

# Strengthening Solidarity for Reciprocity: Rethinking the Role of SSC in Reinvigorating Multilateralism during Global Crises



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**“The fundamental goal of strengthening global solidarity during global crises is to achieve substantive equal partnerships between all countries in the future.”**

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## From Solidarity to Reciprocity: The Transformation of South-South Cooperation

Solidarity has been the core spirit of SSC when many Asian and African countries were struggling for independence in 1940s. The spirit of solidarity also forged the Non-Alignment Movement a few years later, which features the common identity, equality and solidarity between the third-world countries. The key objectives of SSC were political: the defense of sovereignty, opposition to colonialism and hegemony of the “North” as well as building a fairer international economic order. The spirit of solidarity was represented in both the domestic economic development strategies of southern countries and the creation of south-led international organizations like the Group of 77 (G77), United Nations Conference for Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), etc. During the 1950s and 1970s, development planning,

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state intervention, import institution featured the national economic strategies of many developing countries to varying degrees. The New International Economic Order (NIEO) advocated by UNCTAD has contributed to creating a fairer international investment and trade regime although the world economy was still in the control of the developed countries. These indicated that the influence of solidarity between southern countries has gradually spread from political sphere to economic field although the economic cooperation between Southern countries were rather limited back then.

The 1980s, however, witnessed the decline of the solidarity spirit due to a number of factors: the dominant influence of two superpowers urged the developing countries to choose side for patronage; the debt crisis of the third-world countries, the imposition of structural adjustment programmes from major international financial institutions and traditional donors, the fragmentation of the common identity of third-world countries caused by the “take-off” of East Asian counties and economic development in Latin America (Bergamaschi et al., 2017). The political reason was not attractive enough to forge the foundation of South-South Cooperation, and the major areas of South-South Cooperation identified by the South Conference in late 1980s, which include trade, finance, industry, business, transport, information and communication, and people to people exchange, were ignored to a large extent as the voice of advocacy was too weak to be heard (Chaturvedi 2012, 18).

The global economic crisis in the 1990s not only eroded the economic growth of many developed countries, but also threatened the sustainability of their aid budgets for developing countries. Many traditional donors could not meet their promise of aid provision. At the same time, the persistence of poverty in many recipient countries led to new discussions on the effectiveness aid from traditional donors to recipient countries. The aid fatigue and underperformance of aid projects made scholars from both the North and the South reflect on the inherent inequality embedded in this type of aid-recipient dichotomy. On the contrary, the resilience showed by the newly emerging economies like China and Brazil revived the South-South links as the investments from these countries to other developing countries started to grow. However, different from the SSC featuring political solidarity, the new SSC focused more on reciprocity, that is, equality, mutual respect, mutual benefit, non-interference and non-conditionality.

The new South-South Cooperation gained its momentum in the 2000s as the emerging and developing countries began to form coalitions and different forums such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), CIVETS (Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, and Turkey), IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa), FOCAC (Forum of China-Africa Cooperation), etc. to promote their common interests, agendas and visions for global governance and international development. Concurrently, the volume of aid, trade and investment between Southern countries is also increasing tremendously. The South has contributed to more than half of the world’s growth

in recent years with the decrease of ODA from developed countries (World Bank, 2017). The estimated non-DAC countries' contribution to ODA has reached 15.2 per cent.<sup>1</sup> The intra-south trade is accounting for more than a quarter of all world trade. The outflows of foreign direct investment from the South represent a third of the global flows; and remittances from migrant workers to low- and middle-income countries reached 466 billion dollars in 2018, which helped lift millions of families out of poverty."<sup>2</sup>

In most recent decade, many scholars started to argue that SSC, led by the emerging economies in particular, is transforming the landscape of global development cooperation through a "silent revolution" that might lead to the death of existing donor-recipient aid system (Woods, 2008; Jing et al., 2020). Some scholars straightforwardly pointed out that ODA based on the experiences of the North could hardly provide effective prescriptions for the development of the South and it only focused on managing modernization's "bads" rather than promoting its "goods" (Jing et al., 2020). However, the new development assistance system should not replace the existing ODA system but strengthen the system through integrating the emerging economies into it. The new framework based on the principles of reciprocity can not only promote horizontal partnership, increase the aid effectiveness, but also bring in more resources for development through advocating structural reforms. Such reforms could create the necessary conditions for mutual benefit and autonomous decisions on development policies in the global south (Esteves & Assuncao, 2014). But the question remains

how this could be operationalised in the new international scenario with the heterogeneity of developing countries in the face of global crises.

