TOWARDS A NEW DEVELOPMENT THEORY FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Around the world, progressive governments have taken office, yet they do not have a clear strategy to rebuild their societies from the detritus of neoliberalism. These governments, in countries such as Honduras, Senegal, and Sri Lanka, articulate clear critiques of the International Monetary Fund's debt-austerity regime, but they often lack a concrete policy programme capable of decisively moving beyond it. Unable to develop a policy that fully breaks from neoliberalism, many of these progressive governments slip back into neoliberal immobility.

International institutions, such as the United Nations (UN), have also been unable to chart an alternative framework. One notable attempt dates to 2000, when the UN inaugurated a process of highlighting outcome-based goals for development with the establishment of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) focused on issues such as poverty and education.[1] The MDGs were succeeded by seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, which are supposed to be met by 2030. However, like the MDGs, the SDGs merely outline a broad set of goals that are toothless, ineffectual, and lack an underlying theory or programme.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the SDGs are 'moderately to severely off track' as a 2023 UN report noted, a failure that it attributes to developments such as the Third Great Depression (2007–2008), COVID-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine, and genocide against the Palestinian people. More specifically, only 12% of the 140 targets are on track, 50% moderately or severely off track, and 30% either stagnated or regressed.[2]

Those who defend the SDGs' methodology argue that the solution to improving their success is to increase funding for development. However, this approach ignores the reality that funding from the Western-dominated financial system is simply not available. As it stands, there is a $4 trillion yearly shortfall of funds needed for the SDG targets to be met by 2030.[3] The 1970 pledge by Global North countries to spend 0.7% of their Gross National Income (GNI) on Official Development Assistance (i.e. foreign aid) – and therefore toward the SDGs programme – has not been met: in 2023, the United States spent a mere 0.24% of its GNI on development assistance, France spent 0.5%, and the United Kingdom 0.58% (this is in contrast to the 2014 pledge by North Atlantic Treaty Organisation members to increase their spend on war making to 2% of Gross Domestic Product).[4] Furthermore, countries in the Global South that align their development plans with the SDGs are more likely to attract international aid, loans, and foreign direct investment tied to development projects, including lending initiatives from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Yet these lending initiatives are often conditioned on those countries adopting 'free market reforms' (including austerity policies, deregulation, and government downsizing). So, poorer nations are 'incentivised' (i.e., coerced) to take on more debt or to open their economies to Western financiers in order to meet SDG targets and attract investment for development. And since there is no theory underlying SDGs and the only way to finance their progress is by taking on debt, in practice SDGs are used more as sticks than carrots. This actuality goes against SDG 17.4, which is to 'assist developing countries in attaining long-term debt sustainability through coordinated policies aimed at fostering debt financing, debt relief, and debt restructuring'.[5] In other words, the SDG framework is not merely limited by a lack of funding, as its proponents argue, but by a world order and development programme that seeks to keep the South underdeveloped and by the lack of an alternative development theory and programme for the Global South that is able to overcome this reality.

As early as 2018, three years after the SDGs were outlined and adopted by every member of the United Nations, IMF Deputy Managing Director Tao Zhang wrote that 40% of low-income countries were in high risk of debt distress – up from 26% in 2015, when the SDGs were adopted – and therefore could not service their debt.[6] Further, the UN's *Financing for Sustainable Development Report 2024* showed that the median debt service burden for the poorest developing countries rose to 12% in 2023, 'the highest level since 2000'.[7]

There is a burning need for a new development theory for the Global South, one that can go beyond the overambitious goals of initiatives like the SDGs or the failed approach of the IMF and its debt-austerity regime. Without a scientific development theory, there can be no development programme.[8] This dossier, a collaboration between Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research and Global South Insights, lays out the debate over the failed development theories of neoliberalism and the need for a new development theory for the Global South, offering an initial framework for the latter. Over the course of the next few years, we will produce more texts on a new development theory of this nature by analysing specific countries and regions and then studying the overall possibilities.

Theories of Underdevelopment

Before we elaborate on some of the key elements of a new development theory, it is important to go over other approaches to development, such as modernisation theory (exemplified by the work of W. W. Rostow), the Washington Consensus, and more radical lines like dependency theory and the debates it has evoked on the left.

