

Exchange to change

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Alumni

magazine



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| IOB | Institute of
Development Policy

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To contact us:

I0B - University of Antwerp
Lange St.-Annastraat 7
2000 Antwerp

e-mail:

iob@uantwerpen.be

website:

www.uantwerpen.be/iob

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E2C team: Divin-Luc Bikubanya, Hans De Backer, Sara Dewachter, Joëlle Dhondt, Laura Fournier, Baudoin Koussognon, Ezra Moïse, Joel Astora Chavez, Linh Chi Ngac

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Dear Alumni,

This new academic year 2025–26 opens with a warm welcome to our incoming students, as we also bid farewell to the remarkable graduating class of 2024–25. Your journey with IOB has hopefully been intense, yet deeply rewarding. The centrefold in this edition capturing your experiences in all their intensity seems to suggest a year filled with discovery, reflection, resilience, transformation and unforgettable moments.

This issue of Exchange to Change offers both food for thought and practical wisdom for our community. Juan's PhD research takes us high into the Andes of Sumapaz, Colombia, where campesino communities fight for autonomy and ecological justice. Using ethnographic and participatory action research methods, the work became part of the collective effort to establish a Campesino Reserve Zone in Upper Venecia.

Critical perspectives also come from Divin-Luc, who questions the future of development cooperation amid global development cooperation cutbacks and declining multilateralism, and from Baudoin, who adds his own sharp reflections on motives for mediation in today's geopolitical landscape.

The magazine also invites you to (re)live IOB life. Our centrefold visually narrates a year of unforgettable memories through students' eyes, while Chi generously shares advice for new students—wisdom not to be missed.

Looking outward, this issue features a spotlight on Siaka Coulibaly, whose professional journey across the globe can inspire us all.

As always, Exchange to Change is not just a magazine but a collective story of experiences, journeys both professional, personal and intellectual and solidarity. Do reach out to us, to share your ideas, perspectives, work or stories. We'd love to share them in our Exchange to Change community.

With warm greetings to all of you, wherever you may be, and with hope that you are doing well despite the turbulence around us.

The E2C team

Entangled struggles: a PhD journey from Antwerp to the highlands of Colombia

by Joel Astora Chavez

At the University of Antwerp, PhD research often stretches far beyond the walls of the institution, embedding itself in real-world contexts and social struggles. For doctoral researcher Juan Sebastián Vélez Triana, this meant traveling to the high-Andes forests of Sumapaz, Colombia, where *campesino* (peasant) communities are engaged in ongoing battles for territorial autonomy and ecological justice.

The central focus of his PhD was to understand how social-ecological transformations, peasant struggles, activism, and politically engaged research intersect in the creation of more just and sustainable realities. Working alongside local communities, the project sought not only to analyse these struggles but also to actively contribute to them. Using ethnographic and participatory action research methods, the work became part of the collective effort to establish a Campesino Reserve Zone in Upper Venecia.

We decided to interview Juan about his journey...



What is your PhD about?

The central objective of my PhD research was to comprehend how processes of social-ecological transformation, campesino struggles for territorial autonomy, activism, and politically engaged research get entangled in social-ecological struggles aimed at creating more just and sustainable realities. It followed an ethnographic and participatory action research (PAR) approach developed to support the autonomous project

to create a Campesino Reserve Zone in Upper Venecia, in the high-Andes forests of Sumapaz (Colombia). The research delves into how campesino struggles, ecological change, activist agendas, and researchers become entangled in contesting dominant understandings of conservation and the highland ecosystems, pursuing a deconstruction of such understandings from the standpoint of locally situated agrarian movements and strengthening contemporary struggles for territorial autonomy.

How did you plan and carry out your fieldwork?

The fieldwork was planned mainly through research agreements for collaboration constructed together with campesino organisations and civil society organisations in Colombia. The objective of each fieldwork stage was decided collectively to ensure that it would contribute in some way to the local transformative aspirations of civil society. It was primarily an ethnographic fieldwork study, but in its implementation, I integrated the ethnographic method with other forms of knowledge, such as local traditional knowledge and artistic creativity.

What's one of the most important things you found in your research?

One of the biggest learnings from the process was to understand that, to conduct collaborative and transdisciplinary research, it is essential to decentralise the research process from theoretical problems and academics as the primary axis of articulation. I learned, instead, that understanding engaged researchers as just one small part of a larger transdisciplinary collective that works in the interests of civil society and social movements allows the process to be much more meaningful, transformative, and inclusive. The role of alternative languages and artistic creativity is key to creating such articulations.

