

Mutual Learning: A Real Way to Cooperate? Evidence of More Equal International Development Cooperation

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Abstract

This contribution forms part of the recent debate on international development cooperation, which has been progressively brought to the fore through several interventions promoted by the United Nations and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which have long proposed reflection on the value of cooperation aimed at promoting human development and protecting the fundamental rights of human beings. Within this changing landscape, the article aims to analyse the mutual learning concept emerging in the literature on development cooperation. Through a qualitative study based on the administration of 21 semi-structured interviews, this essay proposes a theoretical-empirical definition of mutual learning and explores two further aspects: the conditions that make it possible and its likely implications in practice. There are currently still very few sociological studies that cover mutual learning among cooperation partners. However, if the concept were investigated both theoretically and empirically, it could bring about a paradigm shift in cooperation that could help overcome the ethnocentric logic of colonial heritage, which sees cooperation exclusively as a means for economic aid transfer, and encourage the use of cooperation as a concrete tool for “doing together”. This would involve different actors who, through working in partnership, could enhance their starting resources and learn from each other.

Keywords: mutual learning, international development cooperation, post-aid world.

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1. Introduction

International development cooperation represents a heterogeneous research subject that has undergone deep transformations throughout its history (Abdel-Malek, 2015; Chaturvedi et al., 2020). It took shape in the post-Second World War period and changed radically over the subsequent decades (Dann, 2013; Mellano & Zupi, 2007): from being associated with a mere transfer of economic resources from the global North to the global South, aimed at triggering industrialisation and financial growth, it came to be recognised as one of the preferred tools for promoting the integral human development of every person (Caselli et al., 2021; Sen, 1999).

The New Millennium has contributed decisively to this shift in perspective (Hasselskog, 2022; Högfeldt et al., 2019): the publication of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, the 2030 Agenda with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, and the holding of a few international forums on the effectiveness of the aid and cooperation promoted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Paris Forum in 2005, Accra Forum in 2008, Busan Forum in 2011) have defined the new framework within which to formulate international development cooperation policies (Chaturvedi et al., 2020; Mawdsley et al., 2014). Through these initiatives, the international community has openly declared its commitment to promote increasingly inclusive and sustainable forms of cooperation, designed to reduce the most severe forms of poverty and pursue the goal of combating social, economic, and cultural inequalities, “leaving no one behind” (Chaturvedi et al., 2020; OECD, 2018).

Referring to the aforementioned framework, this article draws attention to an emerging expression in the most recent debate on international development cooperation, for which, however, there is still no clearcut definition in the literature: mutual learning. In fact, the research question guiding this contribution looks at how this concept is understood by actors operating in the different sectors of cooperation and animates it through participation in inclusive development partnerships (Appe, 2017; Van Ewijk, 2011), contexts considered particularly suitable for initiating mutual learning processes (Im & Swan, 2021; Johnson & Wilson, 2009). Thus, the research objectives on which the essay is based were (1) to identify the key elements that can contribute to building a shared theoretical-empirical definition of mutual learning in cooperation; (2) to earmark the main conditions that would allow mutual learning to unfold in practice; and (3) to uncover any implications that the enactment of mutual learning could generate. The research adopted a qualitative approach based on the administration of semi-structured interviews with key

Mutual Learning: A Real Way to Cooperate? Evidence of More Equal
International Development Cooperation
Silvia Malacarne

academic respondents to understand the theoretical aspects, and with practitioners/cooperators to access empirical data.

The text will be structured as follows. After a brief theoretical review of the literature related to mutual learning and the three key words that can be associated with this concept in the context of international development cooperation – reciprocity, learning, partnership –, the methodological framework of the research and its most significant findings will be presented. The hypothesis underlying the essay is that mutual learning may be the key to a real paradigm shift in cooperation and, thus, support the overcoming of the typically colonialist, welfarist logic that sees cooperation as a tool for the unidirectional transfer (from the global North to the global South) of economic and financial aid. The implementation of this change could push for cooperation that is increasingly based on a more concrete concept of “doing together” among actors from different backgrounds who have the opportunity to enhance their resources and learn from each other, according to an equal logic and through organisation in partnerships.

2. A glance at the literature

2.1 What is meant by mutual learning?

The concept of mutual learning in the field of international development cooperation remains largely theoretically and empirically unexplored; only a few studies mention it, attempting to highlight its peculiarities albeit in a non-exhaustive way (Constantine & Shankland, 2017; Crisp, 2014; Van Ewijk, 2011). However, by considering other disciplines, such as international relations, transdisciplinary research, participatory action-research, and organisational studies, it is possible to find defining aspects and feasible applications of mutual learning, which are useful as a basis from which to explore its profile more deeply in the area of cooperation (Table 1).