Modernisation Theory

In 1960, the US economist W. W. Rostow, who advised both US presidents Lyndon Johnson and John F. Kennedy in their campaigns against socialism and national liberation, published *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*. Its title announces its intentions. Rostow, an ideologically committed anti-communist and Cold Warrior, theorised a universal and linear path of development from so-called 'traditional society' to the 'preconditions for take-off', 'take-off', the 'drive to maturity', and, finally, the 'age of mass consumption'.[9] He argued that secular education would help give rise to an entrepreneurial class that would place 'rational' economic incentives over 'irrational' traditions. This, he claimed, would lead to a high rate of investment and economic diversification, ultimately culminating in a consumer society akin to that which had allegedly already been achieved in the Global North.

Rostow's theory was a caricature of post-World War II modernisation theories which, following figures such as Saint Lucian economist W. Arthur Lewis, argued that economic growth would happen when surplus labour was reallocated from a mainly rural and agrarian traditional economy to a mainly urban and industrial capitalist economy.[10] Rostow and other modernisation theorists saw development in terms of a transition to capitalism. Their fatal flaw was their ahistorical approach, which assumed that after five hundred years of colonialism the Global South was starting from a similar position as Europe before the Industrial Revolution. They viewed underdevelopment as an original condition. In reality, there was no 'traditional society' as such in the Global South. Rather, there was a completely new socioeconomic system that had been violently imposed by colonialism and imperialism. Moreover, unlike pre-industrial Europe, the Global South was operating in a world where technology, trade, and finance were dominated by monopolies of the Global North, with a neocolonial economic and political structure already fully in place.

Rostow's argument built on his earlier work, such as *An American Politics in Asia* (1955, written with Richard W. Hatch), which was more explicit about the Cold War context of modernisation. In *An American Politics*, Rostow wrote that the 'alternative to total war initiated by the United States is not peace. Until a different spirit and different policy prevail in Moscow and Peking, the alternative for the United States is a mixture of military, political, and economic activity'.[11] In other words, the United States had to use its entire arsenal of weapons, including 'total war', to overthrow communism in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. For theorists like Rostow, war making had to be encouraged in the crusade against communism rather than recognised as the waste of precious human labour that it is. Indeed, in the 1960s, political scientist Samuel Huntington came up with the theory of 'military modernisation', which argued, first, that the militarisation of states in the Third World would be the most effective way to achieve 'social modernisation' and, second, that as a result, military rule should be encouraged to fight communism and build a 'modern society' modelled after the US.[12]

Modernisation theory defined the development paradigm for the IMF and the World Bank from the 1950s to 1980s. Its failure to generate a 'take-off' in the Third World did not impact its credibility in the halls of power. It did lose its sting due to the Third World debt crisis that struck countries that had relied upon stable and relatively low interest rates for the US dollar. When the US Federal Reserve raised interest rates precipitously in 1979, it reduced available credit for the developing states and led to several perilous financial situations (including the bankruptcy of Mexico in 1982).[13] Modernisation theory collapsed with the peso, and a new theory arose to define the work of the IMF and the World Bank.

The Washington Consensus

In the 1990s, John Williamson, a British economist and senior fellow of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, coined the term Washington Consensus to describe the neoliberal agenda to privatise state-owned enterprises (SOEs), commodify public goods, and liberalise capital accounts and trade.[14] These policy choices, driven by the IMF and World Bank in alignment with the

US Treasury, find much of their theoretical justification in neoclassical economics and the works of thinkers like Friedrich Hayek and those associated with the neoliberal Mont Pelerin Society.[15] The Washington Consensus paradigm is perhaps most famous for its role in the so-called structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), which led to a lost decade on the African continent.[16]

