Rising Powers in the New South

Inaugural workshop

DSA Rising Powers Study Group

&

EADI New South Study Group

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Background & Context

The workshop marked the (re-)launch of two working groups: the re-launch of the Rising Powers Study Group of the UK Development Studies Association (DSA), and the launch of the New South Working Group of the European Association of Development Research Institutes (EADI). Both groups retain an empirical focus on the Global South, organised around three core analytical themes:

1. Agency, acknowledging the legacy of colonialism while highlighting the capacity of Global South states and societies to overcome those legacies;
2. Connections, recognising the South-North connections being forged through the diffusion of investments, institutions and ideas;
3. Divergence, highlighting the growing divergence within the New South, particularly between the 'poor South' and the 'power South.'

The one-day event comprised three roundtables:
Roundtable 1: What is the New South?
Speakers: Elisa Gambino, Eyob Balcha Gebremariam

Roundtable 2: The New South and the Changing Landscape of Development *Speakers: Emma Mawdesley, Vimala Asty, Florence Muheirwe*

Roundtable 3: The New South and the Transforming World Order *12:00–1:00* | *Speakers: Wenxing Cui, Shahar Hameiri, Pádraig Carmody*

Opening

The session opened with a round of introductions in which participants were asked to share their name and three words describing their research interests. This was followed by a brief overview of the Study Groups, and a presentation of the three analytical themes framing the workshop: Agency, Connections, and Divergence. The introductory presentation is attached. (Annex 1). The framing was grounded in vignettes from Gambino's research (Annex 2), intended to make the categories tangible for participants from policy, practice, and fields beyond Development Studies. The themes also drew on Roy's (2024) GDI Working Paper titled "Connected politics of global development", available open access here.

Roundtable 1: What is the New South?
Speakers: Elisa Gambino, Eyob Balcha Gebremariam

Balcha Gebremariam opened his intervention with the suggestion of an 'epistemic cul-de-sac': the idea that development studies is intellectually trapped, unable to make genuine progress on its core questions no matter how it reinvents its language or frameworks. His central question was whether adding 'New' to South simply risks repeating this pattern. He reflected on the term 'rising powers': while outdated, it was at least grounded in a realist logic of power struggle and carried a clear meaning. What does 'New South' add? Does it offer a genuine basis for critiquing hierarchies, or does it implicitly reproduce them? Balcha Gebremariam asked whether we are repackaging existing studies of power relations, the lived experiences of those at the receiving end, and whether we can frame questions around emancipation rather than the legacies of colonialism.

The small group and plenary discussions following his intervention surfaced some tensions. On the question of terminology, several participants raised the risk of periodic relabelling without analytical advance, noting how terms have evolved from 'Third World' to 'emerging' to 'rising' to 'Global South,' and asking what 'New' genuinely adds.

One colleague introduced the idea that the Global South may itself have been a depoliticisation of the Third World, an attempt to shed negative associations, and asked whether a more political framing is needed. Another asked: given current global upheaval and political fragmentation of the North, should we not be asking 'what is the new North?'

On the geography and scope of the concept, colleagues debated whether the South is primarily a geographic term or whether 'New' is the more analytically significant part, and what the starting point of the New South really is. The real test, as one participant put it, is whether the New South framing generates new research questions and whether these cannot be answered without it.

Several colleagues made a case for keeping global capitalism at the centre, asking: what is it about the structures of global capitalism that is making actors call themselves the New South (e.g. The Centre for the New South in Morocco)? Others emphasised ongoing de-territorialisation and the need to push back against such a tendency by centring the stories of people, communities, and those disadvantaged by development. Many suggested that the New South is to be thought of as a concept rather than a set of countries. Others built on this, noting that whatever we do with the word, there will be baggage attached to different terminologies used, including global South.

There was also a productive discussion around the three analytical themes themselves. The framing of agency, connections and divergence was broadly welcomed, though participants proposed the following considerations:

- heterogeneity as a possible substitute or supplement for divergence
- struggle, tensions, conflict as a necessary addition to capture the competitive and unequal nature of New South dynamics.
- The risks of romanticising agency in a context where New South interests are contested, fragmented, and in competition.

