

Populism, the West and the 'rest'

The victory of the Tea Party in the United States, the referenda in Switzerland on the ban of minarets and the deportation of convicted foreigners, the huge success of Thilo Sarrazin in Germany, who argued that Germany was compromising itself in his book *Deutschland schafft sich ab*, the French actions against the Roma people, the victory of the new right-wing party in Sweden, the rise of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands – like it or not, these developments have all but buried traditional ways of thinking and shaped a new political landscape in the West.

Xenophobia and nationalism are the order of the day in domestic populist politics. This shifting mindset poses a challenge for those who are engaged in international cooperation and believe in an open, pluralist society.

The dangers of populism have opened people's eyes to the outdated traditional aid model, which took for granted a North-South, rich-poor divide. This model needs to be discarded in favour of a new narrative that looks far beyond the Millennium Development Goals.

This new narrative has to focus on people's collective self-interest for more global justice and pluralism.

The self-interest of people in Southern countries is increasingly coinciding with the self-interest of the developed world. For example, both Brazilians and Western Europeans have a stake in preserving the Amazon rainforest – the lungs of the world – just as both Nigerians and Dutch citizens have an interest in managing the scarce resources of Nigerian oil fields, and Somalis and the British have a shared interest in maintaining a secure and stable Horn of Africa.

A new narrative is urgent because European populist movements want to brush aside development organizations as a cosmopolitan elite that is wrongfully embracing globalization. The fact that this so-called elite advocates a more just and sustainable world is of no interest to them. Populists are less interested in what is going on in New York, Nairobi or Beijing than in what is happening in their own back gardens.

Moreover, the new alliances between the economic Right and the populist Right are a cause for alarm. The former has eyes only for the economic interests of developed countries. Worse, they continue to push for the deregulation of the financial markets. The populist Right, meanwhile, is primarily interested in defending its given country's 'national' identity, which it feels is being threatened by 'outsiders'.

The impact of 9/11, the financial crisis and the rise of emerging economies is reshaping the landscape of international policy making. A new development narrative must respond to these changes.

Europe, the United States, Australia and post-World War II Japan have been calling the shots in almost every domain of public life for more than 500 years. In many ways, the 'rest' has been forced to dance to their tune, unable to challenge their

supremacy. The question is, now that this power is gradually shifting to the East and the South, will the traditionally powerful be dancing to someone else's tune in the near future? Will China's style of international diplomacy take the lead? Will this century see Bollywood conquer Hollywood?

Historically, the strongest pillar of development cooperation has been a narrative of altruism and morality. This narrative was driven by a self-perceived image in Western countries that because they were rich, they were obliged to share their wealth with the distant poor – an obligation that to many entailed a moral superiority.

The traditional narrative is on the wane. The divide between rich and poor is no longer a clear North-South divide, but one of inequality within societies. The images in the news of the super-rich in cities like Bangalore, São Paulo and Moscow have begun to re-write the traditional narrative all by themselves.


The main pillar of a new development narrative, alongside collective self-interest, is inequality. The truth is that the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer, whether in Italy, Brazil or Zambia. Inequality is omnipresent, in low-, middle- and high-income countries, and that is what the new narrative needs to focus on.

Poverty is no longer always the consequence of total deficiency. Poverty is about distribution and access. Who owns natural resources, who owns land, who controls access to education and health?

These questions should certainly be asked of emerging economies, which often have huge numbers of people living below the poverty threshold. But these questions also pertain to African countries, many of which have massive natural reserves, whether it be oil, minerals or land.

Collective self-interest and inequality – these are the new global development narrative's buzzwords. No longer will the focus be exclusively on the poor, way over yonder. This narrative will unite the here and the there.

The exciting challenge is to search for a self-interest shared by people who geographically may be far removed from each other, but who recognize each other in their commitment to a more just world. They will be the drivers of change who exemplify a true cosmopolitanism that is rooted in neither North nor South, East nor West – but in a vision of reciprocity. ■

 A longer version of this article can be found at www.thebrokeronline.eu

By **René Grotenhuis**, director of Cordaid, the Catholic Organisation for Relief and Development Aid in The Hague, the Netherlands.