For the past several decades, the IMF has enforced a combination of austerity (what they call a 'balanced budget' agenda), privatisation, and trade liberalisation on decolonising nations. This has stripped states in the Global South of the capacity to drive their development processes and protect their infant industries. In order to deal with the resulting imbalances, the IMF has frequently encouraged underdeveloped countries to borrow from private capital markets, leading to more debt traps. Meanwhile, the World Bank has historically followed an agenda of recommending *anything but large-scale industrialisation* for the Global South. In the early post-World War II era, this manifested in its recommendations for countries to stick to their 'comparative advantage' in exporting raw materials. By the 1990s, the World Bank was promoting 'financial deepening', code for encouraging financial deregulation as a panacea for mobilising resources for development.[17] More recently, the World Bank has shifted its focus to promote development in the service sector and investment in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), both recipes for continued debt bondage on the national and household level. The service sector is often dominated by multinational corporations (MNCs) with monopolistic structures, making states that focus their development on this sector susceptible to the whims of MNCs in the Global North. SMEs, which typically lack the resources (including government subsidies) to compete with MNCs and do not have the advantages of scale of MNCs, end up absorbed into these larger monopoly-dominated networks. Indeed, the combination of financial liberalisation and the promotion of SMEs locks countries into what Samir Amin called generalised monopoly capital, with both upstream (raw materials, technology, and capital) and downstream (distribution, marketing, and consumer access) networks of control.[18]

One of the main outcomes of the Washington Consensus has been an almost religious belief in the power of foreign direct investment (FDI) to drive economic growth and structural transformation. The FDI mindset drives Global South states towards a narrow focus on opening up their labour and natural resource markets to Western monopolies, thereby linking their agendas to the rent-seeking needs of financiers rather than the developmental aspirations of their populations. Empirical evidence of FDI's transformative capacity, however, is limited at best: this form of investment fails to promote integrative growth that could pave a pathway out of indebtedness and towards national sovereignty, instead promoting unproductive sectors of the economy. Three characteristics of FDI are important to note:

1. **FDI flows are declining.** FDI peaked in 2007, the year that the Third Great Depression took hold in the major capitalist countries, and has decreased in the years since.[19] Indeed, according to the United Nations' Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), both FDI and project finance (long-term infrastructure or industrial funding)

have experienced a gradual decline. From 2022 to 2023, for instance, developing countries saw a 7% decrease in FDI flows to developing countries.[20]

2. **FDI flows are non-productive.** Over the past few years, UNCTAD's annual investment reports have shown the changing character of FDI. While in the past it was concentrated in the manufacturing and industrial sectors as well as natural resource extraction, FDI has increasingly been channelled into the financial and service sectors, where it does not generate integrated or transformative development that could help transcend colonial underdevelopment.

3. **FDI flows do not drive growth or investment.** According to a 1999 UNCTAD report, large FDI inflows to developing countries in the 1990s had little impact on increasing investment patterns.[21] More recent studies by UNCTAD have shown a clear divergence between FDI flows and GDP growth since the Third Great Depression.[22] This means that economic growth is increasingly independent of FDI flows.

The Washington Consensus has only reinforced the colonial pattern of underdevelopment, producing debt burdens that cannot be easily serviced. With bondholders mercilessly seeking repayment and interest regardless of a country's economic situation, the debt spiral eats into precious revenues that could otherwise be spent on health care, education, and productive industry and infrastructure. Countries borrow and go into debt. When they cannot repay their debt, they borrow more to pay off their existing debt, and the spiral continues.[23] As Raghuram Rajan, the IMF's chief economist from

2003 to 2007, wrote in his book *Fault Lines* (2010), the IMF's policies are a 'new form of financial colonialism'.[24]

Dependency Theory

Dependency theory, which developed in opposition to modernisation theory, has a long and powerful history. Its roots trace back to Latin American structuralism and the interventions of giants like Raúl Prebisch and other *dependentistas*, as they were known, who argued that the world capitalist system is organised in two tiers: first, a core set of countries that hold dominion over the global political economy and, second, a large set of peripheral countries unable to break away from that regime. As the *dependentistas* showed, the deteriorating terms of trade between the industrialised core and the unindustrialised periphery fuelled underdevelopment and instability in the latter.[25] The peripheral countries largely produce unprocessed commodities, which are purchased at a low cost and then sold through multinational corporations to the core, which uses its industrial capacity to produce finished, higher-value commodities that are then sold back into the periphery. The terms of trade between the core and periphery allow capitalist accumulation to take place in the core, which is then used for the innovation of new products and technologies. These scientific and technological improvements in turn provide the core with advancements that allow it to remain in control of the system. Andre Gunder Frank called this the 'development of underdevelopment', a pessimistic assessment of a sombre reality.[26]

