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## *From Recipient to Donor: The Case of Polish Developmental Cooperation*

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Research on development aid has focused on Western powers—the global South’s 20th century colonial masters—largely ignoring the practices of donors who are not members of the West-dominated Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and its Development Assistance Committee (DAC). This article informs about the world of “non-DAC donors,” through examining Polish development aid and its sociocultural foundations. Since around 2000, Poland has been defined as an “Emerging Donor.” I argue that this category reflects contemporary shifts in global power relations and Poland’s attempts to rearrange itself within the post-Cold War world order. For Poland, a country still battling its image as a Second World aid recipient detached from global relations, attempts to reverse the aid chain and constitute an effort to redefine its position within the global hierarchy of givers and receivers. This article explores how the modalities of Poland’s international involvement as a donor are shaped by its past experience as the subject of development practice.

**Key words:** emerging donors, Poland, development discourses, gift theory, international aid

The 20 years since the end of the Cold War have reshaped international arenas and impacted the global developmental apparatus. Today, so-called new donors, such as China, Brazil, India, and new member states of the European Union (EU), are intensifying their activities in the sphere of international development. This causes development analysts to question these players’ agendas (Lightfoot 2010; Six 2009), what their involvement means for global aid politics and “traditional” donors (Kragelund 2008; Manning 2006), and their potential impact on recipient countries (Sato et al. 2010).

In late 2007, I had the opportunity to follow the work of one such new actor in the development scene: a Polish organization specializing in humanitarian assistance. In November 2007, I accompanied the president of this NGO to her meeting with the Governor of one of the South Sudanese states. The visit was nothing more than a courtesy call, as the NGO had already been active in the state for a year. However, the NGO president had not yet visited the country, hence, her appointment with the official. We sat down for a friendly chat and drank sodas. The president introduced herself and her organization: “We are a Polish organization, from Poland.”

“Poland! I know Poland!” The governor seemed excited once he heard the name mentioned: “I have been there during my studies! We had a very interesting trip there as students, to Eastern Germany, to Poland, yes! That was a long time ago.” The discussion continued in a friendly manner, with the governor talking about his study trips around Eastern Europe and the people he met there. He also mentioned some Polish doctors he met in his travels across Africa. After this courtesy conversation, he concluded the meeting saying, “Welcome to Sudan!” and added this NGO to the long list of foreign institutions already working in the state. For him, it seemed that the NGO simply represented another cohort of *khawajas* (foreigners) who were active in the area.

The ease with which the Sudanese governor recognized a potential donor in this small Polish actor contrasts sharply with the existing debates among donors themselves, who are often puzzled by the presence of non-traditional, non-Western aid providers in Africa. Those contradicting assessments of the recent development scene—on one hand suggesting significant changes and the emergence of new actors, yet on the other implying continuity with the past—prompted me to examine the process of becoming a donor. Although the category of “emerging donors” might be problematic and more political than analytical, it provides a fascinating pretext for investigating how one becomes a donor. Thus in this article, I will discuss how development activists validate their donor activities. While I believe that this query should be addressed to both so-called traditional and emerging donors, in this article I focus on analyzing Polish developmental endeavors. As I will demonstrate in this paper, the study of development

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practices and discourses showcases contemporary identity politics and the worldviews of those who produce and mobilize them. Even though development discourses are created as platforms for talking about foreign involvement and the world of a "Distant Stranger," they in fact inform more about the donor and their perception of their place in the world.

### **International Aid and the Polish People Without History—"Emerging Donors," "Established Donors," and Global Power Hierarchies**

When dealing with the question "why should Poland get involved in development," supporters of this international interventionism invoke the date of May 1, 2004, which is when Poland joined the EU (Bagiński, Czaplicka, and Szczyciński 2009; Czaplicka 2007; MFA 2005, 2006; Wojtalik 2008). Poland's accession to the EU, but also to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), is presented as a paramount reason and a turning point for the beginning of Polish developmental engagement. Engaging in development is considered "a chance to become known in international public opinion—both among donors as well as recipients of aid—as a country which is responsible, generous, and strong" (Wojtalik 2008:3). The earlier involvement of Poland in development politics, in particular as a member of Comecon,<sup>1</sup> is virtually absent from the discussion. Instead, a new history of global development is being put forward. For instance, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs contracted an external expert to prepare a report on Polish Official Development Assistance (ODA) in 2010, she was specifically asked not to write about Polish developmental engagement as a member of Comecon. The ministerial authorities who ordered the document argued that contemporary Polish involvement in the world has nothing to do with the past. As a result, the report contained no discussion of that historical engagement. Moreover, according to the 2003 Strategy For Poland's Development Cooperation, "the primary factors influencing international development cooperation include: a) globalization in the world economy...; and b) the end of the Cold War and democratization in Central and Eastern Europe..." (MFA 2003).

