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Beyond “dichotomania”

Drawing new worlds
for global policies

DRAFT

Policy Paper

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"There are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don't."

Robert Benchley

Introduction

This could be a question on a game show: are Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Chile, Russia, Singapore, Trinidad and Tobago, or Bulgaria developed or developing countries?

And the answer is... it all depends on nomenclatures. Singapore, a country with one of the world's highest human development level, is considered a developing country by the United Nations (according to the so-called "M49 standard"), unlike Ukraine whose *per capita* income in 2023 is lower than that of Botswana. Russia is classified as developed for the purposes of the Montreal Protocol, but as far the Convention on Biological Diversity is concerned. These countries, like dozens of others, lay at the intersection of several sets of "development boundaries" based on multiple existing (and conflicting) cartographies. In total, 61 countries, or more than 30% of the community of nations, are alternatively developed or under development according to different international nomenclatures.

The categorisation of major emerging countries also questions the geography of international policies, especially those related to the largest among them: China. In spite of its position as the world's largest exporter, the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases and the world's second-largest economic power, China is nevertheless classified as a developing country by the WTO, the international climate agreements and the OECD, which enables it, for example, to receive development aid.

These examples question the current relevance of the concept we call the "dichotomy of development" in the present publication, that is to say the division of the world into two groups of countries according to their purported "level of development".

The invention of the categories of "developed" and "developing"^[1] in the mid-20th century created a representation of the world whose impact has been nothing short of extraordinary. So much so that this binary opposition still constitutes today the basis for mapping all international institutions and global policies: globalization has been written in the language of development (section I).

[1] More specifically, "underdeveloped countries", then "developing countries" and "developing countries" from the 1980s.

This bipartition of the world has a double nature: it separates countries according to their economic and social indicators, but it also constitutes a division of nations according to shared identities, forged by modern history, along a dominant/dominated axis.

However, since the beginning of the 21st century, the bipartition of the world into two homogeneous and separate economic blocs has been increasingly contradicted by facts. The “camel-like” global distribution of income has evolved from a “two-humped” model to a “one-humped”, Gaussian configuration. Regardless of the indicators one chooses to focus on, the world remains marked by deep inequalities, but has also become more “compact”, which has allowed for a state of developmental in-betweenness of considerable magnitude (section II). At the same time, the political identity shared by countries originally defined as developing seems to have endured the test of time and has become a given in the cartographies of global policies. As a result, political structure of the world no longer corresponds to its material structure. The emergence and rapid affirmation of the notion of a global South is presumably part of this perspective (Section III).

This divergence between the economic and political dimensions of development creates great confusion in international nomenclatures and, through them, obfuscates the spatial syntax of international policies. The adoption of the SDGs in 2015 should have been an opportunity to renew the bipartition of the world according to a stricter definition of the level of development, as proposed by several international institutions. This has not been the case: in fact, the dichotomy of development is so deeply entrenched in cultural and political representations that the phenomenon now reaches what could be defined as “dichomania” (Section IV).

While the category of “developing countries” has become extremely heterogeneous, the use of other categories has remained consistent over time, such as those of the least developed countries. International efforts to reduce inequalities should therefore focus on least developed countries (LDCs), with the likely addition of the most vulnerable countries. Beyond this primary objective, international policies could be organized according to the triple principle of a common world with common yet differentiated responsibilities and sector-specific roadmaps, adapted to the specific contours of development financing, climate change mitigation or trade (Section V).

It is thus time to move beyond the dichotomy of development and to sketch new worlds for global politics.

**1.
Globalization
has been built
around
the bipartition
of development**

1.1 – The original dual nature of the developing world

The various nations or political entities that make up the world have been grouped in different ways over time, based on geographical, political, historical or cultural proximity.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the world was divided along various faultlines, between victors and vanquished, communists and liberals, colonized countries and colonial powers. It is in this political context that Harry Truman, then President of the United States, proposed, in his famous speech at point IV of his inaugural address in 1948, the new concept of “underdeveloped countries”.^[2] President Truman thereby set the foundations for a new way to divide the world based on economic and social criteria. This new categorization of nations occurred in a context where, on the one hand, multilateral institutions were in the process of being created and, on the other hand, systems of international statistical standards, including national accounts, were being developed.^[3]

From a geographical, historical or cultural standpoint, the category might have, at the time, appeared excessively heterogeneous, as William Easterly would emphasize a few decades later:

“Poor nations include an incredible variety of institutions, cultures and histories: millennia-old civilizations in gigantic China and India; African nations convulsed by centuries of the slave trade, colonialism, arbitrary borders, tropical diseases and local despots; Latin American nations with two centuries of independence and five centuries of extreme inequality; Islamic civilizations

with a long history of technical advance relative to the West and then a falling behind; and recently created nations like tiny East Timor. The idea of aggregating all this diversity into a ‘developing world’ that will ‘take off’ with foreign aid is a heroic simplification”.

(Easterly 2003)

However, from a purely statistical point of view, that of GDP *per capita* or life expectancy, the “underdeveloped” countries did originally form a specific and homogeneous group within the “concert of nations”.

This predominantly economic division reflected only one aspect of the issues at stake. Nonetheless, it fit fully into the specific context of international relations and was primarily carried out not by statisticians but by political powers (notably the United States and later the OECD). Its aim was to forge a new world order. The technical classification of countries according to their level of development would quickly begin to intersect in various ways with political factors.^[4]

The major development in these debates was the gradual appropriation of these categories by countries designated from the outside as underdeveloped and then as developing, as to build a political identity in sharp contrast with that of dominant industrial countries (in both the Western and Eastern blocs).

According to Gilbert Rist, the 1955 Bandung Conference in 1955 “marked the beginning of a collective demand by Third World countries in the political and development fields” (Rist 2013). This affirmation became even more marked in the

[2] According to Gilbert Rist (2013): “This is the first time that the adjective ‘underdeveloped’ has been used in a text intended for such dissemination ... , the term was first used in 1942 by ILO official Wilfred Benson in an article entitled “The Economic Advancement of Underdeveloped Areas” (1942).”

[3] The first national accounts were developed in 1947 for the United States, based on the work of Simon Kusnetz.

[4] Originally, development did not divide the world into two categories, but into three: industrialized countries, socialist countries and underdeveloped countries, described by Alfred Sauvy (1952) as the Third World: “We speak willingly of the two worlds in presence, their possible war, their coexistence, etc., forgetting too often that there is a third, the most important and, in short, the first in the chronology. It is the set of those that are called, in style UN, the underdeveloped countries”. It is only from 1980 with the weakening of the Soviet Empire that the Brandt report (Brandt 1980), established a real dichotomy of development by separating the world in two spaces (North and South) separated by what was then called the Brandt line.

following decade when UNCTAD was created,^[5] where a group of countries, the future Group of 77, coalesced around a common identity, that of developing countries. Finally, in the 1970s, the discussion around the New International Economic Order (NOEI) would officialize the label of developing countries as a political category bearing demands on international rules (Gilman 2015). This remains the case today, particularly within the G77 which has expanded to 134 members:

"The Group of 77 is the largest intergovernmental organization of developing countries in the United Nations, which provides the means for the countries of the South to articulate and promote their collective economic interests and enhance their joint negotiating capacity on all major international economic issues within the UN system, and promote South-South cooperation for development."

(The Goup of 77)^[6]

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) was created on September 30, 1961, replacing the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), which had been established in 1948 to administer the Marshall Plan. It comprises 38 countries located from North and South America to Europe and the Asia-Pacific region .

The G77 and the OECD, whose compositions are defined by peer affinity and co-optation, constitute a sort of purely political version of the bipartition of development based on a shared identity.

The invention of development thus possesses a dual origin: on the one hand, an economic (and social) one and, on the other, a political one. The resulting world partition, which became necessary in the 1980s, would profoundly mark both the geographical syntax of international policies and institutions.

1.2 – International institutions and the cartography of development

The cartographies that were eventually adopted by the various international institutions – in particular by Bretton Woods institutions and by the rest of the United Nations– perfectly mirror this dual origin of development, at once political and economic.

Following a gradual construction^[7], the United Nations defined the M49 standard, managed by the United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD), which distinguishes two groups of countries, developed and developing. This standard, established in 1969, is still widely used today. It is strongly inspired by a political conception of development with a definition of developing countries largely overlapping with the list of members of the Group of 77.^[8]

The United Nations finalized this cartography of development by defining other categories of countries such as landlocked developing countries (LLDCs, identified from 1957 onwards), small island developing economies (SIDS, from 1994 onwards), or the category of Least Developed Countries (LDCs, since 1971), a subset of developing countries elaborated according to a multi-criteria statistical approach that combines the level of

[5] "The developing countries consider their unity, the unity of the seventy-five, to be the most significant event at this Conference. This unit was born out of the recognition of their common interest in establishing a new international trade and development policy to address development issues. They consider that this unity has brought clarity and coherence to the discussions of this Conference. Their solidarity was tested and their unity and strength were strengthened." (from the Group's statement at the UNCTAD conference on 15 June 1964: : Sauvart, Karl P. 2014. « Le groupe des 77 à ses débuts », *Chronique ONU*, June 27, 2014. <https://www.un.org/fr/chronicle/article/le-groupe-des-77-ses-debuts>.)

[6] See: <https://www.g77.org/doc/>.

[7] The first official classification of development seems to date back to the 1950s when the United Nations compiled a list of "underdeveloped" and "donor countries" for international economic assistance statistics (UN 1958). The UN then retained a definition of "underdeveloped" countries adapted from the geographical criterion: "Underdeveloped countries were defined to include all countries of Africa, North and South America and Asia, except the Union of South Africa, Canada, the United States and Japan" (Quoted by Bracho 2015).