In the area of international relations, Eun (2018) associates mutual learning with forms of dialogue between typically Western principles of international relations theory and non-Western local experiences, aimed at building a common knowledge through the contribution of all involved parties according to a bottom-up logic (Hachmann, 2011). Therefore, in this case, mutual learning is taken to mean the promotion of a two-way dialogue, capable of orienting current international relations theory – with still largely Westernised connotations – towards a more inclusive and global perspective (Eun, 2018, p. 438).

In addition, mutual learning is applied in the literature devoted to participatory action-research projects (Beks et al., 2022; Hazard et al., 2017; Ngoma, 2022). Here it is understood precisely as “a process of investigating, understanding, reflecting upon, establishing, developing, and supporting mutual learning between multiple participants in collective reflection-in-action” (Högfeldt et al., 2019, p. 5). Through collaboration between researchers and potential research beneficiaries (Hazard et al., 2017), it is possible to initiate a true co-design that allows participants to learn from each other. Participatory action-research increases the relevance, legitimacy and credibility of the knowledge acquired (Cash et al., 2003) because it is the result of a mutual learning process.

Mutual learning is also defined by Scholz (2001) as the key principle of transdisciplinary research, based on cooperation and discussion among scholars from various disciplines and non-academic actors (Lang et al., 2012; Pettibone et al., 2018; Scholz, 2001; Vilsmaier et al., 2015). In this context, the concept is defined as a process of exchanging, generating, and integrating existing or developing knowledge in different areas of science and society (Scholz, 2001), the outcome of a joint and varied process among scientists and stakeholders of various natures (Walter et al., 2007), through which the knowledge of all research participants can improve (Häberli et al., 2001).

Table 1. Defining aspects of mutual learning that emerged from the literature review.

Mutual learning	
International relations	Form of dialogue between Western and non-Western contexts capable of transforming the current conception of international relations theory.
Participatory action-research	Process fostered by participatory action-research projects that involve researchers and potential beneficiaries in co-design.
Transdisciplinary research	Process of exchange, generation, and integration of knowledge between scientists and stakeholders of various kinds (exchange between science and society).
Organisational studies	Exchange that occurs in an asymmetric relationship between mentor and learner, generating mutual benefit

Sources: personal elaboration by the author.

Finally, exploring the organisational domain, mutual learning is associated by Stockkamp and Godshalk (2022) with the mutual exchange that occurs in a mentoring relationship between a more experienced member of an organisation and a less experienced one. The authors argue that in such a relationship, traditionally considered asymmetrical in that the more inexperienced member learns from the mentor, mutual learning can instead take place, bringing the relationship back to a more equal and, precisely because of this, mutually

beneficial dimension (Kram & Isabella, 1985). The mentor can offer organisational resources such as career development and psychosocial support, while the newcomer can in turn provide appreciation, new skills and perspectives (Ragins, 1997).

2.2 Three key words for mutual learning: reciprocity, learning, partnership

“Mutual learning” is a compound expression that seeks to combine two different themes: reciprocity and learning. When studied in the context of cooperation, this pair must easily come to terms with a context of partnership, the organisational tool by which cooperation is realised. Given these premises, it is worth conducting a brief reflection on the three concepts of (1) reciprocity, (2) learning, and (3) partnership, seeking to integrate them within the reality of international development cooperation in order to better understand their potential contribution to the definition of mutual learning.

(1) Reciprocity is a complex concept that can be studied from different perspectives. Considering it in the context of cooperation, it would seem prudent to think of it as an asymmetrical exchange of resources – in which the timing, manner and objects exchanged may take different forms between the parties involved – but also as a creative force of social bonding between partners. With regard to the timing of the reciprocal relationship, it is worth noting that exchanges based on reciprocity do not imply restitution in the immediate term, but leave room for reciprocation in the long term. If giving back were an obligation and not a possibility, one would fall into exchanges of equivalents, typical of the market (Provasi, 2014). In fact, cooperation is based on long-term exchanges, in which recipients reciprocate (if they do) over very long periods of time. Reciprocity, moreover, takes place in a two-way relationship that aims to initiate a prolonged interaction over time based on “give-receive-return”, and which is accomplished between two parties: the donor and the recipient (Boccacin, 1999). Thus, reciprocity generates a social bond within a dynamic that develops, more often than not, into an asymmetrical relationship (Provasi, 2014). This is what happens in development cooperation experiences where “there is asymmetry between those who, on the one hand, have more resources and capacities and those who, on the other hand, have less” (Caselli, 2015, p.113). Finally, with respect to the resources being exchanged, it is useful to refer to the distinction proposed by Gouldner between “homeomorphic reciprocity”, based on an exchange between identical objects, and “heteromorphic reciprocity”, an exchange whose content may differ in nature and value (Gouldner, 1973). Assuming the perspective of the

second type, reciprocity relationships are not based on the equivalence of the exchanged “objects” since they are forms of exchange incentivised by the value of the bond rather than the good or service being exchanged (Pais & Provasi, 2015).

