

ARTICLE

Did You Notice? The Global South Has Just Shifted the Power

By Lauchlan T. Munro and Syed Sajjadur Rahman

I. Introduction

The concept of decolonisation (or the negation of colonialism) has gained much currency and generated significant debate in the academic as well as popular discourse (see, for example, Táiwò, 2022). There appear to be two interlinked threads in this debate. The first concerns the decolonisation of the North-based development industry (usually understood as Northern countries' bilateral aid agencies, multilateral development banks, and international NGOs) and the second centres on institutions (governance, including civil administration and education) in the Southern countries themselves. Too much of the debate, we contend, has focused on the former.

This note argues that the decolonisation of the development industry is of limited relevance in today's South, but that the decolonisation of the Southern institutions remains a major concern. Conflating aid and development is an unfortunately common mistake based on the flawed (neo-)colonial assumption that aid provided by bilateral and multilateral donors and lenders and international NGOs is a central feature of everyday life and public policy in the Global South today. Given how fundamentally the world has changed over the last 50 years, we posit that the Global South has already shifted the power away from the development industry. In our view, the true challenges of decolonising development and successfully shifting the power lie in changing the prevailing institutions in Southern countries to ones suitable for an independent country.

Section II provides evidence on the decolonisation of the development industry and its implications for the decolonisation debate. Section III undertakes a similar analysis for the Southern institutions. Finally, Section IV provides the conclusions of the note, suggesting that the Northern-based development industry has a limited role, if any, in the decolonisation of Southern institutions.

- II. The rise of the South and the declining importance of the development industry: Implications for the decolonisation debate

The last few decades have seen an attenuation of the West's political, economic, and cultural hegemony and a simultaneous rise to power of large parts of the Global South. These movements owe their origins to the mechanisms meant to preserve the Western hegemony, like the liberalisation of trade and foreign direct investment, encouragement of pluralistic governance systems modelled after those prevailing in the West, and aid. This trend has been evident since the 1980s (Cochrane and Zaidan 2023). O'Neill's (2001) coining of the term "BRIC" (later, "BRICS") over two decades ago recognised a trend that was already well established. But it has now reached an inflexion point where it is no longer the case of just the ascent of the BRICS countries, but a far wider phenomenon.

The rise of the Global South

Since 1999, economic growth in middle-income countries (MICs) has consistently outstripped that of the high-income countries (5.3 per cent per annum on average vs. 2 per cent); there are now more MICs than low-income countries (LICs): 108 vs. 26, and five out of eight people live in MICs (World Bank 2024). In 1970, while the share of North America and European Union in global GDP was 66 per cent, by 2023 it had shrunk to 45 per cent (ibid). South-South trade increased from US\$600 billion in 1995 to US\$5.3 trillion in 2021 and its volume is now higher than that of North-South trade, featuring non-traditional exports, including higher value added and technology-intensive manufactured goods (UNCTAD 2023). The growth of South-South flows of foreign direct investment (FDI) was faster than that of FDI from the North in the late 1990s and has remained more resilient in the post-Asian-crisis period (UNCTAD 2004).

The rise of the South has not just been economic. Over 60 countries in the Global South are now high human development countries (UNDP 2024). Many have become policy independent; even the LICs that rely heavily on Western aid and lending show remarkable skill in resisting the policy demands of Western donors and the international financial institutions (Swedlund 2017). There have been open disavowals of Northern policy directions, including disagreements on how to deal with the financial crisis of the late 1990s and the global recession in 2009. On the diplomatic front, even the West's most strenuous efforts to get the Global South to align on key issues like the Ukraine war have met with solid resistance from the most important MICs (Brazil, China, India, South Africa, Türkiye).

The result has been a reduction in the relevance of official development assistance (ODA) from the West. As more countries become MICs, their ability to generate domestic revenues offsets the need for official external funds (Table 1). While aid remains important in the 26 remaining LICs and in fragile and conflict affected states (FCAS), its importance in most MICs is negligible. Sixty-two countries have "graduated" from ODA eligibility since 1970. Many countries have gone from being aid-dependent to trade-reliant. International trade, FDI, and remittances are the major external financing sources for the Global South (Rahman 2021; World Bank 2024).

