



Review

# Transforming Global South alongside UN Agenda on Sustainability

Mihajlo Jakovljevic<sup>1,2,3,\*</sup>, Anupam Khajuria<sup>4</sup>, Shih-Shen Chien<sup>5</sup>, Tiago Correia<sup>6</sup> and Lee Wing Yan Vivian<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO-TWAS, The World Academy of Sciences, Trieste 34100, Italy

<sup>2</sup> Shaanxi University of Technology, Hanzhong 723099, China

<sup>3</sup> Department of Global Health Economics and Policy, University of Kragujevac, 34000 Kragujevac, Serbia

<sup>4</sup> Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability, United Nations University, Tokyo 150-8925, Japan

<sup>5</sup> Department of Geography, National Taiwan University, Taipei 106319, Taiwan

<sup>6</sup> Associate Laboratory in Translation and Innovation Towards Global Health, LA-REAL, Global Health and Tropical Medicine, GHTM, Instituto de Higiene e Medicina Tropical, IHMT, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, UNL, 1099-085 Lisboa, Portugal

<sup>7</sup> Centre for Learning Enhancement and Research (CLEAR), The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China

\* Correspondence: [sidartagothama@gmail.com](mailto:sidartagothama@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** The concept of the Global South has evolved over time alongside the low-and middle-income countries' efforts to catch-up with the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. True progress relies on deep, structural changes rather than small reforms. Colonialism, industrialization, and global trade created lasting inequalities between the Global North and South. These historical factors have influenced today's urban growth, population trends, and the rise of megacities, as well as the decolonization movement and initiatives like the Non-Aligned Movement. The Global South is becoming more prominent in global governance and trade through South–South cooperation, BRICS+, Belt and Road Initiative and regional alliances. However, despite these advances, significant gaps in income, technology, and institutional strength remain. Prominent obstacles to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), remain weak health systems, rising rates of noncommunicable diseases, challenges like poverty and the middle-income trap, and ongoing governance problems like corruption and instability. Yet new opportunities arise, including digitalization, mobile banking, AI-driven health services, and improved data use primarily among the leading Emerging Markets. Speeding up progress on the SDGs requires unified efforts in several areas: better governance, fairer trade and financial systems, investment in social protection and health coverage, more equitable technology sharing, and increased South–South collaboration. In a changing world, the Global South must use its growing population, expanding middle class, and innovation to promote development that is both fair and sustainable, while tackling deep-rooted inequalities. The objective of this contribution is to identify feasible pathways for accelerating just and equitable development in years to come.

**Keywords:** Global South; sustainability; development; economic growth; science diplomacy; Global North; emerging markets; BRICS+; Belt and Road; green agenda; UN



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## 1. Introduction

The contemporary “Global South” consists of a vast number of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) countries whose jurisdictions mostly belong to Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Common assessments of its population ranges from 84 to 86% of the humankind, and their joint Gross Domestic Product (GDP) accounts for approximately 39% of the world’s GDP [1]. Origins of Global North-South economic disparity can be traced back deep into economic history. This paper critically explores the evolution, current dynamics, and future directions of the Global South through the lens of sustainable development anchored in the United Nations (UN)’s 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Sustainable development is here defined as economic, social and institutional transformations that strengthen resilience, equity, and environmental stability over time.

The argument of the paper is that the transformation of the Global South must be understood through the interaction of long-term historical inequalities, demographic transitions, structural economic constraints, and emerging geopolitical realignments. While many LMICs have experienced rapid growth and social progress, these gains remain fragile due to persistent governance gaps, limited fiscal space, and uneven technological diffusion. Sustainable development in the Global South requires structural, not incremental, change.

While existing literature frequently treats the “Global South” as a static economic category or a relic of Cold War geopolitics, there is a significant research gap in understanding the dynamic interplay between historical colonial structures and the modern, multipolar shift led by BRICS+ and digital innovation. This paper moves beyond simple descriptions of poverty or growth. Its theoretical significance lies in applying a “path-dependency” lens to the UN 2030 Agenda, arguing that the Global South’s success is not just hindered by a lack of funds, but by structural “traps” such as the middle-income trap and the “Silver Tsunami” of premature aging that are unique to late-developing nations. By analyzing these intersections, the study provides a practical framework for policymakers to move from “incremental reforms” to “structural transformations”.

This paper addresses a critical research gap: the tension between the Global South’s rising macroeconomic influence and its persistent internal structural vulnerabilities.

The paper proceeds in four steps: (1) tracing the historical roots of Global North–South inequalities; (2) describing contemporary participation of the Global South in the UN’s sustainable development agenda; (3) analyzing the structural hurdles that constrain sustainable development; and (4) outlining pathways for accelerating SDG progress. By analyzing these contradictions, this study moves beyond descriptive synthesis to provide a framework for “Transformative Sustainability”.