(2) To speak of learning in the context of international development cooperation is to conceive of it holistically (UNESCO, 2013), as a process that mobilises all human capacities: cognitive or rational, but also character, social, and emotional (WEF, 2015; Maccarini, 2016). Thus, learning in cooperation is an experience that activates individuals in their totality. Moreover, again in the context of cooperation, learning is situated in social contexts, which in turn determine its nature and content (Mahieu & Caudenberg, 2020; Johnson & Wilson, 2009). Thus, we are not dealing with the reception of theoretical notions or with knowledge learned only through formal and institutional instruction channels, but with a dynamic process that takes place through the active participation of individuals within a context in which they interact with one another (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning in cooperation can also take on the connotations of so-called experiential learning, that process which involves understanding, reflection and conceptualisation from the experiences of individuals, and through which new knowledge is generated (Kolb, 1984). Among cooperation partners grappling with the management of joint projects, it is as if a true “action learning space” is created, a shared space that intermingles interactions, events, stories and cross-cutting experiences that influence the learning and production of knowledge, practices, tools and innovative techniques (Johnson & Wilson, 2009). A final aspect to consider is the social character of the learning process in cooperation, since it is the result of the relationship between a multiplicity of constantly changing actors. Not only context and environment influence this process, but also access to social networks (Morrice, 2012) and social relations, including power relations (Johnson & Wilson, 2009).

(3) The literature devoted to international development cooperation seems to have focused more sharply on partnerships than on the previous two concepts. Indeed, it is well known that the promotion of comprehensive and inclusive partnerships for development is at the heart of current actions by the international community engaged in cooperation; the creation of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC), which came into being in 2011 following the Busan International Forum on Aid Effectiveness and Development Cooperation, is proof of this. The GPEDC represents the most inclusive agreement to date in the field of cooperation as it brings together actors of various kinds (public, private, civil society organisations) and provides an open platform for knowledge exchange and mutual monitoring mechanisms (OECD, 2011). Moreover, according to the

2015 OECD Report entitled *Making Partnerships Effective Coalitions for Action* (OECD, 2015), partnership building is the main pathway to human development and in particular the most appropriate tool suitable for promoting the SDGs (see Objective 17). Partnerships have three fundamental functions in this context: (a) to promote the principle of accountability, thus the legal, financial, and ethical responsibility of all actors involved in cooperation actions towards beneficiaries (transparency in financial and legal procedures, respect for and protection of data used in LDC statistics, control of investment practices within public resources); (b) to implement coordinated actions at the global level; and (c) to implement and disseminate shared knowledge, since dialogue and learning are indispensable to transform mindsets and promote effective reform in global development cooperation. One of the greatest challenges for a partnership is for it to be effective, and therefore able to shape the common goals it has set for itself; for this to happen, it is essential that there be trust among its members, that everyone feel involved and valued in their role, and that they see their interests fulfilled (Maxwell & Christiansen, 2002). International development cooperation has the task of working in this direction.

In light of the literature review just outlined, we would like to emphasise the original contribution that the research illustrated in this article intends to make from three perspectives. Firstly, it attempts to construct a definition of mutual learning in a field such as international development cooperation, in which the concept has not yet been uniquely and thoroughly fine-tuned. Secondly, it sets out to trace the characteristics of mutual learning, not only from a theoretical point of view but also from an empirical one, thus also questioning with other academic subjects the operators/cooperators engaged in field activities. Finally, it broadens the defining aspects, to which two more attention points were added: the conditions of possibility and the implications of implementing mutual learning, elements that allow a better understanding of the concept and will be presented in the results section.

3. Context and methodology

3.1 Subjects

The research involved 21 key respondents selected on the basis of a reasoned choice criterion and the following principles of inclusion (Table 2).

- Representativeness of the international development cooperation sectors: public-government, private for-profit, private nonprofit and academic, in order to access both theoretical and operational information.

- Involvement of experts, researchers, directors, coordinators in the field of cooperation in order to question those who are most likely to approach new concepts, elaborate theories and policies, and offer design guidelines with an overview.
- Gender representativeness, in order to have evidence from both male and female experiences while respecting the principle of gender equality.
- Variety in geographical origin or residence, to listen to the voices of individuals with different cultural backgrounds and educational and work paths, as well as those who live and work in international contexts.