Table 1: Net Aid Dependency, 2021

Income groups/ Countries	Low income (LIC)	Lower– middle income (LMIC)	Upper– middle income (UMIC)	Malawi (LIC)	Bangladesh (LMIC)	Peru (UMIC)	Syria (Fragile)
Net aid (% of GNI)	12.1	0.8	0.1	9.3	1.2	0.1	113.2

Source: World Bank (2024)

What is more, the West is no longer even the dominant aid donor. Three groups, more or less equal in size (Rahman 2021), now provide foreign aid – the OECD–DAC donors, the Arab World, and China and the other non-DAC donors. The Arab donors concentrate their aid in Muslim-majority countries. For example, the preeminent Arab donor entity, the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) overwhelmingly lends to its 57 Muslim member countries (IsDB, 2023). China, now the “lender of first resort” to many developing countries, uses aid-like instruments and credit to pursue commercial advantages and foreign policy objectives, not unlike the OECD–DAC donors (Dreher et al., 2022).

The North no longer supplies the majority of the innovations, whether technological or for social infrastructure. There are now significant South–South exchanges. Examples include the emergence of South-East Asian tigers as technological hubs or of many Asian and African countries experimenting with and exporting social innovations. MICs are also building international organisations like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank, that compete with older, Western-led bodies like the World Bank (Munro, 2018).

An increasingly assertive Global South has emerged whose development aspirations are more nationally driven (e.g. Chimhowu et al. 2019). For example, while the UN’s Millennium Development Goals were often used as development goals in national development plans, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are used more as indicators rather than as primary goals in many plans (Zaman and Rahman 2020). In 170 national development plans published between 2016 and 2021, only about half had the SDGs as their central focus; plans from MICs paid the SDGs the least heed (Munro 2023).

Implications for the decolonisation debate¹

Despite the rise of the Global South, many of the founding texts of the decolonisation and “shift-the-power” movements are (implicitly or otherwise) preoccupied with addressing the development industry of Western aid donors, multilateral lenders, and international NGOs (e.g. BOND 2023; 2024; Global Fund for Community Foundations 2019). Both authors of this paper have attended many meetings of Northern-based NGOs where “decolonizing development” is

equated with decolonising the development industry and where the rise of the Global South (BRICS, middle-income countries, emerging economies, China, etc.) go unmentioned (e.g. Cooperation Canada 2022).

A foundational document of this type of thinking is the “#ShiftThePower: A Manifesto for Change” (Global Fund for Community Foundations 2019); it addresses the well-known ills of the development industry: agendas set by “external actors and requirements”, international “transfer of funds”, the obsession with “quick solutions” and the measurement thereof, and, perhaps most importantly, the very idea that “‘international development’... is defined by money and power” relations emanating from the West. Even where authors do not explicitly equate aid with development, they often suggest that decolonising aid is crucial for decolonising development as a whole (e.g. Foroughi and Kelly 2024; Kesar and Kvangraven 2024). That the development industry is rife with problems is indisputable. But whether the pathway to decolonising development lies through decolonising the development industry of aid and international NGOs is highly debatable.²

As alternatives, these threads of the decolonisation and shift-the-power movements (like much of the rest of the decolonisation movement) propose a decentralised, democratic, and communitarian alternative (e.g. BOND 2024; Global Fund for Community Foundations 2019) with which we have some sympathy. In so doing, however, they risk romanticising non-Western modes of life, just like generations of critical development scholars, activists, and practitioners have before them (Mishra 2017; Ziai 2004).

There is little recognition that, as a result of the rise of the Global South, the thread of the decolonisation and shift-the-power movements focusing on decolonising the development industry is becoming increasingly irrelevant. Nowhere is this more apparent than in their notable silence on the changing patterns of global power spurred by the “rise of the rest” (Bull 2015), in particular, China and the other BRICS, and of the implications for good or evil (e.g. Dreher et al. 2022; Mishra 2012; 2017).