## 2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multi-scalar thematic analysis to examine the evolution of the Global South within the framework of the UN 2030 Agenda. The methodology follows a three-step approach. First, a historical-comparative analysis is used to trace the genealogy of developmental taxonomies to understand their normative impacts on policy. Second, the paper utilizes secondary data analysis of macroeconomic and demographic trends, specifically GDP growth, purchasing power parity (PPP) shifts between the G7 and BRICS+, and fertility rate changes to identify structural hurdles. Finally, the study adopts a case-study approach, examining specific regional examples like the Belt and Road Initiative. This synthesized approach ensures the findings are grounded in both historical context and contemporary empirical evidence. This multi-layered approach allows for an analytical rather than purely descriptive exploration of the levers that can accelerate SDG progress.

## 3. Economic History and the Global South—How Did Historical Processes Create Today’s Global South?

Before we discuss the history of the Global South, let’s clarify the terminology of developed/developing/least developed countries, First/Second/Third World, and Global North/Global South, which are historically contingent conceptual frameworks that encode particular geopolitical imaginaries, theories of development, and normative assumptions about global order. A critical comparison of these three systems reveals their different genealogies, analytical strengths, and political limitations [2–6].

First, the tripartite developmental taxonomy—developed countries, developing countries, and least developed countries (LDCs)—emerges primarily from post-1945 modernization theory and the institutional architecture of the Bretton Woods system. Here, states are grouped according to measurable economic criteria such as per capita income, industrialization levels, and later including human development indicators. While widely used in policy arenas, this system reproduces a linear and teleological model of progress in which countries are implicitly positioned along a single continuum of development, with “developed” economies representing the normative end-point. Critics note that such terminology obscures structural inequalities generated by colonialism,

global trade asymmetries, and financial dependence, thereby implying that “underdevelopment” is an internal deficiency to be remedied rather than a relational outcome of global political economy.

Second, the Cold War classification of First, Second, Third (and Fourth World) reflects a fundamentally different logic: rather than economic performance, it prioritizes geopolitical alignment. The “First World” referred to capitalist, US-aligned industrial democracies; the “Second World” to socialist states led by the Soviet Union; and the “Third World” to newly decolonized or non-aligned countries seeking autonomous development trajectories. The lesser-used “Fourth World” later arose to describe stateless peoples, Indigenous nations, or marginalized internal peripheries. Although analytically powerful for interpreting Cold War alliances, the terminology is now considered anachronistic and normatively problematic, as numerical ranking suggests a hierarchical ordering that naturalizes inequality and homogenizes diverse regions. The decline of the Soviet bloc further undermined the utility of the “three worlds” schema, rendering “Second World” virtually obsolete.

Finally, the Global North–South–East–West framework represents a contemporary attempt to account for shifting geopolitical landscapes in an increasingly multipolar world. The North–South axis emphasizes structural inequalities in wealth, technological capacity, and political influence, highlighting how global power is unevenly distributed rather than linearly staged. The emergence of the Global East—often associated with postsocialist states in Eastern Europe or the strategic ambitions of China and Russia—illustrates a new conceptual space not captured by Cold War binaries or development paradigms. Similarly, the Global West is invoked to denote liberal-democratic alliances rather than strict geography. This scheme draws attention to global interdependence, cross-regional political projects, and the fluidity of emerging power blocs; yet it remains imprecise, as boundaries of the “Global South” can shift depending on the issue area, and the “Global East” lacks stable definitional criteria.

In addition to these three major categorization systems, there are others such as the Group of 77, founded in 1964, was supposed to strengthen cooperation among developing “Third World” countries and lay grounds for accelerated socioeconomic development [7]. More than a half a century later it consists of 134 nations referring to themselves as the Global South. Also, the Finance Center for South-South Cooperation [8], established by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, has pioneered the official designation of member nations of the Group of 77 plus China. Also, there are ongoing geopolitical uncertainties since the early 2010s, exchange of trade wars and proxy military conflicts indicate the return of great power rivalry. In such circumstances, a myriad of diverse developing countries is seeking alignment with leading international forums frequently belonging to the opposed geoeconomic blocks [9]. There is a traditional proximity of most Global South governments with the Bretton-Woods institutions of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. However, in an attempt to release themselves from strict fiscal policies imposed by WB and IMF through different loan arrangements, and many LMICs have become increasingly open to Asian actors such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Eurasian Union, Belt and Road Initiative [10], BRICS Development Bank etc. [11].