[8] Developing countries in the M49 nomenclature are close to the Group of 77, but with some differences. Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, Turkey, Uzbekistan and a number of small islands are not members of the G77 although they belong to the group of developing countries in the M49 nomenclature. China's status vis-à-vis the G77, often presented as G77 plus China, is also unique.

income with the level of vulnerability, as well as social indicators.

In addition to these general classifications, many institutions later adopted sector-specific^[9] classifications both similar to and distinct from the M49 standard +. Some of them still included the category of countries in transition created to describe the specific situation of countries emerging from the Soviet bloc after the fall of the Berlin Wall^[10]. The case of UNDP probably needs to be set apart, given that this institution proposed a particular concept of human development in 1990, which it uses since then to categorize countries according to a statistical indicator combining income, as well as health and education levels, according to a decidedly economic and social logic.

The Bretton Woods institutions started from a purely economic logic to build the global cartography of their policies. In 1978, the World Bank started to classify countries by income level distinguishing low-income countries, middle-income countries (separated into lower and upper groups) and high-income countries. This classification would prove to be extremely influential and remains in use today.

The IMF also adopted an international classification of an economic nature, which, after several changes (Nielsen 2011) distinguishes three groups of countries since 2004: “low-income developing countries”, “other developing economies and emerging markets” and “advanced economies.”

Different institutions have also defined sub-categories within the group of developing countries according to specific dimensions: this is the case in particular of classifications based on the “context of fragility” (OECD), the “situation of fragility or conflict” (World Bank), or “multidimensional vulnerabilities” (UN), etc.

[9] Most of the specialized agencies of the United Nations –UNCTAD, UN-DESA, UNDP, UNFPA, FAO, UNIDO and many others– have defined specific categorizations adapted to their field of action sometimes in several categories, but always in some way creating a dichotomy between “developed and developing countries”.

[10] This is the case, for example, of UN-DESA in its annual reports (UN-DESA 2024).

The cartographies of development have thus been built and have gradually evolved according to either political or economic logics, and sometimes a mixture of the two, giving great importance to the dichotomy between developed and developing countries (see Annex 1).

This construction of the world in a bipartition has come to occupy a prominent place in international politics.

1.3 – The cartographies of international policies in tension

As international law expanded, often in close relationship with major multilateral institutions, global policies were gradually organized by adopting the contours of development cartographies, through numerous treaties and agreements.

This is particularly the case for environmental policies. By conducting comprehensive research in this area, Farias (2023a) thus identifies the presence of this development dichotomy in 81 multilateral environmental agreements^[11]. In many of these documents, the classification of developing countries is only recommended for specific provisions, but 23 of them call for a differentiated treatment based on legal or regulatory provisions.

The case of environmental agreements is further proof that the whole set of international policies has been built around a bipartition of development, with variegated nuances depending on specific contexts.

The first of these policies is, of course, official development assistance (ODA), perhaps the first policy to be described as truly global (Severino and Ray 2010). Seen through the prism of the dual origin of development, the cartography of ODA appears quite hybrid. Indeed, since 1993, the list of ODA-eligible countries comprises developing countries as defined by the World Bank, as well low

[11] To be precise, 52 original treaties, 12 protocols and 17 amendments (Farias 2023a).

and middle income countries and is thus solely based on income *per capita* criterion.^[12] On the other hand, the list of ODA donors, often referred to as developed countries, is mainly composed of OECD member countries (with the addition of a few non-member countries joining on a voluntary basis), thus based on a much more political approach. The inclusion of cooperation between developing countries, the so-called South-South cooperation, is a highly debated topic in the field of ODA (Cichocka *et al.* 2024), as is the eligibility of major emerging economies to receive development assistance.

Trade policies are an emblematic example of the pre-eminence of a political identity criterion in the elaboration of their cartography. In the aftermath of the 8th round of multilateral trade negotiations conducted within the framework of GATT (the so-called Uruguay round), self-identification has become an integral component of the rules of the newly-created WTO (Farias 2023b). Thus, each country joining the WTO can choose to join as a developed or developing country, the second option opening up access to preferential provisions:

"There are no WTO definitions of 'developed' and 'developing' countries. Members announce for themselves whether they are 'developed' or 'developing' countries".

(World Trade Organization)^[13]

[12] This has not always been the case. Until the 1990s, this list, which initially excludes China, will evolve more or less ad hoc at the request of donor countries, including in particular overseas territories or dependent, but also some other high-income countries such as Taiwan, the Cayman Islands or Bermuda until the 1990s.

[13] See: https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/devel_e/dlwho_e.htm.

This self-identification approach raises questions and objections. Some high-income countries such as South Korea, Singapore or Israel are registered as developing countries by the WTO. The same is true of the world's largest trading power, China. In this case too, a robust international debate is underway^[14].

Climate policies are part of a specific development cartography defined in the first climate agreement of 1992. It distinguishes developed countries, defined as members of the OECD at that date (Annex II), with the addition of European countries which regained independence or political autonomy after the dissolution of the Eastern bloc (Annex I), and finally all the other countries considered as "developing" (not in Annex I). This country-by-country classification seems to follow a politically-oriented logic, which, in particular, does not take into account the measure of emissions.

The international cartography of climate policies has remained virtually frozen to this day,^[15] although the OECD has expanded from 24 members in 1992 to 38 today. It determines the financial commitments made in 2024 in Baku for a transfer of \$300 billion from developed to developing countries starting in 2030. Again, this mapping has come under strain as the geography of global emissions has changed dramatically.^[16]

[14] The United States recently called for reform of the WTO classification: "While some developing-country designations are proper, many are patently unsupported in light of current economic circumstances. For example, 7 out of the 10 richest economies in the world as measured by Gross Domestic Product *per capita* on a purchasing-power parity basis—Brunei, Hong Kong, Kuwait, Macao, Qatar, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates—currently claim developing-country status. Mexico, South Korea, and Turkey—members of both the G20 and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)—also claim this status." (The White House, 2019. "Memorandum on Reforming Developing-Country Status in the World Trade Organization". Presidential Memoranda. *The White House*, July 26, 2019. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidentialactions/memorandum-reforming-developing-country-status-worldtrade-organization/>) and in particular challenged the status of China, the world's largest exporter, as a developing country. However, 10 developing countries rejected the US proposals arguing that "self-declaration of 'developing' Member status, a fundamental rule in the WTO, has proven to be the most appropriate classification approach to the WTO" (WTO 2019).

[15] Very few changes were made on a case-by-case basis. Turkey was removed from Annex II in 2002, after being added in 1992 when it became a member of the OECD. Kazakhstan has made the reverse request, not yet effective, to integrate Annex I.

[16] The top 10 countries emitting greenhouse gases *per capita* in 2023 (source: *World Development Indicators*) are all developing countries according to the UN's M49 nomenclature. Palau, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Brunei, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Trinidad and Tobago, Saudi Arabia and Mongolia.

It is therefore the set of global policies related to international aid, environment, and trade, as well as those specific to the in the field of public health, sport, or postal exchanges that, in a more or less centralized fashion, structured around a dichotomy between developed and developing countries, resulting directly or indirectly from the original invention of development in the 1950s and 1960s.

Each policy has adopted its own cartography, based on a specific reasoning centered around self-identification, the membership in various political clubs or, conversely, economic or technical criteria. Globalization has thus been written around a common narrative that emphasizes the dichotomy of development.

However, these cartographies of global policies have all come under considerable scrutiny due to the breakdown of the world's economic bipartition.

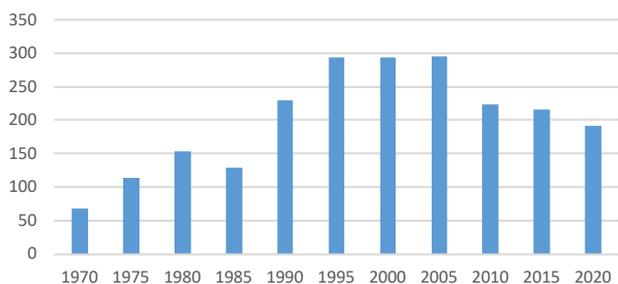
2.

**The rise of
the one-humped
camel**

2.1 – The end of the two-block world economy

The division of the world into (three then) two distinct blocks according to their average wealth level has been given from the 1950s until the 1980s. Since then, this separation of countries into two homogeneous blocks according to the standard of living has progressively been vanishing. International economic inequalities have obviously not decreased (or at least not sufficiently), based on how they are measured: there still exists a gaping rift between the poorest and the richest countries with an average income difference by a factor close to 200.

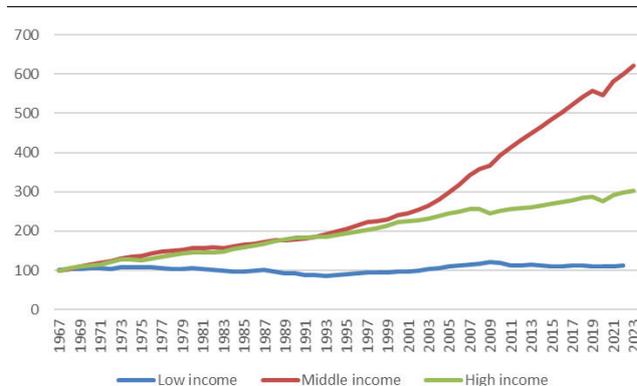
Figure 1 – Average GDP *per capita* gap between the 10 richest and the 10 poorest countries



Source: WDI, our calculations.

However, between these extremes, many countries have experienced a significant level of growth that has led them to join either the group of high-income countries or a significantly densifying stratum of intermediate development, a phenomenon that effectively cancels the former bipartition of the world into two blocs of rich and poor countries. This dynamic is clearly visible in the World Bank’s comparative rates of growth for different income categories.

Figure 2 – *Per capita* growth for different categories of countries



Source: WDI.

