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Circular cooperation

Evolving international partnerships for the 21st century



GLOBAL COOPERATION INSTITUTE

Jonathan Glennie

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Our work is guided by three core values: the humility to learn, the courage to challenge, and the hope to inspire others.

About the author

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He is author of The Future of Aid: Global Public Investment (Routledge, 2021), Aid, growth & poverty, with Andy Sumner (Palgrave, 2016) and The trouble with aid: Why less could mean more for Africa (Zed, 2008).

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Jonathan Glennie
Founder & Director, Global Cooperation Institute

June 2025

Abstract

This report presents Circular Cooperation as a new approach to international partnership based on mutuality, shared responsibility, and joint benefit. It challenges the traditional donor-recipient model by proposing a framework in which all countries – regardless of income or status – participate equally in setting priorities, contributing resources, and sharing outcomes. Grounded in the evolving landscape of South-South and triangular cooperation, Circular Cooperation expands the logic of collaboration to reflect a multipolar, interdependent world. The report argues that this model is not only more inclusive and legitimate, but also more effective in addressing today's complex challenges. It highlights key domains where Circular Cooperation could drive progress, including climate action, social protection, urban development, and public health. The report argues that only by adopting more inclusive and circular forms of cooperation can the global community respond effectively to shared challenges – and build a more just and sustainable future.

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Endorsements

"Circular Cooperation proposes a more inclusive and equitable form of collaboration, recognizing that all countries – regardless of their level of development – can and should participate as co-responsible actors in setting priorities, implementing initiatives, and sharing benefits... For Colombia, promoting this kind of innovation represents an opportunity to strengthen its regional leadership and contribute actively to transforming international cooperation from the Global South."
Eleonora Betancur, Director, Colombia's Presidential Cooperation Agency, Speech to the UN High Level Committee on South-South Cooperation, May 2025

"Given the current state of the 2030 Agenda and the challenges of meeting the SDGs, we propose incorporating a reflection on the evolution of cooperation modalities toward a model better suited to today's context and the sustainable development approach that is becoming more widespread in the 21st century – namely, Circular Cooperation."
Chile's International Cooperation Strategy 2023–2026

"Circular Cooperation reflects the reality that in today's world, no country has a monopoly on solutions. As the climate crisis and global inequality intensify, we need models of cooperation that are grounded in mutual benefit, shared intelligence, and co-dependence."
David McNair, Executive Director for Global Policy, ONE

"Circular Cooperation reflects what many in Latin America have been working toward for years – a more balanced, respectful, and knowledge-driven approach to international collaboration. It builds on existing practices and offers a way to deepen trust, share responsibilities, and shape development on our own terms."
Andrea Vignolo, Director for International Cooperation, Education & Culture Ministry of Uruguay and regional expert in international cooperation

"Circular Cooperation is a timely and important concept. It challenges the old hierarchies in development by promoting transparency, shared knowledge, and mutual accountability. If taken seriously, it can help us build partnerships that are more equal and more effective."
Dr. Jessica Espey, Associate Professor, School of Geographical Sciences at the University of Southampton

Foreword

A group of foreigners step off a bus in a quiet town. They're dressed differently, speak another language, and carry notebooks and ipads. They are welcomed into a local school, where community representatives – councillors, social workers, or perhaps just the loudest voices – describe the problems they face: a struggling education system, rising mental health crises, teenage pregnancy, food banks running on empty. The visitors listen carefully, ask thoughtful questions, and eventually the group leader offers solidarity, explains that they've dealt with similar challenges and have experiences to share. Perhaps they can help.

It's a familiar scene in many so-called developing countries as development "experts" arrive to help plan interventions with local communities. But what if this wasn't in the developing world at all? What if the community being visited is in Manchester or Frankfurt or a poor rural area of Italy, and the visitors are *from* the Global South, bringing their expertise, their culture, their solutions.

For decades, versions of this encounter have played out across towns and villages in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Foreign "experts" arrive, often with good intentions, to understand, advise, and support. And to their credit, international development practitioners today are far more reflective than in the past. They rarely speak of "charity" anymore, preferring the language of partnership. They listen more, impose less.

And yet, for all the shifts in tone and terminology, one stubborn paradigm remains: that development is still something we do for them. That the Global North holds the tools, resources, and answers, while the Global South remains the subject of intervention.

But maybe it is time to imagine development differently – not as a one-way street, but as a circular path of mutual learning, shared contribution, and common benefit. This is the spirit of Circular Cooperation: a model where knowledge, solidarity, and support move in all directions, not only from "developed" to "developing" contexts. A model in which a project piloted in rural Colombia or coastal Bangladesh might shape policy in rural England. A model in which development is not something done *to* others – but *with* others, for all of us.

The Global South has insights the world needs. They have innovated in community health, conflict resolution, education, care systems, and social protection. They have survived – and adapted – in ways that the world should be learning from.