From a comparative perspective, these three systems illuminate different aspects of global order: developmental labels foreground economic capacity and institutional performance; Cold War terminology highlights ideological alignment and historical geopolitical divides; and the North–South–East–West lexicon attempts to map contemporary power relations and multi-scalar inequalities. Each scheme, however, carries embedded normative assumptions that risk oversimplifying complex histories and heterogeneities. While a more reflexive approach is necessary to treat these labels as discursive constructs shaped by political agendas, epistemic traditions, and struggles over representation in global governance, it is roughly agreed that there are conceptually overlapped categorization among developing/least developed countries, third world ones, and the global south counterparts.

Back to the history of so-called global south, at the dawn of Colonial Era [12] the discoveries of new maritime routes in Renaissance, originated primarily from Spanish and Portuguese monarchies and Italian merchant city states. Thus, the role of the Ancient Silk Road diminished as a continental trade route connecting Beijing and Rome [13]. Since James Watt’s improvement of the steam engine in the 1740s, the industrial revolutions in coal and steel [14] spread from Imperial England and the Netherlands towards overseas Colonies [15].

Throughout many world regions of the Global South, there are statehood and bureaucratic administration traditions dating back to antiquity, such as Persia, Egypt, India, Mali, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Cambodia, Pakistan, Syria, Turkey, and Mexico, to name just a few. However, devastating damage was done to these cultural legacies during the Colonial Age leaving the remnants of these civilizations with weakened governance and long-lasting political instability. This case is particularly visible alongside artificial colonial state borders established through Sudanese and Sub-Saharan Africa, where ruling majority nations, such as the Zulu people were violently forced to live in different states. Modern-day developing world countries also suffer from endemic corruption [16] which is very common even to cultures with very different ethno-religious backgrounds [17].

Surprisingly, throughout most of the Colonial Age duration, India and China still remained the wealthiest nations until 1870s [18]. Commencing in the early 1800s, Western European powerhouses relocated a huge amount

of national wealth of wider India (prior to establishment of Pakistan and Bangladesh), China, Indochina, and ASEAN (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations; Brunei Darussalam, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) towards their imperial metropolitan countries. Examples ranging from Belgian Congo to French and Dutch possessions in Indochina and ASEAN, Portuguese in Africa and Brazil are so many. Due to all the aforementioned circumstances, significant economic recovery across the Global South was paradoxically only made possible during the Cold War era of superpowers' rivalry between [19]. This extraordinary age commencing in the late 1940s was the cradle to many exceptional leaders, Nelson Mandela [20], Patrice Lumumba [21] and Mahatma Gandhi [22] to name just a few.

Under the context of colonization, the rise of cities, along with industrialization and modernization, happened due to rural-urban migration and the establishment of the first factories [23]. Agricultural practices were changed forever, and increased energy consumption. Crops breeding became more efficient, and alongside with sanitary measures, supported improved early childhood survival in the high fertility era [24]. Improved housing, clean water, and food safety jointly led to longer healthy longevity [25]. These events laid the grounds for a demographic explosion. Accelerated population growth could not be met with expanding capacities for housing, education and socioeconomic support [26]. For the sake of comparison, during the industrialization of Western Europe and North America, some 300 million migrated from the countryside towards towns and cities leaving agricultural peasant cattle breeding life to become an industry worker [27]. The same process is now witnessed throughout the Global South at far larger scale with almost three billion (3,000,000,000) people moving from rural to urban areas [28]. The majority of these migration routes have taken place after WWII, exposing the socioeconomic and health systems of these developing nations to almost unbearable pressure. Ultimately, such a chain of events gave rise to their megacities with Shanghai, Kolkata, Guangzhou, Jakarta, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Lagos, Manila, Dhaka, Kinshasa, and Karachi being amongst the most prominent examples [29].

During the Cold War, some positive intersections between the USA and USSR's interests set the stage for the establishment of the famous Non-Aligned Movement, which described itself as "history's biggest peace movement" [30]. This triangular association established in Belgrade on 1st September 1961 consisted of a wide range of underdeveloped Third World countries, and was informally led by a triangular presidency of former Yugoslavia, Egypt and India. The ultimate consequence was that British, French, Dutch and Belgian empires dissolved, with even the wealthiest of their colonial possessions like India, Congo and Brazil, gaining formal independence [31]. Decolonization of Spanish and Portuguese imperial possessions in Latin America happened in the early 19th century [32]. There were attempts to control native resources, though not entirely successful, after the colonies gained independence. This was done mostly through the CPLP (Community of Portuguese Language Countries), La Francophonie (The Organisation internationale de la Francophonie) and the British Commonwealth [33]. The process of gradually diminishing cultural influence and fading economic ties persisted throughout the Cold War, while mostly the USA and USSR geopolitical influence replaced the European one [34]. Beloveshka Forest voluntary dissolution of the USSR in 1991 marked the end of the Cold War era (Belovezha Accords). During the consecutive three and a half decades, the world has become a much different place. Globalization, with all of its manifestations like colonial Era demise, 44 years of Cold War rivalry [35], the Non-Aligned Movement, industrial technology dissemination to the LMICs developing nations, continued to accelerate mostly from early 1990s until early 2010s [36].