This graph represents the average *per capita* growth for each income group, as they were constituted in 2023. It is clear that middle-income countries are by far the fastest growing group since the turn of the 21st century, generating a “middle ground” in terms of global development, which has become much more important in terms of its total population compared to that high- and low-income groups.

In fact, the income categories of countries as defined by the World Bank are quite fluid (Fantom and Serajuddin 2016). High-income countries, now 85 in number, collectively form a geographical pattern that moves away from a typical North–South divide. As of 2024, 15 countries in the East Asia and Pacific region and 18 countries in the Latin America region belong to this group of high-income countries.^[17]

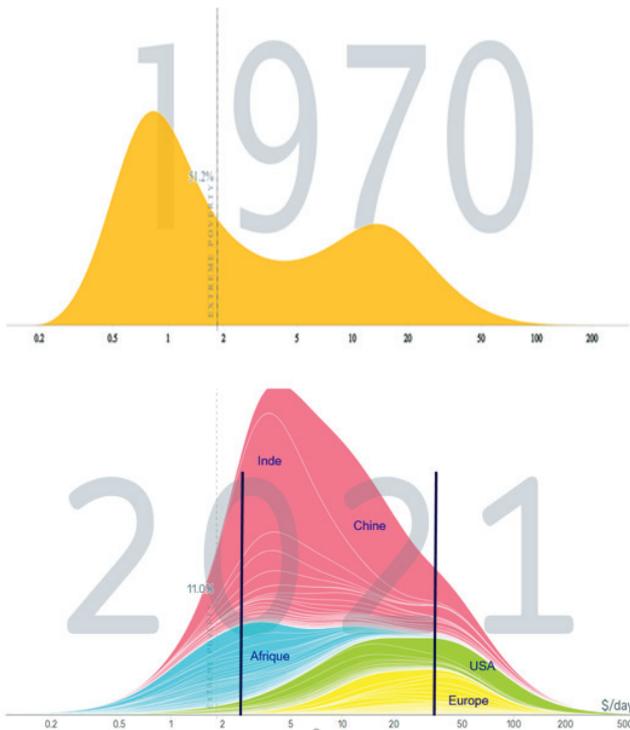
What is true for groups of countries is even truer for the world population itself as a homogeneous whole (Melonio *et al.* 2022). Indeed, since the 1980s, the global phenomenon of densification of the intermediate category of countries is compounded by the predominance at the intra-country inequalities over inter-country inequalities.^[18]

[17] See: Metreau, Eric, Kathryn Elizabeth Young and Shwetha Grace Eapen. 2024. “World Bank country classifications by income level for 2024-2025”. *World Bank Blogs*, July 01, 2024. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/world-bank-country-classifications-by-income-level-for-2024-2025>.

[18] See: Chancel, Lucas, Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman (eds.). 2021. *World Inequality Report 2022*. n.l. : World Inequality Lab. https://wir2022.wid.world/www-site/uploads/2023/03/D_FINAL_WIL_RIM_RAPPORT_2303.pdf

As a result, the representation of the shift from a "two-humped" global distribution income to a "one-humped camel" pattern has already been analyzed by several scholars (Gates and Gates 2014; Melonio *et al.* 2022).

Figure 3 - Distribution of the world population by income level



Source: Melonio *et al.* (2022).

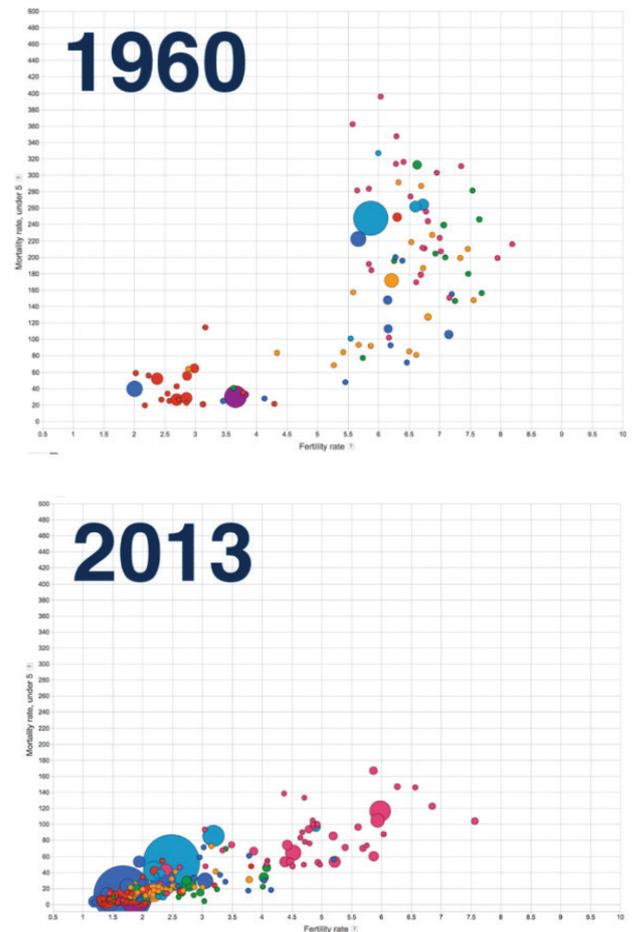
Graph reveals the existence of a large global middle class, largely located in Asia, but also in South America and in other continents. It constitutes a visual demonstration of the obsolescence of the dichotomous division of the world between two groups, the "rich" and the "poor".

2.2 – An unequal yet compact world

The disappearance of the two-block world is not only observed in terms of economic wealth and living standards. It applies to all areas of the economic and social sphere (or environmental, see below). For example, Khokhar and Serrajuddin (2015) illustrated the same phenomenon on demographic

indicators by contrasting representations of countries in the world in 1960 and 2013.

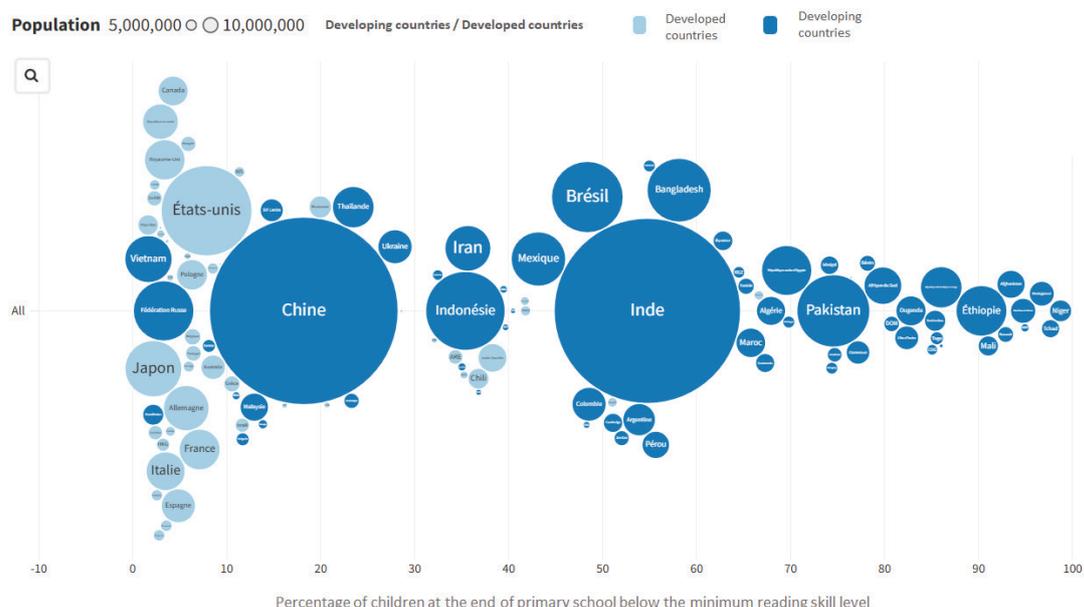
Figure 4 - World countries by demographic indicators



Source: Khokhar and Serrajuddin 2015.

Graph 4 show the fertility rates of all countries in the world in abscissa and their respective mortality rate before the age of 5 in ordinate, in 1960 and 2013, using the same scale. As is the case for economic variables, there is a clear shift from a world in two blocks to a situation where strong inequalities persist, but are organized in much more continuous pattern. Mahler *et al.* (2024) also provide a similar illustration of this phenomenon, also based on infant mortality, but incorporating other variables, as well, for instance from the field of education.

Figure 5 – Reading skills of children at the end of primary education in 2020



Source: Malher *et al.* 2024 (data: WDI).

Graph 5 shows, for each country in the world in 2020, the share of children still under the reading proficiency level after completing their primary education. We lack corresponding data from the 1960s or 1970s that would probably show a clear gap between developing countries and developed countries. However, graph 5 shows, as far as education levels are concerned, the very wide dispersion of developing countries with ratios between them ranging from 0% to 100%. Additionally, the same graph shows a lack of separation between developing countries and developed countries at the top of the distribution (left of the graph).

The same phenomenon can be observed on all economic and social indicators, as well as on even environmental ones. From 1950 to 1980 (according to available data), indicators gave the picture of a world divided into two more or less homogeneous groups (with differences based on the selected indicators), but in all cases distinctly separated. In 2020, and in all areas, this bipartition has clearly disappeared. Inequality between countries remains very high, but the group of developing countries has

become extremely heterogeneous and has partially merged with the group of developed countries, making way for a compact world no longer split in two.

If the dichotomy of development historically proved to be so influential, it is because it made it possible to analyze in a relevant –albeit schematic– way all forms of international inequality, through a simple breakdown, (Fialho and Van Bergeijk 2017). These forms of international inequality were not only economic, but also financial, social, demographic, environmental, as well as historical or (geo)political, and even geographical to an extent since Japan (as well as South Africa according to certain classifications) has long been the only large developed “isolate” within developing continents.

