

# **INTRODUCTION: GLOBAL SOUTH INSIGHTS FOR A CHANGING WORLD**

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# INTRODUCTION: GLOBAL SOUTH INSIGHTS FOR A CHANGING WORLD

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## Rethinking international cooperation and multilateralism

In an interconnected world, no nation acts in isolation. Decisions made in one country today can shape lives thousands of miles away and across generations. Whether it is the impact of carbon emissions, war and conflict, financial instability, the disruption of global value chains or the spread of disease, global challenges demand collective solutions (Sandler, 2004). Against this backdrop, international cooperation and the multilateral system are pivotal in promoting institutionalised mechanisms where governments can come together to discuss and address pressing issues of global scale and impact. Although international cooperation has been the subject of a polarising public debate, framed as altruistic by some, and as reflecting geopolitical interests by others (International Task Force on Global Public Goods, 2006; Malacalza, 2024), in reality no nation is shielded from global threats. As such, international cooperation needs to be understood and analysed as a tool to reconcile national and global interests.

Similarly, the multilateral system is arguably experiencing one of its most significant crises since its creation after World War II. Profound tensions in world politics, characterised by an erosion of trust and geopolitical fragmentation, are also taking their toll on multilateral institutions. This year alone, we have seen key donor countries substantially scale back funding for international cooperation and withdraw political support for the multilateral system (Obrecht & Pearson, 2025; OECD, 2025). The current so-called “crisis of internationalism” that is shaking up multilateral institutions from New York to Geneva brings existential challenges for global stability and sustainable development. At the same time, the latest calls to reform multilateralism based on a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape and related budgetary constraints might present a historic opportunity to rethink the current international system, which was born at a time when a large part of the Global South was still under oppressive colonial rule. This demands, however, an inclusive approach in any upcoming discussions on the future of multilateralism. The growing and urgent need to renew and revitalise international cooperation therefore raises the question of who gets to shape global priorities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of the “UN80 Initiative” launched in 2025, a reform process is currently in the making to modernise and streamline the United Nations system. In light of recent budget shortfalls, it focuses on improving efficiency, restructuring organisational operations, and ensuring more effective use of resources.

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In a spirit of enriching broader debates on the Global South's contribution to the current restructuring of international cooperation, we present the first edition of Global South Perspectives, which is a space for Global South researchers to analyse and propose actionable solutions, crafted in the Global South, to tackle global problems.

In September 2024, a call by the UN Secretary-General to revitalise multilateralism, as well as countries' commitment to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and addressing key global challenges, gave rise to the Summit of the Future and its key outcome, the Pact for the Future.<sup>2</sup> Resonating with the vision and commitments of the Pact, the Global South Perspectives publication brings forward insights from Global South think tanks on global issues that disproportionately affect them. Through eight articles that critically examine common challenges in the fields of climate change, governance, global security, and finance, the publication offers reflections and forward-looking proposals which contribute to the debate on the future of international cooperation.

## **Global systemic issues: A framework for inclusive global governance**

A useful lens to explore global and regional governance processes, which often lack sufficient input from the Global South (Rucavado Rojas & Postigo, 2025), is to look at so-called global systemic issues (GSIs). These are defined by Khan and Ahmed (2019) as complex changes caused by one country that have positive and/or negative impacts, which vary in nature and extent, and which occur at a national, regional and global level.

In this way, it is critical to recognise how global policy frameworks that are often defined in developed countries can inadvertently impose significant challenges in other parts of the world, even when those policies are designed to be universally beneficial. Moreover, in an era of rapid globalisation, the interconnectedness of national economies means that related decisions made in wealthier nations can have far-reaching, unintended consequences for developing countries (Islam, 1981).

Acknowledging these interdependencies is an important step towards the goal of designing inclusive strategies which balance the diverse and at times contradictory needs and interests of both developed and developing

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**2.** For more information, visit the official website: <https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future>

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nations. This approach provides a more integrated understanding of what international cooperation for sustainable development could mean.

For instance, trade agreements, particularly those favoring liberalisation, can lead to negative externalities for the Global South. The rapid removal of trade barriers may expose local industries in developing countries to intense competition from more established foreign firms. Additionally, the emphasis often placed by Global North nations on export-oriented growth can result in environmental degradation, as countries may overexploit natural resources to meet international demand (Ollivier, 2016). This is evident in instances where production for export results in policies with no environmental protections, leading to unsustainable freshwater withdrawals, pollution, biodiversity loss, and deforestation (Heyl et al., 2021).

Moreover, economic policies such as structural adjustment programs mandated by international financial institutions often require austerity measures. These measures can lead to reduced public spending on essential services like healthcare and education, exacerbating poverty and inequality in the Global South (Ortiz & Cummins, 2021; Perez & Matsaganis, 2018). This, in turn, can increase disorganised mass migration and contribute to the brain drain that many countries currently face (Finnsdottir, 2019).