So, what if we flipped the model? What if international development in 2030 were no longer defined by geography or GDP, but by mutual vulnerability and mutual responsibility? What if the next global initiative isn't about "helping" others, but about working together – across borders, cultures, and income levels – to navigate the shared challenges of the 21st century?

To be clear, this is not a denial of inequality or an indulgence of false equivalence. Extreme poverty still affects billions and demands urgent action; countries with greater resources must still contribute far more finance into the system, as well as ideas and technology. But those contributions must now be accompanied by humility, curiosity, and a willingness to learn, as we finally dismantle the last great myth of development: that only some people have something to give, and others only something to receive.

The world is changing and so is our understanding of cooperation. It is time for the final stage in the grand, gradual evolution of modern global cooperation – for knowledge and experience to flow in all directions. For the dignity and contributions of all people be recognised. For Circular Cooperation.

Jonathan Glennie
Bogota, June 2025

To Ian Knowles,
and everyone else who asks difficult questions
and inspires us to think differently

A vision for global cooperation in 2030

It is 2030. The world operates on the principle that all countries both contribute to and benefit from international cooperation. The outdated donor–recipient binary has been replaced by a global ecosystem of shared responsibility, mutual learning, and distributed leadership. National cooperation agencies now exist in nearly every country – embedded within governments, civil society, multilateral organisations and academic institutions – to provide and receive support across a wide range of social, environmental and economic challenges.

These agencies coordinate technical expertise, policy advice, and institutional support in areas such as climate resilience, digital governance, health systems, education reform, and public finance. The terms "provider" and "beneficiary" are no longer in common use; cooperation is structured as a two-way, and often multi-directional, exchange of capabilities and knowledge.

Professional communities focused on cooperation have expanded significantly in the Global South. Cooperation professionals from cities like Dakar, Jakarta, and Bogotá routinely lead technical missions abroad, including to Europe and North America. Capacity is now measured by practice, not income level.

Thousands of cooperation initiatives are active, linking local governments, Indigenous networks, youth movements, universities, and public agencies in diverse constellations. These initiatives tackle shared problems – extreme heat, ageing populations, urban informality, ecosystem degradation – not through top-down aid, but through co-creation, reciprocal learning, and long-term relationships.

United Nations offices operate as policy and cooperation hubs in all regions, facilitating exchange rather than delivering pre-designed solutions. They work with local actors to convene knowledge, align global and national agendas, and link projects across geographies.

This new architecture has delivered measurable results. Health outcomes have improved through exchange on community care models. Renewable energy access has expanded rapidly thanks to cooperative technology transfers and public–public innovation. Urban resilience has strengthened through peer learning between cities confronting climate shocks. And most importantly, public trust in cooperation has grown – replacing cynicism with confidence that global problems can be tackled together, on equal footing.

This "Circular Cooperation" has become the dominant model for global partnership. It is reflected in financing instruments, embedded in institutional mandates, and integrated into training and evaluation standards. It shapes how cooperation is resourced, governed, and

understood: not just as crisis response or moral obligation, but as an everyday infrastructure of interdependence.

Let's look at one example in particular to give us an idea of how this new system now operates in practice: the problem of extreme heat.

The fight against extreme heat

Since 2025, cities from Karachi to Kansas City have been experiencing record-breaking temperatures, but traditional development cooperation frameworks were poorly suited to addressing the complex mix of urban planning, health systems, social protection, and community infrastructure required to respond effectively. Despite being on the frontlines of rising temperatures, countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America were rarely seen as sources of relevant expertise. Their community-based cooling strategies, indigenous architectural designs, and climate-health innovations remained peripheral to the dominant, donor-driven response frameworks, which tend to prioritise fixes devised in wealthier contexts. As a result, global heat responses lacked relevance, legitimacy, and the adaptive power that comes from recognising the Global South not as a beneficiary but as a leader in climate resilience.

Circular Cooperation has changed the equation. Today, in 2030, governments in India and Brazil, which have pioneered community-based heat action plans, work directly with cities in Southern Europe, offering not only technical expertise but frameworks for governance, early warning systems, and low-cost cooling solutions. UN country teams facilitate regional exchanges between public hospitals in West Africa and the American Southwest to redesign heatwave protocols based on mutual insights. Youth-led organisations from Thailand are collaborating with counterparts in Spain to implement urban greening projects that reduced temperatures in dense neighbourhoods.

Cities such as Ahmedabad, Recife, and Ouagadougou, which have spent years developing practical, low-cost approaches to heat resilience, are now leading international knowledge exchanges. Through cooperation agencies embedded in local and national governments, they share lessons on shade infrastructure, school closures, hydration networks, and early warning systems with partners across the globe from Marseilles to Memphis.