This omits the 50-year Cold War history of development, which created the very categories of the First, Second, and Third World and shaped the politics of development (Escobar 1995; Gardner and Lewis 1996; Rist 2002). There is no mention of Poland's involvement in international assistance as a member of Comecon and a donor representing the Soviet Bloc. While some academics dispute the importance of foreign aid offered by the Eastern Europe to Africa, Asia, and South America (Bagiński 2002; Bagiński, Czaplicka, and Szczyciński 2009; Czaplicka 2007), others recognize that "the rapid advances in industrialization of the Eastern Bloc countries in the 1950s and 1960s acted as a model for many developing countries and resulted in the copying of centralized economic planning policies in many Third World

states" (Dauderstädt 2002:65; see also Baj 2010; Knopek 2008; Kuczyński 1990; Jałowicki 1978; Stanek 2010). The controversy surrounding Comecon and development aid offered by the Soviet Bloc is echoed in Polish developmental discourses, which suggest it is exactly the end of this historical period that paved the way for developmental cooperation. The rewritten history of Polish aid signifies a new future distinct from the pre-1989 socialist past. As a result, Polish audiences today who still remember "contracts" in Africa or Asia, who like the Southern Sudanese Governor benefited from the development cooperation between nations of the "Second" and the "Third World," are taught that Polish developmental engagement only started after 1989 and that Poland is an "emerging donor" rather than a country with a valid historical presence in the world.

This specific perception works both internally and externally to craft the identity of the state and society as historically and politically detached from international politics. Consequently, it defines the state and its members as inferior to other international actors, who are presented as "established donors" more experienced in development politics. During my fieldwork, I learned that some development experts from Poland and other Eastern European countries find these specific relationships tense and patronizing. According to one of my colleagues, during NGO meetings in Brussels there is a sense of hierarchy between "established donors" representing "Old Europe" and "new donors" originating from New Member States. The former set the tone of the discussion, pressuring their "younger" partners to "level up" and meet their standards of development cooperation. At the same time, this hierarchy of donors is not only accepted but also reproduced by Polish development activists who, by comparing themselves to the "established donors" in the West, complain that Poland still "lags behind," "does not meet European standards," or remains "outside of global trends" (Bagiński, Czaplicka, and Szczyciński 2009; Czaplicka 2007; Wojtalik 2008).

Comparisons which envisage Poland, Polish society, and its institutions as globally inferior are not exclusive to the official documents analyzing Polish ODA. They infiltrate other forms of social activity, including the informal, daily debates of Polish development experts. While working in the Development Cooperation Department (Departament Współpracy Rozwojowej or DWR) in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland (MFA), I often heard my colleagues enviously compare Poland to Western Europe. In particular, those colleagues, who in their daily work had to confront politicians' low interest in development issues, would often single out Great Britain as an example where supposedly "development is valued so highly that a special minister and separate department (Department for International Development) have been appointed for the management of development issues" (personal communication, December 2009). By comparison, the Polish Development Cooperation Department is considered the least prestigious division within the ministry. Similarly, when in 2007 I started my research in one of the biggest Polish developmental NGOs, I witnessed

a rather pessimistic conversation about the appointment of Bernard Kouchner (the founder of Médecins Sans Frontières or MSF) to the position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of France: "We can only envy them; we will have to wait forever before we get to that point in Poland." According to the NGO worker who voiced this concern, French politics reflected the respect that NGOs enjoy in the West and the prioritization of humanitarian issues in foreign affairs, a characteristic absent in Polish reality.<sup>2</sup> As the conversation continued in this spirit, I heard comparisons of Polish NGOs to "ideal models" such as Oxfam, MSF, or Save the Children—organizations which were pointed out to me as exemplars of "good practice, enjoying wide national support and having strong budgets allowing for a broader scope of activities, and great effectiveness" (personal communication with staff members of Polish development NGO, October 2007). The respect that Western development institutions enjoy among Polish activists was visible in the frequent referencing of documents produced by those NGOs and the translation and usage of their educational materials, which Polish organizations distributed at their own events across the country. Significantly, during my fieldwork, the corridor of the Development Cooperation Department in the MFA was decorated with posters advertising the work of Oxfam rather than Polish organizations.

This sort of hierarchical thinking about global relations, in which a group of players set the "standard" of international practices while others follow, has also been displayed at large numbers of official outreach initiatives that have been organized in Poland since the early 2000s. As Poland is an "emerging donor," this is meant to educate Polish society, politicians, civil administrators, and developers, who are supposedly ignorant of the basic mechanisms governing international aid and sustainable development. To that end, in educational projects, development educators from Polish NGOs and government institutions used the "West" almost exclusively as sources of inspiration and examples of "good practice."