However, this vision of the world is obsolete today, at a time when each dimension of development creates a continuum of inequalities that reveals a wide developmental gap between extremes on both sides.

2.3 – The “middle ground” of development

The end of a clear distinction between rich and poor countries leads to the emergence of a vast “middle ground” that blurs those international classifications that were mostly based on the former bipartition of the world.

A database of classifications developed by Deborah Farias^[19] demonstrates that 61 countries, or about 30% of the United Nations are alternatingly assimilated to developing and developed countries according to different international classifications.

These countries are “unclassifiable” in models that rest on a pure dichotomy and comprise the many countries that have experienced strong growth for several decades and have therefore integrated the group of high-income countries of the World Bank while remaining assimilated by several institutions assimilated to developing countries: Singapore, Qatar or Bermuda are emblematic examples.^[20]

International institutions have also struggled to treat countries emerging from the break-up of the Soviet block in the dichotomous vision of development and have adopted different

rules to this end.^[21] It may be surprising to see that the country, which has, by far, been the first recipient of ODA, in recent years is Ukraine, a nation belonging to the developed world from the standpoint of the United Nations.

Finally, the emergence of large countries in the former “Third World” raises a question of another nature: is it legitimate that the partition of the world used in public policy discussions is based only on *per capita* indicators? Are power, or weight in absolute value in global balances, or the influence of local policies on international issues not additional relevant criteria that should be taken into account in the cartographies of global public policies?

These questions are worth asking for all the major emerging countries, but particularly for the first of them, China, the world’s largest exporter, the world’s largest emitter of greenhouse gases and the second-largest economic power, which is nevertheless classified as a developing country by the WTO, in international climate agreements and by the OECD, enabling it, among other things, to be eligible for development assistance.

The convergence of all dimensions of international inequalities around a single world divide explains the immense success of the development dichotomy, which has in turn created a relevant framework for all international issues. This division of the world no longer corresponds to the objective reality of economic and social situations. Yet it retains considerable influence in international institutions and policies: indeed, it seems to have survived as a marker of a certain political identity.

[19] See: Farias, Deborah. 2022. Developing Countries Database. <https://www.developingcountries.info/>.

[20] For example, South Korea and Singapore are considered developing countries by the WTO, the Montreal Protocol or the Biodiversity Convention. They are also treated as developing countries (non-Annex I) for the UNFCCC. Singapore is also a developing country in the M49 nomenclature). The same applies to Chile and Uruguay, countries with high incomes and very high human development, but considered as developing in all other classifications. The oil countries of the Gulf are in a very similar situation, considered as developing countries by the United Nations, WTO or UNFCCC, but as high-income countries by the World Bank or with a very high level of human development by UNDP and finally as emerging countries by the IMF. Finally, many small islands with a high *per capita* income –Antigua, Aruba, Barbados, the Bahamas, Bermuda, Nauru, Palau, Seychelles, Trinidad, etc.– are also part of this grey area. Often classified as developing countries by taxonomies of a more “political” nature, or with an emphasis on vulnerabilities, they appear in the first categories from the perspective of economic and social indicators.

[21] The UN statistical division, for example, has adopted a continental logic. It affected the ex-Soviet countries belonging to the European continent in the category of developed countries of the M49 standard and the countries of the Asian continent (including the countries of the Caucasus) in the category of developing countries. Among the former communist European countries, the poorest of them are therefore classified as developed by the United Nations (M49), and listed in Annex I of the UNFCCC, but are considered to be developing by many other institutions. At one extreme, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina or Moldova are thus considered developed countries by the M49 standard alone, but assimilated to developing countries in almost all other classifications. Ukraine is in a similar situation except that it is also included in the category of developed countries in the Montreal protocol. Kosovo is considered non-developing by UNDP alone. By contrast, the most prosperous former communist countries in Asia or the Caucasus are considered developing countries by the United Nations, but for some of them they are treated as developed countries for other classifications. This is the case of Kazakhstan, which is a country with very high human development for UNDP, or Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan considered as developed countries by the Montreal protocol.

3.

**The resilience of
the two-humped
camel**

3.1 – “Developing country” as a political identity

If the developing world no longer constitutes a coherent set to analyze multidimensional inequalities, in particular economic inequalities, does it still constitute a relevant concept in the political field?

The question deserves to be asked particularly in view of the frequent definition of the category “developing countries”, notably by the United Nations (for example via the M49 standard), whose contours very closely resemble those of the list of countries included in the Group of 77.

The Group of 77, although originating from the developing world of the 1960s, is undeniably a united political entity –and perhaps increasingly so as its economic homogeneity weakens. This characteristic is, for instance, fully at play in the Group’s very active role in all international negotiations, especially climate negotiations (Jespen *et al.* 2021), as well as in the resurgence of postcolonial studies (Ziai 2012).

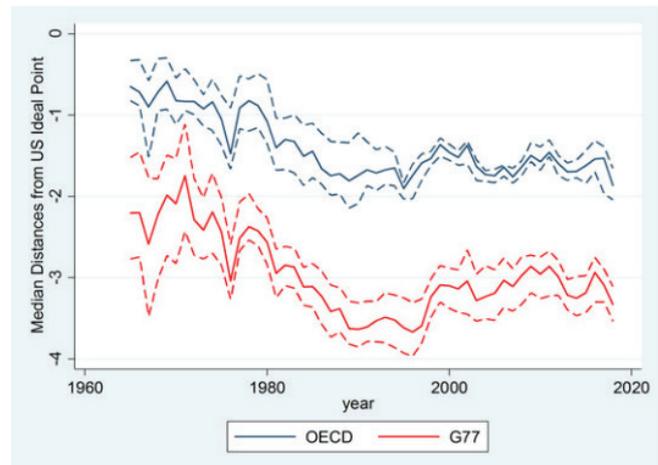
Indeed, the political unity of developing countries (in the G77 sense) appears to no longer be defined by economic criteria, such as comparable living conditions and common challenges to improve them, but, above all, by a shared identity as dominated nations that stems from modern history, as well as from inequalities in access to the institutions, to the norms and to the values that have determined the rules of the international game until today.

The original dichotomy of development might therefore appear to have lost its coherence from an economic (and social) standpoint, in spite of having retained it –and maybe even reinforced it– from a geopolitical standpoint and within the framework of international relations.

Nicholas Lees (2021) studies the votes of different country groups at the UN using historical data from Bailet *et al.* (2017), showing that, the dispersion of votes at the UN General Assembly

among G77 countries has been relatively stable since the 1980s and thereby highlighting the persistence of a certain political cohesiveness among them. Lees also measures the average “distance” of the votes cast by different countries, comparing them to US positions. Graph 6 shows the average distance between US votes and votes cast by OECD countries and G77 countries, framed by the distance calculated for the 25th and 75th percentiles of those groups ordered by distance from US votes.

Figure 6 – Average distance from US votes at the UN General Assembly by country group

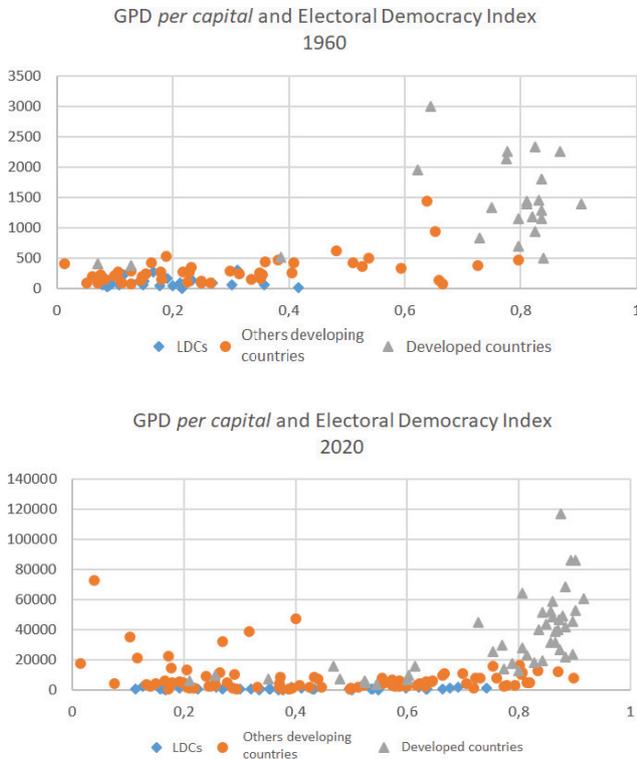


Source: Lees 2021.

This distance does not decrease over time for G77 countries, including for the 25% of countries that are closest to the US vote. After a marked increase until the mid-1990s, the “geopolitical coherence” of G77 as measured by this indicator remains at a fairly high level, significantly higher than that of OECD countries.

This political cohesiveness appears to not only be due to geopolitical alliances, but also to the nature of internal political choices, and in particular to positions regarding liberal democracy. The chart below contrasts the distribution of countries in the world in 1960 and 2020 according to their GDP *per capita* and their level of electoral democracy (V-Dem index), distinguishing developed and developing countries (and LDCs, see below) according to the UN M49 standard.

Figure 7 - Distribution of countries in the world according to their *per capita* GDP and level of electoral democracy



Source: V-DEM, WDI.

