



# IR-UI COMMENTARIES

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## Where Human Security Meets International Political Economy: The Layers Beneath North-South Development Partnership

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### Summary<sup>4</sup>

The agenda of development aims to advance prosperity for all nations and eliminate the prevailing North-South divide. Since 1990s, the development agenda moved further by the centring of human in its agenda, which brings together the notions of human rights, human security and human dignity as important indicators. However, while the discourse of development has shifted from aid to partnership, the unequal power relations between and within the global North and South continue to exist. By examining the case of human rights agenda as the interrelated language of development, this paper attempts to show the entanglements between normative contestations and the structure of global political economy.

**Keywords:** *human rights, development, North-South, norms, global political economy*

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## Human Security and International Development

International development cooperation is the nexus where human security meets international political economy. The agenda of development, when it was first introduced, aims to advance economic prosperity for all states. However, in line with the centring of human in security discourse through the introduction of “human security” concept, recent developments in development discourses put more emphasis on people as the centre of development. This concern was later reaffirmed through the internationally-recognized Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030, which one of the agenda is to “no one left behind”, meaning everyone needs to benefit from development equally. While the centring of “human” is arguably more visible in the development agenda rather than in the field of security, it remains strongly entrenched within the unequal structure of international political economy.

As with “security,” “development” is a contested concept and thus continuously evolving. The introduction of the agenda of development was strongly connected to decolonization, in which an emerging community of nations that shared a colonial experience refused to be further exploited under the Post World War II global political economy. Unsatisfied with the Bretton Woods arrangements which neglected the unique circumstances of the newly independent states, these countries pushed for the [New International Economic Order](#) (NIEO). While the NIEO initiative faded away, their efforts had shaped the global agenda of development through the establishment of [UNCTAD](#) (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), the adoption of the [Charter of Economic Rights and Duties in 1974](#), and [South-South Cooperation](#), a UN framework for collaboration between developing countries, as well as the introduction of the [“right to development”](#).

With the end of Cold War eased worries about interstate conflict, [the concept of human security started to gain traction](#). Similar pattern occurred in the global development agenda with the centring of human in development, as indicated by the introduction of notions like “human development” or “development as (individual) freedom.” Furthermore, the concept of human security was absorbed and integrated into the development agenda, arguably even deeper than in the security sector which is still dominated by state centrism. For example, Japan, one of the proponents of human security in the UN, put human security in its development assistance under JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency).

Nevertheless, the relatively successful recentring of development by orienting it more towards human does not mean that the development agenda is detached from the patterns of interaction between states. The human-centred development agenda remains strongly entrenched within the unequal structure of international political economy. To illustrate this point, this paper investigates the debate surrounding human rights promotion agenda from the global North to the global South by looking at the case of EU and Indonesia. It looks at two layers of contention: “normative” and “structural.”

### The Normative Layer: How Universal is Human Rights?

The global North have established a number of developmental aid projects in the global South. European countries, through the European Union (EU), are one of key actors in international development regime. The data from [OECD](#) demonstrates the annual increase of development assistance, with the total of USD 152.8 billion in 2019. For the EU, the development partnership

agenda focuses in adopting human security and human rights paradigm through various programs. EU adopted [European Consensus on Development](#) as a response to 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which aligns its focus on poverty eradication, discrimination and inequality reduction, and gender equality in development. Human rights, democracy and the rule of law become the underlying principles in implementing this Consensus and in overall EU foreign policies with third countries around the world. The EU has stepped further by endorsing the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2012-2014, 2015-2019 and 2020-2024) aims at further EU's global leadership in the field of human rights and democracy.

Indonesia, as one of EU's strategic development partners, is widely known as the large democratic country with largest moderate Muslim majority, demonstrating that the democratic values are compatible with religious norms. Yet, the issue of universality and indivisibility of human rights often remain contentious.

Under its Human Rights and Democracy Country Strategy in Indonesia (2016-2020), the EU has prioritized the issues of death penalty, non-discrimination, women's rights, business and human rights, access to justice and penal policy. In practice, these priorities were applied in the EU cooperation with various actors in Indonesia. Under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities (CSO-LA) programs, the EU mainly working with civil society organisations (CSOs) and local authorities to promote these development agendas. Despite the overall progress in protection and fulfilment of human rights and implementation of democratic principles in Indonesia, challenges persist. The EU has also to face these challenges in its effort to promote human rights and democracy in its relations with Indonesia; not all segments of the Indonesian society perceive EU's initiative positively.