Finally, the emphasis in this thread of the decolonisation and shift-the-power movements, as in the rest of the decolonisation movement, is not on colonialism as such, but on Western colonialism. This emphasis discounts the continuing legacies of other empires like the Chinese, Japanese, Moghul-Timurid, Ottoman, and Russian/Soviet empires (Frankopan 2015; Mishra 2017). This is ironic, given the growing unease in Africa and Asia at some practices of the Chinese Government and certain Chinese companies, to say nothing of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine.

III. Decolonising the South

This last section demonstrates that the thread of the decolonisation and shift-the-power movements that focuses on decolonising development by decolonising the development

industry is largely misguided. But does that mean that there is no work left to be done in terms of decolonisation? Our view is that there is more work to be done, but elsewhere.

In particular, the governance institutions in much of the Global South have been deeply affected by their colonial legacies. Pockets of influential elites whose behaviours mimic the “control” and “exploit” objectives of the former colonisers and whose value systems are defined by their links to the West (and, for many, to China and the Gulf states) through education, economic, or social networks continue to dominate the development discourse and strategic directions of most ex-colonies in Africa and Asia. These elites are more subversive of a progressive development process than the Western-based development industry. The perpetuation of these practices is strengthened by their contribution to the economic benefits accruing to the elites.

This argument is not new. Galtung’s structural theory of imperialism (1971) suggested that the colonial–imperial structure did not just involve a centre exploiting a periphery, but a centre exploiting its own lower classes as well as a centre in each peripheral state, dedicated to exploiting its own lower classes. Obioma (2017) is even more radical:

Today, most of the nations in Africa should not even be called African nations but western African nations. The language, political ideology, socio-economic structures, education, and everything that makes up a nation, even down to popular culture, do not originate within these countries ... Central to this psychology is the proliferation of Africans being educated in the west. This trend has resulted in the rise of an army of western influenced elites who continue the colonization of their own people.

In many African and Asian countries, the current civil administration systems are almost exact replicas of those in place during the colonial era. The continuation of a colonial system based on notions of exploitation and control is clearly antithetical to the notion that the objective of the administrative system of an independent nation should be to serve the public. In South Asia, the Indian Administrative Service, the Civil Service of Pakistan, and the Bangladesh Civil Service are largely unreformed versions of the colonial-era Indian Civil Service (ICS). The selection and training of the elite groups is identical to the British colonial systems, with a set of written examinations and interviews (Ewing 1982). Elite academies have been set up for the selected, with a few selected for further education in Europe and North America. Upon completion of training, the officer is appointed to head up regions within the country or appointed to executive positions in Ministries. The post-colonial Indigenous civil service remains the dominant administrative apparatus that maintains and strengthens the colonial exploitative and control-based practices to the detriment of the local populations, mainly for its own benefit and the perpetuation of its group influence.

Some authors have placed the blame on the continuation of the prevalence of colonial administrative values and practices in public administration curriculums (Nzewi and Maramura 2021). Hansen (1977) provides a primer on the South African decolonisation debate dating back to W. E. B. du Bois, arguing that debates about curriculum decolonisation have mainly been

linked to specific movements rather than questioning the inherent colonial bias in the administrative systems stemming from the curriculums. Pilane (2016) suggests decolonisation of the curriculum has been associated with #FeesmustFall, #Rhodesmustfall, and #Afrikaansmustfall dissents (see too Jansen 2023).

According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2023):

Decolonisation did not succeed in removing coloniality. ... It survived the end of direct colonialism. In 'postcolonies' it continues to affect the lives of people, long after direct colonialism and administrative apartheid have been dethroned. What, therefore, needs to be understood is [that] colonial matrices of power ... continue to exist in the minds, lives, languages, dreams, imaginations, and epistemologies of modern subjects in Africa and the entire global South.