What was the most challenging part of the whole process?

Research-wise, the most challenging part was to ensure, on a constant basis, that the research process was truly responsive to the interests and needs of the people with

whom I was collaborating, aiming to keep the research grounded on the real struggles of people. On the other hand, being away from my home country and missing the familiarity of my culture was also a challenging part.

What advice would you give to someone just starting their PhD?

I would advise you to own your research from the beginning and pursue methodologies, theoretical approaches, and objectives that you feel passionate about, even if this sometimes differs from the research agenda of your supervisors.

To sum up, we learn from Juan that the journey was not without challenges. Ensuring that the work stayed aligned with community interests required ongoing negotiation and care. On personal levels, it can bring moments of cultural distance and longing for familiarity. Yet these difficulties became part of the process of growth and learning.

For those embarking on their own PhD journey, the advice is clear: make the research your own. The story of Juan's PhD is ultimately one of entanglement: between people and ecosystems, research and activism, local knowledge and academic theory. It shows how scholarship can contribute to struggles for autonomy and sustainability — not as an outside observer, but as a participant in the making of new realities.



Sumapaz and the Magic Guatila
Social-ecological struggles, campesino autonomy, and alternative relationalities in the Colombian Andes highlands

Juan Sebastián Vélez Triana
Doctoral research - PhD Development Studies

Valentia Montes
y la Guatila Tierranegra

- Abstract & PhD Dissertation
- Academic publications
- Valentia Montes and the Magic Guatila [English translation]
- Info PhD Defense - 16th June

OCALDES

When peace hides interests

the unseen face of international mediation

by Baudoin Koussognon

In a world where geopolitical interests pull the strings, international conflicts emerge or worsen, challenging the global order. In this sensitive context, mediation appears as a preferred tool to resolve disputes between two or more parties. Seemingly neutral, the mediator establishes dialogue, helps the parties move closer together, and encourages compromises to reach a mutually beneficial solution. As [Maria Zhomartkyzy \(2023\)](#) points out: “One of the key features of mediation is its flexibility and adaptability to different types of conflicts. It can be used in territorial disputes, economic disagreements, issues of national identity, as well as in broader contexts such as religious or ethnic conflicts. Mediation is not limited to ending hostilities; it also lays the foundation for lasting peace and cooperation.” However, mediation is not without its limits: a party may unilaterally withdraw from negotiations, and the agreements reached often have no legally binding value. This was the case in Venezuela in July 2024, when outgoing President Nicolás Maduro rejected any mediation proposal in the post-election crisis. Another example is China’s mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, weakened by accusations from Riyadh that Tehran had failed to honor its commitments. As Maria Zhomartkyzy reminds us in her article that “the role of mediation in international conflict resolution, mediation in international conflicts requires a significant investment of time, resources, and effort.” Thus, in the face of proliferating mediation efforts, one question arises: what are the true motivations of external actors?



Before mediation: positions and diplomatic condemnations

Whenever a conflict breaks out, diplomatic stances multiply—often under the guise of international or humanitarian law. But upon closer inspection, each position serves specific interests.

Take the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: India, for example, adopts a strategic

neutrality. While it has a historic solidarity with Palestine, its relations with Israel have strengthened, particularly in security and energy. Thus, New Delhi condemns Hamas but remains cautious about Israel’s reprisals in Gaza, as shown by its repeated abstentions at the UN. Chile, home to one of the world’s largest Palestinian communities, takes a position strongly in favor of Palestine. In contrast, Guatemala and El Salvador

support Israel, due to their closeness to Washington, past military cooperation, and bilateral investment treaties. Argentina also sides with Israel—a choice rooted in history: in 1992 and 1994, attacks targeting Israel took place on its soil, causing numerous casualties.

Mediation and hidden interests

Some countries are content with diplomatic stances; others take on the role of mediator—often for reasons beyond simply promoting peace.

Turkey: between Moscow and Kiev

Turkey maintains significant economic ties with Russia: energy (Akkuyu nuclear power plant, TurkStream gas pipeline), Russian tourism, trade (11% of Turkish trade in 2022). With Ukraine, it benefits from wheat imports, tourism, and close military cooperation. By positioning itself as a mediator in the Russia–Ukraine war, Ankara aims to preserve these interests while boosting its international prestige. For instance, the July 2022 agreement on exporting Ukrainian grain via the Black Sea, presented as an act of solidarity toward African countries, also allowed Turkey to benefit from part of the exports.