## **Collapse of Multilateralism and Challenges to Reciprocity of SSC**

The global outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic as a global health disaster and the social-economic crisis it caused has accelerated our time into an era of "mutual dependence". No country can deal with the crisis alone. At the same time, the pre-existing conditions like de-globalization, the rise of populism and "thinning of multilateralism" were exacerbated to some extent with the global spread of the pandemic as many developed countries focused on dealing with domestic issues. The US-China trade conflict, the US withdrawal from the World Health Organization and the Paris agreement during Trump era, as well as the politicisation of the pandemic led by the United States further divided the global community and the goal to restructure the global solidarity led by the United Nations System has become more difficult.

The asymmetry in mobilizing the public resources, in facing this challenge, has widened the gap between developed and developing countries. According to the statistics released by UNCTAD (2021), the developed economies had committed on average almost 30 per cent of their GDPs to fight the pandemic, while the average size of relief package in developing countries does not even reach 5 per cent (including 10 per cent of China, 6 per cent of India) as

of May 25, 2020. General government health expenditure in low- and middle-income countries amounts to only 3 per cent of GDP and in the group of least developed countries (LDCs) just 1 per cent, against 10 per cent in high-income countries. Meanwhile, the economic recession hit by the pandemic has been far more severe for developing countries than developed countries and it will take longer time for the South to recover due to their higher capacity constraints in both providing health facilities and resource mobilization. At the global scale, the resource constraints in the least developed countries will make achievements of 2030 agenda for sustainable development goals impossible if no further actions on global cooperation are taken.

The global outbreak of the pandemic and the consistent appearance of the new variants of the virus make the whole world rely on vaccine to build immunity against the virus. Providing timely and equitable access to vaccines against COVID-19 for all people is crucially important and key to control the wider negative impacts of the pandemic. However, this presents enormous challenges in developing countries, especially when taking into account competing health priorities and broader commitments in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (OECD, 2021). The global community witnessed “vaccine nationalism” in some developed countries; the countries prioritised their own citizens and insisted on priority access to vaccines through bilateral deals (Mancini & Peel, 2020). Over 50 per cent of the vaccine doses that the principal producers have pledged to

deliver in 2021 have been pre-ordered by wealthy countries (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021) and some even reserve vaccine volumes far more than their populations (NYT, 2020).

The better performance of the Southern countries in the global crisis brings a silver lining to the cloud. At the beginning of the pandemic, the new forms of transnational solidarity like South-North Cooperation (for example, China provided aid to Italy and Russia sent medical team to the United States) were born to tackle the global challenge. Some recipient countries also provided support to southern partners (for example, Mongolia and Pakistan provided support to China). As the largest developing country, China made commitment of making vaccine a global public good and joined G20’s Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) to relieve the debt burden of the least developed countries. So far, China has provided vaccines and other types of support to more than 100 countries and quite a few international organizations. The first virtual meeting of the International Forum on COVID-19 Vaccine Cooperation was held on August 5th, 2021. President Xi Jinping announced that China will strive to provide two billion COVID-19 vaccine doses to the world throughout this year and offer 100 million U.S. dollars to the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) facility. A joint statement was jointly released by the 23 Southern countries after the Forum. These efforts indicate that solidarity was overriding reciprocity in SSC during the global crisis.

The active action taken by the Southern countries resonated with the North. The most impressive example is the G7's Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative, which promised to "provide a transparent infrastructure partnership to help narrow the \$40 trillion needed by developing nations by 2035". This is certainly good news for many developing countries who are struggling with infrastructure provision deficiency. However, according to the United States government officials, the objective of this mega-project is not just a G7 consensus on the need for a shared approach to China on trade and human rights, ..., to offer their standards and their way of doing business (Holland & Faulconbridge 2021). What concerns us here is not the competition it brings to the developing world, which to some extent will benefit many developing countries and help improve the quality and standards of Chinese Belt and Road Initiative projects. The question is the business model it promotes with developing countries. Will it combine aid with trade and investment or is it just a pure business model? Do the standards they plan to impose on the developing countries really be fit for them? What about the issues of efficiency and effectiveness of the cooperation between countries at different development stages? The fundamental question here is "Can the North follow the same principles of reciprocity in SSC when conducting development cooperation with the South?", that is, "Can the norm of reciprocity advocated by the SSC be applied to NSC" during the crisis period? What will be the best approach to addressing the issues of global public goods provision in a world

with countries of big divergences in size, capacity, interests, and values?