These exchanges are coordinated through national cooperation agencies and supported by multilateral funds designed for multidirectional learning, not top-down aid. Multilateral development banks and bilateral actors now channel resources via pooled platforms governed by participating countries, inspired by the logic of Global Public Investment. Regional development banks have launched new circular facilities to scale proven solutions, prioritising projects where leadership and innovation came from the communities most affected.

The impacts, as we start the 2030s, are measurable:

- Heat-related deaths are falling in cities with circular partnerships.
- Community-based early warning systems cover 100s of millions of people
- New urban infrastructure – Including reflective surfaces, shade corridors, and cooling centre – has been co-designed through global South-North-South partnerships.

Just as importantly, public trust in international cooperation has risen, as communities have begun to see real results from partnerships based on equality and respect.

Executive summary

Introduction

The global cooperation system is at a crossroads. Persistent crises – climate change, pandemics, rising inequality, and geopolitical fragmentation – have exposed the limitations of traditional models of international development. The donor-recipient paradigm, which has structured global partnerships for decades, is increasingly seen as out of step with today's realities. In this context, *Circular Cooperation* emerges as a transformative alternative, proposing a model of global partnership rooted in mutuality, shared responsibility, and joint benefit. This report, authored by Jonathan Glennie, Founder & Director of the Global Cooperation Institute, sets out the vision, rationale, and practical roadmap for Circular Cooperation as a framework fit for the 21st century.

The need for a new model

The international cooperation system is under unprecedented strain. Trust in multilateral institutions is fragile, especially among younger populations and in middle-income countries, as highlighted by the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer. Traditional aid models are losing legitimacy, and the scale of interlocking global crises is exposing the inadequacy of vertical, top-down responses. The global landscape is now defined by multiple centres of power and influence – what Amitav Acharya calls a "multiplex world" – where legitimacy can no longer be monopolised by a narrow group of historically dominant actors.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) marked a conceptual shift toward universality and shared responsibility, but institutional structures have lagged behind. Most global institutions continue to allocate resources and define roles based on outdated income categories, reinforcing hierarchies and limiting the potential for truly inclusive and effective cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic, climate crises, and rising debt distress have further demonstrated the interdependence of nations and the inadequacy of transactional, short-term approaches.

From Vertical to Circular Cooperation

Historically, international cooperation has been dominated by vertical models – unidirectional flows of resources and expertise from high-income to low- and middle-income countries. While this has financed important gains, it has also entrenched structural asymmetries, undermined local agency, and limited the circulation of knowledge and innovation. Horizontal and triangular cooperation have broadened the geography of collaboration, but they have often failed to fully dismantle the donor-recipient logic.

Circular Cooperation represents a paradigm shift. It is defined by three core principles:

- **All contribute:** Every country and actor brings something of value – financial resources, technical expertise, lived experience, or legitimacy.

- **All benefit:** Cooperation is structured to deliver tangible returns to all participants, not just recipients.
- **All decide:** Decision-making is shared from the outset, with joint agenda-setting, co-implementation, and co-authored evaluation frameworks.

These principles challenge the assumption that only some countries have something to give and others only something to receive. They recognise that knowledge, leadership, and innovation are distributed across the globe and that effective cooperation requires the full participation of all stakeholders.

Key areas of application

Circular Cooperation is particularly relevant in domains where expertise and experience are widely distributed and where challenges are shared across contexts. The report highlights several areas where Circular Cooperation can drive progress including climate adaptation, health and care systems, social protection, education and innovation, conflict prevention and peacebuilding

Circular Cooperation is not limited to international relations. Its principles can be applied to address power imbalances within countries – between urban and rural areas, or between dominant and marginalised communities. Indigenous knowledge systems, for example, are increasingly recognised for their relevance to climate adaptation and biodiversity conservation, yet they remain underutilised in both domestic and international policy.

The report also emphasises the need for a cross-sectoral approach, involving civil society, academia, the private sector, and grassroots communities in the design and governance of cooperation initiatives. Inclusive governance structures, participatory budgeting, and multi-stakeholder platforms are essential for ensuring that all voices are heard and that cooperation delivers for everyone.

Implementing Circular Cooperation

Translating the vision of Circular Cooperation into practice requires intentional design and institutional reform. The report offers a seven-point roadmap for making projects circular:

1. **Co-create:** Involve all partners in shaping the agenda from the outset.
2. **Value diverse contributions:** Recognise and reward non-financial inputs.
3. **Share implementation:** Build project teams that reflect the full diversity of participating countries.
4. **Ensure inclusive governance:** Establish joint steering committees and rotating convenorships.
5. **Enable equitable mobility:** Facilitate exchanges and residencies in all directions.
6. **Redefine success:** Evaluate process indicators such as shared ownership and reciprocity.
7. **Plan for longevity:** Embed cooperation in durable institutions and long-term partnerships.