China: ambitions in the Middle East

Historically close to Iran, Beijing has shifted its diplomacy to balance its ties with Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia



and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This has resulted in increased economic exchanges between China and Gulf countries. According to Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang, China's mediation between Riyadh and Tehran officially aims to ensure regional stability and protect it from outside interference. But it also serves a strategic objective: securing the Belt and Road Initiative routes through the Middle East and reducing US influence in the region. The World Bank notes that the Belt and Road Initiative could significantly improve trade, foreign investment, and living conditions in participating countries. Indeed, in pursuit of a new world order less favorable to US influence, China harbours growing ambitions in the Middle East. By positioning itself as a guarantor of peace in the region, China aims to enhance its influence. In his program *Geopolitics in Asia*, Jean-Yves Heurtebise argues that this would "show that Washington is a second-tier power, leading to the establishment of a parallel world order not dominated by the West and imperialism." Similarly, Terra Bellum (France's leading defense and geopolitics magazine) explains that "by initiating dialogue between two major Middle Eastern powers, Chinese delegations have a free hand to expand their activities across the Persian Gulf for their Belt and Road Initiative".

Qatar: soft power as a lifeline

Karim Sader, a political scientist specializing in the Middle East, describes Qatar as "a tiny country of just over 11,000 square kilometers, with geopolitical fragility as it is wedged

between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the region's great powers." Nevertheless, Qatar engages in multiple mediation efforts, notably in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. A source close to the Qatari government told Francesca Cicardi that Doha's priority is "to end this war, the massacre of innocent civilians, and to find a negotiated solution to secure the release of hostages." In reality, as Chelkha Marwa, research assistant at CERMAM, points out, behind its image as a 'promoter of peace', Doha compensates for its military vulnerability with soft power, strengthening its diplomatic weight and strategic alliances. According to Karim Sader, apart from its financial power, soft power is Qatar's only way to exist. That is why, in his view, "*it has mastered and sharpened its mediation skills by trying to talk to everyone, which has given it room to maneuver on the international stage.*" Yves Bourdillon confirms that "*forced to remain a military and demographic dwarf, with only 300,000 inhabitants and surrounded by unscrupulous regional powers, Qatar also buys itself a life insurance policy via very powerful Western allies.*"

United States: transparency of interest

US diplomacy is more open about its motivations. In the crisis between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) and Rwanda, Washington facilitated a peace agreement on 27 June 2025, while securing better access to Congo's strategic minerals (copper, cobalt, lithium). Yet, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio declared that the goal is "to end wars or save lives. It's about enabling people to live." Interviewed by France

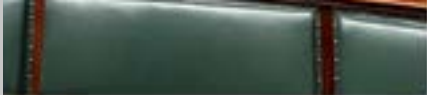
24, Thierry Vircoulon observed that "the Americans are indeed interested in this Congolese mining sector, which is 70% dominated by Chinese interests" and that "they want to shake up Beijing's influence and gain control over some of the mining assets in the DRC." BBC News reported that the deal includes "reviving investments in infrastructure, mineral resources (copper, cobalt, lithium), and reforming the Congolese security sector, rehabilitation of Route Nationale 2 (RN2) and the Goma–Bukavu axis via the US Development Finance Corporation (DFC)." The same logic applies in the Russia–Ukraine conflict: the proposal to take control of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant and interest in Ukraine's mineral resources shows that peace goes hand in hand with economic opportunities. Finally, mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan led to the creation of



a strategic corridor ('Trump Road'), enabling the United States to strengthen its influence in a region strategically located between Turkey, Iran, and Russia, and rich in hydrocarbons.

Conclusion: a two-faced diplomacy

Behind humanitarian rhetoric, international diplomacy resembles a puzzle whose pieces are moved by interests. China, the United States, and Qatar illustrate three approaches: Beijing and Washington seek to shape a world order to their advantage, while Doha, a geopolitical 'David', uses mediation as a survival strategy. As noble as it may seem, mediation is rarely free from ulterior motives. In this game, peace is as much an end as it is a means.