For example, on the issue of non-discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation, suspicions and controversies are clearly visible. When the EU promotes LGBTIQ rights in terms of their rights to access education, employment, healthcare, for instance, the society usually conflates them with rights to practice certain sexualities and sexual activities seen as a threat to the existing religious and social values. Another example includes the child labour practice. While the EU attempts to eliminate the practice, there has been a longstanding argument among society that children helping their parents have become a culture passed through generations.

On a larger context, nevertheless, this contestation is related to the discourse on value imposition from Western/Northern countries to Eastern/Southern countries with different value and culture—employed and reproduced primarily from ruling elites. Typically for Asian countries, the notion of [Asian values](#) (Asplund 2009) and debate surrounding Western democracy have been apparent since 1990s. In ASEAN, human rights agenda is constantly debated.

This continuing debate on the universality of human rights and its related moral-based discourse has continuously become an impediment for realization of human rights agenda which strive to free individuals from any kinds of oppression and repression. However, we have to recognize that the idea transmission from the global North as well as the responses from the global South do not exist in a vacuum. The North-South power relations, particularly, needs to be situated in the broader context of the global political economy.

## The Structural Layer: Who gets what, how, and when?

The practice of development partnership though covered in the moral-based language of 'assistance' is not free from political and economic motives. Academics have argued that while the narrative of development has shifted towards the notion of equality, the new illicit form of domination exists. The data shows that although the amount of aid from global North increases, there has been [illicit financial flows](#): for every dollar transferred to developing countries, 24 dollars flow back to the global North. This incites a critical question over who is being developed by whom.

Development aid has become a lucrative industry sustaining the unequal power relations between North and South ([de Haan 2009](#)) which has been enabled by the very structure of global economic system. This is different from the prior kind of domination on the cultural and racial basis, as reflected in the history of colonialism. More interestingly, the gap occurs not only between the global North and South, but also within South (and North). The global economy forces production chains and the logic of accumulation of wealth to systematically suppress and disadvantage vulnerable groups, such as labours, from realizing their socioeconomic rights. In the controversial debate on palm oil restrictions between Indonesia and the EU, for instance, the Indonesian elites continuously accuses the EU for inciting a discriminative [trade war](#) on the ground of environmental sustainability as a cover for their own material interests over their rapeseed and sunflower oil industries, the EU-based rivals of palm oil industry ([Choiruzzad, 2019](#)). At the same time, there are accusations of [exploitations](#) to workers in the industry. Here, the question over whose rights/dignity are at stake becomes critical.

The promotion of human rights, therefore, can no longer be understood solely from norms-based views. The questions over social and economic justice become important to examine, both from the views of proponents and opponents of human rights agenda. Human rights agenda is merely an illusion if it fails to grip with people's actual needs and concerns, which have been continuously co-opted by elites and privileged classes both in the global North and South. The importance of investigating the political economic drivers beneath the normative layer of human rights has been introduced and supported by a number of academics, such as Lederach (1999) who emphasizes the notion of 'justice gap' or Moyn (2018) who calls for widening the gap between the rich and poor before putting human rights as our highest ideals. These are some proposed answers which require a complete rethink of the prevailing neoliberal economic system which has systematically administered the way international politics work for decades.

## Conclusion

From a normative point of view, human rights agenda is an inherent part of development which serves as the universal force aiming to free individuals. To bridge cultural differences that continue to resist the realization of that agenda, continuous dialogue among all actors, including local government authorities, private sector, activists, and local society is critically required to seek a middle ground—to renegotiate and redefine human rights norms with local sensitivities.

At the same time, we have to be critical to essentialist claims, both from those who argue that human rights are universal and those against the idea. Human rights is believed to be a common cause deserved to be fought for by all societies, in order to achieve the shared goal of advancing

the humanity. It is only a matter of finding the same 'language' that applies to all. However, looking closely at the global economic and political forces operating beneath the normative layer of human rights, it is critical to reconceptualize the agenda not only from the individualistic notion of human freedom and dignity, but also on the principal basis of global justice and solidarity. The fierce debate on human rights is not necessarily driven by cultural differences, but more by unequal access to sustainable livelihoods among vulnerable groups, driven by the widening gap between privileged elites and marginalized classes. Therefore, ensuring that all people are given the equal voices and access to socioeconomic resources should be the focus of both human rights and development agenda between and within the global North-South divide. \*\*\*

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