#### **4. Modern Day Global South and Its Participation in the UN Agenda: How Is the Global South Positioned within the UN 2030 Agenda?**

The historical inequalities described above shape the Global South's position in today's UN-led development structures. In here, it must be noted that although the term Global South often appears as a homogenizing shorthand for countries outside the historical core of Euro-American power, it is internally differentiated by significant variations in economic capacity, geopolitical ambition, aid-giving practices, and structural vulnerability. A comparative examination of three major groupings—BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), emerging donors, and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) or low- and middle-income countries (LMIC), —reveals a better landscape in which development cooperation is shaped as much by hierarchies within the Global South as by relations with the Global North.

First, as aforementioned, BRICS countries represent the most powerful and politically assertive segment of the Global South and have increasingly positioned themselves as rule-shapers in global development governance [37]. Initially observed as way too weak to challenge the world order, these large economies of a scale found mutual synergy while effectively mimicking successful economic policies of Western neoliberal capitalism of that time. They exposed almost three decades of continuously stronger real GDP growth, ultimately resulting in their joint

economic output exceeding that of the G7 measured in purchasing power parity terms in 2024 (BRICS+ 35% against 30% G7) [38]. A large share of this joint economic output remains dominated by the China's remarkable development trajectory [39]. However, all the other BRICS are witnessing bold progress with India's economy size rapidly expanding, while Russia managed to exceed both Japan and Germany in PPP terms in fiscal 2024 [40]. All of these gradual changes contribute to the overall reshaping of supply and demand patterns and to the re-establishment of global trade routes after the temporary halt worldwide in 2020. Interestingly, a large segment of their real economic growth is driven by domestic consumption, such as the Chinese or India, unlike reliance on exports and foreign trade as it used to be the case prior to the pre-pandemic.

These states seek to offer alternatives to OECD-DAC paradigms of aid. Their development cooperation often emphasizes infrastructure finance, resource-for-development agreements, and state-led growth models rooted in national sovereignty and non-interference [41]. Yet BRICS influence is ambivalent. On one hand, their investments expand development space for LDCs that have long faced conditionalities from the IMF and World Bank. On the other hand, the scale and direction of such projects can create new dependencies, particularly when resource extraction, debt-financing structures, or geopolitical interests outweigh local development priorities. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the most visible example [42,43]. ProSAVANA in seeking to apply Brazilian experience to Mozambique with controversy between imagination of agricultural expansion and land-grabbing is another example [44]. Thus, BRICS states dominate certain global development arenas not merely through economic weight but through their ability to shape norms, expectations, and pathways of "South-South solidarity."

A second tier within the Global South comprises emerging donor economies such as Turkey, South Korea, and the Gulf states, and so on. An array of other middle-sized emerging markets, such as Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, the Philippines, Vietnam and many others are performing economic development quite well [45]. These actors occupy an intermediate position: wealthier and more institutionally consolidated than many developing countries/regions. Some emerging donor economies actively emulate OECD-DAC norms: South Korea, for example, promotes results-based management, transparency, and "knowledge-sharing" models shaped by its own developmental state experience [46,47].

More importantly, others display clear alignment—politically, economically, and ideationally—with BRICS countries. KazAID (Kazakhstan Agency for International Development) in 2017 provided ODA-like programs to Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and others and therefore Kazakhstan is considered the most institutionalized donor among the Central Asian states [48]. And, the Gulf states' sovereign wealth funds and development agencies invest heavily in ports, industrial parks, and special economic zones similar to China's overseas modalities. The involvement of UAE, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states in BRICS+ expansion signals a symbolic and institutional shift toward a multipolar governance architecture [49].

And thirdly, given that there is a deep income gap associated with revenue streams generated by different socioeconomic classes, so-called Least Developed Countries (LDCs), largely concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and small island developing states, represent the most structurally constrained group in global development. With low-income levels, economic dependence on primary commodities, limited industrial bases, and heightened climate vulnerability, LDCs often lack the fiscal and political capacity to negotiate effectively with either the Global North or BRICS.

LMICs nations of the Global South since the early 1990s have experienced steady and continuous expansion of their participation in industrial manufacturing, agricultural production, South-South trade [50] and service sector investment [51]. In this sense, the UN is primarily interested in facilitating the sustainable development of the the majority of the global population. This is topping the agenda not only because of the provision of food, safety and essential medicines but also in order to slow down environmental pollution on a large scale. Low-income Southern Hemisphere countries were lagging much behind these achievements, frequently caught in a poverty trap and distorted by civil wars and unrest. It took almost half a century for the developing world to catch up with the industrialization and urban development of the wealthy Global North [52].