Transformative
empowering
eye-opening

IOB transformed my
mindset, shaping
how I analyse
development, think
critically, and connect
globally



The most significant change IOB
triggered in my life is the courage
to turn personal struggle into
scholarly purpose — transforming
political pain into critical research
and silence into voice

The most significant change IOB
sparked in my life? Learning to
navigate—and even feel comfortable
with—uncertainty!

Working with so many
different people from so
many different professional
and cultural backgrounds

International
insightful
inclusive

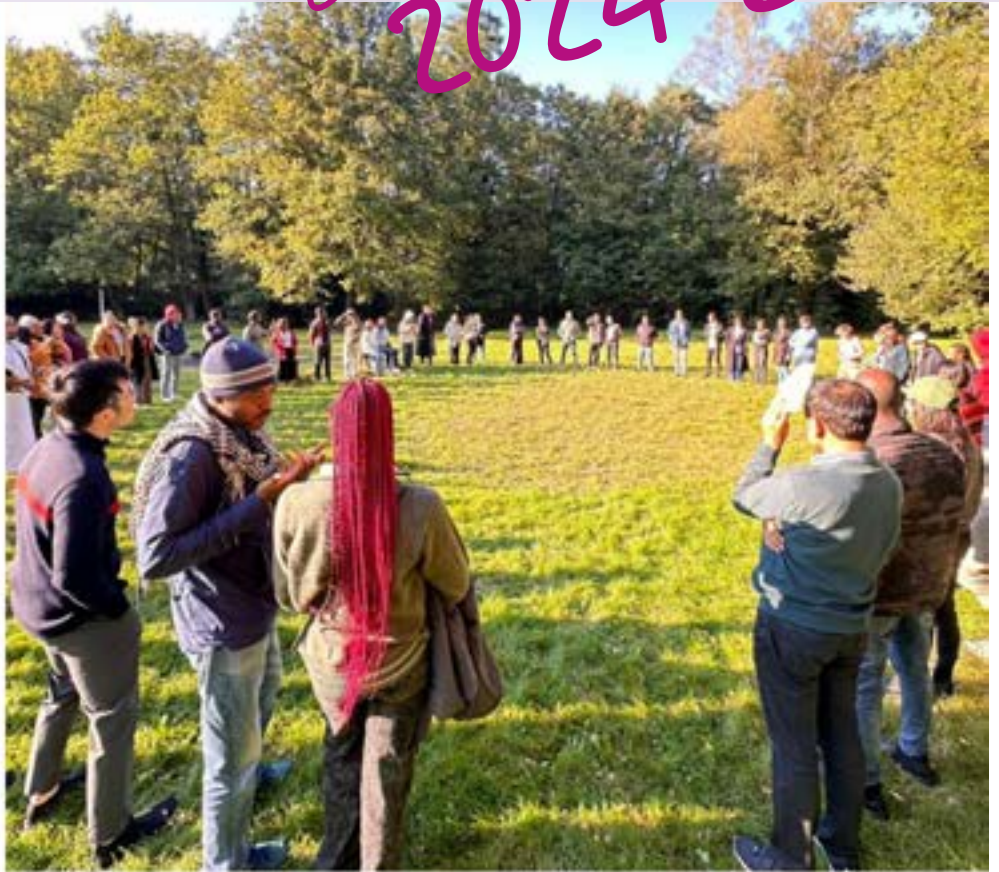
I become more
courageous and believe
in myself

IOB has transformed my life both
personally and professionally.
Earning the international
academic degree has broadened
my critical perspectives and
taken my career to the next
level.

It helped boost my level
of confidence and accept
differences across cultures

The ability to critical-
ly think about social
phenomenon

This was the year 2024-2025



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Student secret guide to Antwerp

by Linh Chi Ngac

A NOTE FROM IOB STUDENTS TO THE NEXT COHORT!

Welcome to the Institute of Development Policy and Antwerp!

If you're feeling excited, nervous, or slightly overwhelmed upon arrival, that's perfectly normal. Everything might feel unfamiliar and a bit hectic at first. To be honest, it will be like that for a little while, but you'll find your rhythm eventually.

In the meantime, here's a little secret guide from the students who have been in your shoes. It will help you ease into the city, understand the pace at IOB, and even fall in love with this whirlwind of a year.

And yes, when IOB warns you about the intense academic pressure and workload, believe them. But don't be afraid. Embrace it. This year is yours.



