The Research Nobody Dreamed Possible

What happens when an economist meets a big data platform built for the Global South

For decades, the policy advice handed from Washington to the Global South has carried the weight of orthodoxy: reduce state investment, liberalise markets, shift to consumption-driven growth. China, the most successful development story of the past half-century, has been told repeatedly that its investment-led model is unsustainable — that it must follow the path of the advanced economies.

But what if the data told a different story?

And what if the reason nobody had checked was not a lack of will, but that the tools to do so were kept out of reach?

The Finding

For more than twenty years, John Ross has studied China's economy — not as a theoretical puzzle, but as the most consequential development story of the era. He watched the country rise from poverty to become the world's second-largest economy while Western economists kept predicting the growth would stall. It never did.

Ross — a British economist, Senior Fellow at the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University, and former Director of Economic and Business Policy for the Mayor of London — set out to test the prescription. His question was straightforward: across the world's economies, what is the relationship between how much a country invests in infrastructure and productive equipment (what economists call "net fixed capital formation"), and how fast its economy grows?

Not for a handful of conveniently chosen countries — essentially cherry-picking, selecting data that supports an argument and pretending it represents the world. Ross wanted to examine all 210 economies, group them by size, and compare. A systematic empirical study on a scale nobody had attempted.

The result: among the world's ten largest economies, which together account for 67 percent of global GDP, the correlation between the share of net fixed capital formation in GDP and the rate of economic growth is 0.95. In social science, a correlation above 0.7 is considered strong; above 0.8, very strong. Above 0.9, in real-world economic data, is virtually unheard of. What this number means is stark: among large economies, the more a country invests in productive capacity, the faster it grows. No exceptions.

Expand the scope to the fifty largest economies, excluding oil exporters, covering 88 percent of world GDP. The correlation holds at 0.90.

For Western economists, the political implications are uncomfortable.

China and India, with net fixed capital formation above 20 percent of GDP, are the fastest-growing large economies. The G7 countries — the United States, Japan, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Canada — mostly fall below 5 percent. Their growth is correspondingly sluggish. The countries with the highest consumption-to-GDP ratios — Namibia at 98 percent, Sudan at 97 percent, Zimbabwe at 94 percent — are among the poorest on earth.

Those who advise China to "shift to consumption-driven growth" are, in effect, advising it to walk down a path that the data has already shown leads to slower growth. Among large economies, the higher the share of consumption in GDP, the slower both economic growth and consumption growth turn out to be. The advice is not merely questionable. The data suggests it is a prescription for stagnation.

This was the first time anyone had conducted a systematic empirical study of global economies grouped by size. The full findings, published by Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research as *Towards a New Development Theory* for the Global South, mount a formidable challenge to the development prescriptions that have shaped policy across the South for decades.

Why This Research Was Impossible

Ross had wanted to conduct this study for years. He never did — not because the theory was too difficult, but because the infrastructure to do it did not exist.

The data needed for a study of this kind is scattered across more than a dozen international institutions — the World Bank, the IMF, the United Nations, the ILO, the FAO, UNCTAD — each with its own website, its own download procedure, its own data format, its own update schedule. Simply learning to extract trade data from the UN's Comtrade system took three months.

Then comes the second problem. GDP is not a single number. It comes in thirty-two varieties: current prices or constant prices, US dollars or local currency, purchasing power parity or market exchange rates. Each choice is a fork in the road, and the resulting figures can differ by a factor of several. Working out what those thirty-two variants actually are, and which one is appropriate for which kind of analysis, took another three months. Six months gone before a single calculation.

Then the computation itself. A moving average is a basic statistical operation. But computing one in a conventional spreadsheet for a single indicator across 160 countries means building macros, wrestling with pivot tables, and checking every data point by hand. One indicator: thirty to forty hours. Ross was looking at tens of thousands.

As he put it: "This is research I didn't even dream of doing, because to do 160 countries' moving averages and actually compare them, load them, and run them — that would have been years of my life. On one series."

This is not a story about one economist's inconvenience. It is a story about how the architecture of global knowledge production filters what questions can be asked. When data is fragmented, formats are incompatible, and processing requires resources available only to well-funded institutions in the Global North, entire lines of inquiry are foreclosed before they begin. The imagination of researchers across the South is pre-censored — not by ideology, but by infrastructure.

Breaking the Monopoly

The platform that made Ross's research possible is called GSI — Global South Insights, a project of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. It was built not for Silicon Valley or the Ivy League, but for scholars, progressive governments, and social movements in the Global South.

GSI brings 96 datasets from international institutions — 41,100 indicators, 3.45 billion rows of data spanning from the 1920s to the present — under a single unified system. It harmonises definitions across institutions, documents where the World Bank and IMF mean different things by the same term, and flags which datasets cannot be directly compared. It has built in safeguards against common methodological errors: try to compute a real growth rate on a current-price series, and the system will stop you. The thirty-two varieties of GDP are systematically organised with usage rules that prevent the kind of mistakes that can quietly invalidate an entire study.

Calculations that once took thirty to forty hours per indicator are executed in seconds. Country groupings — 274 of them, from the G7 to the BRICS to African Union sub-regions to groupings by colonial history — are built in. The methodological breakthrough of grouping economies by size, which conventional tools could not support without starting from scratch each time, becomes a simple selection.

When Ross saw the system complete in seconds what he had assumed would take years, his reaction was not simply "that's more efficient." Something more important happened: he began asking questions he had never dared to ask before. Every research question used to pass through an invisible filter — do I have the time to run this? Do I have the resources? That filter killed countless good questions before the researcher even noticed it was there. Now that filter is gone.

The point is not the technology. The point is what becomes possible when the Global South has sovereign access to the empirical tools needed to challenge received wisdom. For the first time, an independent scholar in Accra or La Paz can interrogate the same data, at the same scale, as a research team at Harvard — and arrive at conclusions that Washington's orthodoxies have long worked to obscure. And because GSI was built for the Global South, these capabilities are available at a cost so low it is practically negligible.

Ross's findings were published by Tricontinental as *Towards a New Development Theory* for the Global South. The full study, and the vision behind it, will feature in the inaugural issue of Bandung Circuit.

The spirit of Bandung was always, in part, a demand for the right to know the world on one's own terms. That demand now has a new instrument — and the evidence it is producing should unsettle anyone still peddling the old advice.