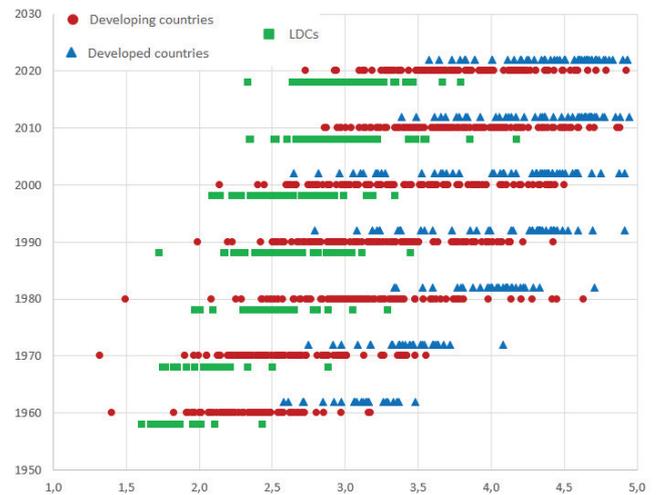
Graph 7 should be compared with those that are comparable on purely economic and social variables (see Graphs 4 and 5 above). Similarly, division of the world into two blocks is very visible in 1960, but in some way survives, in a less marked way, in 2020 on the democracy variable. The dichotomy of development, as it emerged in the 1960s, remains a strong explanatory factor that can account for the degree of international democracy.

3.2 – The separation of politics from economics

The fact that there is a common political identity among countries defined as “underdeveloped” in the 1950s and 1960s and then as “developing” in the 1980s seems to be confirmed by the analyzes above. It is therefore not surprising that this group of countries plays a political role in international negotiations and policies, particularly through the G77.

However, development as a political identity and development as an economic rank define increasingly divergent cartographies. For illustrative purposes, Graphic 8 compares the GDPs *per capita* (in current-dollar terms) of countries classified in the main UN categories: least developed countries, other developing countries and developed countries. In other words, it combines the distributions of countries according to a political-historical reading of inequalities (the M49 standard) and a purely “material standard of living” reading of these same inequalities (GDP *per capita*).

Figure 8 - Representation of different groups of countries (UN) by their *per capita* GDP



Source: WDI, our calculations.

On this graph, each point represents a country in the categories “LDCs”, “other developing countries” (according to M49) and “developed countries” (according to M49), and is classified on the x-axis according to the GDP *per capita* of related countries on a logarithmic basis, for each year at the beginning of the decade.

As early as the 1960s, historical-political and economic inequalities did not perfectly overlap due to a few outliers.^[22] As early as 1970 and especially 1980, the Gulf countries have been added to these diverging points. In 1990 and 2000, the

[22] A few developing countries with *per capita* GDP levels comparable to those of developed countries partly due to exchange rate effects: for example, Bahamas, Venezuela or Trinidad and Tobago.

opposite phenomenon took place. Some countries emerging from the fall of the Soviet empire, which were considered developed according to the M49 standard, had levels of GDP *per capita* comparable to those of developing countries.

But, above all, what characterizes the most recent situation in 2020 is the extent and number of countries affected by this overlap of distributions, which show that countries considered to be developing countries in the historical-political sense (according to the M49 nomenclature) and developed countries as measured by GDP *per capita*, are in fact entirely entangled categories.

Graph 8 thus illustrates the growing divergence between a historical-political conception of the developing world and an economic conception of that same world.

The “political” bipartition of development seems to be almost frozen in time, like the M49 standard, which has seen very little change since it started to be used more than 50 years ago.^[23]

Conversely, economic development is shaping an increasingly fluid world in which 34 countries have joined the group of high-income countries since 1990 (World Bank 2024).^[24]

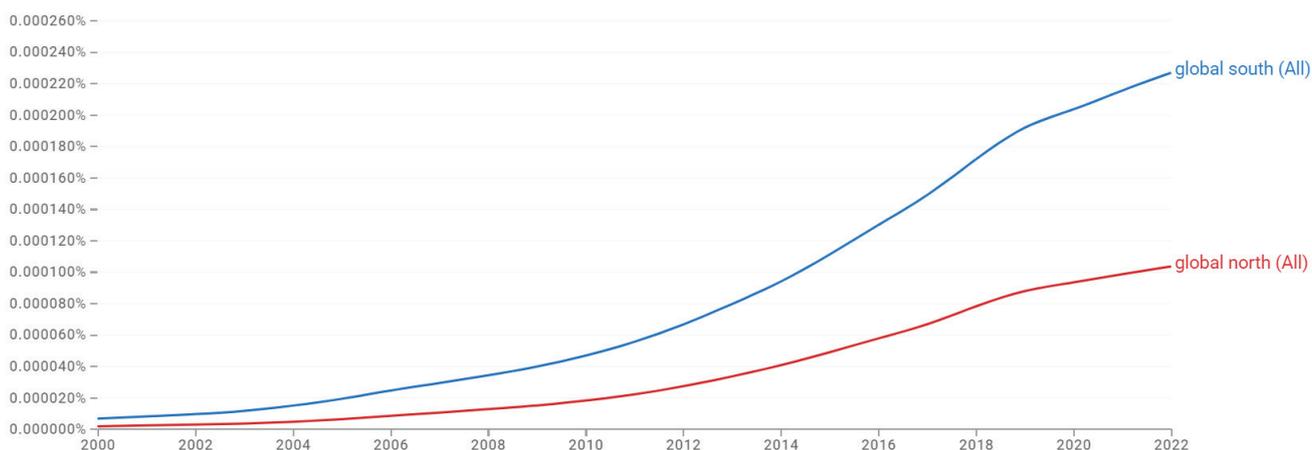
To this divergence, one could add the diversity of geographical divisions that is specific to each international policy and, by their very nature, have tended to freeze existing cartographies in the early days of climate negotiations. Thus the cartography of trade policies is similar to the development dichotomy that existed in 1964 at the beginning of GATT, just as the international landscape of 1992 seems to survive in frozen form in the cartography of climate negotiations.

These cartographies, all different and using the same terminology, are a source of profound confusion in the language of international debate.

3.3 – Is “Global South” a reality beyond development?

A beginning of clarification could come from the growing use of the expression “Global South”, reflecting the trend toward increasing politicization of development categories.

Figure 9 - Frequency of use of the terms Global South and Global North



Source: Google N-Viewer.

[23] South Africa moved from developed to developing countries in 1993. South Korea (1994), Cyprus and Israel (2018) followed the opposite path.

[24] It is sometimes said that these new high-income countries are often small countries that change little in the world map (World Bank 2024). But this is only partly true: South Korea, Poland and Chile have joined the high-income countries since the beginning of the century. This is also the case for Russia (and Bulgaria) in 2025, and it could be the case for China in the next 5 years.

While the Brandt line separating the world between North and South dates back to 1980,^[25] there has been a very rapid rise since the early 2000s in the use of the terms "Global North" and especially "Global South", in a non-symmetrical way.

While these terms have initially been primarily used in media discourses, UNCTAD proposes in its latest report on Trade and Development (UNCTAD 2024) to appropriate the notion of Global South as a new basis for analysis. UNCTAD notes that the "official" use of this concept has become widespread only over the course of the previous two years (UNCTAD 2024).

"Since 2023, references to the global South have been featured in the official documents of the G20, Group of Seven and BRICS summits. In January 2024, the term was included in the outcome document of the Third South Summit held in Kampala, Uganda. For the first time, 134 States members of the Group of 77 collectively agreed to place 'the Global South onto a more influential and equal footing in the international arena and in mutually beneficial cooperation with all partners' (Group of 77, 2024)".

(CNUCED 2024)

Some analysts present the Global South as a space for resistance (Haug *et al.* 2021) against the domination of the North, or as an ensemble united by a feeling of dissatisfaction with the international order (Lees 2021):

"The states of the Global South are dissatisfied states that have repeatedly asserted that the world order is unjust and reflects the interests of the North".

(Lees 2021)

However, if everyone agrees that the Global South has experienced uneven but sometimes spectacular development, and has therefore been marked by both internal divergences and progress in terms of overall weight, this does not necessarily mean that this shared dissatisfaction has diminished:

"The Global South has increased its significance within the world economy, but there is no sign that states of the Global South are any less dissatisfied with their positions in global economic and political hierarchy".

(Lees 2021)

The Global South must thus be seen as a purely geopolitical concept and not as a multidimensional one, as was the developing world. The Global South and the Global North do not overlap with the contours of the global poverty or with GHG emissions on a world scale.

In fact, strictly speaking, these two notions do not correspond to categories of countries. Even if it closely resembles the Group of 77, the Global South does not match with a precise perimeter that could be delineated on a map of the world or in the form of a list of countries. It also does not aspire to partition the world as the opposite of the Global North; the largest country on the planet, Russia, clearly belongs neither to the Global South nor to the Global North, while other countries such as Colombia, Chile, Costa Rica and maybe soon Brazil and Indonesia with one foot in the OECD and the other in the Group of 77 aspire to integrate in both global hemispheres.

[25] In 1980, at the request of the World Bank, an independent commission chaired by former German Chancellor Willy Brandt produced a report entitled "North-South: A Survival Program" (Brandt 1980). His cover, adorned with a map of the world that highlights the north-south boundary between the rich "North" and the underdeveloped "South", has etched into minds the geographical and economic division of the world according to what has long been called the "Brandt line".

At the same time, the concept of the “global North” also finds its way into the language of geopolitical rhetoric, as Vladislav Sourkov, former political advisor to the Russian president, put it:

“Since there is no South without a North, the idea of the North started to emerge as soon as the term ‘Global South’ was used. In the past, the idea of a ‘global North’ could not take root, as it was still only a pleonasm of that of the West. Now, however, the contours of the Far North are becoming clearer and taking on an entirely new significance. It’s hard to believe that these currently antagonistic systems could eventually reach such a level of convergence”.

(Sourkov 2024)^[26]

UNCTAD also notes that the Global South has entered the common parlance of politics perhaps because it is such an “amorphous” concept:

“Despite a history going back to the 1960s, the term ‘global South’ has been rather amorphous. It cannot be clearly defined on a map, and it includes regions and countries with diverse histories, cultures and political-economic regimes. It often refers to the rise of individual countries rather than a cohesive group”.