LET'S START WITH ACTION! (LITERALLY)

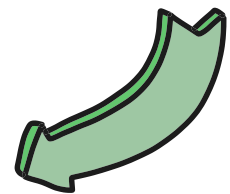
Action (the name of a shop) is your go-to for almost everything: homeware, kitchenware, and random essentials you didn't know you needed at student-friendly prices.

THEN COMES FOOD (BECAUSE FOOD IS LOVE)

Antwerp has many supermarket chains. **OKAY**, **ALDI** and **Lidl** are budget-friendly and have stores in most neighbourhoods. Some students swear by one or the other; you'll quickly find your favorite by searching for supermarkets near you.

Carrefour is excellent for family-sized meat packs (perfect for group dinners or bulk cooking). **Albert Heijn** and **Delhaize** are on the pricier side but occasionally have great deals.

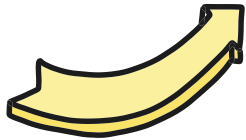
✚ **Heads-up:** Most supermarkets are closed on Sundays except for Albert Heijn, Delhaize and Jumbo, which still puzzles many of us.



ACTION



WEEKEND MARKETS



Theaterplein Exotic Market on Saturday is the place for local and southern specialties. And on Sunday, you will find a market for antiques, flowers, and clothes at the same square.

If you're hunting for international ingredients:

- Amazing Oriental and Chinatown are your go-tos for Asian ingredients.
- Supermarkets on Diepestraat offer an extensive selection of ingredients from the Middle East.



- The African markets can be found tucked in Chinatown.

For health and beauty supplies, Kruidvat is your best bet. It offers a variety of personal care products.

Most of these stores can be found on Meir Street, the city's main shopping area (and just a short walk from the university campus).

EXPLORING ANTWERP



A walk through the city centre will quickly lead you to its most iconic sights:

- The **Cathedral** of Our Lady, Belgium's largest Gothic church
- **City Hall** and **Grote Markt**, nestled near the river
- And **Frituur No. 1** is said to have the best Belgian fries in town (according to our last year's tour guide)

For the best panoramic view of Antwerp, take the free Sint-Anneveer ferry from Steenplein to the Left Bank (**Linkeroever**), or walk the historic Sint-Anna tunnel.

- + **Fun fact:** Artists have visited this spot since the 15th century to capture the city's skyline. The 1658 "View of Antwerp" by Jan Baptist Bonnecroy (now in the MAS museum) is just one example.

Speaking of **MAS**, don't miss the free rooftop terrace. Open Tuesday to Sunday (9 am–11:30 pm), it offers an unforgettable view, especially at sunset.

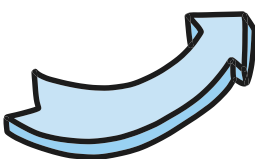


NIGHTLIFE TIPS (IOB STUDENT APPROVED)

Need a break from books? Here are the student-recommended bars:

- Tram 3 is for chill vibes and dancing
- Barbosa for the playlist
- Bar Paniek is a summer bar with local gems for drinks
- Cabron and Beer Lovers, because you are in Belgium, the beer capital after all
- Kelly's Antwerp for those who like their drinks with great music

You can also follow @antwerpen on Instagram for events, updates, and off-the-map finds.

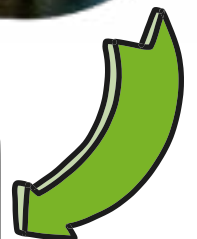


FOR GREEN ESCAPES

Park Spoor Noord is a hip hangout built on old railway yards.

Stadspark is a former fortress site located in the city center.

But if you ask for the most romantic garden, **Begijnhof** is a hidden gem on campus. It's part of a centuries-old, secluded community once built for single women. Red brick houses. Cobblestones. Quiet charm.



Welcome to your first semester at IOB!

Your calendar might feel like a game of Tetris. Between lectures, readings, quizzes, and exams, you will feel like you are always racing the clock. At least that was how we all felt last year.

Here's what helped us:

- ✦ **Pace yourself:** The workload is real, but don't try to read everything at once. Learn to prioritise. Not every reading needs to be read word for word. Focus on the compulsory material, find summaries, discuss with classmates, and don't hesitate to ask for help.
- ✦ **Find your study rhythm:** Whether it's working at the library, a quiet study space like Ichthus, Cabin, or 360, or your room, to figure out where you focus best.
- ✦ **Study together:** You'll be amazed at how much you learn just by discussing ideas with your new friends. It also helps beat the isolation of academic stress.
- ✦ **Talk to your professors:** They're not scary, I promise! They're kind, brilliant, and genuinely want you to succeed. Take breaks, guilt-free: Burnout is real. Go for a walk. Visit the river. Call your family. Or plan a little trip.