From the LMICs evolving demographic landscape is dominated by population ageing, and with strong international migration, such as the Sub-Saharan Africa and Middle Eastern routes towards Europe since the early 2010s. Surprisingly, a phenomenon primarily characteristic of emerging BRICS+ markets, exposing strong real GDP growth, is the rise of their middle-class citizens. The purchasing power of this layer of population inhabiting primarily coastal and industrial regions of their megacities further drives demand for many goods. Domestic consumption was one of the key causes of how Chinese trade adjusted and survived throughout global pandemic restrictions since 2020, with its export-oriented economy. Under such context, it is unfortunately noted that economic constraints typical of most Global South nations refer to the so-called middle-income loop or poverty trap [53]. Their real GDP growth is frequently stagnant, marked by low Gross National Product (GNP). Additional hurdles arise from the international trade arena dominated by wealthy, post-industrial countries of the Global North [54].

Such an economic competition further constrains the resources available for investment in technology and innovation [55].

LMICs nations also face substantial challenges in achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC), one of the core goals of Agenda 2030 [56]. Constellation of socioeconomic, demographic, and political factors makes delivery of equitable and sustainable medical services hard to achieve [57]. LMICs are contending with a rising prevalence of noncommunicable “lifestyle-related non-communicable diseases” or NCDs such as atherosclerosis, kidney failure, diabetes, cancer, obesity, depression and chronic obstructive respiratory disease (COPD). Underlying drivers include the transformation of labor markets, sedentary lifestyles, and nutrition patterns favoring fast and processed foods [58]. Most NCDs expose a chronic clinical course, are largely incurable and an expensive lifetime burden for the patient and the family. Accounting for palliative and last year of life intensive medical care, these illnesses tend to consume value equal to the entire lifespan medical consumption of an average citizen [59,60].

Mainstream economics consists of a large body of seminal literature proving that population health has a strong feedback effect on the economic productivity of the entire society. Therefore, investment in medical care provision and preventive medicine is given high priority on the agendas of developing country governments. LMICs governing authorities are continuously attempting to increase insurance enrolment and reduce out-of-pocket expenses. Among the few Global South nations truly demonstrating the capacity to do so are the largest emerging markets known as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). Most of them, except for India, which remains steadily around 3.8% of GDP, managed to significantly expand their health expenditures since the early 1990s. GDP percentage-point share is unique among health econometric measures of health spending in that it allows comparisons across inherently different economic systems. Furthermore, % of GDP share indicates a higher priority of medical needs against other major budgetary allocations such as education, public order, defence, culture, environmental issues, housing etc. [61]. See Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Summary of Global Health Expenditures and Fertility Rate in LMICs 2022 (Data World bank 2022).

Country	Health Expenditures (% Gross Domestic Products, GDP)	Fertility Rate (Births per Woman)
Angola	2.93	5.209
Bangladesh	2.39	2.179
Benin	2.68	4.634
Bhutan	4.39	1.478
Bolivia	8.43	2.584
Cambodia	4.71	2.616
Cameroon	4.48	4.397
Comoros	8.38	3.935
Congo, Rep.	2.19	6.106
Cote d'Ivoire	3.64	4.349
Djibouti	2.50	2.653
Egypt, Arab Rep	4.70	2.75
Eswatini	7.22	2.801
Ghana	3.70	3.434
Guinea	3.96	4.303
Haiti	3.21	2.699
Honduras	8.28	2.522
India	3.31	1.994
Jordan	6.83	2.679
Kenya	4.33	3.262
Kiribati	10.50	3.182
Kyrgyz Republic	4.92	2.8
Lao	2.02	2.455
Lebanon	5.74	2.263
Lesotho	12.65	2.716
Mauritania	4.48	1.32
Micronesia	10.34	2.785
Morocco	5.68	2.256
Myanmar	5.20	2.131
Namibia	9.30	3.248
Nepal	6.66	2.002
Nicaragua	8.95	2.24

Table 1. Cont.

Country	Health Expenditures (% Gross Domestic Products, GDP)	Fertility Rate (Births per Woman)
Nigeria	4.27	4.552
Pakistan	2.90	3.662
Papua New Guinea	2.62	3.165
Philippines	5.16	1.929
Sao Tome and Principe	7.46	3.695
Senegal	4.06	3.864
Solomon Islands	4.82	3.62
Sri Lanka	4.36	1.984
Tajikistan	7.63	3.127
Tanzania	3.11	4.671
Timor-Leste	14.32	2.801
Tunisia	6.96	1.847
Uzbekistan	7.36	3.396
Vanuatu	4.15	3.647
Vietnam	4.59	1.927
West Bank and Gaza	9.73	3.375
Zambia	5.26	4.175
Zimbabwe	3.63	3.767

Surprisingly, elderly citizens in some of the world regions formerly associated with Marxist socialism (Afghanistan, Mongolia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Yemen, Congo, Angola, Ethiopia, Somalia, Madagascar, former Yugoslavia, Eastern Germany), despite suppression of civil freedoms, remember this period for its social justice [62] and almost zero crime rates [63] in many countries. Today, due to sudden but uneven economic development, newly established welfare is unequally distributed within these societies [64]. Such inequalities in access to essential goods and services [65] create many social tensions and lead to frequent changes of governments, unrest and still widespread poverty despite real growth in macroeconomic indicators.