(UNCTAD 2024)

Conversely, one might be surprised by the persistent attachment of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member countries to the notion of Official Development Assistance (ODA), which has remained largely unchanged since the 1960s. It is as if the “Global North” finds here a coherence—albeit negative and reassuring—even though its own interests should encourage it to expand the list of countries contributing to the shared burdens of globalization.

In sum, the political structure of the world no longer corresponds to its material structure, and the powerful movement of decarbonization currently in progress further hastens this process of decorrelation (Charbonnier 2025). The rapid emergence and affirmation of the concept of Global South has now almost completely replaced the now overly imprecise notion of “developing countries” and are therefore part of this process as well.

But beyond of the necessary clarification of the terminology, the central question is indeed that of the coherence of the cartographies of global policies.

[26] Sourkov, Vladislav. 2024. « La naissance du Nord global ». In « Portrait d'un monde cassé : L'Europe dans l'année des grandes élections ». Edited by Guiliano da Empoli. *Le Grand Continent*. 120-27. Translated by the authors.

4.

**From dichotomy
to dichotomania**

4.1 – The dichotomy of development dissolved in the SDGs?

The end of a world divided in two, and the resulting disintegration of the developing world, has of course already been diagnosed by several analysts (Rosling 2013; Alonso *et al.* 2014; Georgalakis 2016) and by influential development actors (Gates 2013), who noted that the statistical heterogeneity of the concept “developing country” no longer made it a relevant and performative category for analysis in the economic and social fields.

In this context, the adoption of the SDGs by the UN General Assembly in 2015 represents a pivotal moment. Until then, the international community was committed to Millennium Goals based on objective, economic and social specificities, of the Developing Countries Group. The shift to sustainable development goals that include biodiversity, climate, ocean protection, social cohesion, peace, responsible consumption, leads to a form of dissolution of the dichotomy of development. On the one hand, no country is “developed” from a sustainable development perspective; on the contrary, all countries are in some way “developing”. On the other hand, the goals tend to a common world and no longer to the contribution of one group of countries (developed countries), to the goals of another group (developing countries).

The SDGs thus carry with them an as yet unfinished overhaul of the international financing framework from ODA to SDI^[27], and a new representation of the world order.

Logically, starting in 2016, the most widely used database for development, the *World Data Indicators* of the World Bank, stated it was no longer necessary to distinguish between developed and developing countries.

“Motivated by the universal agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals, this edition of World Development Indicators also introduces a change in the way that global and regional aggregates are presented in tables and figures. Unless otherwise noted, there is no longer a distinction between developing countries (defined in previous editions as low- and middle-income countries) and developed countries (defined in previous editions as high-income countries)”.

(World Bank 2016)

This “revolution”, which is analyzed as a logical follow-up to the adoption of the SDGs, is not accompanied by other arguments.

Subsequently, the World Bank’s data scientists confirmed this proposal for abandonment and repeatedly recommended that categories of developed and developing countries should no longer be used for analysis (Khokhar and Serajuddin 2015; Fantom and Serajuddin 2016), notably in a blog article entitled “It’s time to stop talking about the developing world” (Mahler *et al.* 2024). The arguments are those already set out: too much heterogeneity of the “developing countries” group and an artificial continuity solution between “developed” and “developing” countries, which introduces a “false hierarchy among countries”. More significantly, the United Nations Statistical Division announced in 2021 that it would stop using the dichotomy of development. The explanation for this change deserves to be reproduced in full.

“There is no definition of developing and developed countries (or areas) within the UN system. However, in 1996 the distinction between ‘Developed regions’ and ‘Developing regions’ was introduced to the Standard country or area codes for statistical use (known as M49). These groupings were intended solely for statistical convenience at the

[27] See: Melonio, Thomas, Jean-David Naudet and Rémy Rioux. 2024. *Double Standards in Financing for Development*. Policy Paper 14. Paris: Éditions Agence française de développement.

time^[28] and did not express a judgement about any country' or area's stage of development. Over time the use of the distinction between 'Developed regions' and 'Developing regions', including in the flagship publications of the United Nations, has diminished. Since 2017, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) report and the statistical annex to the Secretary General's annual report on SDGs progress uses only geographic regions without referring to the two groupings of developed and developing regions. Therefore, following consultation with other international and supranational organizations active in official statistics, the 'Developed regions' and 'Developing regions' were removed from the 'Other groupings' of the M49 in December 2021"

(UNSD—Methodology)^[29]

This unease regarding current categories of development, and their uses, is in fact widespread. It applies equally, if not more, to categories arising from international treaties or agreements, as the WTO itself states:

"[T]he WTO remains stuck in a simplistic and clearly outdated construct of 'North-South' division, "developed" and "developing" countries. Each is a seemingly static set, regardless of economic, social, trade, and other indicators. This binary construct does not reflect the realities of 2019".

(WTO 2019a, 2)

The same is true of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC/UNCC) classification, which no longer corresponds to the current map of global emissions.

There is therefore a widely shared recognition within international institutions that the artificial division between developing and developed countries is no longer relevant from multiple points of view. However, is the use of these categories really in decline?

4.2 – A difficulty seeing the world other than cut in half?

The dichotomy of development is formally included, albeit with different definitions each time, in many international treaties and agreements. From this point of view, we can only specify its scope as it will become possible to move towards other, more relevant cartographies.

But beyond these formal uses, this bipartition remains omnipresent in the entire discourse on development and international policies.

Thus, even though the World Bank's data bank and several of its leading analysts (see above) recommend abandoning the dichotomy of development, official reports of the World Bank continue to routinely use associated categories. For example, the World Development Report 2024 *The Middle Income Trap* uses the expression "developing countries" 47 times (excluding bibliography).

Moreover, the World Bank's scope of action remains implicitly defined by the concept of developing countries, encompassing the three lower categories of countries classified by their average income *per capita*, an evidence of the in getting out of categorizations even when they appear to be partially problematic.

Beyond the World Bank itself, the assimilation of low and middle income countries with developing countries continues to be sanctioned by the OECD, which designates as such all countries eligible to receive ODA. It is therefore followed by all governments and ODA donor organizations that routinely and officially use this categorization. In France, for example, "developing countries" are mentioned 25 times in the August 4th 2021 Law of Programming on Inclusive Development and Combating Global Inequality.

[28] We ourselves point out, to our astonishment, that for the United Nations the division of the world between developed and developing countries would have been nothing more than a statistical convenience of an era.

[29] See: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/>.

This contradiction is equally pronounced at the United Nations. Thus, in addition to the announcement of the deletion of the “developed” and “under development” categories in the M49 standard according to the argument cited in the previous section, the same UNSD website notes that the demand for developed/developing classifications remains high, and while it proposes to abandon it in the M49 standard, it agrees in the same text to maintain (and even update it) for users who request it:

However, several users expressed the need to maintain the distinction of developed and developing regions based on the understanding that being part of either developed or developing region is through sovereign decision of a state. Therefore, a file was created that contains an updated classification of developed and developing regions as of May 2022, in addition to the historical classification of December”.

(UNSD—Methodology, *op. cit.*)

Overall, the dichotomy of development remains so widely used in UN publications that it is hard to imagine what some of these publications would use if the distinction between “developed world” and “developing world” were to entirely disappear. For example, the term “developing country” appears 351 times in 321 pages in UNCTAD’s *Trade and Development Report 2023*.

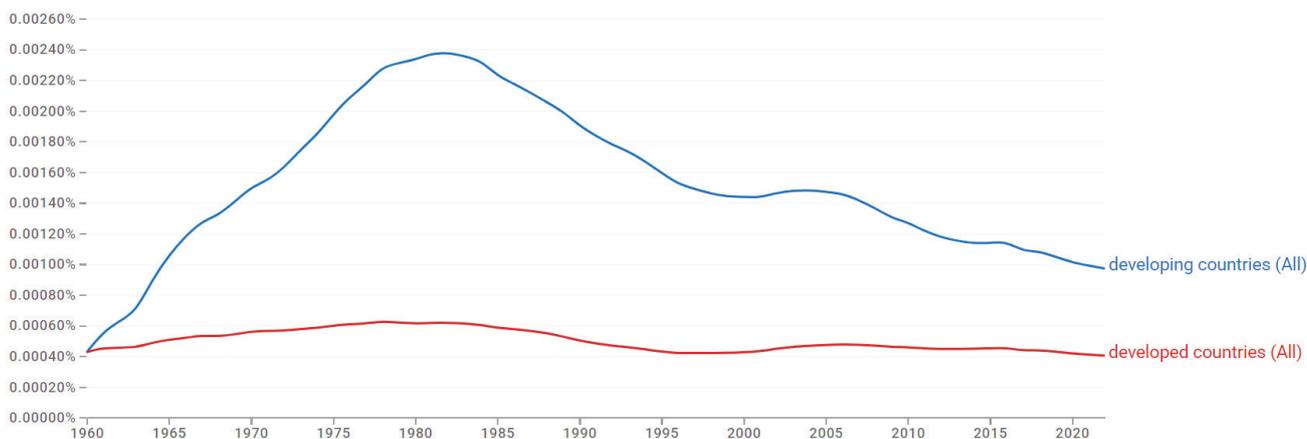
Even in forward-looking analyses, these categories, although firmly rooted in the past, still occupy a large lion’s share of related discourses. Thus the *zero draft* communicated by UNDESA (2025) for the Seville FfD4 conference of July 2025 uses the term “developing countries” 89 times in 29 pages, without specifying its scope.

Similarly, the report titled *The Triple Agenda* (IEG 2023a; IEG 2023b) commissioned to an independent expert group by G20 as a way to strengthen the role of multilateral banks in financing the SDGs makes extensive use of the category “developing countries”, which is mentioned 46 times throughout the text (34 in Volume 1 and 12 in Volume 2). Again, what a “developing country” might entail is never clearly specified.

