

INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Rise of Global South enriches development knowledge

By XU XIULI and MA JUNLE

For decades, English-language research in international development tended to cast Global South countries as passive recipients of aid. In reality, these countries have long been active participants in development practice and contributors to development knowledge. Seventy years after the Bandung Conference opened a new chapter in South–South cooperation, the rise of the Global South and the flourishing of new forms of cooperative mechanisms have fundamentally transformed the landscape of international development. Through their own modernization practices, developing countries have gradually explored a wide range of development paths suited to their respective contexts, experimenting with approaches that reflect their local needs and conditions. They have also deepened cooperation, building networks, sharing experience, and reinforcing their collective capacity to influence global agendas. Together, these trends are giving rise to a new paradigm of development knowledge—one that enriches, and in some respects challenges, earlier models dominated by developed countries, offering new possibilities for global development in the new era.

Global North's dominance in international development cooperation

The international development cooperation architecture that took shape after World War II was structured largely around the priorities of Global North countries and anchored in North–South cooperation. For many years, international development cooperation was virtually indistinguishable from North–South cooperation, a reality reflected in the prevailing development ideas, theories, mechanisms, platforms, and agendas.

At the level of ideas, mainstream development narratives were largely derived from interpretations of Western development trajectories. Theoretically, influential approaches such as economic growth theory, modernization theory, and neoliberalism were either formulated by leading scholars from Global North countries or developed within international organizations. Mechanistically, some scholars trace the origins of the modern international development architecture to former US President Harry Truman's "Point Four Program," announced in January 1949, which called for applying America's technological and industrial strengths to advance "underdeveloped areas." This initiative marked the beginning of a systematic, North-led mechanism for supporting development in the Global South. In terms of platforms, the major institutions within today's global development governance system—including the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the OECD's Development Assis-

tance Committee (DAC), along with numerous international NGOs and foundations—are predominantly led or shaped by Global North countries. Regarding development agendas, although Global South countries have made important contributions to the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals, most agendas remain primarily led by developed countries. Taken together, these dimensions have long reflected the Global North's dominance in development knowledge.

Modern South–South cooperation, like North–South cooperation, also emerged after World War II. Since the beginning of the 21st century—especially over the past decade—as Global South countries have gained greater economic strength, South–South cooperation has expanded into more comprehensive and in-depth political and economic cooperation, taking on the characteristics of a new, multifaceted model. The Bandung Conference held particular significance in initiating South–South cooperation on the international stage.

South–South cooperation and international development system: parallel yet intertwined

The Bandung Conference laid a crucial foundation for South–South cooperation. From April 18 to 24, 1955, 29 Asian and African countries, including China, convened in Indonesia at the initiative of Indonesia, Pakistan, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), India, and Burma. They engaged in extensive consultations on issues of shared concern—from economic and cultural cooperation to human rights, self-determination, and global peace and cooperation. This was the first large-scale international meeting initiated and successfully organized by emerging Asian and African nations without Western participation, and it had lasting implications for the international development system and South–South cooperation.

Specifically, the conference communiqué recognized "the urgent necessity of promoting economic development in the Asian–African region," signaling these countries' awareness of their own agency in development and their determination to move beyond the passive role ascribed to them by the Global North. This marked the emergence of a collective development agenda among these nations. The communiqué also stressed that economic cooperation among participating regions did not exclude engagement with countries outside them, underscoring an inclusive outlook. The "Ten Principles" advanced at Bandung, which emphasize respect for diverse development paths and form the enduring core of the Bandung Spirit, have since been echoed repeatedly in various UN resolutions. The conference also encouraged deeper solidarity among Asian, African, and Latin American



The Global South Modernization Research Network was launched at the Global South Modernization Forum in Beijing on Nov. 21. Photo: Wang Zhou/CSST

countries, boosting economic and technological cooperation and advancing regionalization among developing nations. Many of its proposals, such as establishing the International Finance Corporation (1956) within the World Bank and the UN Special Fund for Economic Development (1958), were put into practice and helped direct development institutions' attention toward the needs of developing countries.