Table 2. 21 subjects interviewed in the research.

Role	Membership Body	Sector
Project Manager	** data cannot be disclosed	Private nonprofit
Founder	Sunugal Association	Private nonprofit
Scientific Director	CeSPI	Academic
Country Representative	COE	Private nonprofit
Former Director of the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development	European Commission	Public-government
Social design support	Municipality of Crema	Public-government
Senior programme manager	Crown Agents	Private nonprofit
CEO and Co-Founder	De-LAB	Private for profit
Member of the Sustainability Department	ENI	Private for profit
Conservation Agriculture Officer	FAO	Public-government
Project Manager	AVSI Foundation	Private nonprofit
Research Fellow	Tovini Foundation	Academic
Research Fellow	Institute of Development Studies	Academic
Scientific Coordinator of the Master's degree in International Cooperation and of the Diploma in Development Cooperation	ISPI	Academic
Vice-Minister	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation	Public-government
President	Progettomondo	Private nonprofit
Member of the Training Office	Rondine Cittadella della Pace	Private nonprofit
Board Member	Rondine International Peace Lab	Private nonprofit
President	TAMAT	Private nonprofit
Project Manager	UNIDO	Public-government
Associate Professor	University of Jyväskylä	Academic

Sources: personal elaboration by the author.

3.2 Procedures and instruments

As mentioned above, the research involved the administration of 21 semi-structured interviews between late 2020 and early 2021 via the Teams platform or by telephone. The interview guide was developed in two versions: the first was intended for academics with a view to investigating the theoretical aspects, while the second was dedicated to practitioners/operators and aimed at collecting operational data. In addition, since mutual learning draws attention to the themes of reciprocity, learning and partnership, the guide was structured into several sections aimed at dissecting all three concepts.

3.3 Data analysis

Data analysis was initially carried out using the “paper-pencil” technique and then by way of the qualitative analysis software Nvivo, with which the following operations were performed: creation of codes in order to systematise the collected material, identification of co-occurrences, and checking of certain conceptual relationships between codes through the “Matrix Coding Query” function. It was then decided to blend a grounded approach (Tarozzi, 2016) with a directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005); this allowed “the text to speak” by deriving categories that emerged directly from the conversations with the interviewees, while additionally constructing a composite codebook consisting also of theoretical categories derived from the preliminary study of the literature.

4. Results¹

The results below have been arranged so as to meet the three research objectives outlined in the introductory section. The defining aspects of mutual learning mentioned by the respondents will first be reported, followed by a description of the conditions of possibility and the implications of the concept that emerged in the survey phase.

¹ Excerpts from interviews, transcribed in their entirety and adhering to what was directly expressed by the interviewees, will be reported in this section; we chose not to intervene in rephrasing proposed sentences nor correcting any grammatical or logical anomalies, in order to respect the respondents’ views as much as possible.

4.1 How is mutual learning defined?

By mutual learning, the interviewees refer to a recent theoretical concept for international development cooperation that should be further explored as it pushes for a more equal view of North-South relations and, thus, for a model of cooperation through which each partner can benefit.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the United Nations and its entities offered mainly technical assistance underpinned by a banal observation that there were very few trained human capital resources in African countries (...) this justified a model of development cooperation related to unidirectional teaching (...). However, today we can say it is much less true, for example, in Vietnam we have 200 universities, in Italy there are 100 (...), let's just say the framework of the idea of unidirectional learning is much less true today (...) than fifty years ago.²

Mutual learning must be a style and principle of cooperation, much more so today than in the past.³

So, it's a good concept. And it is not about teaching the others and the others learn, but actually that everybody should learn, but then we need to go more kind of in-depth.⁴

Moreover, mutual learning is associated with a process of exchanging and sharing resources that are heterogeneous in nature and value (theoretical knowledge, technical expertise, experience, practices, cultural systems, development models) and that can enrich all cooperation partners.

Sharing is perhaps a really key word in this sense, not so? Sharing skills, sharing experiences, sharing ideas, here at the national level but also internationally, in my opinion is a correct approach. (...) Like sharing a teaching but also, precisely from a more operational and more practical point of view, sharing teachings, technologies.⁵

² Interview, Scientific Director, Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI) – Centre for International Political Studies, Roma (online platform), 3 February 2021.

³ Interview, Former Director, Directorate General for International Cooperation and Development of European Commission, Brussels (online platform), 10 December 2020.

⁴ Interview, Associate Professor, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä (online platform), 17 February 2021.