However, it needs to identify that there are still some typical financial hurdles to affordable and equitable medical care, including insufficient health insurance coverage, too heavy workload of public hospitals due to low physician and nursing staff density and high out-of-pocket expenditures [66]. Many households might be exposed to the risk of catastrophic health expenditures, which means debt because of a serious illness, sinking entire families into poverty [67]. There is also substantial heterogeneity of the quality and price of medical services between wealthy coastal or urban regions and the remote countryside [68]. Bottleneck sustainability inefficiencies are recognized in inadequate public financing and a large discrepancy in the equity of provision of medical services and pharmaceuticals. A vast array of developing country governments faced substantial hurdles in increasing socioeconomic support to the vulnerable layers of the population to a sufficient extent to improve service quality and expand insurance coverage [57]. The unresolved challenge of how to provide impetus for the sustainable long-term real economic growth remains the creation of strategies to support social protection financing and resilience [69], rural-urban migrations and rise of megacities and an unseen environmental pollution on land and in oceans alike [70].

Although there is a visible lag in technological development, being a remnant of a turbulent past, some of these nations surprise with catching pace faster than wealthy northern OECD societies. The case of mobile banking among African youth whose literacy is far beyond the one of their European counterparts is the prominent example [71]. Another case is utilization of various artificial intelligence-assisted applications by clinical physicians, where again software literacy in China and Far East Asia exceeds substantially the one of medical doctors of the same kind in German speaking countries [72]. Big Data accumulation taking place in Mandarin-speaking regions accelerates at a previously unseen scale anywhere in the world. This growth is primarily driven by massive population size and divergent regulatory frameworks compared to those currently in place in the EU and North America. Such a huge amount of citizen behavior associated with expansion of AI assisted small wearable medical devices makes telemedicine services possible to provide care in rural countryside and reduce the workload of the hospital network of facilities [73]. Evidence-based decision-making is a brand-new invention for most Southern Hemisphere governing elites. Decision makers slowly adopt some of its advantages, being largely unaware how much good managerial practice may increase the technical efficiency frontier in resource allocation in welfare, social protection, education and medicine [74].

UN multilateral agencies and LMICs national authorities continue their strive to deliver socioeconomic protection of the vulnerable and the poor through donor aid and capacity building. Local capacities help

significantly in overcoming these challenges through mutually beneficial South-South collaboration. ASEAN countries of South-East Asia expose substantial unmet need for essential medicines and small, wearable medical devices, frequently associated with artificial intelligence utilization. Supply was found externally from India, whose massive pharmaceutical manufacturing sectors serve as the global hub for generic medicines. On the medical device side, supply was secured by exports from China [75]. From a larger Asian perspective, a very convenient example of wider global trends is the fact that Chinese exports to ASEAN reached \$526 billion in 2023 [76], surpassing both the United States and the European Union by \$502 billion each and up a further 12% in 2024 [77].

### **5. Linking the Global South Development to Achieve Sustainable Development: What Structural Constraints Prevent LMICs from Achieving Sustainability?**

The Global South's hurdles to achieve sustainable development arise from the interaction of long-standing demographic pressures, historical inequalities, structural economic vulnerabilities, governance fragilities, and uneven technological diffusion, which together constrain the capacity of these countries to convert economic growth into stable and inclusive development. Political instability, characterized by shifting alliances, fragmented governance structures, and weak institutional capacity, remains widespread across the Global South. Sustainable development strategy implementation is largely hindered by political uncertainties, which often lead to fluctuating priorities and inadequate long-term planning [78].

Accelerated demographic growth occurred only once in eight millennia. It originated from the industrial revolutions of coal and steel in England and France, and consecutive breakthroughs in agricultural farming. First stage happened primarily in Western Europe and North America from 1750s to 1950s [79]. The success of Anti-Colonial Independence Movements after WWII, the spreading of sanitary measures and advanced crop breeding, set the stage for a second, much more widespread phase of demographic explosion in Asia, Latin America and Africa. It resulted in incredible growth from 1 billion to 8.2 billion in a negligible time window 1804–2025. Here, an honest observer would notice that historically, all the societies of the past were high-fertility communities. The main driver behind population growth was increased early childhood survival, coupled with extended longevity. This case was most obvious in the so-called baby boomer generations following both world wars, Korean, Vietnamese, Afghan and other major military conflicts during the Cold War era.