Many examples of initiatives where Polish actors "learn" from their Western partners can be named: they include the "Global Development and the New EU Member States—Time for a Re-launch?" conference, organized by Polish Humanitarian Organization (PHO) and Global Development Research Group (GDRG) in May 2011; The Academy of International Development Cooperation organized by GDRG in 2010/2012; the discussion panel "Dutch and Norwegian Experience in the Field of Development Cooperation—implications for Poland" which took place at the III Development Cooperation Forum organized by the MFA; and the "To Act You Have to Know" project of the Polish Humanitarian Organization. In this initiative, Polish Members of Parliament (MPs) did not visit the PHO project sites but instead looked at initiatives implemented by Western organizations and state institutions. Other examples include the project "Global Rights, Europeans Acting Together," in which the Polish agents were PHO and Education for Democracy Foundation (Fundacja Edukacja dla Demokracji or FED), and whose members had a chance to take part in "study trips" to project sites run by Action Aid

and Terre des Hommes where they could learn about the Humans Rights Approach to Development. Finally, the list can include documents such as: "Mechanisms of the Private Sector Involvement in Development Cooperation—Guidelines for Poland" which was ordered by MFA and prepared by GDRG and included descriptions of Austrian, Danish, French, Swedish, and German examples which provide possible solutions to analogous issues in Poland.

Such activities were usually dubbed as "cooperation" and discussed in terms of "partnerships," even though they clearly present unbalanced relations, where one side sets the tone of the debate defining the "standards" which others ought to and want to follow. On these occasions, various experts from such institutions as the OECD, Oxfam, Overseas Development Institute UK (ODI), DFID and many others "share" their knowledge about development issues with Polish development experts—the audience—and the roles are rarely reversed. In this process of learning, it is through the evocation of their "established" status as donors, but also through underlining their Western background (associated in Poland with the ideal of modernity, as explained above) that foreign "partners" are able to speak from the position of experts, whose knowledge and opinions hold the power of "truth."

This particular dynamic was especially present during events focusing on the reorganization of the ODA structures in Poland. Since the early 2000s, when in the process of EU accession, the Polish government had to create ODA institutions and laws; development activists—both from NGOs and the state—have lobbied for the introduction of new ODA structures. Searching for the best models of ODA arrangements, development experts looked mainly to Brussels, but also to various other countries representing the "ideal," "Western" model. One of the many examples of such activities was the "Foreign Assistance—Experiences, Challenges, Trends" conference held in October 2008 at the Polish Parliament. As it was anticipated that all structural and legal changes of the ODA would eventually have to be approved by the Parliament, the basis of the conference was to provide Polish parliamentarians with information on how other countries organize their national ODAs. This catalogue of "good practice" would eventually allow the MPs to make informed decisions when recreating the Polish ODA. However, the choice of speakers was clearly selective. MPs—who came in very few numbers, with none staying at the conference for the whole day—could attend mostly presentations given by representatives of various Western bodies managing development aid.<sup>3</sup> Only one presentation, left to the very end of the day, highlighted a non-Western perspective—that of the Czech Republic's Department for Democracy and Human Rights affiliated with the Czech MFA. This marginalization of the Czech Republic (but also other Eastern European countries, significantly absent in this meeting) is especially interesting given its similarities to Poland in history of development, state organization, and transformation experiences with its neighbor to the south and the potential relevance of the Czech case to the Polish context.

For Polish development professionals active in all forms of organizations—from very small NGOs to established organizations managing budgets worth millions of dollars, and even state departments—Western institutions and international laws such as that of the EU seemed more familiar and desirable than national or local laws. In this context, Polish “standards” are defined by the most powerful world institutions (EU, World Bank, OECD, International Monetary Fund) and international agreements (Monterey Agreement, Paris Declaration, European Consensus on Development, Millennium Development Goals, Accra Agenda for Action, etc.), even though those institutions are in fact responsible for contributing to global socioeconomic asymmetries (cf. Caufield 1996; Moyo 2009; Wade 2002). Nevertheless, these very organizations represent the “highest standard” and function as positive points of reference for Polish developmentalists.