Dependency theory made it very clear that this sombre reality stems not from the cultures of the Third World but from the neocolonial world system established during the colonial and imperialist eras. That is why Walter Rodney's 1972 classic is called *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, with an emphasis on European colonialism.[27] As Gunder Frank explains, 'underdevelopment is not an original state, rather it is a result of economic capture and control of backward regions by advanced metropolitan capitalism'.[28]

The pessimism that results from this theory led Samir Amin to develop the argument that the periphery had to 'delink' from the core. Delinking, Amin wrote in 1987, is 'the refusal to submit national-development strategy to the imperatives of "globalisation"'.[29] Since this 'refusal' is rooted in political power, and not in economic policy per se, states in the developing world must have sufficient political power to construct their own national development strategy and break from the bondage of global value chains (which Benjamin Selwyn accurately calls 'global poverty chains') or 'delink'.[30]

Critiques of Dependency Theory

Dependency theory offers a precise assessment of the *need* for a new development theory, but it does not, by itself, provide such a theory. In other words, dependency theory limits itself to critiquing the neocolonial system and assessing the importance of delinking to create space for a national development strategy, but this tradition

– which is also our tradition – does not articulate a strategy or plan to affect these changes.[31]

Further critiques of the dependency school from within progressive and Marxist economic tendencies could be synthesised into three main lines of thought.

First, some heterodox economists thought that the rise of the 'Four Asian Tigers' (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan) disproved the pessimism of dependency theory and claimed that coordinated state intervention, combined with a pragmatic mixed economy, could overcome the inertia of capitalist underdevelopment. Interest in the phenomenon of the Four Asian Tigers subsequently birthed an entire school of literature on the developmental state and industrial policy. Johnson Chalmer's book *MITI and the Japanese Miracle* (1982) and Alice Amsden's book *Asia's Next Giant* (1989) are foundational in this regard.[32] Even the World Bank came into the act with a large report called *The East Asian Miracle* (1993), though its assessment attempted to underplay the role of the state.[33] No doubt, the works of figures like Ha-Joon Chang and Mariana Mazzucato have also been influential for centre-left governments in the Global South.[34] Yet their line of thinking is merely a proposed strategy of statecraft based on past precedent and fails to present a new development theory or take into account the diverse realities across the Global South. Whereas the Four Asian Tigers grew under the protection of the US security umbrella during the Cold War, countries in Africa, Latin America, or other parts of Asia have had to develop under neocolonial intervention or imperialist and capitalist encirclement.[35]

Second, some Marxists, such as the British scholar Bill Warren, actively argued in favour of the supposedly progressive aspects of imperialism. In his book *Imperialism: Pioneer of Capitalism* (1980), Warren argued that imperialism could act as a transformative force in modernising backward countries in the Global South since, he claimed, it laid the foundations for both industrialisation and democracy.[36] Warren's supposedly left-wing rehabilitation of imperialism was widely critiqued by Marxist-Leninists in the Global South who were keenly aware that not only had imperialism as capital in motion failed to develop the productive forces in the South: it had also violently underdeveloped their economies, plundered their resources, and entrenched dependency through brutal wars, repression, and the destruction of indigenous systems of production.[37] Warren's theory amounted to nothing more than a version of neoclassical modernisation theory garbed in Marxist jargon.

Third, in the 1970s and 80s some Marxists, known as political Marxists, charged the *dependentistas* with being 'neo-Smithian Marxists' for overemphasising the relations of exchange between the core and periphery while neglecting the internal social and political relations in the periphery.[38] Yet there may be room for conciliation between the so-called neo-Smithians and political Marxists, with some theorists linking externalities like imperialist relations to internal socio-political dynamics like class relations.