⁵ Interview, Member of the Training Office, Rondine Cittadella della Pace – Rondine Citadel of Peace, Arezzo (online platform), 27 November 2020.

Mutual Learning: A Real Way to Cooperate? Evidence of More Equal
International Development Cooperation
Silvia Malacarne

The method they use in sub-Saharan Africa to make so-called dikes, a kind of arrangement of the land so that when the water comes it doesn't get lost (...) these are very useful technical things for us who now have these problems.⁶

We have to learn from others, understand from others the positive things and give positive things to others too I mean.⁷

Finally, mutual learning is defined as a reciprocal exchange that takes place in a space of asymmetrical relationships due to the presence of resource differentials between the parties and, thus, power differentials. However, if partners work together to pursue common goals according to an equal logic and not one of prevarication or welfarism, respectful sharing can take place that values differences and based on which each can feel fulfilled.

Mutual learning, if you go and weigh it, will not be balanced. So, let's say the element of reciprocity is conditioned precisely by the economic, financial, cultural, political structural constraints, expectations that don't coincide; so it's an unbalanced mutual learning, I would say. (...) It is in the nature of things – even a couple's relationship is built on reciprocity, mutual respect, recognition of otherness in differences and [also] the construction of the relationship (...) between two partners in this case, but which could in short be countries or territories or organisations; it aspires to a balanced reciprocity but it suffers, let's say, from this burden that is the inheritance of all that one has. (...) The challenge is precisely to start with common challenges because those pose a common basis on which to really build alliances, then partnerships become alliances in this sense.⁸

Mutual learning doesn't mean that everybody learns equally. Right? So, reciprocity. Yes. But that doesn't mean it's symmetrical. And that one of the biggest challenges of mutual learning is the assumption that one partner will learn a little and the other will learn a lot.⁹

⁶ Interview, President, TAMAT, Perugia (online platform), 15 December 2020.

⁷ Interview, Founder, Associazione Sunugal – Sunugal Association, Milano (online platform), 9 February 2020.

⁸ Interview, Scientific Director, Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI) – Centre for International Political Studies, Roma (online platform), 3 February 2021.

⁹ Interview, Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, Lewes (online platform), 18 February 2021.

Because it is not that then there is a teacher and a student; however, let's say the exchange of ideas, insights and experiences was totally mutual so certainly the company learns from the experiences; however, it has to be, let's say in quotes, "humble", to the point of arriving without prior ideas, without preconceived ideas because otherwise it is not creating cooperation, but is creating a foreign market (...). The concept of mutual learning is fundamental and is precisely what distinguishes, in my opinion, cooperation with a private party done well, from the internationalisation of business or philanthropy where the company simply wants to help.¹⁰

4.2 Under what conditions is mutual learning achieved?

The interviews allow us to identify a number of conditions that seem to favour the implementation of mutual learning in cooperation: first of all, the adoption of a bottom-up approach in the design process, whereby partners work in synergy with beneficiaries to respond appropriately to identified needs.

Cooperation is the idea that answers really do come from the bottom and are not handed down from the top, and so in this sense we learn from each other, we teach each other.¹¹

(...) It is precisely about considering the beneficiary from the project writing stage, so understanding what their needs are, understanding what the needs are on the ground and (...) considering them as an implementing part; let's say, as a part that implements the project itself.¹²

Moreover, mutual learning takes place within a partnership, a relational context in which actors from various backgrounds interact and in which a mutual exchange of resources can take place.

And I must say that we have learned a lot thanks also to this network here. (...) That is, no one can know everything, all the territories; so, if you work in a network, it really means acquiring the skills, knowledge from the other.¹³

¹⁰ Interview, CEO and Co-Founder, De-LAB, Verona (online platform), 9 April 2021.

¹¹ Interview, Research Fellow, Fondazione Tovini – Tovini Foundation, Vercurago, 3 December 2021.

¹² Interview, Project Manager, Fondazione AVSI – AVSI Foundation, Erbil, 16 November 2020.

¹³ Interview, Founder, Associazione Sunugal – Sunugal Association, Milano (online platform), 9 February 2020.

Mutual Learning: A Real Way to Cooperate? Evidence of More Equal
International Development Cooperation
Silvia Malacarne

We are all interconnected and interdependent and so, of course, the moment a partnership is established we undoubtedly learn from each other; but above all, we also benefit from each other because by now there is an awareness - especially as a result of the pandemic - that what happens even thousands of kilometres away from us actually affects us closely.¹⁴

Furthermore, in the context of the partnership, two aspects emerge as important for the implementation of mutual learning: in-depth knowledge between partners and an extended period of collaboration.

