on empowerment as a goal in itself moves to the centre of attention.
- The locally led development initiative focusses on the pluralism of knowledge through different aspects, for example through principle five (“appreciate and build on existing capacities”), in which it is stated that “indigenous knowledge, practice and beliefs” should be included when building on existing capacities (USAID, 2022a, p. 17). Interestingly, the localisation initiative also addresses power imbalances, but it details even further how the United States itself can use its power to address such imbalances, stating “[...] we can use our power intentionally to include, elevate, and empower them [...]” (USAID, 2022a, p. 16). The question remains as to who can and would decide on how to use the power intentionally.
- The GPI initiative defines “power” as an external object that needs to be addressed. This is a disappointing finding, since the EWG does not examine its own position within a system of power through a critical reflection. As a counter-argument, we can underline that the attempt at participation by a variety of stakeholders already endeavours to counteract a power imbalance. The question remains as to whether participation or co-creation by a high number of participants will be operationalised in further jointly developed, concrete approaches for action without locking the process, as occurred with the framework of the Paris Agreement of 2015: The Agreement was perceived as a landmark, even though application of the framework of concrete regulations and rules has repeatedly stalled up until today, even after COP 27 in Sharm-el-Sheikh in 2022.

## **5.3 User-centred approaches and a critical stance towards the established scientific discourse**

- In our opinion, the FemDP initiative is the strongest in describing a user-driven approach by explicitly focussing on its user group and repeatedly naming this aspect as a cross-cutting issue. Schulze describes the empowerment of her user-centred approach through both the attempt at decolonisation on a macro level through strong partnerships (Schulze, 2023) and through the inclusion of civil society and groups in vulnerable contexts, such as indigenous peoples (Schulze, 2022). Subsequently, this PD element cannot be seen independently from tackling power imbalances (PD criterion 2) and including grassroots movements such as civil society (PD criterion 4).

In this context, scholars of FemDP stress the importance of the fact that “gender-neutral” foreign policy as such does not exist, since it automatically reproduces gender inequality (Zilla, 2022, p. 2). The focus on a specific target group offers a lot of space for this aspect in particular, whereas other PD aspects are dealt with, but only on the periphery. Throughout the examination, one aspect became especially remarkable: Even though FemDP does not focus on an alternative to development, as defined per PD approaches, it puts a strong emphasis on a transformative approach when it comes to its user-centred empowerment elements. This leads to the assumption that the aim describes not only a rhetorical reorientation but an attempt at actual reformation, even if implementation can only be revealed with the new FemDP strategy.

- However, with the GPI initiative, the aspect of a user-driven approach is unfortunately left out because no mention is made of vulnerable groups such as women, youth, persons with disabilities and the LGBTQIA+ community. Subsequently, the transformative approach poses the challenge that important target groups are not directly addressed, which in turn leads to inequalities that should be removed. This observation raises the question of whether this might be the greatest challenge for PD approaches: to reconcile the idea of transformation and focus on certain user groups, such as vulnerable groups, at the same time. The two approaches – which focus on specific vulnerable groups (FemDP initiative) and also emphasise the idea of a participatory global transformation towards a system of alternative development (GPI initiative) – do not appear to be compatible with each other, so we conclude that a balancing of priorities must take place. The question is whether it is easier to work in the current system than to strive for reformation in order to achieve these goals.

### *Scientific discourse*

- The discourse of science is not part of the discourse in all three initiatives. This could be the case since a) the discourse of knowledge is automatically understood to be a discourse of science, or b) scientific research is not a priority at this point. At least the GPI network attempts to link with major sector initiatives and global campaigns. From a PD perspective, the inclusion of networks from the Global South would be a positive development. Certainly in this context, according to Melber (2019), there exists one additional challenge: Networks of the Global North must be aware of the fact that their own interests and networks (e.g. receiving renormalisation through the number of citations) can even intensify the citation gaps between the North and the South, resulting in gatekeeping and further marginalisation of scientific work from the Global South. As a result, international databases only document the bias as indicators of marginality. He points out that journals from the Global South should be considered, such as *Development Southern Africa*, the *Eastern African Social Science Review* and the *African Sociological Review* (Melber, 2019, p. 270).