This strong attribution of power to the West corresponds with contemporary identity politics, which wrestle with the identification of Poland as a Second World country representative of the East (Cavanagh 2004; Janion 2006; Wedel 1998). This ongoing struggle over identification processes and geopolitical positioning is effectively played out by Polish development discourse. In 2006, the then-President Lech Kaczyński addressed the UN General Assembly with these words:

Poland's heritage is inextricably connected with the heritage of Europe.... Like many other countries over the course of history, we have experienced disasters that, unfortunately, still affect the everyday lives of millions of people on different continents. We have suffered because of wars and massive destruction thereafter. Because of poverty. Because of a lack of freedom and a loss of independence. Today, in a free country, where for over a decade now we have been implementing essential reforms—we are making up for lost time. We are actually sharing our experiences of deep transformation with others. Poland's experience with shedding a totalitarian regime and taking up the task of modernizing the country affords us a special comprehension of the needs of countries that follow a similar path and the essence of their transition.... Today, Poland is a rapidly developing country. We are turning into a country that is able to donate to the global community, much to our satisfaction. Indeed, I would like Poland to become even more active in this respect. (Kaczyński 2006).

This particular developmental rhetoric promotes the vision of a state engaged in making a difference in the world and regaining control over its destiny. As in Ferguson's (1999) description of Zambia, the aim here is also to return to modernity and regain power within global relations. To achieve this dream, development activists emulated institutional solutions (as visible in the ODA reforms), propaganda materials (of Oxfam), development indicators (of the OECD), and prescriptions (such as Millennium Development Goals) from central players in the “Western World” who define positions within the global hierarchy. As in the Cuna case described by Taussig (1993), the only available strategy is the impossible, imperfect illusion of mimesis.

As we can see, even though international aid promises development for others, it is also just another attempt to realize the dream of modernity for Poles themselves. The case of India described by Bornstein (2009:629) reflects the Polish moral story of progress: the country is “imagined as a developed nation, a benevolent donor, no longer a needy recipient.” The belief that Poland has the knowledge and capacity to assist others on their road to modernity ultimately proves that Poland has left its backward status and finally returned to the West. Furthermore, as Mitchell (2000) has argued, the passage from pre-modern to modern is always envisaged as a rupture and separation. In light of this theory, it is clear why the Poland's socialist past and its Comecon involvement is rejected and why the socialist times, associated with a backward status, are today reimagined as a terra incognita.

### **Aid as a Gift: Paying Back the Debt**

This specific version of (no) history, envisioning Poland as a country detached from global relations, results in a situation where justification for foreign involvement must be created anew. The key to that task is in another part of the country's history—one that defines it as an aid recipient.

In her biography, Janina Ochojska, the founder of the Polish Humanitarian Organization—one of the most prominent Polish developmental NGOs—discusses with the interviewer her motivations for humanitarian pursuit (Ochojska and Bonowicz 2000). At great length, she reveals her private struggle with health issues resulting from polio, which she survived as a child. Since then, she has been battling with spine and bone structure problems. Her condition required specialist care that was impossible to obtain in Poland in the 1980s. The government of France, as well as various French individuals and organizations, came to Ochojska's assistance by financing and facilitating her treatment abroad. This experience was pivotal in the formation of her future life mission to assist others both in the country as well as abroad.

The individual aid that Ochojska received was in fact part of the wider humanitarian assistance that Poland started receiving at the beginning of 1980s. Bonowicz summarizes Ochojska's difficult past this way: “You had a personal debt to the French people. But at the same time, we—the entire nation—became ‘indebted’ to them as well as others” (Ochojska and Bonowicz 2000:102). The aid she received is referred to as “a gift,” which in fact reflects the most popular language used to describe foreign assistance to Poland; this practice and goods obtained through it were called “gifts from abroad.” These “gifts” represented goods that were difficult, if not impossible, to obtain at home. They also had the power to humiliate by reminding people about their poverty and the hopeless sense of disempowerment. On one hand, it referenced one's individual condition; on the other hand, it fed into the process of identity construction: it referred to the not-so-fortunate position of the country and even reminded about the existence of distant others who were better off and who could afford all the things Poles could not. Yet, it was

only a couple of years later, in 1992, when Ochojska managed to mobilize unprecedented support for convoys with aid for the victims of the Yugoslav war. A journalist member of the convoys described them to me as an extraordinary expression of empathy, but also a meaningful part of the identity building at that time:

There was nothing like that in Poland ever before. It was the biggest initiative of that kind. People were so dedicated, so driven.... For the first time, people could finally feel that they can also give, but they also understood what it is like to be in such a situation when you have nothing. They felt for them. But it was also important that they didn't have to feel so worthless anymore; it was important as they could finally feel proud that they have also something to offer and not only to accept gifts from others (personal communication, March 2010).

Effectively, Polish people transformed from international aid recipients into donors. What, however, is especially important in this continuum is their explicit conceptualization of that process in terms of reciprocity and gift categories.