Since 1950s, the sexual revolution [80] and emancipation of women in the Southern hemisphere, integrating them into the labor markets, has created a financial incentive to have fewer births [81]. Due to a variety of public health programmes, including family planning initiatives, adoption of the “one child policy” in China and this huge fertility wave, was substantially weakened. The resulting fertility fall, in most modern-day nations, was sharp, with a prominent example of Turkey ranging from 6.9 children per woman (during her entire life span) back in 1900, reaching only 1.62 live births per woman in 2022 [82]. Ultimately, the global trend gradually slowed down, resulting in annual world population growth peaking at 2.1% in 1968, dropping to only 1.1% in recent years [83]. Core landmarks of new world landscape were widespread Silver Tsunami, ageing of entire Western Pacific WHO region imposes substantial constraints on fiscal sustainability of retirement systems created during the era of demographic growth a century ago [84]. The entire equilibrium of demand and supply routes across the Global South has been heavily disturbed during the pandemic and is now being rebuilt again from scratch [85]. Unlike in previous centuries, this process of reconstruction of trade routes is now largely being done relying on South-South cooperation and trade in vital resources and services, largely surpassing wealthy economies of the Global North [86].

One of the structural characteristics of the most rapidly developing segment of the Global South is its sudden and continuing growth of middle-class citizens [87]. An empirical evidence would probably notice that most of the developing world countries have documented a significant rise in living standards and a massive expansion of their middle class since the end of the Cold War. This is witnessed with better, more affordable housing [88], improved food security [89] and extension of life expectancy worldwide [90]. This expansion is likely to have a profound effect on the world economic output and spending. The Southern hemisphere middle-class is rapidly exceeding both in their population size and, to a limited extent in their purchasing power, sometimes exceeding that of the national middle-classes of wealthy OECD nations of the Global North. Relatively thin but powerful layer of BRICS' super-rich millionaire elite are giving new life to the luxury goods, spa services and high-end tourism demand worldwide [91]. The phenomenon is largely driven by new and ever-growing opportunities for South-South trade [92]. Picturesque example is less known fact that China and Japan have remained world's leading luxury goods markets for many years [93]. A turning point was 2012 when a key shift took place: China surpassed Japan to become the world's largest luxury goods market. This event has marked a major structural change in global luxury consumption. During the 2010–2020 decade China (and Asia-Pacific overall) rapidly grew as the engine of global luxury demand. Given the contemporary momentum, Asia-Pacific (led by China) is now

the dominant global luxury-goods region. Such a situation is reflected in the unmet needs ranging from expensive medical technologies, quality housing, reliable employment or medical tourism industries for ordinary citizens [94] driven by insufficient insurance coverage in LMICs [95].

Sub-Saharan African countries remain particularly vulnerable to brain drain, worsened by massive migrations towards wealthy Arab Gulf countries and Western Europe [96]. The African indigenous young workforce receives quality education primarily in Western countries and China, funded through various scholarship programmes and donor agencies [97]. Most of them prefer to find jobs, settle and establish families in these target countries, with very few coming back home to bring back the knowledge and expertise to their native lands [98]. A typical example of bottleneck inefficiency is the traditional scarcity of available hospitals and primary care centers, and laboratories, coupled with the low density of available general practitioners and nursing staff. Spreading of modern technology, deploying E-medicine covers some of the unmet needs of the citizens residing in rural and remote areas [99].

An array of the so-called geopolitical key countries owning substantial resources ranging from fossil energy reserves to lithium or rare minerals, this gift was more a curse than a blessing. Namely it placed them at the arena of Great Power competition [100] while being caught in a middle-income trap and difficulties to establish continuum of stable governance [101]. As prominent examples of this kind we may notice Afghanistan [102], Venezuela, Vietnam [103], Sudan, Yemen, Serbia [104], Bolivia, Syria [105], Kuwait and many others. Probably most impressive driver of fiscal unsustainability of many such economies is the scale of social inequalities [106]. For the sake of comparison, it is frequently cited that almost 60% of India's population survives on less than \$3.10 a day, the World Bank's median poverty line [107]. Yet these poverty rates continue to shrink rapidly, particularly among the largest emerging BRICS markets and regional powers. Hurdles remain ahead of the Global South regions' attempts to build up a stable upward pathway towards sustainable development. Yet the impression of success in this struggle remains widespread among almost all regional leaders, ranging from Brazil, Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa, Vietnam or Indonesia [108]. Next to real GDP growth and innovation, evolving compassion and governing responsibilities for those entrapped in slums and favelas of Third World megacities, should lay grounds for optimism in the decades ahead as we approach 2050 [109].