The perverse effects of this indigenous form of colonialism are well documented. In too many countries, rent-seeking elites have effectively captured the state apparatus to gain illicit access to taxes or resource revenues. These elites then siphon capital out of the country, placing it in offshore tax havens and investments in London, Manhattan, or the Persian Gulf (e.g. Burgis 2016; Hollingsworth and Lansley 2010). Some Western (and non-Western) banks, law firms, real estate agents, accountants, and investment advisors have been complicit in this pillaging of resources and the subsequent money laundering, especially but not uniquely from Africa (Burghis 2016) and the former Soviet Union (Hollingsworth and Lansley 2010). This is reminiscent of the colonial-era exploitation processes except that the main actors are now the local elites abetted by the Western and – in recent decades – the Persian Gulf-based private sector and is a major constraint on development in many countries (e.g. Fisseha 2022). While post-colonial governments and elites sometimes take a strong anti-colonial line and have in fact sidelined older colonial elites, they usually exercise their elite power for their own benefit and those of their close followers, to the detriment of women, minorities, and long-term development; think India or Zimbabwe. In addition, their behaviour has often mimicked that of the ex-colonial power, particularly in the area of public administration. The rooting out of these periphery-based elites and their “control” and “exploit” attitude is a far greater need in terms of shifting the power than the decolonisation of the increasingly irrelevant aid industry.

IV Conclusions

There is now a chasm between critical development studies and associated social movements, like certain threads of the decolonisation and shift-the-power movements on the one hand and international relations and development economics on the other. Critical development studies, especially in the North, is preoccupied with what it sees as enduring Western hegemony, while the latter two focus on the growth and agency of non-Western “emerging” countries in general (e.g. Baranyi and Rahman 2018; Bull 2015; Munro 2018) and of China (e.g. Dreher et al. 2022) in particular. The facts on the ground increasingly validate this latter approach.

The Global South has already shifted the power to itself. The decolonisation and shift-the-power debates involving the development industry (bilateral aid, multilateral institutions, and international NGOs) is only interesting in Western capitals and the ever-smaller number of LICs and FCAS in the Global South where the development industry remains important. For most of the Global South, decolonising the development industry is a mere sideshow. The global decolonisation process will be faster and more appropriate if the West accepts that there has been an ownership transfer in determining the development trajectory in the Global South (Baranyi and Rahman 2018).

However, the decolonisation debate remains relevant for the Global South. Governance institutions including civil administrations must change in ways that are fit for independent nations and national value systems that reflect the aspirations of the populations – in particular, those belonging to the periphery of the periphery. Curriculum reform is called for in ways that appreciate the pedagogical value of indigenous knowledge relating to public administration. This need not be an “anti-West” movement. The aim should be to learn, acquire, and transform national and global knowledge in ways that are appropriate for the indigenous conditions and fit for an independent nation.

The West must cease to propagate Western administrative models as “ideals”, cease facilitating rent-seeking and money laundering processes for rogue elites in the Global South and respond to Southern calls for partnership in creating enabling conditions for global sustainable development. Decolonize development? Yes, of course. But that noble aim will not be achieved by decolonising the development industry of bilateral donors, multilateral lenders, and international NGOs. That is now a sideshow. The real show is in the Global South itself.

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¹ Here we deal only with the limitations of that part of the decolonisation literature that equates decolonising the aid industry with decolonising development. But the decolonisation literature has faced many other criticisms, notably from Táiwò (2022) and Jansen (2023). Particularly problematic is the conflation of modernity and Enlightenment with the West; see too Conrad (2012), Gopnik (2015), Herbjørnsrud (2017), and Mishra (2012). Táiwò also shows that the current decolonisation movement “denies or at least seriously discounts the agency of the colonised” (2022: 7), in sharp contrast to earlier generations of critical scholars and activists like Fanon, Freire, Gandhi, Nkrumah, and Nyerere, who emphasised the agency of Southern actors.

² It is also ironic that so much of the current decolonisation literature focuses on the reformist agenda of changing donors’ behaviour, for the original language of decolonisation was much more radical, even revolutionary: NEIO, Non-Aligned Movement, G77, etc.