## **Convergence of NSC and SSC: Feasible, Good or Bad?**

Before we try to answer these questions, let us review the norms that the world has been following in development cooperation. For a long period of time, the western world has advocated overtly 'charity and responsibility' to be the driver for providing development assistance to other developing countries. However, their altruistic character was often overshadowed by "conditionality" and "selectivity" imposed by donors on the recipients. The discussion on aid and development effectiveness since mid-1990s demonstrated the self-reflection of the traditional donors, which gave rise to the principles of "ownership" and "accountability" in evaluating the aid effectiveness. A series of actions were taken by the OECD-DAC countries to solidify its position in international development cooperation both in reality and in rhetoric with the aim to mobilize more development finance and improving development effectiveness.

The rise of the new SSC further accelerated the reform of north-dominated development cooperation regime. One of their attempts was to incorporate the emerging economies into their system by creating Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC), a multi-stakeholder platform that brings together all types of development actors to advance the effectiveness of their development efforts, to deliver results that are long-lasting, and contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable



Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>3</sup> The most important task of GPEDC is to explore synergies between NSC and SSC. The latest progress report, published in 2019, covered the data from 86 partner countries and territories, more than 100 development partners and hundreds of civil society organizations. Although, GPEDC was co-launched by OECD and the United Nations Development Programs (UNDP), yet many southern experts still consider it a northern dominated scheme with the motive of imposing their rules and standards on the emerging economies. No meaningful participation from China and India in the first two high-level meetings led many people doubt the sustainability of the platform (Li et al., 2018).

Another important action taken by OECD is the creation of Total Official Support for Sustainable Development (TOSSD), a new international standard for measuring the full array of resources in support of the 2030 Agenda. The objective was to monitor not only ODA, but also private resources mobilised through official means flowing to developing countries. The TOSSD has developed a lot since its first establishment in 2015. The framework is more comprehensive than before. The reporters include bilateral and multilateral providers, trying to cover the resources of ODA, Other Official Flows (OOF), SSC and Trilateral cooperation (TrC), and support international public goods and private resources mobilised by international interventions. The first comprehensive report of TOSSD data, based on the year 2019, was published in March, 2021. It is said that more than 90 providers reported their support to SDG to TOSSD

international task force. However, no information was given on the providers from the given data set, only the data based on pillars, sectors, and recipients was provided. So far, only partial data on SSC and TrC was provided and no data was available on support given to international public goods.<sup>4</sup>

There is no doubt that the major objective of TOSSD is to get SSC providers on board. But since the very beginning, the actors from the Global South voiced their concern that the framework will be governed by the OECD-DAC club and serve its own interests. In the past few years, we witnessed the effort made by OECD to address these concerns and many non-DAC providers including Asian and African beneficiaries as well as recipients of development assistance and international organizations joined the team to report the data to OECD. However, crucial providers such as Brazil and China are only observers and are therefore not proper members of the task force. India is not participating in the task force at all (Li, 2019). In order to get the major players like China, Brazil and India on board, the OECD-based taskforce seeks to transfer ownership of TOSSD to the UN. In March 2020, the UN Statistical Commission decided to create a working group to further refine the proposal by the International TOSSD Task Force to integrate TOSSD in the 2020 Comprehensive Review of the SDG indicators. But from the data released by TOSSD, we can see there is still a long way to go to make TOSSD accepted by the global community.

The convergence of the South to the North is also an obvious trend in the last decade. This is not only

reflected in the increase of the aid volume, their contribution to global governance and their willingness to take more global responsibility, but also in following the rules and norms. Taking climate change as an example, while major western countries were swinging their pendulum in climate leadership, BRICS countries have started to invest heavily in sustainable resources (Baker 2019), despite their dependence on energy sources that lead to a high rate of pollution. There were huge sums destined to the development of alternative energy sources out of the first loans provided by the NDB in 2016. Looking individually, China has committed to achieving carbon emissions peak in 2030 & carbon neutrality in 2060 at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly and has already integrated green development into its “14th five-year plan”. In April 2019, China and international partners officially launched the BRI International Green Development Coalition (BRIGC) at the Second Belt and Road Forums for International Cooperation. BRIGC aims to establish a policy dialogue and communication platform, an environmental knowledge and information platform, and a green technology exchange and transfer platform, so as to advance global consensus, understanding, cooperation, and action of a green Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In December 2020, the BRIGC published its first report, *Green Development Guidance for BRI Projects Baseline Study Report*. The report summarized best practices for addressing ecological, environmental and climate risks in overseas investment based on the analysis of environmental policies, safeguard measures and practices of

governments, financial institutions and NGOs around the world. It formulated a classification framework, produced positive & negative lists for BRI investments and put forward specific suggestions to promote green BRI projects.