Taken together, these factors reveal that the challenge of sustainable development in the Global South is not rooted in insufficient effort or ambition, but in the deep structural conditions that shape these societies' demographic trajectories, economic opportunities, and political stability. While many countries have experienced real progress (e.g., expanding middle classes, rising life expectancy, and strengthen empirical evidence) would probably notice that most of the developing world countries have documented a significant rise in living standards and a massive expansion of their middle class since the end of the Cold War. Yet, one interesting point to note that low-income countries have the highest SDG index in SDG 12 and 13 according to the cluster analysis of SDGs [110]. One of the potential reasons could be low income countries by embracing circular economy and industrialization without de-industrializing or sacrificing economic stability [110]. This is witnessed with better, more affordable housing [88], improved food security [89] and extension of life expectancy worldwide [90]. While many countries have experienced real progress (e.g., expanding middle classes, rising life expectancy, and strengthened domestic markets) such gains remain fragile without long-term investment in governance, social protection, innovation, and equitable access to essential services. The persistent tension between rapid economic change and limited institutional capacity explains why development paths continue to be uneven and why achieving sustainability demands not incremental adjustments but transformative strategies capable of addressing the historical and systemic constraints that define the region.

## 6. Accelerating UN SDGs Progress in the Global South: What Levers Can Enable Transformation?

Accelerating UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) progress in the Global South requires a multidimensional strategy that addresses persistent structural barriers while leveraging the region's unique potential innovations. Based on the 2023 UN Global Sustainable Development Report [111], five levers for transformation were mentioned including (1) Governance, (2) Economy and Finance, (3) Individual and collective action, (4) Science and technology and (5) Capacity Building. Firstly, the Governance plays an important role by setting out regulatory interventions, policies for financial redistribution and taxation, government policies on food loss and waste reduction and nutritional interventions including public health education, policies on decarbonisation and reduce energy consumption as well as expansion of municipal waste collection and investment in public transport networks. Secondly, the economy and finance are vital to provide resources to sustain the SDGs especially in LMICs. Nevertheless, the U.S. withdrawal from global health financing and multilateral engagement is generating substantial turbulence, with disproportionate repercussions for LMICs. Abrupt reductions in WHO

funding, instability surrounding PEPFAR, and the termination of thousands of USAID programmes have weakened disease surveillance, disrupted essential services, and eroded research and workforce capacities. Geopolitically, the U.S. retreat has created a power vacuum that exposes the extent to which global health governance is vulnerable to competing interests. Thirdly, the individual and collective action could be achieved by public education in LMICs such as changes in health and diet behaviors, recycle and reduce waste as well as utilizing public transportation. Fourthly, the engagement of science and technology plays important part for transformation. For example, investment in research and development for advancing technologies in the agricultural industry and renewable energy technologies. Fifthly, capacity building is crucial in securing the SDGs transformation. In response, many LMICs are seeking to strengthen South–South cooperation, bolster regional institutions, and pursue more autonomous models of financing and research. The impact of South-South and triangular cooperation has proven essential, facilitating knowledge transfer, technical assistance, Industry 4.0 and data-driven decision-making tailored to local realities<sup>14</sup>. Yet the power vacuum caused by the U.S. simultaneously attracts new actors (e.g., philanthropies, development banks, and emerging powers) whose priorities may not align with equity or the SDG. The consequence is an increasingly multipolar and uncertain global health order, in which LMICs must navigate intensifying constraints while struggling to sustain progress toward global health and development objectives. To sustain and scale progress, the Global South must continue to prioritize inclusive partnerships, strengthen governance, and secure reliable financing. At the same time, international actors support technology transfer, capacity-building, and equitable trade policies. To meet the UN 2030 Agenda, the Global South must leverage its “innovation leapfrogging” such as AI-driven telemedicine and mobile banking to overcome historical gaps in institutional strength. True progress requires addressing the scale of social inequality, where even in rising powers like China and India, the large shares of the population remain below the median poverty line despite rapid GDP growth.

In conclusion, the paper shows that sustainable development in the Global South is constrained not by isolated challenges but by a constellation of deeply interdependent structural forces that must be addressed in tandem.

### **Author Contributions**

M.J. has defined the concept, research questions and created original manuscript draft. A.K., S.-S.C., T.C. and L.W.Y.V. have all consecutively amended the manuscript substantially during multiple rounds of review for important intellectual content, thus fulfilling ICMJE criteria for authorship. All authors express their consent to share responsibility for the content of this Review contribution. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest. Given the role as Editor-in-Chief, Mihajlo Jakovljevic had no involvement in the peer review of this paper and had no access to information regarding its peer-review process. Full responsibility for the editorial process of this paper was delegated to another editor of the journal.

### **Use of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies**

No AI tools were utilized for this paper.

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