Financial participation should influence the scale of contribution, but not determine control or voice. Pooled funds, co-financing, and participatory budgeting can help balance influence and ensure that all partners have a stake in decision-making.

The role of INGOs and professional ecosystems

International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) must also evolve to support Circular Cooperation. This means co-designing programmes with local partners, rebalancing power in partnerships, and diversifying governance structures to include meaningful representation from the Global South. Funding should flow directly to local organisations, and INGOs should act as enablers rather than intermediaries.

Building a professional ecosystem in the Global South is essential for realising the full potential of Circular Cooperation. This requires investment in local and regional consulting firms, academic institutions, and professional networks, as well as reforms to procurement systems to ensure that Southern actors can compete for and lead international contracts.

Conclusion

Circular Cooperation offers a practical and principled alternative to outdated models of international development. It is not just a philosophy, but a design logic that can be applied to real-world projects and programmes. By embedding mutual contribution, shared benefit, and joint decision-making at the heart of global partnerships, Circular Cooperation can restore legitimacy, effectiveness, and relevance to the international cooperation system. As the world faces complex, interconnected challenges, the time has come to reimagine cooperation as a circular path of mutual learning, shared contribution, and common benefit.

Introduction

The international cooperation system is undergoing a profound transformation. Long-standing calls for reform – rooted in frustration with unequal power dynamics and inefficiencies in the aid system – are gaining renewed traction as geopolitical assumptions fracture. The return of a Trump presidency has disrupted multilateral norms, Western governments are scaling back development spending, and emerging powers like China and India are reassessing their roles – not merely as recipients or alternative donors, but as standard-setters.

The world is no longer shaped by singular leadership or fixed hierarchies. The unipolar moment of the post-Cold War era has given way to a multiplex world, as Amitav Acharya has described it – one where overlapping centres of influence (from the United States and China to the EU and assertive regional blocs in the Global South) promote competing norms and governance models (Acharya, 2017). Power is more diffuse, and legitimacy increasingly contested.

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals a decade ago signalled a rhetorical shift away from traditional development paradigms toward the universality of global challenges and the principle of shared responsibility. Yet institutional structures failed to keep pace. The core frameworks of international cooperation – its funding models, decision-making processes, and accountability mechanisms – remained largely anchored in a donor-recipient logic ill-suited to today's realities.

But today it is clearer than ever that legitimacy can no longer be monopolised by a narrow group of historically dominant actors. It must be earned – through meaningful participation, transparency, and the capacity to respond to real-world demands. Across Latin America, Africa, and Asia, countries are deepening intra-regional cooperation not to retreat from global governance but to strengthen their collective voice within it. For example, the AfCFTA, launched in 2021, now comprises 54 signatories and is projected to increase intra-African trade by over 50% through the elimination of tariffs and non-tariff barriers (UNECA, 2023).

These political shifts are unfolding against the backdrop of escalating structural pressures. Climate change, debt distress, food insecurity, and pandemic risk are no longer distant threats – they are present crises that expose the inadequacy of transactional, short-term approaches. As the UNDP's 2023/24 Human Development Report emphasised, these are not "development issues" confined to the Global South but systemic global risks that demand co-owned, long-term responses. The report identifies a "global risk society" where insecurity in one region quickly reverberates across borders, undermining the siloed rationale for development assistance (UNDP, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the interdependence of nations. Health systems

collapsed, economies contracted, and vaccine hoarding prolonged the crisis for all – including the wealthiest countries. According to one analysis vaccine inequality contributed to an estimated 1.3 million preventable deaths worldwide by mid-2022 (Moore et al, 2022). Similarly, while the climate crisis has its roots in the industrialisation of the North, its effects are disproportionately borne by lower-income countries – yet the solutions are increasingly emerging from every corner of the globe, from regenerative agriculture in Africa to urban resilience strategies in Latin America. The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report highlights how Indigenous knowledge systems – particularly in the Global South – are vital to ecosystem-based adaptation efforts that are often more cost-effective and sustainable than high-tech alternatives (IPCC, 2022).

Against the backdrop of systemic global crises the traditional aid model, built on donor-recipient hierarchies, is neither credible nor effective. The prevailing logic of aid as a one-way transfer is obsolete. The global landscape demands a new model of cooperation: one that is multipolar, grounded in legitimacy, and built on reciprocal obligation, co-creation, and shared benefit.

Purpose

This paper introduces Circular Cooperation as a transformative approach to international cooperation fit for the realities of the 21st century. Circular Cooperation offers a model grounded in mutuality in which all countries – regardless of income level or geography – are both contributors and beneficiaries.

