The Future of International Development Co-operation
Regional Roundtable: Africa[1]

31 March 2026 – Online

This discussion was one of three regional roundtables (Africa, Asia and Latin America) hosted by Southern Voice, in partnership with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), as background research for the OECD Conference on the Future of Development Co-operation: Charting Strategic Directions and the Southern Voice Global Development Initiative. Each roundtable asked regional experts: 1) what the future of international development co-operation should look like in its purpose, impact, priorities and governance structure; and 2) what concrete mechanisms, reforms or other actions can steer co-operation towards this vision. Common takeaways across the three regional discussions were:

- Global South countries should play a central role in agenda setting, as co-creators and co-deciders of an equitable, inclusive future for international development co-operation.
- International development co-operation should emphasise investment in long-term change and the institutions that can drive it, over short-term projects.
- Domestic resources can be unlocked by accelerating reforms of the international financial architecture – with debt an urgent priority across contexts.
- Transparent partnerships should be grounded in an open dialogue around co-operation objectives to strengthen trust and enable the development of mutually beneficial pathways.
- Globally shared thematic priorities include economic transformation and just energy transitions, while other priorities are region specific.

This roundtable stressed the urgency of centring African voices as co-creators and co-deciders, moving away from hierarchical donor-recipient relationships. Co-operation should drive structural transformation – including industrialisation, fairer trade and global financial architecture reform – while urgently addressing debt that diverts resources away from health, education and infrastructure.

Meaningful representation and an active voice from Africa

International development co-operation must have African voices, priorities and evidence at the centre of critical conversations – especially those that relate to international development financing flows to the region – with African countries as co-creators and co-deciders, prioritising local knowledge over external assumptions. In bodies like the Development Assistance Committee, inclusive representation of recipient countries is imperative to move towards mutual interests and leave hierarchical relationships behind. The addition of the African Union in the G20 and the expansion of sub-Saharan Africa's role on the International Monetary Fund Executive Board are

[1] Roundtables were organised and notes drafted by Margarita Gomez, Tracy Mamoun and Valeria Colunga of Southern Voice. OECD input was provided by Ida Mc Donnell and Eleanor Carey of the Development Co-operation Directorate.

examples of the inclusion needed in development co-operation forums. A genuine multistakeholder approach could, for example, give a more active role to parliaments and regional bodies, as well as allocate resources to regional financial platforms and Global South development banks that facilitate accountability and decision making. It is also important to incorporate perspectives and feedback from civil society and the private sector into decisions.

Distinguishing co-operation from aid to emphasise long-term transformation

Rather than an overall shift from aid, it is important to distinguish between the complementary objectives of aid and development co-operation; both are needed. The purpose of international development co-operation should shift further from that of aid, towards creating the conditions for independence rather than managing ongoing dependence. Participants flagged the importance of co-operation that promotes long-term structural transformation, allows initiatives to mature, and is embedded in policy processes. This requires partners to be highly transparent on the objectives of co-operation. It also requires their genuine interest in building capacity through investments in industrialisation and human capital – such as South-South and triangular knowledge and technology exchange, joint research on shared issues between countries, and joint infrastructure for projects. Lastly, it requires alternative measures of impact, such as wealth created through investments in people training, infrastructure created, or additional participation in value chains. Financing models like Global Public Investment were mentioned as potential alternatives to the traditional donor-recipient model.

Accelerating reforms of the global financial architecture

Structural concerns about global finance remain a priority. The global finance architecture remains fragmented, insufficient and unfit for purpose, limiting access of the countries most in need. Urgent reforms are required to simplify access, scale up concessional finance and mobilise private capital through blended finance. The Economic Commission for Africa was presented as a positive example, given its commitment to scale up innovative inclusive financing mechanisms and to strengthen partnerships and capacity.

The roundtable agreed that economic development is futile without addressing the debt distress many African countries face, which fundamentally shapes what they can or cannot achieve. A significant share of national revenue goes into debt servicing rather than investments in critical areas such as health, education, infrastructure and security, undermining both development and stability. Existing reform efforts centred on debt relief and governance shifts are insufficient, as they fail to address structural imbalances that undermine Africa's fiscal autonomy. Among the priorities that participants believed international development co-operation should address are high borrowing costs due to biased credit ratings and foreign-currency-denominated debt. Another concern is the resources that the African continent loses annually to illicit financial flows, which raises essential questions about rules to get resources, what happens to them and who controls them.

Transforming economies through fair regional investment

Economic transformation was strongly highlighted as a priority impact for development co-operation, with one participant flagging the disconnect between international commitments to development and the advancements seen on the ground. Industrialisation and the strengthening of global value chains are key to economic transformation, and these require stronger regional integration – as one participant highlighted that natural resources do not follow national borders.

Transformation also requires a co-investment approach among countries in a region to upscale industrialisation and localise production of minerals, generating measurable and lasting local value. Fairer trade arrangements, and particularly critical mineral agreements, are necessary to shift away from extractive relationships. For this, reforms of the World Trade Organisation are imperative, as are reforms of copyright, intellectual property regimes, and the intellectual investor-state dispute settlement system, which participant see as skewed towards the Global North.

Priority issues: Climate adaptation, digital governance and peace

Notably, Africa bears the highest costs for the climate crisis despite contributing less than 4% of global emissions. As climate shocks intensify, it is imperative that financing for development enables African countries to meet the needs of rapid green industrialisation concurrent with climate adaptation. In the era of artificial intelligence, other critical focuses are technology, digital inclusion and digital governance. Data sovereignty is increasingly important, and development co-operation could play a key part in creating local data observatories to gather data and evidence. Finally, sustainable development cannot take place without peace. Development co-operation should prioritise conflict prevention by investing in mechanisms like early warning systems, preventive diplomacy and state capacity, and addressing the root causes of instability such as inequality and weak governance.

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