The idea of addressing foreign aid issues in terms of gift theory has previously been introduced (Barnett and Land 2007; Benthall 2001; Hattori 2003; Korf 2007; Mawdsley 2010; Silk 2004; Silva 2008; Stirrat and Henkel 1997). Most of them, building on the gift theory introduced by Mauss (2002) and continued by Sahlins (1972), Parry (1986), and Laidlaw (2000), focus on the problem of unequal relations within the circle of gift giving. As Stirrat and Henkel (1997) observe, within the dynamic of aid giving, especially that concerned with giving via NGOs, what starts as a potentially pure, disinterested gift becomes an object or a service entwined in the complex social relations reinforcing, or even reinventing, social differences. We can see how authors who themselves benefited from aid to Poland appreciated the gesture of their benefactors, describing Germans as "Angels" or Norwegians as "Heroes of Europe" (Jagiello 1993; Strękowski 2005). Yet, this idyllic vision of the partnership also has a darker side: Wedel (1998) articulately recounts the tensions and frustrations resulting from being positioned at the receiving end of the aid chain. According to development activists in Poland, it is precisely these feelings that could potentiate development aid of a new quality. "We know what it is like to receive aid," I was told by many of those who implied that those experiences equipped them for carrying out responsible aid provision in the world.

The institutional expression of the logic of the gift is especially visible in the most recent changes in the MFA. When the Department of the European Integration Committee (UKIE) was closed down at the end of 2009, the staff members who were responsible for negotiating and implementing development funds for Poland were integrated into the ODA structures within the MFA. The idea behind this move was that they not only knew "how the system worked," but also had a better understanding of the dynamics of giving and being given to and, therefore, might avoid the patronizing attitudes

of their Western counterparts. As Silva (2008) observes, donors who do not enjoy the reputation of being a traditional or established aid provider (such as "emerging donor" Poland) establish themselves as a counterweight to the dominant aid practices by characterizing themselves as more open to and tolerant of diversity. Mawdsley (2010) echoed this sentiment by claiming that "emerging donors" might offer alternative discourses and practices to the dominant "Western" pattern of aid giving. Reflecting on the Polish experience of aid receipt and the identity struggle associated with the stigma needing foreign assistance, Polish organizations discuss their involvement in the world as an ideal model formulated as to counter the "insensitive" and "ignorant" position often taken by Western donors.

NGO sites provide another example. Many NGO leaders, who were cooperating with Western donors to implement development projects in Poland at the end of 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, became brokers negotiating Western initiatives in the countries to the east of Poland in the mid-1990s. Describing the beginnings of FED, Krzysztof Stanowski (personal communication, November 2008), its longtime leader (before becoming an under secretary in the Ministry of National Education in 2007 and an under secretary in the MFA in 2010), explained to me:

It was maybe in 1991 or 1992 when we understood that we are not chosen by God, that it is not only Poles who have a right to a free market and human rights, but that there are also people elsewhere who would like to have a right to express an opinion on the shape of their house, their school and that we have no right to tell them: this is your problem. Especially in the situation when we ourselves have experienced so much solidarity, when we were fighting for exactly the same thing, when we were saying that we want to have the possibility to influence our own future.

Besides manifesting a specific morality of giving based on the experience of being an aid recipient (cf. Development Strategies and IDC 2003), the Polish case also furthers those sentiments by incorporating them into the institutionalized apparatus of aid. While FED was one of the first organizations to "share transformation experiences" with other societies, especially the ones located east of Poland, it was soon followed by many others. For instance, in 2010, MFA supported approximately 100 development projects in Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, and Moldova; the Polish aid agenda prioritizes "sharing the transformation experience" with these countries. The prospective applicants interested in implementing similar initiatives in this region at least double MFA's number.<sup>4</sup>

Such formulations of bureaucratic practice reflect the intimate connection between those who are at the center of such bureaucracies and nationalist imperatives (Herzfeld 1993). This relationship is especially prominent in the conceptualization of Polish aid in terms of "exporting Polish experiences of democratic transformation," offering "the gift of democracy," and the particular trajectory of aid

which predominantly focuses on Poland's eastern neighbors. From the selection of partners who are defined as priority, ODA recipients (in 2012, these included Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, followed by Palestinian Autonomy and Afghanistan and Angola) to the choice of field activities—among which the promotion of the (neo-)liberal market, the rule of law and civil society constitute the main components—we can see how Polish donors defined development through the terms and regions that are most familiar to them. As I have discussed elsewhere (Drażkiewicz 2007, 2008), this direction of aid might be interpreted as the continuation of the extensive historical geopolitical interests of Poland, for those areas were for a long time pivotal in light of Poland's own colonial expansion and regional power rivalry with Russia. However, it also reflects more recent history and national sentiments related to the Solidarity movement. As such, it also corresponds to national nostalgia that images Poles as innate democracy supporters, freedom fighters, struggling not only in the name of their own liberty, but also supporting other nations in their struggles for political justice. The late President Lech Kaczyński (2006), when addressing the UN General Assembly, also said:

We [in Poland] support our eastern neighbors in their reform efforts. Poland, which in Central and Eastern Europe paved the way towards the market economy, towards democratic rule of law, towards building a civil society, has extensive experience in these matters. We are prepared to share this experience even further with countries that are transforming their economies and state institutions or that intended to embark upon the reform track.