The purpose of the paper is to establish Circular Cooperation as both a normative and operational paradigm in the global cooperation ecosystem. Drawing on post-development, decolonial, and global public goods scholarship, it positions Circular Cooperation within a broader paradigm shift that includes Global Public Investment, universal social protection, and structural gap theory. The paper offers practical evidence that Circular Cooperation is not a theoretical framing but an emerging reality. Countries like Colombia and Chile have integrated the concept into their national cooperation strategies, and urban networks like C40 already operate under similar principles (C40 Cities, 2024; SEI, 2025).

Importantly, this paper situates Circular Cooperation as a response to both long-term trends and urgent disruptions. Despite growing rhetorical support for universality and mutuality in global cooperation, no systematic model has emerged to operationalise these principles. As the limitations of North-South and even South-South cooperation become more apparent, and as financing for the Sustainable Development Goals falters, Circular Cooperation provides a framework to move beyond the architecture of eligibility and towards one of participatory momentum, where cooperation is structured around shared goals (UNDP, 2024; Acharya, 2017).

Ultimately, this paper is a call to action: to researchers, policymakers, funders, and practitioners. It calls for investment in Circular Cooperation not as a replacement for existing models, but as a complement and catalyst, capable of restoring trust, legitimacy, and

effectiveness in global development. It aims to inform key global processes in 2025, including the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4) and the second World Summit for Social Development in Qatar, ensuring they are not only historic gatherings, but platforms for systemic transformation.

Scope

This paper uses "development cooperation" in an expanded, future-facing sense – one that deliberately detaches the concept from its traditional association with aid and philanthropy. Circular Cooperation is not limited to government-to-government aid flows, nor is it confined to projects funded by high-income countries. Instead, it describes a broader ecosystem of public purpose cooperation – across governments, civil society, academia, and professional communities – in which knowledge, capability, and resources circulate in multiple directions. While public finance remains a vital enabler, the emphasis shifts from who pays to how value is co-created and shared.

Circular Cooperation includes, but is not reducible to, technical assistance; it encompasses the international exchange of policy advice, institutional innovation, and peer learning across countries at all income levels. It also overlaps with, but is distinct from, trade and investment in the commercial sense: where the primary aim is public problem-solving rather than private profit. Indeed, many of the dynamics already found in global professional services – such as Indian or Kenyan firms advising European municipalities – can be seen as early expressions of Circular Cooperation. By framing these interactions not as exceptions but as a direction of travel, this paper invites a wider rethinking of what international cooperation is – and what it could become in a multipolar, interdependent world.

The terms "Global South" and "Global North" are used in this paper not as rigid geographic or economic categories, but as shorthand for broader structural positions within the international system. They reflect patterns of historical power, institutional access, and epistemic visibility rather than income level alone. Middle-income countries may often serve as early adopters or visible proof points, but the long-term aim is a fully plural system in which all countries are seen as credible sources of ideas, expertise, and policy innovation. The paper is rooted in the conviction that knowledge and leadership emerge in every context – including low-income and less internationally prominent countries – and that cooperation must be structured to elevate contributions from across this full spectrum.

Structure

The paper opens by tracing the evolution of cooperation models – from vertical to horizontal and triangular – highlighting their respective contributions and enduring limitations. It discusses how the Agenda 2030 process (a.k.a. the Sustainable Development Goals) led to a new paradigm that wasn't integrated into the cooperation ecosystem.

Section 2 then positions Circular Cooperation as a new paradigm, grounded in the universal logic of the post-2015 development agenda but more responsive to today's complex,

multipolar realities. This section examines its normative foundations, debunks common assumptions, and draws insights from the EU Funds, Latin American thought, and African institutional innovation. It explores how Circular Cooperation reshapes notions of dignity, voice, and impact, and how it complements existing modalities.

Section 3 offers practical guidance for implementing Circular Cooperation. It sets out core principles, outlines steps for implementation, and highlights key benefits. Real-world examples – from city networks to INGOs and Global South professionals – demonstrate how Circular Cooperation is already taking shape, offering a transformational alternative to traditional development models.

The paper concludes with a recap of the advantages of the Circular Cooperation approach and a call for vision and leadership as we rebuild the global cooperation system.

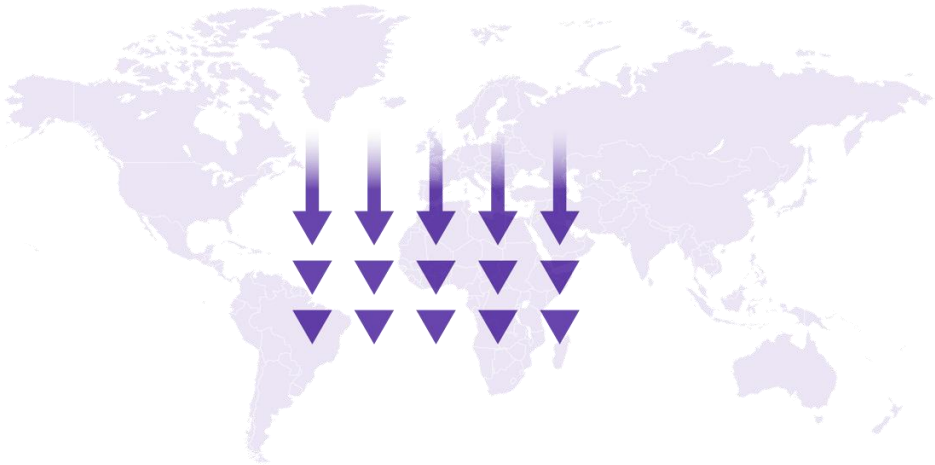
The unfinished evolution: from vertical to triangular cooperation