However, as you well know, to make a cultural change takes time and it takes a lot of cooperation ... having the ability to learn together; you don't always progress at the same rate.¹⁵

The presence of financial resources is mentioned as one of the basic conditions for the implementation of cooperation projects; in fact, they are considered the prerequisite for a space in which mutual learning can be implemented.

This kind of money enables the mutual learning, because without these kinds of resources, we wouldn't have this basis where we can come together and do research together or do courses together; because the fact in this contemporary world is that very little can be done if you don't have any funds. I mean, you know, you need to have some resources to do something. So yeah, I would say that the idea of collaboration starts with an idea; we have some kind of donor who gives us resources jointly, and we need to decide together how to use them and how to report on them.¹⁶

A final theme that emerges from the interviews is that of crisis as a state that rather instinctively pushes people to exchange information more frequently, to share practices and seek common solutions; the experience of a crisis can, therefore, become an opportunity to learn from one another.

Mutual learning might be more effective in times of crisis because probably, for a short period of time during the moment of crisis, people seek

¹⁴ Interview, Vice-Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Roma (online platform), 18 December 2020.

¹⁵ Interview, Member of the Sustainability Department, ENI S.p.a., Roma (online platform), 16 December 2020.

¹⁶ Interview, Associate Professor, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä (online platform), 17 February 2021.

to talk to each other. And this is, I think, a human characteristic; that people need to communicate with each other to be able to get out of a crisis. It's sad that a crisis would be the only, or one of the main things that push us to learn from each other, or at least to share knowledge expertise, but without double thinking; but I think this is what it is now.¹⁷

4.3 What does putting mutual learning into practice entail?

The interviewees' narratives provide some indications as to what the implementation of mutual learning in cooperation can or could entail. It could, for example, encourage the development of more symmetrical relationships between partners. Indeed, the asymmetry inherent in cooperative relationships could be balanced by forms of dialogue that lead to peer-to-peer decision making.

It's a concept that you have to associate [with cooperation], because if, as I said before, if one party is forced to do only what the other says, there will be no real development.¹⁸

Acting out cooperation based on mutual learning would also enable the production of "third" knowledge, resulting from the exchange and sharing of knowledge among partners through a process of project co-construction.

Maybe what is happening (...) is another interesting thing: the two different knowledge [sources] (...) have given birth, in quotes, to a "third" knowledge, (...) what you would like to get to. Obviously, we are not there yet; however, (...) there is a process going on (...) that this common knowledge then results in a different thing. It is no longer either what I teach you or what you teach me, but the two teachings lead us to a different thing that is the result of what we know, but also something more, hopefully.¹⁹

Finally, taking mutual learning as a guiding principle for implementing cooperation projects would incentivise the process of democratising knowledge by breaking down the hierarchies between different types of knowledge (for

¹⁷ Interview, Project Manager, data cannot be disclosed, Erbil (online platform), 20 January 2021.

¹⁸ Interview, Country Representative, Centro Orientamento Educativo (COE) – Educational Orientation Centre, Yaoundé (online platform), 15 February 2021.

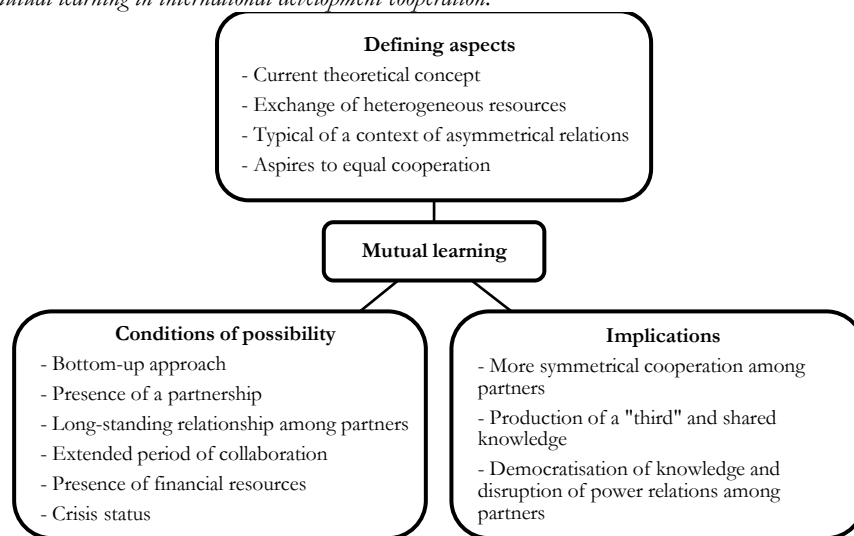
¹⁹ Interview, Member of the Sustainability Department, ENI S.p.a., Roma (online platform), 16 December 2020.

