



CHAPTER 11

South-South Cooperation and Decoloniality

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INTRODUCTION

In this brief reflection, I do not attempt a comprehensive analysis of the multiple ways in which we might theorise and approach the ideas, materialities and practices of decoloniality and (whatever is meant by) ‘South-South Cooperation’ (for a more comprehensive analysis, see Muhr, 2022). I even sidestep the many questions raised by the term

Position statement: I am a white British-Australian academic, who has always learned and worked in ‘privileged’ institutions. Cambridge University, my current professional home, is intimately intertwined with, and still benefits from the profits of, enslavement, colonialism and ongoing structural injustices in national and international academia. As a Geographer and one who specialises in ‘development’, I am caught up in disciplinary lineages and legacies fraught with complicity in colonial and post-colonial power structures. I do not believe I can fully decolonise my thinking, practices or being. But I can commit to the journey of listening and changing while trying to stay attentive to the dangers of complacency and tokenistic virtue-signalling.

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‘South-South Cooperation’ (or ‘South’/‘North’); and I only focus on the last 20–25 years, and not the extraordinarily fertile and revolutionary decades of the 1950s–1970s, or the struggles, resistance and innovations that followed in the 1980s and most of the 1990s. I explore whether and how contemporary South-South Cooperation (SSC) reflects, practices or achieves decoloniality in its normative imaginaries and languages, practices, relationalities, knowledge politics and power matrices. By SSC I refer to ‘official’, state-led institutions, policies and practices, which may enrol, fund and partner with the private sector and other civil society actors. I don’t cover alternative actors and geographies of southern transnational collaborations, which would have a very different flavour and analysis.

I start this analysis by asking whether official SSC today invokes, enrolls or embodies decoloniality? The United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation defines SSC as:

a common endeavour of peoples and countries of the South, born out of shared experiences and sympathies, based on their common objectives and solidarity, and guided by, *inter alia*, the principles of respect for national sovereignty and ownership, free from any conditionalities. Operationally, South-South cooperation for development is a process whereby two or more developing countries pursue their individual and/or shared national capacity development objectives through exchanges of knowledge, skills, resources and technical know-how and through regional and inter-regional collective actions, including partnerships involving Governments, regional organizations, civil society, academia and the private sector, for their individual and/or mutual benefit within and across regions.¹

While this definition captures a lot, it is notable that it infers but does not name colonialism. It also distinctly plays down the earlier counter-hegemonic politics of South-South Cooperation; and indeed, today’s geopolitically competitive dimensions within and across both ‘South’ and ‘North’. It also foregrounds the exchange of knowledge, skills, ‘resources’ (sic) and technical know-how, with no mention of loans, Lines of Credit, grants, debt relief or other financial instruments (unless these are euphemised as ‘resources’ in the list of knowledge-related exchanges). These are the most potent tools for current contestation of Northern

¹ Retrieved on January 29 2023, from: <https://unsouthsouth.org/about/about-sssc/>

hegemony—that is, the realm of development finance—but they are also muted in the UN’s definition. SSC here is being rendered technical and being rendered unthreatening/unchallenging.

SSC is, of course, a hugely diverse, complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Within and between SSC actors there is an enormous variety of narratives, interests, modalities, agendas, capacities and much more besides. Moreover, in the last twenty years, SSC has changed quite considerably, deepening and expanding (although in some cases, like that of Brazil, also undergoing significant contraction), and all within a shifting global development landscape. No singular argument can possibly be accurate, and the overview that follows can and should be contested and refined. So, allowing for this diversity and dynamism, how might we understand SSC in relation to decoloniality?

At first glance, or in one register, the last two decades have seen an emphatically successful, if still not complete, decolonising assault on one of the most invidious bastions of (post-)coloniality: namely, the incredibly powerful normative nexus of ideas, institutions and financial leverage that constitutes the world of Development. This world includes actors like the Bretton Woods Institutions and many parts of the United Nations (UN); the OECD-DAC (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee) and its member states; the EU and its development bodies and policies; philanthrocapitalist foundations; western liberal non-governmental organisations (NGOs); the media; novels, films and other cultural artefacts and representations and so on. As Kothari (2005), Escobar (1995) and many others have shown in detail, the post-war Development industry inherited ideas, institutions and personnel from the colonial matrix of knowledge and power. The Development industry was the epitome of post-colonial epistemic hegemony over the Global South, suffused with the exercise of power in various forms.

The challenge mounted by SSC since the early 2000s to this 50–60 year-long dominance has happened at several levels. In a previous paper I have expanded on these in a threefold framework (Mawdsley, 2019). The first is *ontological*: compared to previous decades, in the early twenty-first century, SSC became highly visible. Southern partners were increasingly recognised and acknowledged as essential to development governance (the so-called ‘traditional’ actors’ attempts to cooperate, co-opt and discipline SSC is demonstrative of the fact that they began to ‘matter’). Southern partners are no longer framed as silent, marginalised

supplicants (whether compliant or subservient), but are securely established as influential actors and agents, whether seen as allies or adversaries.