The question of audience was also raised. Who are these themes for, and does the framing risk excluding certain actors or perspectives by design?

Roundtable 2: The New South and the Changing Landscape of Development *Speakers: Emma Mawdsley, Vimala Asty, Florence Muheirwe*

Mawdsley connected the discussion to the historical innovation of previous framings, noting that the Third World and Global South were both tied to solidarity politics in their time. She offered the observation that academics are good at suspicion and deconstruction, less good at synthesis. She welcomed the agency-connections-divergence framing but pressed on the question of audience and exclusion. Does naming something make us complicit in that exclusion? She referenced the idea that 'the only accurate map is as big as the thing it represents,' noting that any framing captures some dynamics but not all. She also flagged the importance of relational thinking and connected the discussion to the question raised in Winnie Byanyima (UNAIDS)'s plenary at the Global Development Institute Conference held the days before the workshop (plenary available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EllUqeB664) about whether states themselves are becoming more oligarchic (within) even as great power competition intensifies.

Asty brought a practitioner's perspective from the Indonesian presidential office. She noted that South-South cooperation is losing analytical significance from a practitioner's view as geopolitical competition intensifies, with southern countries rethinking their orientation, changing their roles, and racing to become more like the global North.

Muheirwe reframed the North-South axis as one of vertical versus horizontal collaboration. Vertical collaboration is characterised by power inequalities, while horizontal collaboration is the aspiration sketched in South-South narratives, though even within Africa alone, she noted, relations are in practice often vertical. She observed that some changes have taken place, like in how ideas are increasingly being developed more collaboratively in development practice, and expressed support for the New South framing if it genuinely changes the trajectory of how people cooperate.

Discussion in the second roundtable returned to the question of what South-South trade and investment patterns mean for the concept, including the degree to which new actors like Indonesia and Turkey might be filling gaps left by China's shifting engagement, and how Southern countries can use their resources to negotiate on more equal terms.

Colleagues raised three concerns:

- The risk of historicising perspectives through the Old/New binary, and raised the question of inequality within countries as an underexplored dimension
- Unease about China being considered part of the global South, which was echoed by a few colleagues.
- The linear temporality implicit in 'old' versus 'new' temporalities and the hubris this could cause. A circular conceptualisation of time, by contrast, implies a humility in understanding that power is not something to hold onto, a point often entirely absent in realist-based conceptions of great power competition, where actors are motivated by seeking power.

Roundtable 3: The New South and the Transforming World Order *12:00–1:00 | Speakers: Wenxing Cui, Shahar Hameiri, Pádraig Carmody*

Cui engaged directly with the discussion around China. Responding to the question of whether China could even be considered part of the global South, he elaborated the notion of 'two Chinas': one rural and the other urban. Indeed, economically there may well be "more China's", and his observation was connected to the broader discussion of inequality within countries.

Three phases of Chinese engagement can be discernible:

- a first phase from 1949 to 1978 centred on aid and political solidarity;
- a second from 1978 to 2013 focused on domestic development;
- and a third from 2013 to the present, in which China could no longer maintain a low profile and was pushed to the centre of the global stage as a , somewhat reluctant provider of global public goods.

Cui called attention to a saying attributed to Xi Jinping's: 'lucid water and lush mountains are invaluable assets'. This saying is understood as a critique of growth-for-growth's-sake, and outlined China's key global initiatives: the Belt and Road Initiative as the operational arm of its development philosophy; the Global Development Initiative centred on people; the Global Security Initiative centred on states; and the Global Governance Initiative as their institutional arm. China's approach can be distinguished from Western-led initiatives in two ways: (i) Chinese initiatives are framed as shared with developing countries rather than imposed upon them, and that (ii) China positions itself not as a competing development actor but as a shaper of development norms.

Hamieri questioned the analytical usefulness of the North/South frame. Such a framing, he argued, only made sense when the North was cohesive. With the US no longer able or willing to act as hegemon, and with some Southern countries having done well under economic globalisation, powerful groups of states are now trying to retain and forge new connections rather than pick sides. Such "polyalignment" (insert an appropriate link here?) undermines the North/ South framing. Powerful South countries have more in common with the North than is often acknowledged. He also brought forward that the shared interests of Southern countries are thin, insufficient to form the basis of a new world order. Most are, in practice, competitors to each other.