You don't have to do this alone... that's the biggest secret. Everyone is figuring it out, just like you.

The student representatives of IOB 2024 - 2025 have compiled a comprehensive collection of resources and information that you may need, covering topics such as studying, health, and social life.

The last note

You will learn and grow so much in this coming academic year. New friends, fresh perspectives, and memorable moments that will stay with you for a long time. If the IOB class of 2024-2025 could give you a hint, the experience is not only an academic transformation, but also a personal one.

So, take care of yourself. Embrace the ride. And here's to your year ahead:

To a new city, new friends, and a new you.

Welcome to IOB 2025-2026!

Alumni panel



Siaka Coulibaly
Development
promotion: Public
finance management
1988 | Côte d'Ivoire

Where are you currently living? Currently I live in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

Where do you work? I worked with the United Nations as a Senior Executive. Most recently, I served as UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Cameroon (2023–2024), leading 25 UN agencies to advance peacebuilding, crisis response, human rights, and cross-border cooperation.

How did the IOB experience affect your life/ career?

As a proud alumnus of the former College for Developing Countries, now the Institute of Development Policy (IOB) at the University of Antwerp, I hold two Master's degrees in Development Promotion—Economic Planning (1987) and Public Financial Management (1988). These foundations guided my career in the Government of Côte d'Ivoire (1989–2000), UNDP (2000–2015), and as UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Benin,

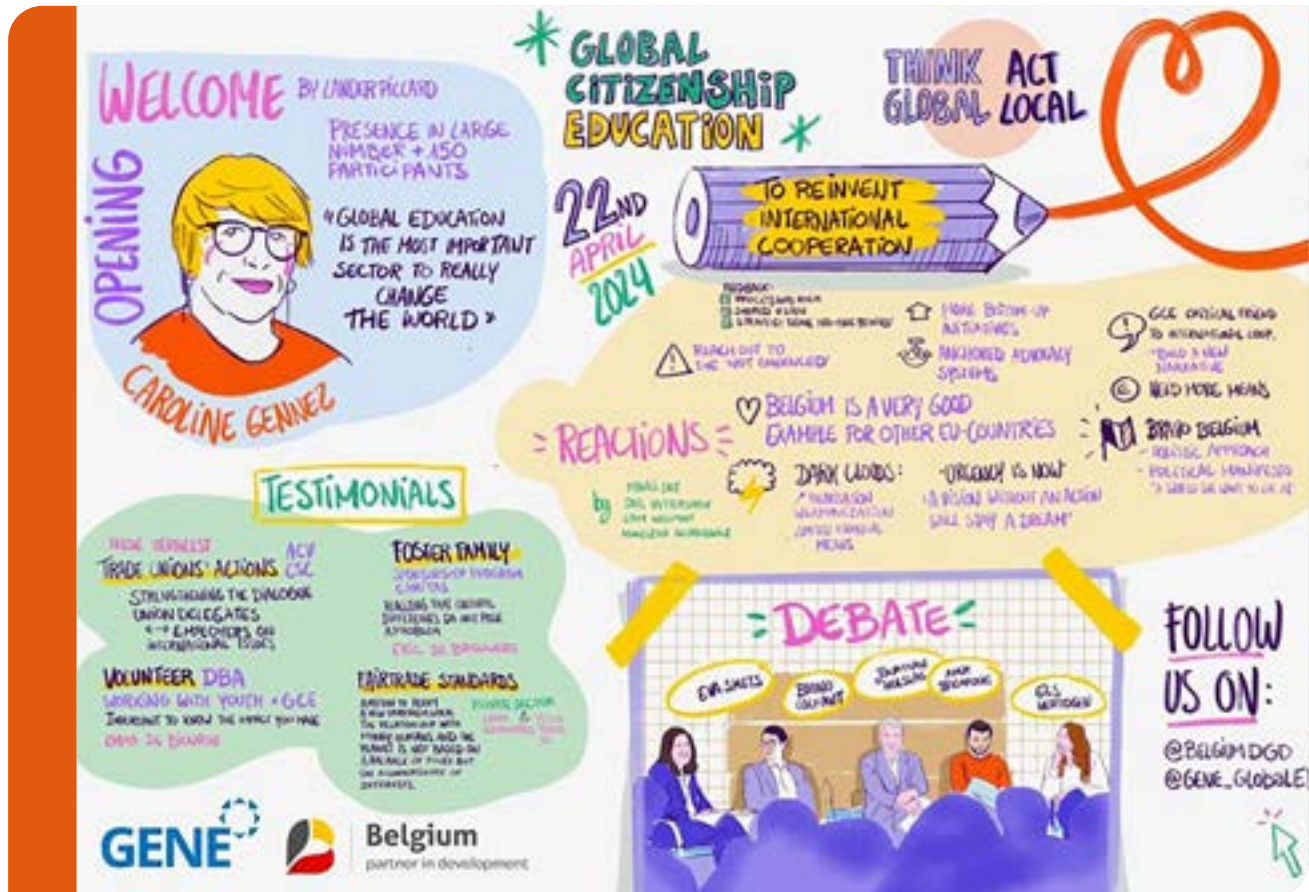
Cameroon, and Senegal (2016–2024). Now retired, I remain committed to supporting the IOB community and mentoring future generations.