Despite decades of reform efforts, international cooperation remains constrained by a set of outdated assumptions, rigid classifications, and narrow modalities. These limitations are not simply technical – they are structural, ideological, and deeply embedded in how cooperation is imagined, financed, and delivered.

At the political level, international cooperation is also facing a crisis of legitimacy. In the Global North support for international engagement is eroding. This is partly due to the lack of narratives and mechanisms that explain how cooperation serves everyone's interests, including those in the North. Without a visible logic of reciprocity, trust in the system fades. In the Global South, countries and communities are treated too often not as partners but as problems to be solved. A condescending narrative persists that undermines the political legitimacy of cooperation and fails to recognise the intellectual and moral leadership emerging from Southern institutions and movements.

Taken together, these problems demand more than incremental reform. They require a transformation in how cooperation is conceptualised, institutionalised, and practised. Over the past two decades, international cooperation has begun to shift away from the traditional vertical model of donor–recipient relationships toward more horizontal and networked forms of engagement. This evolution, while significant in both rhetoric and experimentation, remains incomplete. In this section we look at this unfinished evolution as the basis of how we might continue it.

Vertical cooperation



Vertical cooperation – often synonymous with traditional aid – has been the dominant model of international cooperation since the post-war period. It is structured around a unidirectional flow of financial and technical resources from high-income to low- and middle-income countries. The conceptual underpinning is rooted in an assumption that the so-called "developed" world has the solutions, expertise, and resources, while the "developing" world is defined by need, incapacity, and lack. Despite decades of rhetorical evolution, this model remains largely hierarchical in structure, language, and governance. Between 1960 and 2020, over USD 5 trillion in official development assistance was transferred from donor countries to the Global South, yet the governance of these flows remained disproportionately Northern-led (OECD, 2021).

In practice, vertical cooperation is organised through a donor-recipient framework. Decision-making power – about what to fund, how to implement, and what success looks like – remains concentrated in donor institutions, whether bilateral agencies or multilateral financial bodies dominated by high-income countries. Even when framed as partnerships, recipients are granted little space for strategic autonomy, expected instead to align with externally defined priorities and comply with a logic of conditionality, projectisation, and time-bound intervention. According to a 2023 ODI study, over 70% of major bilateral aid programmes continue to be shaped primarily by donor policy objectives rather than the needs of recipient countries (ODI, 2023). The OECD reports that more than 80% of official development assistance (ODA) is still channelled through Northern institutions and remains highly earmarked, limiting flexibility and co-ownership (OECD, 2024).

Crucially, vertical cooperation is frequently justified by outdated thresholds – such as income per capita – ignoring multidimensional vulnerabilities and overlooking the continued relevance of cooperation beyond arbitrary graduation lines. A recent UNDP analysis shows that over 60% of countries facing severe climate risk no longer qualify for concessional finance based on income metrics alone (UNDP, 2023).

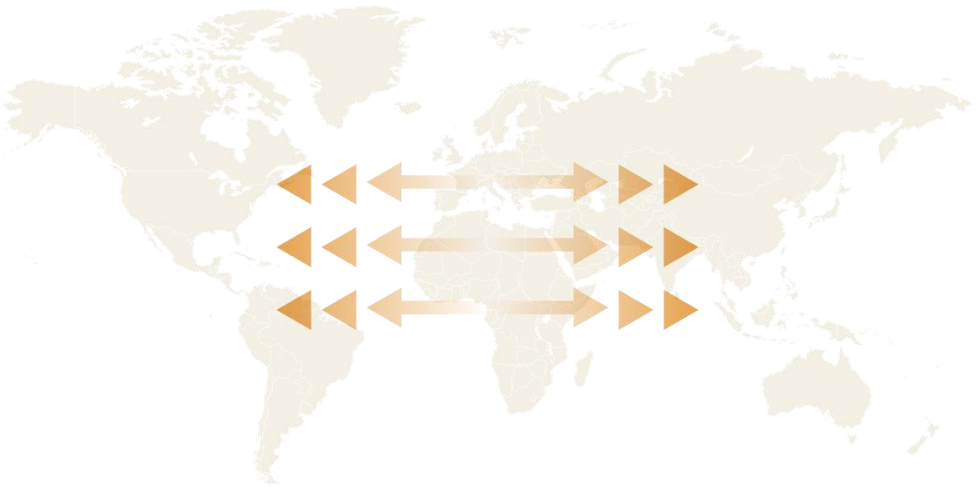
Moreover, vertical cooperation tends to undervalue the contributions that lower-income countries can offer to global learning. For example, policy innovations from the Global South are rarely mainstreamed into global platforms, and when they are, they are often not properly referenced or recognised. A review by the South Centre found that fewer than 10% of documented global health innovations attributed authorship to Southern institutions, despite their central role in delivery and adaptation (South Centre, 2022). In addition to their knowledge and practical experience, these countries often make significant human, financial, and logistical contributions to the implementation of cooperation initiatives – resources that are frequently overlooked in global narratives.