Carmody directed attention to the polyvalence of the term global South. As a reference to post-colonial societies, the South is both a geographical and historical category. As such, there might often be an implicit directionality in the framing, assuming that what happens in East Asia will determine trajectories elsewhere: relatedly, he posed the provocation: is the New South is simply a way-station towards China eventually becoming the new North? Noting the relevance of agency in discussions of the North/ South relationship, he pointed to the absence of US agency (and agency of the global North more generally) in much of the analysis. Finally, Carmody urged for a consideration of climate vulnerability as a fourth criterion for defininf the New South.

These interventions were followed by a return to the question of how China could be positioned China within the New South, with participants noting the influence of Chinese industrial policy on US policy as evidence of the complexity of that positioning. Participants also pushed back on the exclusive focus on China that tends to undergird much thinking about authoritarian development models, noting the growing power of Turkey, the UAE, Singapore and others. The question of how aid-recipient states perceive the powerful states in the South was also raised.

Emerging Themes

On conceptual and terminological questions, the risk of periodic relabelling without analytical advance was a concern. The question of whether the New South generates genuinely new research questions was particularly important. On research questions and audience, greater clarity is needed on who the working groups are speaking to.

On the analytical framework, the three core themes of agency, connections and divergence were broadly welcomed but also hotly contested. Divergence may be better replaced or supplemented by heterogeneity, and there was a strong case made for adding struggle/tensions/conflict as a fourth organising theme, capturing the competitive and unequal nature of New South dynamics. We should be wary of romanticising agency in a context where New South interests are contested, fragmented, and in competition.

On actors and inclusion, the conversation around the New South can tend to be too state-centric. Greater effort is needed to think about the plurality of actors, including communities, transnational coalitions, and those at the receiving end of development. Gender and labour were largely not discussed. Inequality within countries also needs more attention. Indeed, global capitalism and attendant processes of deterretorialisation- which disembed economic activity, capital, and production from territories (places, nation-states, or regions) and instead operate through mobile, networked, often global circuits could be foregrounded.

References

Roy, Indrajit. 2024. The connected politics of global development. GDI Working Paper 2024-076. Manchester: Global Development Institute. Available online: https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/217456/1/GDI_WP_2024-76_2_.pdf

Rising Powers in the New South

Launch of the EADI "The New South" group

&

(Re)launch of the DSA "Rising Powers" group

Convened by:

- Indrajit Roy (York)
- Elisa Gambino (Manchester)

Today's workshop

- *Roundtable 1: What is the New South?*
- *Roundtable 2: The New South and the changing landscape of development practice*
- *Roundtable 3: The New South and the transforming world order*

The New South

The next decade and beyond belong to the New South. As the Northern-dominated world order implodes from within, the balance of power continues its shift away from Euro-America towards the once-colonized states and societies of Asia, Africa and Latin America, especially the so-called Rising Powers. The political orders and economic structures that have framed social life for over two centuries are crumbling as new actors in the global South appropriate and reinvent the ideas, institutions and political economies once associated with the global North. Understandings of capitalism, democracy and development are reshaped by these new actors in the global South. the New South demands greater conceptual, methodological and empirical attention.

Agency

Acknowledging the legacy of colonialism on the global South, the WG's focus on the New South highlights the agency of states and societies in the global South to *overcome* those legacies.

Connections

Against formulations that describe the global North and global South as hierarchical binaries, the WG's emphasis on the New South recognises the South-North connections being forged by states and societies of the global South through the diffusion of investments, institutions and ideas in the global North.

Divergence

Wary of the tendency to categorise the global South as a monolith, the WG pinpoints attention to the growing divergence within the New South between the poor South and the power South: indeed, the WG will be sure to interrogate the cohesion assumed in other similar formulations as the West and East.


SAMSUNG
Le Nouveau
Galaxy
SAMSU


CM










MADE IN CHINA

Some reflection questions

- What is new about the New South?
- What resonates and what does not?
- What are the risks of leaning into this framing?

