

**The Future of International Development Co-operation
Regional Roundtable: Asia¹**

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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 of Asian think tanks highlighted the need to reshape development co-operation around partnership, sovereignty and mutual benefit, not donor-driven aid models. Co-operation should focus on building long-term economic resilience, addressing debt cycles and strengthening institutions, with particular attention to value chains, renewable energy and opportunities for youth.

Towards a partnership approach: Inclusive decision making, evaluation and implementation

A truly inclusive decision making process is imperative to strengthen the impact of development co-operation. Shifting away from a donor-driven approach, the process should instead emphasise sovereignty and regional priorities and integration. As emphasised in the conversation, it should move “from a system that works for countries, to a system that we build together with countries”. This would include strengthening the role of institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure

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.

Investment Bank, as well as reforming structures like the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation.

This new model of development co-operation should be built on a mutual understanding of objectives and enable benefits for all parties, which requires a stronger degree of transparency around incentives for co-operation in the design of development agendas. Moreover, the measurement of impact should make sense to all co-operating parties, for example through fairer trade and investment. Another area of improvement discussed is for parties to steer away from basing decisions on political alignments, visible or invisible, which goes against the “spirit of international development co-operation”. Finally, inclusive decision making means creating meaningful space for the participation of more diverse stakeholders such as civil society, academia, the private sector and citizens, including young people across Asia who are demanding greater accountability.

A clear distinction between aid and co-operation: Respective impact, priorities and processes

The roundtable emphasised the need to shift away from a paternalistic “aid” framework, which is losing popularity in donor countries under internal pressures. The purpose of international development co-operation was clearly stated as bringing long-term change, stronger systems, resilient communities and inclusive development rather than short-term projects. In particular, it should focus on strengthening institutions. Local governments, for example, are responsible for responding to numerous challenges (such as floods) and should be supported with direct, flexible and long-term funding and capacity building. Clearly distinguishing between aid and development co-operation is also necessary to avoid cases where funding from development portfolios is rerouted for emergency assistance, at the expense of education, health, agriculture and food security; humanitarian assistance needs a separate window with different conditionalities. Finally, there was a call to examine which priorities should be a focus for philanthropic and private sector actors.

Beyond vicious cycles of debt

The roundtable clearly established that until vicious cycles of debt (which have both macroeconomic and microeconomic repercussions) are addressed, not all Asian countries will be able to fully benefit from international co-operation. In this context, increasing debt swaps and introducing renewed modalities for debt treatment remain core priorities to ensure resources can be used to promote education, health and food security. In addition, participants raised the importance of holding governments accountable for debt they take on, while protecting their countries’ populations from the consequences of any reckless borrowing.

Prioritising economic co-operation and growth: Value chains, youth and renewable energy

In the coming years, international development co-operation needs to emphasise building stronger economic relationships and economic resilience in an interdependent world. This includes strengthening and integrating value chains, and expanding employment opportunities and access to education for young people. In particular, it is important to focus on how emerging economies can grow using renewable energy, establishing better alignment between different types of finance: development, climate and investment. This can be achieved through the creation of programmes that support and result in economic growth – which requires a significant component of capacity building. Free trade agreements and official partnerships offer some options for this type of co-operation, including agreements or partnerships focussed on trade investment, technology transfer, climate, biodiversity, digital transformation or artificial intelligence. Finally, participants raised strengthening access to capital for small and medium-sized enterprises as a priority, including by developing incentives for lenders. Investments in these enterprises can support poverty alleviation while simultaneously targeting other goals, including green and sustainable development, through relevant requirements.

An equitable digital future

The future of international development co-operation and the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals relies on technology, which positions digital equity as a primary challenge for the Global South. Today, the Global South does not have a neutral technology platform to utilise large language models (LLMs) . For the next decade, bridging the technology gap will be a major task and incentive to co-operate in an increasingly digitalised world. South-South co-operation on technology transfer will be a key component of development pathways in the future, and the importance of improved protocols for using the data of the Global South, in terms of security, privacy and sovereignty was emphasised.

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