While vertical cooperation has financed important gains – especially in infrastructure, health, and humanitarian response – it is increasingly perceived as outdated and institutionally rigid. Its limitations have become more apparent in an era where legitimacy, mutuality, and global interdependence are prerequisites for effective cooperation. Public

opinion polling in Africa indicates a desire for self-reliant development and skepticism about foreign aid motives, with a majority in many countries preferring that foreign donors allow governments to make their own decisions about how to use resources (Afrobarometer, 2021).

Despite these problems, the need for vertical transfers remains. Much of the world's financial wealth remains concentrated in high-income countries – often as a result of centuries of colonial extraction, exploitative trade regimes, and global financial asymmetries (World Economic Forum, 2025). These historical injustices have created a structural imperative for redistribution. In 2021, the global North accounted for nearly 80% of total wealth despite hosting only 16% of the world's population (Credit Suisse, 2022). International public finance continues to play a vital role in addressing global inequalities, funding climate adaptation, supporting fragile states, and correcting imbalances in access to technology, infrastructure, and services (Development Initiatives, 2023). The call for reparations, climate finance, and loss-and-damage funds are all contemporary expressions of this need (FERDI, 2024).

Horizontal cooperation



Horizontal cooperation emerged as a corrective to the asymmetries of vertical models, aiming to build partnerships among countries with similar levels of development, mutual interests, or shared regional contexts. At its core, it promises a more egalitarian logic: cooperation among peers rather than between patrons and clients. This form of engagement can be seen in both South–South and North–North interactions, and is often characterised by joint knowledge exchange, technical assistance, and mutual policy learning (UNOSSC, 2018; OECD, 2021).

In the Global South, horizontal cooperation – especially under the banner of South–South cooperation – has grown significantly since the 2000s. Countries such as Brazil, Mexico, India, and Indonesia have developed dedicated agencies for development cooperation, often engaging with regional neighbours or other Southern partners through technical missions, training exchanges, and collaborative research. South–South cooperation agreements more than doubled in number between 2006 and 2016, reflecting growing momentum and political endorsement across the Global South (UNOSSC, 2018). By 2020, over 130 Southern countries had engaged in technical cooperation or exchange initiatives, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, public health, and disaster preparedness (OECD, 2021). At its best, this modality fosters solidarity-based partnerships, sensitive to local context and history, and is less burdened by conditionalities or donor branding (UNOSSC, 2018).

In the Global North, horizontal cooperation can take place through regional integration processes such as the European Union, Nordic Council, or OECD peer-review mechanisms – where countries exchange experience on matters ranging from fiscal policy to environmental regulation. These arrangements, while not usually framed as development cooperation, often embody principles of co-responsibility, shared governance, and mutual accountability, and serve as important institutional reference points for alternatives to hierarchical modalities. The European Cohesion Policy is a notable case: over 30% of the EU budget is dedicated to reducing development disparities through peer-based regional collaboration (European Commission, 2023).

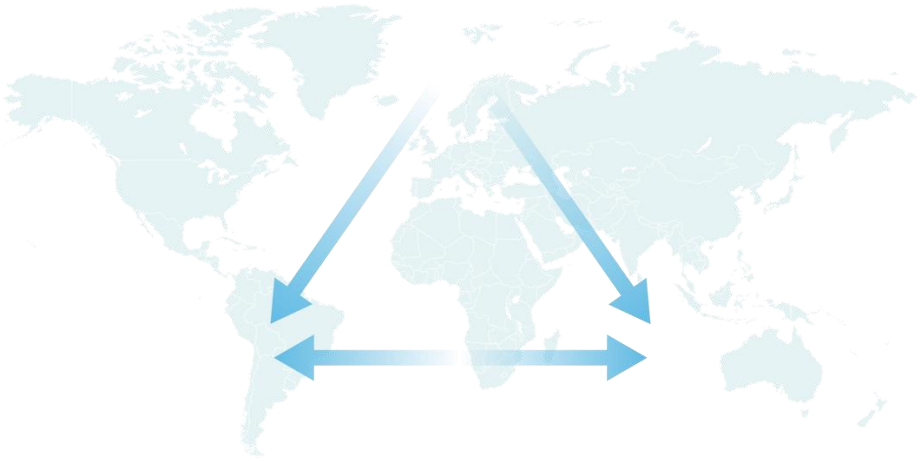
However, the label “horizontal” does not always match the reality. Some South–South and North–South relationships still reproduce power dynamics seen in North–South aid relationships. For example, infrastructure and resource deals between China and smaller partners, or technical assistance from South–South donors, can be shaped by economic asymmetries, loan conditions, or strategic interests – even under the principle of peer exchange (Bräutigam, 2011). According to SEGIB (2022), while 76% of Latin American countries’ international cooperation projects are now “horizontal,” many are co-designed and co-implemented but not always equally governed.