It is often because of this tendency toward self-evidence, which underestimates the “middle ground” of development analyzed above, that the simple categories and time-tested categories of “developed countries” and “developing” have largely “escaped” from the language of international institutions to pervade media, education and even popular discourses.

Graph 10 shows the frequency of use of the expressions “developing countries” and “developed countries” in book titles listed by the Google Books database. Comparison with Graph 9 shows that the use of “developing countries” is 50 times more common than “Global South”.

Figure 10 - Frequency of use of the development dichotomy



Source: Google N-Viewer.

The frequency of use of the category "developing countries" is indeed decreasing from a peak observed in the early 1980s. This decrease is, however, very gradual and measured in frequency in a large and ever-expanding corpus.

Even more surprising is the stability over the last 60 years in the use of the term "developed countries" which, beyond its obsolescence and the condescending nuance it carries, has also become inherently ill-fitted with the advent of the SDGs, the rise of BRICS countries and the growing incompatibility between the trajectories of the richest countries and planetary boundaries.

The use of the dichotomy of development thus appears as the ill-conceived product of semi-conscious repetition, which leads us to

describe it as "dichotomania". It is most often used without specifying whether one refers to a rather political or rather economic conception of the concept of development. Despite the imprecise and obsolete nature of categories such as "developing countries" and "developed countries", their presence in institutional, specialized and public discourses is still quite strong and has barely decreased, while a precise definition of these categories, almost always essentialized, is very rarely offered.

This dichotomy contributes to creating an imprecise language for global policies that complicates the task of placing them back into relevant cartographies that are understood and accepted by public opinions.

5.
**Toward a new
spatial syntax of
global policies**

5.1 – Priority targets for public policy: LDCs and vulnerable countries

The United Nations 2030 Agenda is based on the SDGs but also on a second guiding principle: “leave no one behind.” It has thus revitalized a category, born in 1971, that had been somewhat forgotten: the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). The LDC category consists of 45 countries in 2024.^[30] It is defined by the UN Committee on Development Policy based on three sets of criteria for *per capita* income,^[31] human capital^[32] and economic and environmental vulnerability.^[33] ^[34]

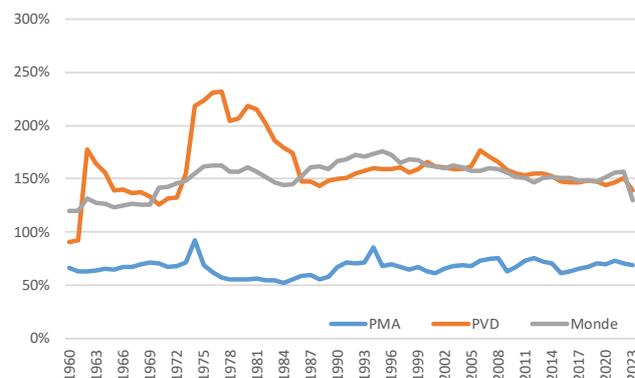
Undoubtedly because of the variety of this set of criteria, the category of LDCs appears as a category entirely homogeneous within itself and opposable to other categories from the point of view of the different dimensions of international inequality.

This is particularly the case with regard to economic criteria. The LDC category remains a consistent category in terms of *per capita* income as shown by the relatively concentrated point clouds for this category in Figure 8 above.

More precisely, Graph 11 shows the coefficients of change (standard deviation over average) in GDPs *per capita* (expressed in current

dollars) for the whole world, developing countries (as defined by the UN M49 nomenclature) and LDCs.

Figure 11 – Coefficient of variation of average incomes for different categories of countries



Source: WDI, our calculations.

Graph 11 confirms the previous analyses on the economic heterogeneity of the developing country category in the historical-political sense (M49 standard) and thus its inadequacy to describe economic inequalities. Indeed, the coefficient of variation is practically identical to that of all countries in the world: in other words, on average two developing countries are as different in terms of their GDP *per capita* as are any two other countries.

On the other hand, it is not at all the case with the “least developed countries” category, which appears homogeneous in terms of income stable over time: the category of LDCs appears as economically coherent in 2023 as it was in 1960.^[35]

The methodology used to define the list of LDCs focuses heavily on social indicators, and less on environmental indicators. The consistency of this classification in the economic field therefore goes far beyond GDP *per capita*. The number of LDCs is 45 in 2024. They account for 14% of the world’s population, but less than 1.3% of global GDP, less than 1% of world trade and less than 2% of GHG emissions. This data is sufficient to convince that the LDC Group also represents a relevant form of

[30] In 2024, the LDCs are: Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Laos, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Niger, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania, Chad, East Timor, Togo, Tuvalu, Yemen and Zambia. LDCs include almost all of the World Bank’s 26 low-income countries (excluding Syria and North Korea) as well as UNDP’s 33 low-human development countries (excluding Côte d’Ivoire, Pakistan and Nigeria).

[31] Gross national income *per capita*.

[32] The indicators selected in 2020 are: under-5 mortality rate; prevalence of stunting; maternal mortality ratio; gross secondary school enrolment rate; adult literacy rate; gender parity index of secondary school teachers.

[33] Share of agriculture, forestry and fisheries in GDP; Remoteness; Concentration of exports of goods; Instability of exports of goods and services; Share of the population living in low-altitude coastal areas; Share of population living in arid areas; Agricultural production instability, Disaster victims.

[34] See: Nations unies, Département des affaires économiques et sociales et Comité des politiques de développement. 2021. *Manuel relatif à la catégorie des pays les moins avancés : inscription, retrait et mesures spéciales de soutien*. 4^e édition. n.l.: Nations unies. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/LDC-Handbook-2021-French.pdf>.

[35] The LDC category did not exist in 1960. The curve was plotted by considering countries classified as LDCs in 2023.

multidimensional inequality, including geopolitics with for example about 2% of the voting rights in the World Bank Group.

This reasoning is widely agreed upon. Many organizations adopt, in addition to a dichotomy between developed and developing countries, the category of LDCs as specific, even when it is an organization where classifications are made on a self-identifying basis such as the WTO.

The LDC category incorporates elements of vulnerability (see note 24), but may not adequately reflect political, environmental and especially climate-related vulnerabilities, which are now taking a major place in the analysis of international inequalities. For even greater coherence, public policies could therefore usefully adopt a cartography of inequalities that would target LDCs and other countries most vulnerable for specific factors such as climate change or conflict risks. This complex classification of vulnerability is itself highly multicriteria with important qualitative dimensions, and is not yet the subject of a global cartography that could prove consensual.^[36]

In an attempt to make different approaches converge, the United Nations (OHRLS)^[37] has recently established a multidimensional vulnerability index (taking into account climate change vulnerability) which could move the international community towards consensus in this area.^[38] But this indicator (MVI) is calculated only for developing countries within the meaning of the UN M49 standard, that is to say for Singapore, China and Saudi Arabia, but not

[36] Several indicators exist. For example, Notre Dame University (Indiana) calculates and publishes an international climate change vulnerability index: the ND Gain Country Index (see: <https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/rankings/>). This index is based on three dimensions (exposure, sensitivity, adaptability) analysed in 6 sectors (food, water, health, ecosystem services, habitat, infrastructure). It results in an order of vulnerability level that is fairly consistent with the original categories (M49) of developed and developing countries, with the countries of Northern and Western Europe and North America occupying the top positions. In contrast, another example, the Physical Vulnerability to Climate Change Index (PVCCI) calculated by the FERDI combining 10 components (5 measures of climatic shocks and 5 measures of exposure) (Feindouno *et al.* 2020) significantly overturns economic and social hierarchies (see: <https://ferdi.fr/en/indicators/an-index-of-physical-vulnerability-to-climate-change>).

[37] Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States.

[38] See: United Nations. "Multidimensional Vulnerability Index. High Level Panel on the Development of a Multidimensional Vulnerability Index". <https://www.un.org/ohrls/mvi>.

for Japan, Cyprus or Ukraine. This shows how deeply the development dichotomy is still embedded in the international institutional architecture and that it has become a barrier rather than a tool for analyzing global inequalities in all their dimensions.

The category of LDCs, to which one could add those countries that are most vulnerable to climate change, could thus fulfill the same role that developing countries played in the 1950s–1970s, that of concentrating all the dimensions of inequalities whether they are economic, social, environmental or political. It appears as a relevant category to structure the set of global policies in particular from their point of view of solidarity and the fight against inequalities.

5.2 – Beyond LDCs: common world, differentiated responsibilities and specific mapping

Beyond this priority target group, the SDGs adopted unanimously by the world's nations have clearly put forward the concept of "common world," which has replaced the division of the world, while of course being accompanied by a principle of common responsibility differentiated in terms of global stakes.

This principle of globalization of issues according to differentiated responsibilities may lead the most reformists to propose a common management of global public goods fuelled by a form of progressive, but universal global taxation (Sumner *et al.* 2020; Glennie 2020).

On a more pragmatic level, it is possible to sketch what could be more coherent cartographies with the current global policies.

International trade policy already identifies LDCs as a specific group with preferential market access and special treatment. On the other hand, the developed/developing subdivision used by the WTO no longer corresponds to any objective trade reality. A geographical, continental and sub-continental breakdown, in conjunction with

the regional trading spaces and the institutions themselves, could be seen as a more coherent basis for discussion of global trade policies, able to protect the benefits conferred on LDCs, which could be added by the most vulnerable countries.

The global climate policy is based on a fixed geographical breakdown from the 1992 international reports. The climate challenge is particularly complex because it highlights very specific issues of interdependence and justice, based on a notion of responsibility that is historically cumulative.^[39]

Despite this, it is hard to believe that a breakdown that gives the same treatment, in particular as far as climate finance is concerned, to China, Burundi, Saudi Arabia or Vanuatu, is the most appropriate to allow for prospective reflection. The future of climate policies can only be based on a gradual convergence of country categories towards the true geography of issues, emissions, responsibilities and vulnerabilities, which will also certainly give a specific place to the category of LDCs.

