

## IASS-Blogpost

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Workshop report

# The Global South – From conceptualization to action?

On 31 May 2021, the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies hosted an event under the title “*The Global South: Where and what is it?*”. The event was planned and organized by Alexandra Tost, Artur Sgambatti Monteiro, Flávio Lira, Natalia Realpe Carrillo, Pradeep Singh and Achim Maas. This online event was the result of several months of preparation among fellows and researchers at the IASS who had realized the potential for a discussion around this topic.

The term “Global South” has been used increasingly in the social sciences and has become a “common ground” concept for Inequality Studies, International Cooperation, Economics and International Law. The main driver of our discussion was, however, the vagueness of the term “Global South”. Although used liberally in academia and the political arena, it lacks a clear definition. Our first question was: *What* is the Global South? Is there a *precise* definition? Does it stem from the idea of the “Third World” or maybe from the more recent notion of “developing and underdeveloped countries”?

Another question soon followed: *Where* is the Global South? If the term is rooted in the idea of the Third World, an idea that belongs to the Cold War era, to what extent does it reflect today’s global socio-political dynamics? How does the term “Global South” relate to the UN definition of developing and underdeveloped countries? On a purely geographical note, does it seem right to apply this term to characterize a group of countries on the basis of common socio-economic factors, even though some of these countries are not located within the Southern hemisphere?

The momentum of our early discussions at the IASS brought together a group of interested researchers. Our unease at the lack of a clear definition eventually gave way to the realization

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that this was an opportunity to hold in a diverse, thrilling and – *why not?* – inspiring discussion on “what” the Global South is and “where” it is.

Three specialists agreed to engage in an open conversation and dialogue about all these ideas:

**Dr. Luis Eslava**, Reader in International Law & Co-Director at the Centre for Critical International Law (CeCIL) at Kent Law School, University of Kent (UK); **Vinod Ramanarayanan**, Holder of an International Climate Protection Fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt-Foundation at Beuth University of Applied Sciences Berlin (Germany); and **Dr. Luciana Ballestrin**, Associate Professor of Political Science at the Federal University of Pelotas (Brazil).

**Dr. Luis Eslava** was the first to present his views at the event. He began by framing his arguments within the context of his field of expertise – international law – stressing that the legal international order is traditionally based on the concept of state-centrism; that is, the idea that sovereign states are the central actors in the international system. From this conceptualization, it is possible to deduce, as Dr. Eslava suggested, that countries, in their interrelationships, sometimes have conflicting impulses and diverging interests.

Dr. Eslava explained that the binarism of International Law is present not only in dichotomies such as national/international, present/past, near/distant, law/factual reality, but also in the discussion about center/periphery in International Relations. Therefore, when discussing the Global South, it is necessary to consider the historical dispute between empires (center) and colonies (periphery).

The process of exploitation that originated from colonialism does not benefit all countries, so there are large asymmetries between the so-called Global South and the (former) colonial powers. The poor ability of countries from the Global South to benefit from globalization is notorious. In conclusion, the Global South can and should be understood as a political concept that must be increasingly studied. In addition to providing a sound explanatory tool, a deeper understanding of this unjust reality could help to bring about change.

**Vinod Ramanarayanan**'s presentation emphasized how countries of the so-called Global South can deal with their problems in a sustainable way. He started by stating that hitherto it has been the countries from the Global North that have devised influential theories around the concept of “development”, dictating what a “developed” country is and how this stage of development can be achieved. He also showed that most data about “urban theories” are compiled by Western countries, which have access to information that is virtually unavailable to much of the Global South. Mr Ramanarayanan proceeded to give examples of actors from the Global South which find sustainable solutions to problems related to their urban agenda. To prove his point concerning the differences between the (Global) North and the South he compared two cities: Amsterdam and Quito. It was clear in Quito's case that the priorities were vastly distinct from Amsterdam's, since the city showed a particular sense of urgency and realistic goals according to their urban problems. Mr Ramanarayanan also stated that, in many regards, the north should be ready to learn from the south. Lastly, Vinod put a lot of emphasis on contextualization since each city is unique and should be treated according to its own reality.



The last panelist, **Professor Luciana Ballestrin**, explained that the concept of a “Global South” can be observed through four different perspectives: descriptive, identitarian, analytical and epistemological.

The *descriptive perspective* refers to the use of the term “South” in a technical and geographic sense. The use of the term with the adjective “global” is a consequence of the end of the Cold War and the emergence of globalization discourse. It is associated with the idea of a world divided into developed and developing countries and is effectively an heir to the (at times dated) term “Third World”. In both cases, there is an association between economic development and modernity as the main standard of differentiation. Prof. Ballestrin emphasized that the Global South should not be viewed solely through the filter of “underdevelopment”. It is not acceptable to consider it only as a group of non-modern countries located in former colonial areas.

The *identitarian dimension* opens the discussion to an analysis of the origins of the South. Prior to the rising of the term “South” in the 1980s, it had already been used as a marker of a marginalized position. It is important to observe, though, that the South is also associated with the campaigns of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism as represented in The Bandung Conference, the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement and Cuba’s Tri-continentalism. It is not, therefore, simply an oppressed region but rather an important realm within the historic fight against colonialism and imperialism.

The *analytical dimension* sheds a broader light on the concept. The members of the Global South are not only traditional nation-states; they can be thought of as a category that does not have a central command, being thus formed by a variety of discourses and actors.

Finally, the *epistemological dimension* refers to the vision of the Global South as a valid and original producer of knowledge. There are many contributions from the South to the academic world such as the alternatives to neoliberal globalization, the debates about academic dependency and the geopolitics of knowledge.

In the wake of these presentations and a lively discussion, maybe the only real conclusion is the realization of just how controversial and value-laden the idea of a “Global South” is. Given the largely “deconstructed” approach to its usage in many studies, it may be difficult to present a definition that can satisfy diverse areas of knowledge. It also seems unlikely that a single definition could a) encompass all the relevant actors; and b) be so specific that it could be considered “scientific” in a traditional Cartesian sense.

This raises the question of whether the term is ultimately an academic fad or is likely to be used mostly as a general replacement for “outdated” concepts. It is also important to consider what difference its use could make for the adoption of measures to fight the high levels of inequality faced by the nations that are usually included in this group.(1)

Although more accurate (albeit less restrictive) concepts and definitions like the “Global South” might be essential for the analytical advancement of the social sciences, they can also



become a trap: we can easily become so busy working out extensive definitions that we lose track of what led us to (re)think them in the first place. Our panel has shown, however, that the gathering of specialists from different but complementary fields can foster a deeper understanding of the inter- and trans-disciplinarity of analytical concepts and ideas without losing sight of the initial impetus: the belief in the need to critically assess the world around us. On the one hand, theoretically, the search for a definition of “Global South” is rewarding enough as it challenges our common sense and impels us to proceed with a constant and constructive examination of our socio-political reality and the ideas we use to make sense of it. On the other hand, it is yet another task to make sure that this conceptual journey promotes fair and positive change in international relations.

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*(1) A recent IASS study by Artur Sgambatti Monteiro et al. (Sustainable Solutions for the Global South in a Post-Pandemic World) does a great job of addressing problems affecting the Global South from several critical perspectives within the broader context of the SDGs. The study can be found at <https://www.iass-potsdam.de/en/output/publications/2021/sustainable-sol...>*