As this speech suggests, the memory of the struggle for democracy and freedom drives Polish involvement in the world; this memory constitutes an especially important part of current identity politics (Janion 2006). It has power to mobilize conservatives, as represented by the late President Kaczyński, as well as more liberal audiences: when in 2012, President Komorowski (who represents the rival party to the one started by the Kaczyński twins) addressed the UN General Assembly regarding the conflict in Syria, just like his predecessor, he legitimized his (and Polish at large) expertise in the field by referencing Polish democratic change, Solidarity, and the Round Table Negotiations of 1989. Indeed, this "transformation rhetoric" is strongly reflected in development discourse and practice. Interestingly, while the discussion of Polish aid in terms of "exporting democracy" has hitherto been limited to Eastern Europe and central Asia, the very recent political changes in North Africa resulted in an expansion of such ambitions to those regions. One of the first signs of such interest was the initiative taken by the Lech Wałęsa Institute, which sent independent observers to the Southern regions of the country during the South Sudanese independence referendum in 2011. Yet, it was not until the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya that the changes taking the place in those regions became explicitly compared to the "Polish experience." Representatives of Polish

diplomacy, the Department of Development Cooperation in the MFA, the Wałęsa Institute, and various politicians then started talking about the situation in Africa as resembling the past one in Poland. The main Polish newspapers soon gladly announced "The export of The Round Table to Maghreb" and boasted about sending "Wałęsa to Africa" to "teach Tunisia about democracy" (Lichnerowicz 2011; Pszczółkowska 2011; Wroński 2011). As Aleksander Smolar, the President of the Batory Foundation put it:

The idea of sending a Polish aid mission to Tunisia under the leadership of Lech Wałęsa is great. I don't think that Poland can aid Tunisia in an economical or legal way. But we can assist in the ways of dealing with the past, building its political system or building non-governmental organizations. We are not planning to give sermons to anyone, we want to talk. It is not about Tunisia taking up our solutions, but creating its own, based on our experiences. Such contacts are welcomed in this region especially that Poland has no colonial heritage. We do not provoke such an "allergic" reaction as other European countries. (Wroński 2011).

These recent events confirm the importance of national identifications for the construction of development discourse. The consequent specialization of the aid gift, as exemplified in Polish attempts to "export democracy," "often leads back to the national ideologies of donors. Linked to narratives of national formation, the specialization of a given country's gift expresses the image of itself and the interests which said country seeks to project" (Silva 2008:23). An analysis of the most recent attempts of Polish involvement in Maghreb reveals how strongly the nationalist-populist imagination of Polish history and its position in the international context is being weaved into the national discourse of foreign aid. Being strongly founded on ideas of reciprocity, it represents a particular (Polish) understanding of development mechanisms. Even though the Polish case offers a special modality of conceptualizing foreign engagement, it also reveals a more general logic of reciprocity and "the gift" as constituencies of development politics.

### **The Logic of the Gift—A Global Circle of Obligation**

As the Polish case informs us, development operates through the general logic of the gift, which includes a strong element of competitiveness (Mauss 2002), and builds an ongoing relation between recipients and givers creating the sense of debt and gratitude, but also humiliating the former while elevating the latter to the powerful position of the generous and wealthy (Sahlins 1972). This relation is hierarchical, and this characteristic becomes especially powerful in the global relations created by development. As Barnett and Land (2007:1070) point out, "Despite whatever 'moral' overtones it might possess, generosity [should] be thought of primarily as a political concept: generosity is a *modality of power*" which is routinely sustained over time and space.