In his magnum opus *The Political Economy of Underdevelopment* (1982), the Sri Lankan Marxist political economist S. B. D. de Silva argued that imperialism developed and strengthened the role of merchant capital while stifling its transformation into industrial capital.[39] De Silva believed that rather than engage in a semantic debate as to whether or not the periphery had transitioned to capitalism (*dependentistas* believed it had, whereas political Marxists, such as Robert Brenner, believed it had not), it was more productive to examine how imperialism acted through internal class structures to prop up elements opposed to industrialisation. For de Silva, underdevelopment was linked to the absence of a class and an economic system that was dedicated to capital accumulation not just in money terms, but also in productive fixed assets.

Similarly, scholars from the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe and Central Asia developed their own analysis of neocolonial dependency in the world economy and the role of internal class structures in the Global South. For instance, the Soviet political economist Sergei Tyulpanov argued that the state had to isolate those domestic forces hindering industrialisation (feudal landlords and merchant capital) and create a strong public sector while encouraging the progressive potential of the national bourgeoisie in a private sector.[40] Within this strategy of 'non-capitalist development', it was crucial that national-democratic parties take charge and not relinquish political power to the bourgeoisie.

A Marxist Development Theory

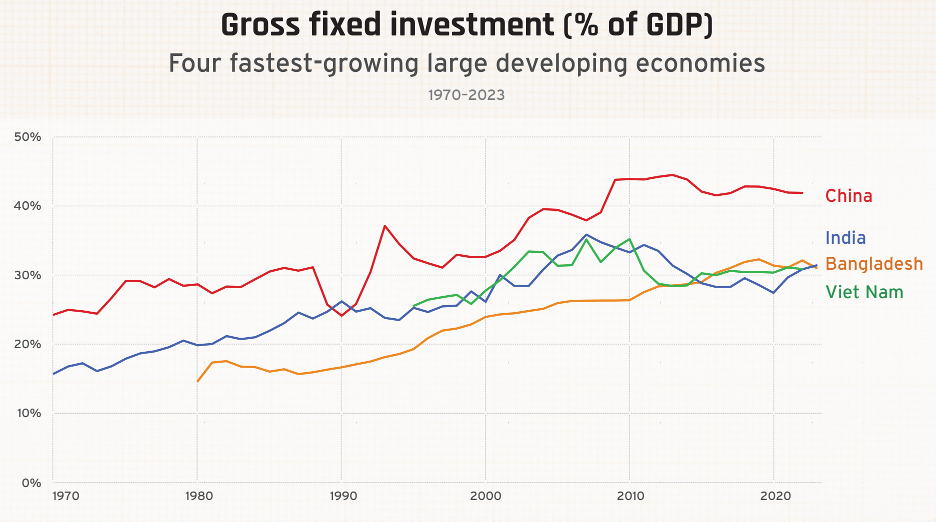
Over the past fifty years, during the height of the Washington Consensus, most of the poorer nations slumped into cycles of debt and austerity, high rates of poverty, and deep despair. China, however, has been able to break through the 'development of underdevelopment' since the 1949 revolution and move from high levels of poverty to a society that has eradicated absolute poverty and emerged as a major economic power.[41] What distinguishes China from other countries is that the balance of political power is not in the hands of the capitalist class (certainly not with MNCs) and that the Chinese government, ruled by the Communist Party of China, has developed a planning process that allocates resources both for growth and social betterment in a dialectical balance. Any robust and pragmatic Marxist development theory must engage with the breakthroughs made in China. Two points are important to highlight in this regard.

First, while a capitalist class exists in China, it has not been allowed to consolidate political power. The dynamics that are present in Global North societies – where the state and other institutions are directed by private capital – are not present in China, where these institutions are instead directed by a political force that is committed to socialism. Furthermore, China has a large public sector that encompasses land, finance, trade, and heavy industry. This sector is sufficiently powerful to prevent the capitalist law of value from overwhelming economic decision making in China. Therefore, China's experience does not conform with modernisation theory.