As the convergence between the North and the South is growing, the concerns on the threat to the existing global governance caused by the rise of BRICS countries are also increasing from both the North and the South. On the one hand, the approaches that the major Southern countries (specifically the BRICS countries), use to establish equal partnership based on the principle of non-interference with the North and among Southern countries were considered a threat to the existing global governance structure which was previously dominated by the West (Bagchi 2012). For example, unlike the IMF and the World Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB) are not ‘interested’ in how projects are put into practice in each country, but only grant funds based on the validity of a project (Abdenur and Folly 2015; Peng and Tok 2016). Also, in the NDB, the five founding members (the BRICS countries) participate with equal economic capital which allows them to have an equal voting capacity different from the case with the IMF. On the other hand, the concern about the status of the BRICS countries among the South is also growing. The rise of these countries has demonstrated the heterogeneity of the Global South: not only in the difference between BRICS and the rest of the Southern countries

in terms of development stages, but also in the difference among BRICS countries in terms of ideology, geography and culture. Therefore, the questions like: Are these countries still willing to represent the Global South, or are they trying to develop new forms of colonialism or imperialism (Deepak 2016)? Can the BRICS still stick to the shared interests of opposition to the 'Euro-American club' which has dominated the world economy since the nineteenth century as the economic interests among themselves are widening?

### **Way Forward: Solidarity or Reciprocity?**

After more than one and a half years since the first case of COVID-19 was reported in China, the entire world is still in the mist of uncertainty for recovery. The effective international cooperation is clearly essential for ending the pandemic and rebooting global sustainable growth and development. But how can global cooperation be achieved with a shattered multilateralism from the South-South Cooperation perspective? Here, we argue that global solidarity should be prioritized during global crises to maintain reciprocity for a more and equal world in the future.

First and foremost, the importance of ODA should be recognized by both SSC providers and recipient countries during the global crises. We all know that the impacts of global pandemic were not limited to health and economic sphere, but more severe on social development like exacerbated world hunger, rising poverty, halted or even reversed progress in education and shortened life expectancy. For many

developing countries, LDCs or LMICs in particular, these problems cannot be solved by themselves. The performance of ODA during the crisis has not been disappointing so far. According to the OECD report, foreign aid from official donors rose to an all-time high of US\$ 16.2 billion in 2020, up to 3.5 per cent in real terms from 2019. The data does not include the ODA from non-DAC countries. Turkey provided 1.12 per cent of its GNI for ODA last year. China has also contributed a lot to help other developing countries fight against COVID-19 pandemic as mentioned above. However, compared to ODA, all other major flows of income for developing countries—trade, foreign direct investment and remittances—declined due to the pandemic. Total external private finance to developing countries fell 13 per cent in 2020 and trade volumes declined by 8.5 per cent (OECD 2021).<sup>5</sup> Government should play a pivotal role in tackling global crises and the role of ODA cannot be replaced by other types of development finance. This should remain to be the foundation of global consensus.

Second, the global crises have shown the urgent need to invest in global and regional public goods against global health crisis, disaster response, climate change and disruption of global value chains, etc. The outbreak of the pandemic also provides opportunities to broaden the international cooperation for global public goods production. Southern countries have huge potential and advantages in contributing to technical, financial and human resources for public goods provision in least developed countries. The manufacturing capacity



in China and India for PPEs, medical facilities and vaccine production has been playing a very important role in narrowing the supply and demand gap. Many other Southern countries also enjoy geographical and human resources potential for participating in global value chains. Governments from both the South and the North should encourage their enterprises to invest in these developing countries. A new development finance architecture to combine aid, trade and investment should be established to encourage global public goods provision through NSC as well as SSC. Moreover, China and G7 should work together to coordinate BRI and B3W to make them benefit the partner countries while maintaining the sustainability of this type of new development finance.