The second element of the South's twenty-first-century challenge to the colonialist continuities of Development accompanies and is constituted by their growing geoeconomic power, and the shift in status, capacity and ambition (albeit highly uneven; and precarious in the light of COVID-19 and the global economic downturn). The surge in Southern development finance in particular has substantially changed the *material* hegemony of the North in Development. Larger Southern partners like China, India and Turkey can fund loans, grants and debt relief; humanitarian relief; technical assistance and educational scholarships; summits and forums; not to mention cyber, metal and concrete infrastructure, on a scale unmatched in previous decades. 'Middle power' partners like Indonesia, Chile, Mexico and South Africa are also committing more finance and foreign policy focus to development partnerships; and regionally important countries like Rwanda, Ethiopia and Bangladesh are increasingly astute at leveraging the expanding marketplace of development partners and their finance. While all of this is more politically and economically fraught than a simple 'rise of the South' might suggest, it does capture the big picture trends of the twenty-first century—at least up to the Covid pandemic: the medium- and longer-term outcomes are yet to be discerned, but closer and deeper South-South relations of some sort and type seem likely.

Third, and related to both, SSC has constituted a challenge to the *ideational* authority of the former colonial powers and their multilateral platforms. This is not to say that this has resulted in *epistemic* disobedience on the part of the 'South'; and neither has it resulted in a decolonising form of re-learning within the 'North'. We will come to this below. But in the last twenty years or so, the South *has* successfully projected alternative languages, stated principles and specific approaches to 'Development'. Early twenty-first-century efforts to co-opt Southern partners into Northern logics, practices and disciplinary mechanisms (Abdenur & Fonseca, 2013), and ongoing attempts and offers of trilateral or bilateral partnership with Southern providers have produced various collaborations, but in these and elsewhere, it is clear that SSC has retained and indeed projected its ideational autonomy. The assertion of Southern agency at global development governance events like the 2011 Busan conference on Aid Effectiveness, which were traditionally directed and dominated by OECD-DAC donors and Northern-led multilaterals, is

an example of this. So too is the failure of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation to cohere as the North's nominally inclusive new Development platform. Indeed, as many commentators have suggested, the direction of ideational travel could be said to be from 'South' to 'North'. The Northern and Northern-dominated Development sector has de-centred the direct poverty reduction focus of the early/mid-2000s, and to some extent re-focussed away from 'making markets work for the poor' through various forms of neoliberalising, individualised social policies. Instead, the investment and energy now lie in approaches initially led by the South—infrastructure, and (explicitly rather than hidden) blurred and blended finance to support neo-mercantilist partnerships that are (supposedly) win-win (Murray & Overton, 2016).

Throughout most of this time, Southern leaders, intellectuals, policy-makers and commentators enrolled the anti-colonialist languages, histories and principles of Bandung, the Non-Aligned Movement, the creation of UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and so on. They framed South-South Cooperation in the empathetically shared experience of colonisation and/or (in the case of China) 'national humiliation'; and the experiences of nations which, even after formal independence, were subject to the galling and enduring injustices of a rigged international system. They project different and more egalitarian principles, based on solidarity and mutual respect; and insist on development knowledge and experience that is based in shared geographies and experiences (see, for example, Shankland & Gonçalves, 2016). However, in the context of Southern 'development' partnerships, in recent years there has been a stronger and more explicit turn towards a more pragmatic, geoeconomically strategic and nationalist set of policies and stances, especially amongst middle and larger Southern powers. In some cases, the older 'Third World-ist' language (Prashad, 2007) has been diluted and/or augmented by the open insistence on national interests; as well as a stronger focus on ensuring a return on investments. Both can be in tension with claims to not impose (policy) conditionalities, partner sovereignty and win-win outcomes.

To what extent then, could it be said that contemporary SSC embodies or reflects decoloniality? For many critical scholars, there is a huge amount to welcome in the ways in which South-South Cooperation has unquestionably fractured the long-standing power matrix of the colonialist Development industry. The latter's nodes of power—like the OECD-DAC—its ideational hegemony (such as the neoliberalised, individualised

focus on market-led social policy as ‘the’ solution to poverty reduction), and its normative power hierarchies (such as the persistent framing of donor-recipient tutelage) have all come under significant challenge. Whether and how these will be sustained or re-inscribed is an open question—the ‘new Cold War’ is already playing out through ‘Development’ initiatives like the US’s International Development Finance Corporation, and the EU’s Global Gateway (Schindler et al., 2022).