Although long overshadowed by North–South cooperation, traditional South–South cooperation never disappeared. Even as multilateral initiatives—such as those led by the World Bank—and bilateral frameworks led by individual developed countries expanded, they did not fundamentally resolve the underdevelopment faced by many nations, and the North–South gap continued to widen. From the 1960s and 1970s onward, numerous developing countries both pursued collective self-strengthening and explored independent development paths suited to their own conditions. These efforts contributed new perspectives, theories, institutional innovations while fostering cooperation among themselves.

Since the start of the 21st century, the importance of new forms of South–South cooperation has become even more prominent. The rapid rise of emerging economies such as China, India, and Brazil reinvigorated South–South exchanges. Increasingly, these forms of cooperation have become intertwined with North–South cooperation and integrated into nearly every development-related international agenda. The UN's Millennium Development Goals (2000) and the Sustainable Development Agenda both prioritize core concerns of South–South cooperation, systematically advancing issues such as poverty reduction and emphasizing the importance of development assistance and South–South cooperation. In addition, as developed countries face shrinking aid budgets and reconsider the effectiveness of aid, they have begun to place greater emphasis on incorporating South–South cooperation through mechanisms like trilateral cooperation. Meanwhile, both the breadth and depth of South–

South cooperation have expanded significantly. Beyond political cooperation, investment, trade, and technology transfer among Global South countries have grown increasingly robust.

Transformation of development knowledge paradigm

Over the past few decades, countries of the Global South have not only strengthened their agency but also deepened their capacity to generate development knowledge. This progress is closely linked to the continuous accumulation of new development resources, new development experience, and new platforms for cooperation.

First, the rapid growth of new development resources constitutes the hard power enabling the Global South to participate in international development governance, providing a solid material foundation for deepening and expanding new forms of South–South cooperation. Second, the accumulation of new development experience—arguably the most significant difference between contemporary Global South countries and their earlier counterparts—provides fertile ground for a new paradigm of development knowledge. Third, the cultivation and expansion of new development platforms has enabled the Global South to actively integrate into existing international development frameworks and reshape global development governance. As a result, new South–South cooperation is increasingly playing a structured and institutionalized role in the provision of global public goods.

The contribution of the Global South to transforming the development knowledge paradigm can be seen in several dimensions. First, traditional development knowledge was built on deeply entrenched North–South inequalities in political and economic structures, giving rise to imagined dichotomies such as center–periphery, dominator–dominated, and subject–object. In contrast, the new development knowledge system, with the Global South as the main actor, emphasizes mutual inspiration among equal actors, parallel advancement along multiple development

paths, and the identification of shared elements. Second, in terms of practice, traditional development knowledge often relies on Global North countries providing aid to Global South countries, reinforcing a single, "prescriptive" model of knowledge transfer. By contrast, new development knowledge instead favors iterative, cooperative practices rooted in consultation, co-construction, and shared learning. These practices often combine aid, trade, and investment in ways that enhance collaborative effectiveness and generate contextually appropriate, if imperfect, development strategies. Third, at its core, traditional development knowledge emphasizes formal logic, rationality, universality, and singularity, whereas the Global South's development knowledge highlights practical reason, local culture, and historical experience, stressing both shared understanding and pluralism.

From the political solidarity among Global South countries in the 1950s and 1960s to the economic and technological cooperation of the 1970s and 1980s—and throughout the waves of globalization since the 1990s—South–South cooperation has run parallel to, yet been closely intertwined with, international development frameworks dominated by Western countries. Across these decades, the expression and growth of agency by developing countries have remained a consistent and defining thread. The rise of the Global South represents a concentrated manifestation of this strengthened agency, now reinforced by the emergence of a new development knowledge paradigm. This paradigm is beginning to exert unprecedented influence, underpinned by substantial new development resources, the accumulation of experience, and the establishment of robust development platforms.

As the world's largest developing country, China has achieved a remarkable transformation in its own modernization process. Standing out among developing countries, it has addressed the earlier shortcomings in South–South cooperation—such as the absence of "locomotive" economies, institutional frameworks, and practical development path references—thereby injecting the Global South with renewed momentum. Moreover, China's extensive cooperation with other developing countries has created a new model for modernization collaboration within the Global South, accelerating the emergence of a new development knowledge paradigm.

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