Annex 2: Vignettes

1. Agency
   on the busy streets of Assigame market, the grand marche of Lome, Togo, a trader has built a thriving distribution business on the back of the explosion in the popularity of affordable Chinese phones. He is the one with the pulse of who needs how many phones where but his success and market prominence as a distributor is not without its challenges. the wholesalers he supplies are often trying to cut him out, but the capital required to continue the contractural relationship with the chinese phone producer both shields him and weighs down his business expansion ideas, which are always, quickly, shut down by the chinese counterparts.

So... he quit, taking with him, in his words, the business school knowledge he acquired without formally doing an MBA, he told me often of how important learning to make market projections has been to his phone business and how, now, he plans to apply the same logics to his diversified portfolio. Indeed, he bought property near a newly inaugurated special economic zone. He started a small taxi business, employing drivers from his wife's community in the North of the country. He set up shops for his wife and sisters to sell clothes made in China and Vietnam in one of the busiest markets in the region.

This reminds me of what Andrea Pollio describes in the Nairobi tech scene, African entrepreneurs using Chinese capital as a springboard.

2. Connections

One of the case studies I'm looking at is the constellation of China malls and similar franchises that are seemingly ubiquitous in African cities. These are shops that sell everything from kids toys and makeup to wheelie bins and construction site hard hats. While browsing the aisles of one of the now more than eight? china malls in Accra, I picked up a product and noticed the description was in Spanish. I turned it over. Made in Spain.

So I looked into it. The factory making this kitchen set in Spain is Chinese-owned. So here is what that product's journey looked like: Chinese diaspora capital, operating a manufacturing facility in Europe, supplying Chinese trading networks in West Africa, selling to Ghanaian customers in Accra. South-North-South. Are then shops like this the site for the connections these groups are inviting us to think about?

these are actually the same shops where, if you look in the right places, you find something else entirely.

In one of these shops, in the washroom, I found a call to unionisation. Workers used the bathroom wall to communicate with each other their discontent over pay. I think James Scott would have appreciated this picture, and perhaps even more the material gains that were obtained through more overt forms of labour resistance, like a strike that led to salary increase. The biggest labour relations improvement, however, took place when a local tax

consultant was hired to solve other issues (tax-related that is) and ended up taking on HR management for one of the groups with china mall franchises.

3. Divergence
   I want to end with a vignette that made me question whether divergence is a word that resonates with the work I have been doing.

In 2024, Accra's largest market of Makola suffered a large fire, which completely destroyed a 4 storey building hosting multiple chinese shops, chinese workers' housing, and the company's entire stock. The ramifications were much broader than the impact it had on these chinese businesses, luckily no one got hurt. I want to focus now on one of the shopkeepers, who had become a regular interlocutor, who lost everything in the fire. He went back to China, regrouped, and came back with his son and a business idea.

Now, arguably hidden, corner of a chinese led industrial park, he makes meatballs for Chinese restaurants and supermarkets. The meat is sourced locally, the machines, inported from China,are inexpensive, the workforce comprises his family and a couple of employees who had previously worked in the shop in Makola.

the outcomes of these two sets of activites have, one could argue, different. Africa made Chinese meatballs entail greater embeddedness in the political economic context, contributing - albeit in small scale in this case, but in much larger scale in other of the cases i look at - to employment creation and developing local supplier networks.

the trade and sale of China-made finished goods imported in African markets, on the other hand, often undercut the competition and foster competition for value capture. traders from all over the region travel to Makola in Accra and to the grand marche in Lome, crossing one, two, sometimes three countries and entangling with Chinese-centred trade and production networks. In West Africa, transnational trade networks have, since pre-colonial times, been crucial to overcoming structural uncertainties hindering cross-border exchange. they aided traders to avoid prohibitive taxation put in place by colonial powers, and, in independence, they served to bypass protectionist regulatory regimes pursued by states to foster domestic economic development, and at times hindering the pursuit of state-led industrialisation. and here i am drawing from Nugent's work on Kwame Nkrumah's industrialisation agenda.

Then, can this layering of economic activities, its political economies, and its histories be captured by divergence? divergence, from my point of view, implies starting from the same point and going in different directions, but as i hope these vignettes have shown, this is rarely the case. Divergence/convergence also evoke an end point, when isn't it perhaps the process of negotiating, translating and remaking economic activity that shapes and determines their development outcomes?