But does SCC—in its dominant state-led form—seek to delink from Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies? Does SSC provide a method or paradigm of restoration and reparation, that acknowledges and validates the multiplicity of lives, life experiences, the cultures and knowledges of indigenous people; the legitimacy of alternative livelihoods; or de-centre hetero/cis-normativity, gender hierarchies and racial privilege? In an interview, Achille Mbembe (in Confavreux, 2022, p. 131) said of ‘decolonial discourse’, that it:

(...) puts on trial ‘Western reason’, its historical forms of predation and the genocidal impulse inherent to modern colonialism. What decolonial theorists call the ‘coloniality of power’ refers not only to mechanisms for exploiting and predating upon bodies, natural resources and living things. It is also the false belief according to which there is just one knowledge, a single site for the production of truth, one universal, and, outside of that, only superstitions. Decolonial discourse wants to tear apart this sort of monism and overthrow this means of bulldozing the different knowledges, practices, and forms of existence.

As the chapters in this collection show, there are many ways of understanding and exploring ‘decoloniality’, but if we follow Mbembe, we can ask specifically whether the formal realm of SSC—diverse and dynamic as it is—puts ‘Western reason’ on trial; refuses the modernist impulse to exploit and predate upon bodies, natural resources and living things, and celebrates and supports different knowledges, practices and forms of existence. In this short reflection I really can’t do justice to these complex questions, which inevitably have no singular answer. Instead, I attempt three short but nuanced responses, more to join the start of a discussion, rather than try anything definitive.

Is ‘Western reason’ on trial? No and yes. The great structures and concepts of capitalism, finance, science and technology (which are ascribed to the West, but which in fact have many more diverse origins

and geographies in their makings) are not rejected but are the focus of competition—to break into, seize and lead. Whether designing technological path dependencies for particular solar power configurations; investing in port and rail infrastructure; creating master plans and building cities or innovating in the mobile phone market, most Southern economic partnerships are working on similar/hybrid terrains as Western powers. Although aesthetics, working practices and geoeconomics considerations may differ, the underlying ontologies of modernity are not seriously challenged by Southern partners, who offer a vision of modernity that is little differentiated in its essentials from those of the western mainstream—modernised agribusiness, smart cities, high speed infrastructure, (green) energy and so on. The challenge is to the distribution and ownership of thought leadership, trade and economic ties, not to its fundamental modernity.

Where there is some departure from this is in China and India's projection of 'traditional' health knowledges, which in India's case, is driven by a growing recourse to Sanskritic concepts, including claims to the value and superiority of non-Western philosophies and science captured in ancient texts (Nanda & Viswanathan, 2010). Although this sits alongside and does not displace India's considerable modern pharmaceutical and medical expertise, the narrative around the sector is not trivial, given its new invigoration by the Bharatiya Janata Party under Narendra Modi. Whatever one's views on the value of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy), the forces of Hindutva in India are a good reminder of the ways in which decolonial thinking, ideas and arguments can be co-opted by the forces of prejudice, hate and extreme nationalism. The incident of Walter Mignolo's endorsement (and later retraction) of J. Sai Deepak's (2021) book is a notorious case in point. Sai Deepak starts with what seems like an uncontentious reading of decolonial theory and theorists, before turning his exposition on decoloniality to the hate-fuelled agenda of Hindutva. There are many now socially disenfranchised and rightly fearful Indian Muslims who would welcome the protections provided by a genuine commitment to a liberal Constitution.

Second, as might be expected given the commitment to (Southern) modernity discussed above, most development partnerships are founded on a techno-modernist mainstream approach to anything approaching a more sustainable or just exploitation of bodies, resources and living things. Southern partners are contributing hugely and substantially to renewable energy in particular, and can and have shared socially and

environmentally positive and innovative ideas, knowledge and assistance. Amongst these, Brazil's *Bolsa Familia* (Family Bursary) is one example (Pomeroy et al., 2019); or India's sponsorship of 'Jaipur Leg' to fit limb prostheses through camps from Fiji to Equatorial Guinea (ANI, 2022). There are certainly extremely positive examples provided through and by SSC of progressive and sometimes innovative responses and solutions to 'development' challenges. But with partial exceptions (such as Cuba's systemic approach to healthcare systems and justice), these do not constitute system-wide revolutionary alternatives to d/Development. Rather, they share more than they differ from the (so-called) 'traditional donors', whether in social policy or environmental approaches.

This brings us finally to the widest and most obvious rift between formal SSC and decoloniality in thinking and practice, and that is respect for and celebration of alternatives knowledges, cultures, practices and forms of existence. This should not be mistaken for the SSC principle—enshrined in Bandung and through other forums, agreements and statements—of respect for the sovereign dignity and autonomy of Southern states as development partners. While sometimes honoured in the breach, this is an important and meaningful distinction from Northern donors, and it constitutes a decisive rejection of 'liberal internationalism' in practice—all too often unaccountable, hypocritical, uneven and damaging. But this principle is one of respect between states, and not within them (indeed, there is a fundamental incompatibility here). To date, notable powers and norm leaders in SSC have not shown any interest at all—if anything hostility—to the many examples of alternative ontologies and ways of socio-economic organisation that are often foregrounded and celebrated as examples of decoloniality.

This reflection just scratches the surface of such a complex intersection between SSC and decoloniality. I hope that this preliminary, short intervention will, open up ideas and debate, and far more extended and deeper responses.

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