Mutual Learning: A Real Way to Cooperate? Evidence of More Equal
International Development Cooperation
Silvia Malacarne

example, university knowledge and knowledge produced by field experience, or Western-based knowledge and knowledge produced in countries of the global South). Moreover, it would disrupt the power relations between partners that generate divisions and inequalities.

This idea of equity, in my view, is very much related to this idea of mutuality and also mutual learning, whereby there is no one who teaches something to the other if the other actually does not learn and teach in turn. (...) There is no knowledge that is more valuable than others in certain respects; it is not said that university knowledge is necessarily at a higher hierarchical level than knowledge that is learned in the field, and therefore it is precisely the hierarchy of knowledge that probably creates hierarchies of power. (...) When we are dealing with a democratic perspective of knowledge governance where the value of knowledge learned precisely from a project experience has the same value as the learning experience learned in university, then we are also undermining the power dynamics that instead see different levels of knowledge recognition. Perhaps this is what should be considered when talking about mutual learning, all the talk about the democratisation of knowledge ... knowledge democracy.²⁰

Figure 1. Summary of research findings: defining aspects, conditions of possibility and implications of mutual learning in international development cooperation.



Sources: personal elaboration by the author.

²⁰ Interview, Research Fellow, Fondazione Tovini – Tovini Foundation, Vercurago, 3 December 2021.

5. Discussion

Based on the results that emerged, it is therefore possible to sketch a brief definition of mutual learning as follows: *a theoretical concept that emerges from the conception of international development cooperation in the 21st century, with which it is possible to identify an exchange of resources that are heterogeneous in nature and value (theoretical knowledge, technical skills, experience, practices, cultural systems, development models) within a context of asymmetrical relations, such as those between countries of the North and countries of the South. However, mutual learning aspires to achieve a mutual exchange between partners so that they can teach and, at the same time, learn from each other, according to a logic of equal collaboration and not of welfarism.*

This definition refers, first and foremost, to mutual learning as a current concept that has emerged in conjunction with the more recent perspective that considers cooperation as a privileged instrument of human development (Caselli et al., 2021). It is also committed to overcoming old dichotomies, such as those between developed and developing countries (Högfeldt et al., 2019) or between Northern donors and Southern beneficiaries (Bini, 2016), and to taking on a more equalitarian logic. Precisely because it is in step with the times, mutual learning could be included among the factors that, at least from a theoretical point of view, are contributing to the transformative process of cooperation.

However, although there is widespread agreement among the interviewees regarding the theoretical and programmatic value of the concept, the need for further efforts to translate it more effectively into practice is stressed. The comparison between theory and implementation represents a more general problem of cooperation: it often happens that, especially in the institutional and governmental sphere, noble principles are proclaimed, only to be realised in disappointing practices (Carrino, 2016). In fact, the risk is of there being a strong gap between the idea of mutual learning and the formalised methods or procedures devised to actually implement it in development projects (Vilsmaier et al., 2015). To compensate for this critical issue, it would therefore be desirable to complement the theoretical analysis of the concept with a study of its operational translation into the design and implementation of cooperation initiatives.

Continuing with the analysis of the proposed definition, we will now turn our attention to the topic of mutual learning as an exchange of heterogeneous resources that, while taking place in the context of asymmetrical relationships, strives for effective cooperation on an equal footing. It is well known that cooperation is frequently associated with economic categories, probably because this makes it a more easily measurable and quantifiable subject (Alonso and Glennie, 2015). Understanding it, on the other hand, as a broader and more varied landscape of tangible and intangible resources shared among countries

Mutual Learning: A Real Way to Cooperate? Evidence of More Equal
International Development Cooperation
Silvia Malacarne

of different levels of development (for example, capacity support or capacity building, technology transfer, policy change) centralises the value – not necessarily economic – of the exchanged resources (Bignante et al., 2015), regarded as valuable – albeit intangible – assets. It is in this case that Gouldner's (1973) definition of heteromorphic reciprocity comes in handy, identifying forms of exchange whose content may differ in nature and value, generating reciprocity relationships incentivised not by the type of good or service exchanged, but by the value of the link between actors (Pais & Provasi, 2015). If cooperation – as the interviewees repeatedly argue – were considered a sharing of heterogeneous resources and not a unidirectional transfer of money dictated by a hierarchical relationship, each partner could give and receive something by deriving satisfaction from the relationship with others. According to the author, what could help further balance the resource and, thus, the power differentials between partners is precisely learning, which, if conceived as a social, holistic and experiential process, could be good for all. In this sense, all partners involved in a cooperative initiative would, in fact, be in a position to teach and indiscriminately learn from one another. From such a perspective, mutual learning can thus be conceived as the result of the union between a heteromorphic type of reciprocity and all-round forms of learning, as well as becoming the guarantor of effective peer co-working.