At the heart of this power relation is the problem of reciprocating the development gift, which results in the symbolic domination of donors, transforming them from the powerful into the generous. Furthermore, participation in the gift chain holds the key to power in social institutions, conditions social relations, and as such is crucial for the participation in social assemblages. Given the omnipresence of development and its power to seize the social and political life of those dubbed as undeveloped (Escobar 1991), the avoidance of the "development gift" chain becomes almost impossible. In fact, Hattori (2003) observed that the rejection from participation in the aid cycle might risk exclusion from broadly understood global relations. One *has* to take part, either as receiver or as a giver (or as the Polish case shows, as both). The EU New Member States, such as Poland, exemplify this necessity. In order to gain admission to the EU, Poland had to sign international agreements obliging them to act as international donors. The involvement as a donor was part of a wider set of regulations negotiated between the EU and Poland. The creation of ODA was not a priority on the agenda, as there were many other topics that required careful bargaining by the Polish government; the requirement to become a donor became marginal in the larger accession negotiations and was agreed to without further debate. Yet today, this process is presented as if Polish involvement as a donor holds a strong significance for the accession process:

In order to enjoy privileges resulting from membership in the EU, such as 67 billion Euros of aid allocated to our country for the years 2007-2013, Poland took up the responsibility for helping to shape international development. Participation in initiatives which aim to fight global poverty is the certificate of our credibility as an active member of the international community. (Antonowicz 2009)

This quotation, taken from the website of *Polska Zielona Sieć* (Polish Green Network), an NGO advocating development issues in Poland, suggests that becoming a donor is a compulsory condition of becoming a member of the privileged "Western Club." Furthermore, the worldview promoted by those activists not only points to the tight correlation between participation in global relations and development, but also frames those issues in terms of reciprocity.

One way to negate the hegemony of givers might be shifting one's own position from recipient to donor. In fact, this strategy is nothing new. As Jerzy Urban (the communist government's spokesperson during the years 1981-1989) described in a press interview such a practice might be a way of building national image abroad:

When the American senate agreed to send the ridiculously low amount of \$1 million in humanitarian aid to Poland, I responded by announcing a shipment of blankets and sleeping bags for the homeless in New York. It was supposed to be a joke, a way of humiliating Americans. But the whole idea, which I detonated, took on its own life and became very popular. The government across the ocean

was terribly offended, but United States charities were writing to me asking for supplies. I made Poland famous. (Bodziak and Kamyk 2008)

While this example is rather anecdotal, contemporary global relations increasingly witness institutionalized and structural attempts of aid giving offered by countries "traditionally" defined as poor. The disasters of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 unexpectedly reversed (even if only for a short while) established directions of aid chains, with the United States becoming an aid recipient, and states such as Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic, and Sri Lanka offering assistance (Silva 2008). Polish donors also offered to assist storm-devastated states and, more recently, sent aid to Japan in the wake of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. As Janina Ochojska stated in an interview for the Internet portal *Gazeta.tv* (2011):

We have made the decision to start fund-raising to assist the victims of Hurricane Katrina, because we thought that solidarity towards Americans, who so much helped our country, requires that we do something, at least display a gesture of solidarity.... And I think in the same way about Japan, for sure Japan will now need our solidarity in whatever form it can take.

It is through events like these and through the organization of long-term aid schemes and ODA institutions that the gift might be finally returned. It is through this practice that the obligation to give might finally be met, even if it is not giving back directly.

The redefinition of one's position within the global aid chain is a way to negotiate global power relations. Becoming a donor is, however, not enough. The attitudes of Western donors towards "emerging" donors suggest that the asymmetry within aid chains is stronger than the power of reciprocity can handle. The ongoing competition between donors and the promotion of OECD rankings suggests that the aid gift is sometimes closer to potlatch than to other forms of exchange and performance of generosity (cf. Silva 2008). When the conflict in Palestine became aggravated in early 2009, various countries around the world responded with aid bids. However, the Polish MFA delayed its decision about involvement in the humanitarian efforts. The question was not whether Poland should contribute to this cause but rather what the value of its contribution should be. The decision was finally made in mid-February, and the media received information that the MFA had decided to support The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) with a contribution of 250,000 Euros. Soon after the press information was released, I heard from one of my informants about a dispute between the head of the department and the author of the note. It turned out that in the various exchanges of documents, the currency of the contribution was mixed up and stated 250,000 Euros instead of the same value in United States dollars (the correct value of the contribution). As a result of this mistake, the Polish contribution to UNRWA at that time reached the level of 250,000 Euros. Due to the currency

exchange rates, the expenditure was higher than intended and impacted the yearly budget. It turned out that the rushed document exchange—which was blamed for the mistake in the press release—was due to the already prolonged decision making process. To have postponed the announcement further would have meant bad press and criticism from the NGOs. The decision, however, could not be made earlier as “we were waiting to see what the Czechs will bid,” as I was told. “They declared \$200,000, so we added \$50,000 on top of that.” Poland’s competition with its southern neighbor is not unusual. Polish NGOs often use any opportunity to compare Polish aid to Czech or Slovak foreign assistance in order to “shame” the Polish government and enforce an increase of the ODA value or other institutional changes.