Second, because political power rests with the Communist Party of China, political decisions made in the country are not driven by other countries' or entities' interests (such as those reflected by the Washington Consensus). China has, as Amin says, successfully 'delinked', allowing its own national development strategy to define its development policy.[42] This is accomplished by the country's public control over land and finance, which enables the state to connect with the world economy through trade, investment, and global value chains, deepening the socialisation of labour (a key element in Marx's political vision for socialism). This has allowed China to break with the pessimism of dependency theory to become the largest trading nation in the world.

Neither modernisation theory nor dependency theory can fully explain China's rise. While China does exhibit certain aspects of a developmental state with proactive industrial policies, this still does not provide us with a theoretical explanation of its rapid growth. China's Reform and Opening Up (1978) was an iterative and experimental process, always emphasising the importance of local conditions. Though it has not yet emerged as a developed economy and society, China has, as Enfu Cheng and Chan Zhai argue, achieved 'continuous progress toward prosperity', moving from the periphery to the position of 'quasi-centre' of the global system.[43]

Yet, even from this position, China has been able to eradicate extreme poverty and make significant progress in science and technology. What factors led to this peculiar outcome? A key component, and the starting point of our new development theory, is that China's economic model has maintained a consistently high ratio of investment to GDP, leading to significant fixed capital formation in the form of infrastructure and industrial capacity.



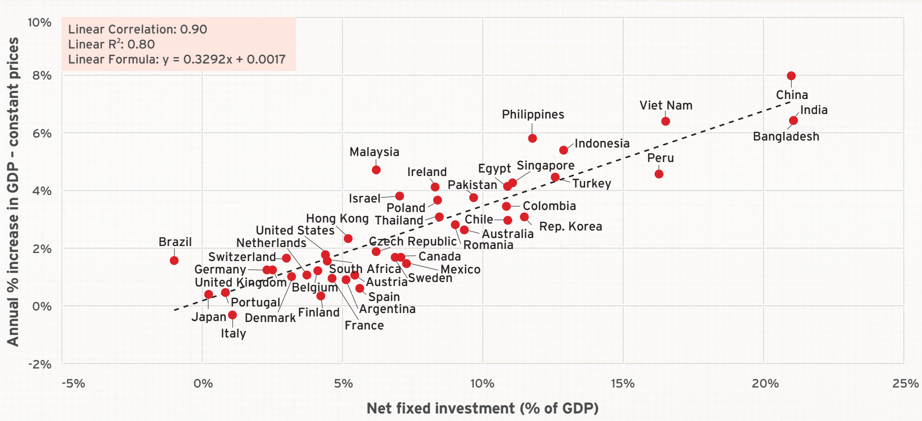
Source: Calculation and elaboration by John Ross and Global South Insights using data from World Bank World Development Indicators, June 2024.

New research by Global South Insights (GSI) suggest that there is an ultra-high correlation between a high quantum of GDP growth and a high share of net fixed capital formation, which we shorten to net fixed investment (NFI). Net fixed investment refers to new fixed capital investment (e.g., expenditure on production machinery, infrastructure, etc., called gross fixed capital formation, minus that proportion of a country's existing capital stock which wears out or becomes obsolete in the same period, which would be called depreciation for a singular enterprise). In short, the higher the share of net fixed investment in GDP, the higher the rate of growth. This high correlation applies to the 50 largest economies which constitute 88% of the world's GDP. It also applies to over 50 smaller economies in the Global South.[44] This is to say that it is not simply financial inflows but also their investment into new tangible assets that drives GDP growth.

Correlation between net fixed investment (% of GDP) and annual GDP growth

50 largest economies (minus oil/gas export-dominated economies)

Average annual figures, 2007–2019, 88.0% of world GDP 2019



Source: Calculation and elaboration by John Ross and Global South Insights using data from World Bank World Development Indicators, June 2024.
Note: Percentage of world GDP is calculated using current USD.