In addition to the defining aspects, the research produced two other areas of findings: the conditions of possibility and the implications of mutual learning.

If mutual learning can be considered a strategy for balancing the relationship between cooperation partners, one of the conditions for its implementation is the presence of a network between those partners: the partnership. The attention given today by the international community to the issue of building increasingly inclusive partnerships for development seems to align with the need for such mutual learning to be further explored and put into practice in cooperation.

The partnership provides a context for cross-cultural exchange that can question the multiple needs of the actors that are brought together from their own actual experiences. It can also find solutions consistent with local contexts through a bottom-up approach (Hachmann, 2011; Im & Swan, 2021), another aspect reported as important for mutual learning to occur. Despite the organisational tool of partnership's potential to build-cooperation based on mutual learning, it is worth noting how it can sometimes fail to respect the principles of inclusion and equality (Gibbons et al., 1994; Goodkind, 2006; Vilsmaier et al., 2015). Indeed, there is no shortage of cases where a hierarchical condition prevails between partners and in which individual interests are pursued (Maxwell & Christiansen, 2002) without cultivating a common vision and pursuing shared goals.

Three other aspects were mentioned by interviewees as conditions for mutual learning: in-depth knowledge between partners, sufficiently extended time for appropriate interventions to be planned and implemented, and the presence of appropriate economic resources to finance development. The first two represent critical points of cooperation around which there is a heated debate among practitioners: the short duration of projects (on average two or three years) and, thus, of their respective funding, severely limits the ability to build bonds of trust and implement effective and sustainable interventions over time (Carrino, 2016). The third aspect is undoubtedly not to be overlooked as it represents the starting point for fulfilling any initiative; a lack of attention here would be a limitation and an obstacle to the improvement of other strategic areas of cooperation, such as capacity building and policy change, which are deeply linked to the availability of economic resources.

Finally, the state of crisis is a condition that, should it arise – and the COVID-19 pandemic is cited as an example in the interviews –, could present an opportunity for the aggregation and sharing of knowledge, practices and common solutions. However, from the researcher's point of view, it is certainly neither essential nor desirable for the implementation of mutual learning.

The implications drawn from the interviews certainly have an ideal connotation. To think that international development cooperation can, through the theorisation and implementation of mutual learning, become a set of perfectly symmetrical relationships based on an effective sharing of resources, in which hierarchies and power differentials that generate inequality and prevarication are broken down, is a dream that is, to say the least, unattainable, at least today. The aspect that makes such processes more difficult is the confrontation between actors with deep gaps in knowledge, skills, and economic, political, and social resources (Ngoma, 2022); the encounter-clash of differences, inherent in cooperation experiences, is a major challenge for the sector, which aims increasingly to build plural and inclusive working groups (OECD, 2015).

On the other hand, dreaming big and hoping for change are two principles that often have a more concrete impact than expected on the reality of things, so much so that they represent the warning for every practitioner involved in writing a cooperation project: setting ambitious goals and only then scaling them down based on reality is the strategy by which one can hope for effective change.

6. Conclusion

The research proposed in this article attempted to answer a simple yet challenging question: how actors working in different sectors of international development cooperation understand mutual learning. It is important to recall that the work pursued three objectives in particular: firstly, to identify the key elements for developing a theoretical-empirical definition of the concept; secondly, to trace the conditions of possibility of mutual learning; and thirdly, to find the possible implications of its implementation. The results that emerged provide an initial set of useful elements for describing a construct that can later be better identified in empirical terms. However, it is interesting to note that, already from this first exploratory study, the interviewees cited concrete examples of mutual learning based on their own experiences: twinning between Italian and Burkinabe schools, development projects promoted through collaboration between international organisations such as UNICEF and for-profit companies such as ENI, health cooperation initiatives that have involved meetings between Western and African doctors, partnership activities within the European Union, etc. These are very different situations and realities that, however, present aspects of the characteristics of mutual learning and, therefore, can here be considered its subsets. Such evidence opens new avenues of study to further refine the definition obtained and more deeply explore the relationship between theorising on the concept and putting it into practice, so as to guide cooperation more effectively from an operational, and not solely theoretical, perspective.

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Mutual Learning: A Real Way to Cooperate? Evidence of More Equal
International Development Cooperation
Silvia Malacarne

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Mutual Learning: A Real Way to Cooperate? Evidence of More Equal
International Development Cooperation
Silvia Malacarne

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