This leads to the policy of financing development which could be divided, following Melonio *et al.* (2022), into, on the one hand, the policy of international solidarity and, on the other hand, policies for financing global public goods, including climate, and more generally the management and financing of common interests.

The policy of international solidarity must thus be treated as a separable issue, which also calls for a certain renewal of its geographical framework. It could be more focused on LDCs and the most vulnerable countries, and expressed from a large group of donor countries.

This does not correspond to the current situation: although the international community has adopted a specific solidarity target for LDCs

(between 0.15% and 0.20% of donor countries' GNI), this objective may on the one hand seem weak compared to the 0.7% target set for the global effort of solidarity for development, and on the other hand it is much less discussed and defended in international debate. Everything seems to be going as if the non-LDP "developing countries", some of which we have seen show many characteristics of developed countries in certain dimensions, should be the main targets of the international solidarity effort.

Similarly, the policy of international solidarity should reflect the important and diversified mobilized, towards LDCs and other vulnerable countries of a group of donor countries larger than that of OECD's DAC, a group of country too close to the category of "developed countries" still used in the 1980s.

Overall, it would not be a possible dichotomy but rather a single financial and reference framework, aligned with the SDG agenda, that would include a specific effort and provide financial guarantees to a group of priority countries, so as to leave no one behind. Generous funding, proportional to the challenges posed by the management of global commons everywhere in the world, would prevent threshold effects.

[39] It is also one of the few areas where the original dichotomy of development was not undisputed, even 50 or 60 years ago, since commodity-rich countries already emitted more *per capita* than many developed countries. Thus, according to WDI, the first 6 countries emitting greenhouse gases *per capita* in 1970 were all developing countries according to the historical-political nomenclature M49.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the Second World War, with the exception of the closed communist space around the USSR, the clear picture emerged, that of a world divided into two groups of countries distinct from virtually all vantage points: rich versus poor, industrialized versus agricultural, largely populated countries versus countries with a growing population, dominant versus dominated, developed versus developing. This striking dichotomy, which spread to the whole world as the Soviet Empire declined, has structured the entire process of globalization from the middle of the 20th century to the present day and has served as the dominant spatial syntax for international institutions and global policies that were thus written in the language of development.

Such a world divided in two no longer exists today from the point of view of the level of development of populations. Inequality remains as deep as before, but the world has become economically and socially much more compact: more than 40% of countries that UNDP classifies as having a "very high human development" are neither European nor North American. At the same time, the categories of "developed country" and "developing country" as defined in the middle of the last century seem to still possess significant currency in terms of political identity and mobilization on the international arena.

This divergence between the political structure and the material structure of the world obfuscates the language of globalization. A great confusion stems from the multiplicity of international standards –which, albeit different, all tend to use similar or related categories– as well as from international debate that remains engulfed in the ambiguity of these same categories.

But above all, the coexistence of a "two-humped" political world and a "one-humped" economic world has put into tension the spatial structure of public policies: the first recipient of aid, Ukraine, is often considered a developed country while the largest creditor of low-income countries, China, is officially still a developing country, while, the top 10 *per capita* greenhouse gas emitters in 2023 are all outside Annex I of climate agreements.

Global issues call for long-term commitments, such as the New Climate Quantitative Goal (NCQG) made in Baku for 2035 and beyond. In order for them to truly come into being, and thereby gain the consent of the peoples, it is necessary to begin to move away from the grip of the development dichotomy if we want global policies to avoid being thrown into turmoil by outdated cartographies.

This can be done by bringing the political world closer to the material world through, for example, the reform of international institutions and the evolution of the rules of the game and the norms that govern these policies. But this must also be done by adopting a new spatial syntax for global policies.

The group of LDCs, to which one could add those countries that are most vulnerable to climate and conflict, now concentrates all the multidimensional inequalities. It is intended to occupy a specific place in all global policies, in keeping with the principle of solidarity and with the fight against inequalities. Beyond that, the principles adopted should match those of the “common world” arising from the SDGs, with common but differentiated levels of responsibility derived from climate agreements and from a new cartography adapted to the nature of the policy concerned.

With regard to financing for development (see Melonio *et al.* 2022; 2024), these principles would call first of all for the expansion of the community of officially registered source countries for financial transfers, in accordance with an already fully effective reality –but in a common frame. In addition, development financing should be based on two distinct pillars and instruments: first, a policy based on solidarity and aimed at reducing international inequalities targeting LDCs and the most vulnerable countries, and, on the other hand, a common financing policy for global issues based on financial efficiency and a contribution in proportion to each party’s responsibilities and capacities.

Appendice

Development nomenclatures in international institutions

The classifications of development in international organizations can be distinguished according to the statistical or political nature given to the concept of development, with many hybrid cases.

A first category, of a statistical nature, is based on a classification by groups of countries established on the basis of one or more economic, social and/or environmental indicators. This is the case of the World Bank and UNDP classifications, each based on the development of an international comparison indicator: GNI *per capita* and the Human Development Index (HDI).^[40] Statistical classifications are based on methodological choices involving a selection of indicators, an aggregation rule and the setting of thresholds for, but they are transparent to users. This gives the nomenclatures thus defined a certain objectivity, although certain choices may be contested.

A second category is of a legal and/or political nature. It covers classifications that are part of treaties or agreements. They are constituted in a more or less collectively negotiated manner. This is the case of classifications associated with international treaties such as those of the UNFCCC or the WTO, which is a particularly illustrative example of the role played by the criterion of “identity” in some of these classifications.

Finally, a third category consists of reasoned classifications, defined in an “expert” way by international organizations based on the combination of quantitative criteria, such as economic and social indicators, and qualitative criteria of historical, political or structural origin (for example the existence of oil resources). This is the case of the M49 standard used by the United Nations, but also, more unexpectedly, that used by the IMF.

The institutions in question admit to making multi-criteria choices and are willing to tolerate some degree of arbitrariness, as well as a certain absence of methodological transparency.

Thus, the IMF has never justified its country taxonomies and states in this regard on its website:

“This classification is not based on strict criteria, economic or otherwise, and it has evolved over time. The objective is to facilitate analysis by providing a reasonably meaningful method of organizing data”.

International Monetary Fund. “World Economic Outlook Database. Groups and Aggregates”^[41]

The same applies to the United Nations and its M49 standard. The United Nations recognizes that: “there is no established convention for the designation of ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries or areas in the United Nations system” (UNSD—Methodology, op. cit.).

To these three types of classification (technocratic, legal/political and hybrid/expert), one must add “club-type” groupings, *i.e.* those of a purely political nature such as the OECD, the Group of 77, the G20, the BRICS+. These “clubs”, whose composition is defined by affinity between peers and co-optation, do not constitute classifications, let alone exhaustive partitions of the different nations of the world, but they nonetheless play an important role in the definition and evolution of existing classifications by conferring, where appropriate, a certain coherence of political origin.

[40] Calculated using the Atlas method, which reduces exchange-rate differences in purchasing power.

[41] See: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2023/April/groups-and-aggregates>.

The comparison of these political groups with development classifications makes it possible to classify them on an axis ranging from the most technocratic (*i.e.* purely statistical classifications), to the most political, (*i.e.* legal classifications obtained through negotiation), which overlaps with club-type groupings. Unsurprisingly, the dual origin of the developing world discussed above is present here too.

In the middle, expert classifications can also be arranged along this same axis. Thus, the classification used by the IMF, although not a pure statistical approach, appears to be guided above all by a technocratic logic around economic variables. In contrast, the UN's M49 standard which defines a category of developing countries very close to the Group of 77, seems to stem from a dominant criterion of political identity.

The table below provides a summary of how the most widely used development classifications can themselves be categorized.

Table 1 - International classifications of development

| AXIS | INSTITUTIONS | NB CAT. | CATEGORIES | CRITERIA |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------|---|---|
| Technocratic | STATISTICAL CLASSIFICATIONS | | | |
| | World Bank | 4 | Low income Lower middle income, upper middle income High income | Level of GNI <i>per capita</i> measured with the Atlas method |
| | UNDP | 4 | Very high, high, medium, low human development | HDI level calculated from economic and social indicators |
| | EXPERT CLASSIFICATIONS | | | |
| | IMF | 3 | Advanced economies Emerging markets Low-income developing countries | IMF-specific methodology by economic characteristics |
| | Political | UN DESA | 3 | Developed economies Economies in transition Developing economies |
| UN (UNSD M49) | | 2 | Developed countries Developing countries | Own methodology with historical, political and economic criteria |
| LEGAL CLASSIFICATIONS | | | | |
| UNFCCC | | 3 | Three categories, Annex I, Annex II (included in Annex I) and non-Annex I treated as developing countries | Arrangements for agreements based on the situation at the first agreement in 1992 at the first convention |
| WTO | | 3 | Developed countries Developing countries (excluding LDCs) LDCs | Modalities of the agreements based on self-identification of developing countries and UN category LDCs |

However, the landscape described above coexists with many hybrid cases. While the UN has a main classification of developing countries (M49) based on their political identities, the UN also lists LDCs using a technocratic approach based on development indicators.^[42] This list of LDCs is used by many institutions such as the WTO, which was described above as an example of a political classification approach. There is therefore a more important entanglement of the different classification logics than shown in the table above, which aims to give an initial clarification as a understand the diversity of existing taxonomies.

[42] The LDC category is defined by three sets of criteria: income, human capital and economic and environmental vulnerability. (See: Nations unies. n.d. « Les pays les moins avancés ». Conférence. <https://www.un.org/fr/conferences/least-developed-countries>).

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