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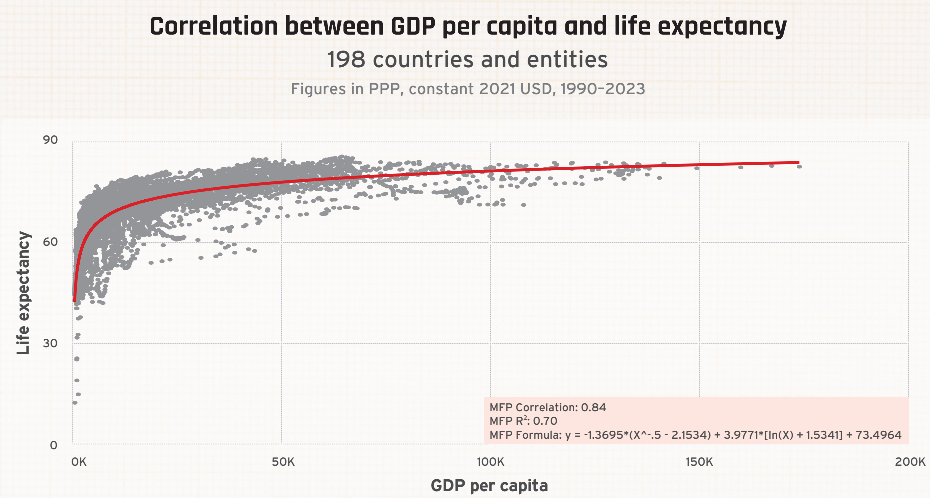
GDP is of course an imperfect measure of economic development, as it does not capture 'externalities' such as environmental degradation or elements of social progress. This does not mean that GDP is unimportant. Research by Global South Insights has found a statistically strong and significant correlation between GDP per capita and life expectancy. This correlation has risen since the 1990s. Moreover, increases in GDP per capita are correlated with proportionally larger increases in life expectancy for people with lower income levels. In other words, GDP growth can have very real material benefits for the people of the Global South. On the other hand, a stagnation in GDP growth, such as that brought about by the Third World debt crisis and the onset of neoliberalism, can lead to lost decades where little to no progress is made in terms of human development. Of course, social protection plays a role too: there are exemplary cases, such as that of socialist Cuba, which has achieved a high average life expectancy even without rapid economic growth due to the criminal over six-decade US blockade.



Since we know that NFI is positively associated with GDP growth and that GDP per capita growth is positively associated with an increase in life expectancy, it stands to reason that the basic task for progressive governments in the Global South is to increase the share of NFI in GDP. However, this presents three challenges:

1. The share of NFI in GDP cannot be raised to such an extent as to depress consumption to intolerable levels in the short term. This requires supportive domestic and international financial institutions that can provide concessional and long-term finance for NFI.

2. Mechanisms are needed to stem the plunder of resources from the Global South and to channel them into NFI. This would require international coordination on corporate corruption such as taxation evasion, transfer pricing, and trade misinvoicing. Additionally, multilateral mechanisms are needed to stabilise commodity prices.

3. The NFI must be of a productive and ecologically sustainable nature (i.e., good quality). It is self-evident that NFI in speculative aspects in real estate cannot deliver the same outcomes as NFI in productive investment in infrastructure, agriculture, and modern industry. The latter is more conducive to the accumulation of skills and technology and the production of material goods. Furthermore, NFI in housing and household's related infrastructure positively impacts both GDP growth and life expectancy. All this would require country-specific industrial and welfare policies that can only be shaped by the balance of forces in the class struggle in each particular case.

Conclusion

China's rapid economic growth and rising living standards since the 1949 revolution cannot be explained by conventional development theories. However, they can be explained by the high rate of NFI prioritised by the Communist Party of China. Consider, for instance, the massive investment and mobilisation of people required to build China's high-speed railway system – the largest in the world. This is in no way a novel idea. Though there are disagreements as to how investment can be mobilised in conditions of semi-feudalism and imperialist encirclement, the Marxist-Leninist tradition has always emphasised that large-scale industry is the material basis for socialism. In 1920, Vladimir Lenin pithily summarised communist development as 'Soviet power plus electrification for the whole country'.[45] Half a century later, the African revolutionary Amílcar Cabral taught us that the goal of national liberation is 'the freeing of the process of development of the national productive forces'.[46] Therefore, the formulation of a new development theory for the Global South is also a return to the source of our struggles for freedom from imperialism and neocolonialism. With it, we will chart the path for the Promethean aspirations of the darker nations.

Notes

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