The international-level global crisis response mechanism to offer prompt, coordinated and effective solutions to global crisis could also be viewed as important global public goods. Unfortunately, during the crisis, we saw the collapse of this type of mechanism. The authoritative platform like the World Health Organization was either abandoned or politicised. We also witnessed the divide not only in international level, but also within national and local levels, which led to mistrust between the state and the society, the biggest obstacle for effective control of the pandemic. The dysfunction or lack of authoritative knowledge system to some extent thwarted the function of scientific measures to preventing the spread of the virus and provided opportunities for some politicians to use pandemic as a political tool to target their political enemies. The

Southern countries should work together to change and avoid the reoccurrence of this situation.

Third, the advancement of digital technology should be an important area for global cooperation rather than mutual coercion and suspicion. The wide application of digital technology in developing countries has become the most important instrument to narrow the gap between rich and poor, developed and developing in terms of education, knowledge transfer and even job opportunities. More global efforts are needed to promote digital technology in developing countries while the global rules under the United Nations for governing technology should be formulated to avoid weaponisation and politicisation of digital technology for their own benefits. The importance of investing in digital technology should be highlighted during the global pandemic and for achieving the SDGs world-wide.

All the targets mentioned above can only be achieved based on new global consensus reached by inclusive, multiple-level actors (governments from both developed and developing countries, multilateral organizations, regional organizations, enterprises and NGOs, etc.) under the leadership of the UN system. The largest scale of global solidarity is needed. To achieve this, the emerging economies like BRICS, could play a decisive role through providing more development cooperation based on solidarity rather than specific reciprocity to avoid the downside slide of the development finance during the global crises. The position of BRICS to represent the South should not be forgone as more international responsibility from

them can provide a benchmark for the developing countries to act according to their promises and rules they made, which will definitely bring benefits to the Southern countries. At the same time, with the enlarging economic gap between the emerging economies and the rest Southern countries, the expectation of more support from them has been increasing. More support from the emerging countries can strengthen the Southern solidarity which to some extent has been weakened in recent years but was needed to tackle the global crisis.

However, this does not mean the principle of reciprocity of South-South Cooperation should be abandoned. The fundamental goal of strengthening global solidarity during global crises is to achieve substantive equal partnerships between all countries in the future. Through sacrificing the specific reciprocity (mutual benefit in the short run) between Southern partners, the downward spiral of negative reciprocity (tit for tat) between the North and the South could be avoided, and a global community with a shared future for mankind can be achieved in the long run.

All in all, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented threat to the world, but it can also be turned into an opportunity “to propel changes that have often been postponed” and it “is too good a crisis to be allowed to go to waste” (Lopes 2020). With concerted global efforts and smart strategies, global challenges like pandemic and climate changes must be resolved and global sustainable development can be accomplished.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/dac/dac-global-relations/non-dac-reporting.htm>
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/intergovernmental-coordination/south-south-cooperation-2019.html>
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.effectivecooperation.org/system/files/2020-06/infographic-v10%20-%20Edited%20v2.pdf>
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.tossd.org/what-is-tossd/>
- <sup>5</sup> OECD’s global Outlook on Financing for Sustainable Development 2021, <https://www.oecd.org/development/global-outlook-on-financing-for-sustainable-development-2021-e3c30a9a-en.htm>

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## INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION 2021

United Nations Day for South-South Cooperation (SSC) is celebrated globally on 12th September every year commemorating the adoption of Buenos Aires Plan of Action (BAPA) for Promoting and Implementing Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries in 1978 on the same date. The UN says that the technical cooperation among nations of Global South started as a pioneering effort to strengthen their diplomatic and international negotiating power through political dialogue. The International day for SSC is an initiative for the economic, social and political developments of the countries in the Southern region. It also highlights the efforts of the United Nations for cooperation among developing countries. SSC helps developing nations to share knowledge, skills, expertise and resources to meet their development goals through concerted efforts. According to UNOSSC, this initiative is a manifestation of solidarity among peoples and countries of the South that contributes to their national well-being, their national and collective self-reliance and the attainment of internationally agreed development goals, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

**Source:** Mirror Now Digital (2021, September 12). International Day for South-South Cooperation: A comprehensive initiative for development of Global South. Mirror Now News. Available at <https://www.timesnownews.com/mirror-now/in-focus/article/international-day-for-south-south-cooperation-a-comprehensive-initiative-for-development-of-global-south/810760>.