A current evolution which worries you and which makes you think bleakly about the future

One current evolution that worries me deeply is the growing inequality between (developed and developing countries) and within countries, exacerbated by technological disruption, climate change and an increasingly fragile global economic system. While a small fraction of the global population accumulates unprecedented wealth and power from globalisation and digital innovation, millions are left behind with limited access to quality education, healthcare, and decent jobs. The digital economy, instead of leveling the playing field, often reinforces existing disparities. Combined with environmental degradation and the erosion of social safety nets, this trajectory threatens to entrench poverty, fuel social unrest, and undermine the prospects of inclusive and sustainable development in the years ahead. If these disparities continue to deepen, the future may be marked by heightened instability, mass migration, and a breakdown in global solidarity.

Reflecting on the crisis in development cooperation in an era of deepening extremism

by Divin-Luc Bikubanya



Development cooperation: when politics gets involved (a little too much!)

Whether it be peace and good governance, climate and environmental action, sustainable economic development or human development and many other areas, development cooperation seems to have had no limits in its fields of action for several decades. However, in recent years, budgetary constraints in donor countries have become an issue, often with such aggressiveness (in terms of the impact on the millions of lives that depend on it) and unpredictability (in terms of unanticipated project interruptions). Development cooperation is no longer only under economic pressure but also, and above all, under political pressure. In two years (2023–2025), the major Western economies have significantly reduced and reconfigured their foreign aid. According to the

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), official development assistance (ODA) from the countries of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) fell to USD 212.1 billion in 2024, down 7.1% from 2023. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and various institutes also report additional cuts announced by major donors (the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom and France). This trend directly undermines stable funding for educational, humanitarian and development programmes. The 2024 Belgian government's annual report on development cooperation highlights that it is facing significant pressures (humanitarian crises, war in Ukraine, climate shocks, financial volatility) and recommends greater flexibility in budget and efficiency, increased support for fragile countries and resilience, as well as enhanced

transparency and independent evaluation. The same report sets out these priorities and illustrates, through operational examples - notably the mandate entrusted to Enabel for reconstruction programmes in Ukraine - the concrete reorientation of certain aid flows. This is supplemented by data published by the OECD, which also confirms a targeted increase in bilateral support to Ukraine in 2024, while reiterating Belgium's commitment to the least developed countries.

However, these commendable efforts face growing political and ideological obstacles such as budget redeployments, security priorities and pressure from far-right movements that restrict civic space. These constraints undermine the sustainable implementation of development cooperation guidelines and calls into question the very sustainability of partnerships.

It is in this rather gloomy context that

this reflection raises the question: How is *development cooperation* affected by (current) *right-wing extremism*? But perhaps the most pertinent question is: *is there a future for development cooperation*?

Indeed, the rise and normalisation of right-wing, populist or nationalist political currents are reflected in public strategies that go beyond electoral rhetoric, marked by the restriction of civil rights, the questioning of multilateralism and a preference for bilateral or transactional security-based approaches. In addition, there is also an emphasis on national sovereignty, the closing of borders with a discourse of 'priority for citizens' that is reflected in laws and administrative practices aimed at controlling NGOs, the press and universities. This is illustrated by recent cases in Hungary denounced by international NGOs and reports on the rule of law in the EU. The following discussion will henceforth explore some pertinent case studies.