## **5.4 Promotion of grassroots movements and local ownership**

- Of the four aspects, the fourth criterion concerning grassroots movements remains the least mentioned, even when supplemented by elements such as the concept of ownership. Within the FemDP initiative, Schulze discusses the strong role of social and feminist movements in her speech, giving examples such as the women’s movement in Chile and the indigenous women in Sierra Leone who fought for voting rights in the 18th century. Thereby, it becomes clear that the PD elements of user-centred approaches (PD criterion 2) and the promotion of grassroots movements (PD criterion 4) are very much linked. However, it remains unclear how common ground with the grassroots movements will be addressed, since FemDP and the principles for local capacity-strengthening mostly focus on stressing “mutual partnerships” of countries.

- In the USAID online consultation, it was noted by stakeholders taking part in the consultation that “local” and “local ownership” share the same definition. Locally led development was defined as a “partnership, with people receiving aid as participants within the process, rather than objects of the process” (USAID, 2018, p. 17). Thus, de-objectification plays an important role in the process of decolonisation (USAID, 2018, p. 17). Furthermore, locally led is defined as “local communities [...] have a leading role in assessment, planning, implementation [...]”. (USAID, 2018, p. 18). In this context, also Westoby et al. point out that locally led adaptation can reduce dependency and promote diverse capabilities and creativity, which is why grassroots initiatives in particular should be strengthened (Westoby et al., 2021, p. 1). Also, Neajai Pailey emphasises that approaches of decolonisation cannot take place without grassroots movements. In doing so, she refers to a political vacuum that needs to be filled “within the African streets” (Neajai Pailey, 2019).
- To conclude, from a semantical perspective, grassroots movements were only mentioned in the FemDP initiative, focussing on civil society and for example, indigenous people. However, all three initiatives make little or no reference to the three concepts. These findings are in line with the results of Ziai’s analysis, in which he also concludes that grassroots movements are the least taken up (Ziai, 2017a).

Considering that DC increasingly faces various criticisms in the public debate, we used the PD discourse as an approach to investigate to what extent the discourse has the potential to reform DC policy initiatives on a discourse level. In doing so, we positioned ourselves positively towards the assumption that PD approaches are increasingly being used to systematically reform DC. This assumption was developed, since most currently, we are recognising an increased acknowledgement of PD approaches or elements of such. Examples would be the emphasis on the asymmetrical nature of DC and its at times post-colonial consequences, the effects of its historical factors and the necessity to be aware of such by political decision-makers (Ziai, 2017a, p. 10). As a result, we can conclude that the three initiatives increasingly have taken up PD aspects. However, we discovered a variation in the use of the different PD elements: Whereas aspects related to power relations, decolonial structures and knowledge management are more prominent, elements such as grassroots initiatives are given less consideration. Similarly, aspects of a possible transformation or reformation are mentioned in all three initiatives. Even though FemDP does not focus on an alternative to development, as defined per PD approaches, it puts a strong emphasis on a transformative approach when it comes to its user-centred empowerment and tackles power imbalances by approaching decolonisation. This leads to the assumption that Schulze’s efforts do not just describe a rhetorical reorientation but involve actual transformative efforts, even if the actual implementation can only be revealed with the implementation of the FemDP strategy. Whereas the locally led development approach mostly uses descriptions of change as a means to reach its objectives, the GPI concept in particular uses PD elements as a reformative approach as per the PD definition, putting the objective of the transformation of international public finance in international cooperation at its centre.

Generally speaking, we can determine that PD elements have the potential to be used as a reformative approach. Valuing PD approaches, we conclude that they do influence public initiatives in one way or another. If inner-systemic change should become an option, we see the greatest added value for the future if PD scholars succeed in underpinning their approaches with instruments that can be used as tools in DC practice.

In the context of this analysis, four aspects should be considered in future research. First, as a result of the argument above, a far-reaching analysis of the PD elements at the implementation level in practice that goes beyond a discourse analysis would be desirable. Second, it is also encouraged to examine the implementation of the two approaches that currently only prevail as ideas or concepts (FemDP and GPI). Both approaches are currently only based on diminutive conceptual work. However, from a scientific point of view, neither consists of a concrete action plan that is suitable for operationalisation, and neither has been put into practice. Third, from a

more methodological perspective, the four selected PD categories following Escobar's definition of PD only allow room for a limited analysis. It would be interesting to adapt them to other contexts to make them more practicable and applicable when looking at policy initiatives. A revision or adaptation of the categories would certainly be appropriate in order to be able to better analyse future policies from the PD perspective. Last, when truly considering PD approaches from a perspective of critical self-reflection, it would be absolutely necessary to conduct the examination together with Southern scholars, otherwise one would immediately undermine their own argument if they were to only accumulate more research from a Northern perspective.

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