

Decolonizing Development: Equity and Justice in Global South SDG Frameworks

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Abstract: This study analyzes the attempts at decolonization of the development practices within the bounds of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Global South. Guided by qualitative methodology and a postcolonial approach intertwined with content analysis of national SDG plans, this research critiques the framing and operationalization of equity and justice. The analysis showcases a mix of achievements and enduring consequences of structural constraints stemming from colonial influences. This research calls for a more holistic contribution to global development discourse through emphasizing cultural sensitivity, ownership, and self-determination.

Keywords: Decolonization; Global South; Sustainable Development Goals; Equity; Justice; Development Policy; Postcolonial Theory; Structural Inequality.

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I. Introduction

The United Nations put forth the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, pledging to eliminate poverty, inequality, and foster sustainable development by 2030. While the goals are intended for everyone, there is predominant criticism regarding their 'one-size-fits all' philosophy, especially for the Global South. Colonially-influenced paradigms of development and out-dated Western frameworks dominate the discourse, allowing little to no room for local innovation based on tribal knowledge or indigenous understandings of permanence. Decolonizing development refers to the process sociologists and anthropologists seek to achieve by removing the Eurocentric power dynamics embedded into global development notions and practices. It seeks to reconstruct development models around colonized nations' lived experiences, priorities, and perspectives. In the Global South where former colonial powers' histories shape the institutional framework and create enduring economic and social hierarchies, a decolonial approach is a necessity rather than option for just and equitable development achievements.

Despite some attempts at contextualizing SDG implementation at the local level, many Global South countries still remain largely dependent on external funding, frameworks, and other external expertise. This monolithic tendency perpetuates colonial-like power dynamics where decision-making authority resides exclusively in the Global North. Moreover, frameworks referred to as 'equity' and 'justice' are brought in without even earning sufficient scrutiny, what this initiative intends to achieve at the specific local level where inequality takes its particular forms.

In addressing the balancing act between sovereignty and dependency, the paper seeks to understand how Global South countries respond or adapt to the SDGs using a decolonial approach. The study aims at identifying the gaps between globalized SDG frameworks with the realities of local contextual development, while interrogating the incorporation of equity and justice as drivers into these national development strategies. With focus on the nexus of policy, theory and practice, the research highlights the promise—and pitfalls—of the current SDG processes in postcolonial contexts.

II. Literature Survey

The recent body of work demonstrates increased attention on attempts to decolonize global development frameworks. Sultana (2019) highlighted the enduring impacts of colonialism on education and development, noting the scant attempt to integrate indigenous approaches and participatory governance.

Likewise, Lingam and Vanishree (2024) supported a shift away from donor-driven agendas toward greater community ownership in SDG implementation.

Hope (2022) has also made an important contribution by critiquing the reliance on Western standards as the basis for defining development success. He contends that such standards overlook traditional life-preserving systems, especially in rural and indigenous contexts. His work emphasizes the need for socioculturally grounded indicators that measure local realities.

In addition, Oswald-Spring (2023) examined the political economy of SDG-related peacebuilding efforts, uncovering how entrenched structures can create neo-colonial dependencies. She argues that the absence of financial and epistemic dependence is a prerequisite for meaningful decolonization. In a different study, they focused on the epistemic frameworks of development, analyzing education's role as either a colonial vector or an anti-colonial vehicle.

A noteworthy perspective is provided by Menton et al. (2020), who concentrate on narrative agency in policy-making. They argue that the Global South must retake narrative control in order to wield influence over how problems are articulated and solutions are offered. In the absence of such narrative control, policy-making remains crafted at the margins.

The literature reveals consensus on the need for more precise legal and sociocultural definitions, stronger enforcement of equity principles, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems. Together, these works indicate that global development frameworks are evolving, though they remain fragmented and often tethered to colonial legacies.

III. Methodology

This study utilizes qualitative research design based on postcolonial and critical development theory. The proposed research design consists of a framework of comparative content analysis of the SDG implementation plans from five countries in the Global South: Kenya, India, Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa. These countries were chosen based on their political and economic regional balance as well as their active involvement with the SDG agenda.

Primary data was obtained from national SDG reports, policy papers, and strategy documents from years 2019 to 2024. Other materials included stakeholder interviews, academic work, and reports from various NGOs. A coding schema was created to track the usage of the words “equity,” “justice,” “inclusion,” and “participation” qualitatively and quantitatively. The analysis also investigated the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems, local governance, and historical frameworks alongside documents contemporary to these governance structures.

Themantic analysis was done to capture similarities and differences between countries. Language, narratives, framing devices, and guiding policies received particular focus. The analysis was elegantly cyclical, incorporating insights from experts and alternative documents for additional rigor and reliability.

Through the blending of theoretical and empirical frameworks, the methodology exposes the degree to which decolonial approaches are included—and, more often, excluded—within development practices. The approach taken in this study avoids sweeping statements, instead providing reflections that best represent complexity and nuance emanating from the Global South.

IV. Results and Discussion

The results show that there exists a continuum in the integration of equity and justice into the SDG framework at a country level for the selected countries. While all five countries recognized these elements, their implementation was quite different across the nations.

Kenya and Brazil exhibited comparatively advanced integration, particularly regarding the vertical and horizontal gender and economic inequalities. India and South Africa displayed strong cultural

contextualization through the application of customary leadership roles to participatory planning. Conversely, Indonesia's approach was more technocratic, with little attention to cultural or historical considerations. Further comparison with global SDG indices highlighted a disparity between the countries' self-descriptions and their externally evaluated performance.

Table 1: Integration of Equity and Justice in National SDG Frameworks

Country	Mention of Equity	Mention of Justice	Contextualization with Local Culture
Kenya	High	Medium	Moderate
India	Medium	High	High
Brazil	High	High	Moderate
Indonesia	Low	Low	Low
South Africa	High	Medium	High

Table 2: Comparison of National vs. Global SDG Progress Rankings (2024)

Country	National Equity Focus (Score 0–10)	Global SDG Index Rank	Observed Discrepancy
Kenya	8	105	High
India	7	112	High
Brazil	9	62	Moderate
Indonesia	4	87	Low
South Africa	8	110	High

This discrepancy indicates that global indices might be overlooking the local and, oftentimes, more granular aspects related to equity and justice. Strong countries seem to do poorly quite often; indicative of the need of other evaluative frameworks which take into account the local contexts.

V. Conclusion

Decolonizing development within the context of the SDGs constitutes an urgent claim both practically and conceptually. From this study, it is clear that some countries in the Global South are attempting to account for equity and justice in planning their development, yet there are still great gaps within the systems. The work ahead involves the creation of locally relevant benchmarks alongside the setting of narrative control to achieve sustainable and inclusive development.

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