Europe and the United States

Firstly, in Europe, educational and exchange programmes, despite their robust impact (measurable gains in skills, employability and internationalisation of institutions), are increasingly exposed to the effects of the rise of radical right-wing movements that restrict civic space and security and defence at the expense of development cooperation and international solidarity. In Belgium, this dynamic translates into a direct threat to national scholarship and capacity-building instruments: VLIR-UOS, ARES, bilateral cooperation via Enabel. In the country, the government's commitment to reduce the cooperation budget by around 25% has been widely reported and is causing concern in the education sector, as it jeopardises the predictability of multi-annual funding and the continuity of scholarships and academic programmes supporting employability and alumni networks. Critically, the budget cut risks weakening precisely those mechanisms that maximise the impact of scholarships. Indeed, without ring-fencing and without long-term guarantees, sustainable training projects and socio-economic benefits for partner

countries become vulnerable to political trade-offs and short-term priorities. Next, the 2024 Belgian annual report on development cooperation addresses this issue in a pragmatic manner, reminding us that citizenship education encourages greater international solidarity, as illustrated by the image (left).

This emphasis on citizenship education is in line with the recommendations of international organisations that consider inclusive education and media literacy to be essential tools for preventing violent extremism. Faced with an international situation marked by simultaneous crises and volatile funding, Belgium's report on development cooperation emphasises the need to ensure the resilience of education systems and to strengthen citizenship skills as a vehicle for social cohesion. In light of the prevailing political and security crises in Africa's Great Lakes Region, particularly in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the necessity for such an international solidarity is paramount.

Secondly, the United States under the Trump administration is currently exerting major pressure on the international aid architecture by redirecting funding towards domestic and geopolitical priorities, while imposing cuts in humanitarian and development aid, compromising the predictability of support for education, health and food programmes around the world. In the last two years, the US has slashed over \$1.4B from the Global Fund, hitting more than 100 countries, weakening the operational capacity of USAID and multilateral agencies. This strategy, which combines an America First stance, security priorities and the use of economic instruments (conditions, sanctions, tariffs), is profoundly reshaping the logic of public cooperation as it had been consolidated since the end of the Cold War. As a result of the programmes being cut, staff are being laid off. This financial crisis is also accompanied by the failing role of the NGO system, which is often criticised in Southern countries. The time has therefore come to adapt to the brutal context of aid cuts, to work independently for civil liberties and systemic change in general.

What conclusions can be drawn?

The threats to development cooperation and the challenges of social justice that have often accompanied it are certainly one more reason to rethink the way North-South collaborations operate. Morally and politically, the instrumentalisation of aid has a cost for democracy and governance autonomy. Indeed, when aid primarily serves national or ideological interests, it erodes confidence in multilateralism, weakens accountability to beneficiary populations and transforms solidarity into an instrument of pressure or geopolitical rivalry. In the short term, this logic may produce political gains for certain governments. On the other side, in the medium to long term, it erodes the trust of local partners, increases the fragility of recipient states and compromises the ability of programmes, particularly educational programmes, to act as bulwarks against extremism.

In an era of crisis in partnerships, cooperation should be seen as a tool for combating the root causes of extremism in all its forms. For that to happen, the future of development cooperation will largely depend on the political and institutional responses provided in countries in the North and in the South. More concretely, it will be necessary to maintain and diversify multilateral funding, provide legal protection for civil society actors and invest in evidence-based educational programmes recognised by UNESCO and specialised networks as effective prevention tools.

Finally, it is therefore necessary to state explicitly that, in the face of the erosion of solidarity mechanisms and the increasing politicisation of aid, only a clear and proactive approach to cooperation (focusing on prevention, education and resilience) can sustainably counter the dynamics that fuel extremism. In other words, if we want to preserve social cohesion and reduce the vulnerabilities exploited by radical discourse, we must reframe development cooperation not as a simple instrument of external interest, but as a public policy for prevention and local capacity building.

IOB - University of Antwerp
Lange St.-Annastraat 7
2000 Antwerp

Tel +32 (0)3 265 57 70

e-mail:

iob@uantwerp.be

website:

<https://www.uantwerp.be/iob>

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