A similar “competition” (though not one that Poland has much chance to actually win) takes place with Western donors. The OECD/DAC is an especially important venue for this rivalry. It is visible in the emphasis that the MFA places on reporting to the OECD the annual statistics of Polish aid and performing well in such audits as the “Special Review of Poland’s international development cooperation.” These practices not only gain feedback on Polish aid, but also perform the role of a “modern” (i.e., transparent, rational, auditable—mature) state power. The respect of OECD, which is conditioning Polish potential membership in DAC holds a symbolic importance ultimately marking Poland’s “graduation” in the global aid hierarchy.

However, “the membership on this [DAC] committee is even more limited than its parent agency, the OECD, which is often criticized as an exclusive club of wealthy states: none of the new states added to the OECD since the end of the Cold War have joined this committee” (Hattori 2003:243). This situation confirms the post-colonial character of foreign aid, in which the tone is still set by former colonial states gathered in the exclusive DAC club, who decline the applications of other donors to join their tight circle (Hattori 2003). Even though the last High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan might suggest that the primacy of the DAC is under challenge, for Polish developers and Polish state representing a middle power (rather than a great power as represented by the BRICs), this Western-governed body remains the main point of reference. And although the standards of giving and the hegemony of “established donors” might, and often are, experienced as oppressive, the rejection of participation in the gift regime, that is foreign aid on their terms, risks—as we could see in the case of Polish accession to EU, OECD, or DAC—exclusion from global relations.

## Conclusions

I have demonstrated that Polish involvement in international aid is conceptualized and legitimized via the particular logic of reciprocity, informed by the memory of the Polish experience as an aid recipient, and by the perception of Polish identity and history as a struggle for freedom. The upshot of this is that Poles can now share their experiences with other

nations. At the same time, it speaks to the general dynamic of international aid, which is fuelled by insatiable need for the manifestations of power and control, defining the world according to the hierarchies of power. Those hierarchies are not simply located in such categories as “developing” or “underdeveloped,” as has been argued by most studies on the subject (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994; Gardner and Lewis 2000; Gow 1996; Grillo 1997; Little and Painter 1995). The Polish case informs us that they are actually enforced and reproduced by the general characteristics of the relations linking all global actors, defining them in the asymmetrical positions of givers and receivers. Development as such operates through the general logic of the gift. This logic, as I have shown, constitutes the narrative organizing the rules of developmental engagement across the world. It also, through the particular understanding of reciprocity combined with the national imagination of contemporary history, allows for a specific Polish variation on that order. In the development context, the theories of the gift explain the modalities of international “cooperation” and justify Polish involvement in the world.

However, to say that development operates through the creation of global hierarchies of power is nothing new. Yet, through the study of the Polish case, we can see that those hierarchies are sustained even though the global politics which once conditioned them (as in the case of the Cold War) have ended, new contexts have appeared (for instance the War on Terror), and some serious repositioning of actors has been taking the place (or rather, judging by the Polish case, *appeared* to take place). Today, the world still operates through two categories of social actors: aid donors and aid recipients. The only way of escaping the humiliation of the unreciprocated gift is through reversing the aid chain and fulfilling the obligation to give. It is through this strategy that the Polish state and Polish activists, who constantly strive upwards in the global political hierarchy, yet who are continuously declined their modern (Western) status, hope to achieve membership in the privileged group of the most powerful and meaningful players in the international arena. In spite of suggestions that developmental engagement holds the key to the promised land of modernity, the achievement of that goal is in fact very difficult, if not impossible. It is not enough to be involved in development and leave the category of aid recipients. Poland must now battle yet another classification, this time, as an “emergent” rather than “established” donor.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Comecon – The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, an organization including countries such as Poland, Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, German Democratic Republic, Cuba, Vietnam, Finland, Iraq, Mozambique, Nicaragua, and Mexico, and operating between 1949-1991.

<sup>2</sup>In 2010, Krzysztof Stanowski was appointed the under secretary responsible for development and humanitarian affairs in the MFA. He spent the majority of his professional career working for NGOs and being involved in foreign aid.



<sup>3</sup>Among them are USAID, National Endowment for Democracy, National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute for International Affairs, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Westminster Foundation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Programme of Netherlands, Conrad Adenauer Foundation, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, European Partnership for Democracy, and Policy Association for an Open Society.

<sup>4</sup>By comparison, there are approximately 40 projects funded per year in Sub-Saharan Africa, and virtually none of them echoes this sort of discourse, but instead represents more technological form of assistance (water and sanitation projects, initiatives focusing on building schools, and other public facilities).

<sup>5</sup>The Polish Round Table Negotiations took place in Warsaw and provided a space for discussions between opposition leaders (mostly representing the Solidarity trade union) and state leaders. They were held in the presence of the press and Catholic Church observers and paved the way for the future political and economic transformation of the country.

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