Likewise, rapid technological advancement may impact developed and developing economies differently. For example, while the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to drive economic growth, it also poses particular risks to labour markets in the Global South (Sikorskyi, 2024). One reason is that automation primarily affects low-skill jobs, which are more common in developing economies (Song, 2024). Automation and AI-driven processes can lead to job displacement and increased economic inequality, particularly in sectors where developing countries have traditionally held competitive advantages, such as manufacturing and services (Zhou et al., 2020). Moreover, these technological changes demand greater investments in education and a reorientation of school programs, limiting the capacity of the Global South to adapt to changes in the job market (Gomez-Mejia, 2021). Finally, recent evidence suggests that AI may increase gender disparities due to gender gaps in the adoption of these technologies (Carvajal et al., 2024; Young et al., 2023).

Improved understanding of how global decisions disproportionately affect the Global South is fundamental to fostering fair and effective international cooperation and enhancing the multilateral system. The notion of GSIs helps highlight how decisions made by one country can have significant impacts

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elsewhere—often on nations that have little say in shaping those decisions. Issues ranging from trade policies affecting local industries, to regulations that affect small farmers, to local policies that worsen international security, all show the need to address these interconnected, indirect effects. Fundamentally, there is a common need for inclusive global governance structures that better reflect and address countries' diverse realities.

## **Global South Perspectives to embrace plurality**

In such a challenging context for international cooperation, it is important to clarify the Global South vision, priorities and development models. Global North and Global South countries may differ not only in their epistemic approaches, but also in their values and how they weigh specific challenges.

Development models have often been rooted in Global North perspectives, emphasising market liberalisation, industrialisation, and economic growth as the primary indicators of progress (Alenda-Demoutiez, 2022). However, without proper contextualisation, these models may overlook the unique cultural, social, and environmental contexts of Global South nations, leading to inadequate analysis and policy design. In fact, an overall dominance of Global North actors in producing and disseminating knowledge could marginalise Global South views and realities (Charvet & Ordonez, 2022).

Furthermore, without meaningful dialogue and co-creation, development models may hinder Global South economies if based more on ideological goals than addressing their specific challenges in context. Consequently, there have been calls for a more inclusive, globally-oriented perspective on development, incorporating diverse viewpoints and needs (e.g., Horner, 2020). Indeed, a critical approach which recognises a range of alternative models is key to legitimising a plurality of views on development. Incorporating the perspective of the Global South requires an open exchange of knowledge, challenging the unspoken assumption that the best research is conducted in the North and merely applied in the South. As McFarlane (2006) posits, this shift in attention implies a reconceptualisation of learning as a process that occurs beyond traditional sites of knowledge production and distribution. Moreover, such an approach should challenge one-size-fits-all methodologies by promoting development strategies that are comprehensive, participatory, and tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of Global South communities.

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## The way forward

What if the future of international development were no longer defined by priorities set by the few, but rather based on the collective vision of the majority? How might the current crisis in international aid and multilateralism be taken as an opportunity to do things differently? While there is the risk that cuts and reforms will lead to Global South interests being put on the back burner once again, the current situation also presents an opportunity to learn from the past, and to bring about new and more inclusive global governance.

From these initial reflections, it becomes clear that the future must be shaped through a collective, inclusive approach that embraces the diverse perspectives of the international community, including the Global South. Recognising the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Global South nations is not just a matter of equity; it is essential for fostering sustainable, resilient, and contextually relevant development models. The transformative potential of Global South perspectives lies in their ability to challenge conventional paradigms, introduce innovative solutions grounded in local realities, and promote a more balanced global discourse on development.

In a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, it is crucial that the voice of the Global South is not lost in the tug-of-war between major powers. Even as the world order becomes increasingly multipolar, with the rise of new regional powers and increased competition for influence, global challenges and threats remain, and solid multilateral structures are key to address them. Countries in the Global South, which are often the most affected by climate change, conflicts and other threats (Ngcamu, 2023; Food Security Information Network & Global Network Against Food Crises, 2024), have a pivotal role to play when it comes to tackling global challenges. The current context highlights the need for more fact-based analysis from the Global South, as well as improved dialogue and greater opportunities to share relevant local knowledge at the regional and global levels. Specifically, establishing platforms for mutual exchange can contribute to fostering environments where knowledge flows bidirectionally from local to global levels, allowing for shared learning and co-creation of strategies that are adaptable to diverse contexts (Zamiri & Esmaeil, 2024).

The path forward for international development lies in embracing a genuinely inclusive, participatory approach that values the insights, experiences, and aspirations of the Global South. This is more than an ethical imperative; it is a strategic necessity for achieving sustainable development goals that are truly global in scope. With this publication, we aim to foster South-North and

South-South dialogue and promote knowledge pluralism. Our hope is that it serves as a vehicle for co-creating a future where development is not a privilege of the few, but rather a shared endeavour for the benefit of all.

This is a call for all international stakeholders, including governments, donors, multilaterals, think tanks, and research institutions, to engage closely with Global South-led development priorities, agendas and research. The time to act is now. The articles showcased in this publication offer a glimpse into some pressing issues; they are not exhaustive, but learning more about what the Global South has to say is the first step in fostering change.

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