Moreover, horizontal cooperation is often limited in scale and reach. It tends to occur between a relatively small group of middle-income countries with sufficient diplomatic and technical capacity. According to UNCTAD, less than 10% of South–South cooperation is directed toward the Least Developed Countries, despite their high levels of need (UNCTAD, 2019).

Nonetheless, horizontal cooperation has been instrumental in expanding the geography of cooperation, diversifying sources of expertise, and legitimising the idea that development solutions can emerge from any context. It is a step toward pluralising the cooperation landscape, while needing deeper attention to governance, voice, and benefit-sharing. The 2019 BAPA+40 Outcome Document reaffirmed this potential, urging better metrics and accountability mechanisms to ensure mutuality and transparency in all forms of South–

South engagement (UNOSSC, 2019).

Triangular cooperation



Triangular cooperation emerged in the early 21st century as an attempt to blend the resources of traditional donors with the contextual knowledge and implementation experience of middle-income countries, typically directed toward a third, often lower-income, country. It was conceived as a bridge between vertical and horizontal cooperation, combining financial and technical inputs across different geographies and roles. In theory, triangular cooperation offers the best of both worlds: diversified expertise, broader ownership, and expanded legitimacy. According to the OECD, more than 60 countries have participated in triangular cooperation projects, which are valued for enhancing mutual learning and building trust across diverse actors (OECD, 2023).

In practice, triangular cooperation brings together a high-income country (or multilateral agency), a "pivotal" Southern country that serves as a technical partner, and a third Southern partner as the beneficiary. Examples include German-Brazilian agricultural support in Mozambique, Japanese-Indonesian disaster risk management work in the Pacific, and Spanish-Mexican health system support in Central America (OECD, 2018). These arrangements are frequently praised for fostering innovation, mutual learning, and more context-sensitive programming (OECD, 2023).

The model is particularly prominent in Latin America, where agencies such as GIZ, AECID, and AMEXCID have institutionalised triangular modalities as part of broader South–South and regional strategies. The Ibero-American space, supported by SEGIB, has formalised and documented triangular cooperation as a legitimate modality of its own, with all Ibero-American countries now participating in triangular projects, often in sectors such as health, education, agriculture, and disaster risk reduction (SEGIB, 2022).

This modality has great value. It has helped re-normalise the idea of multiple contributors and diverse expertise. It has encouraged some donors to cede partial control. It has created space for Southern providers to expand their development engagement while maintaining national sovereignty. Triangular cooperation is widely recognised as a complement to North–South and South–South cooperation, and its role is formally acknowledged in the 2019 BAPA+40 outcome document as vital for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (UNOSSC, 2019).

But triangular cooperation stops short of full mutuality and rarely escapes the gravitational pull of the traditional donor–recipient paradigm. The Northern country remains the financier and often the initiator too, while the intermediary (Southern) country may contribute expertise – but not to address Northern challenges. Indeed, there is seldom any effort to identify problems in the Northern country itself, let alone respond to them. In this sense, triangular cooperation is not reciprocal. The Northern partner does not position itself as a learner or beneficiary, even when the South is nominally cast as a co-provider. Funding is often still Western-led, and the Northern country may retain control over key decisions, while the pivotal (Southern) country contributes expertise but may have limited influence (GPI, 2021).

As a result, triangular cooperation can be seen as a transitional model: a step toward greater pluralism and mutual respect in global cooperation, but not a structural transformation of the system. It expands the actors involved, but not the logic of cooperation itself. Unless Northern partners begin to accept roles as learners or co-beneficiaries, triangular cooperation will risk reproducing the same hierarchies it aims to reform.

The one-way flow fallacy

Despite the apparent differences between vertical, horizontal, and triangular cooperation, all three rest on a largely implicit but deeply influential assumption about how cooperation is designed, financed, and evaluated – even as the world has changed dramatically and rhetoric has evolved. These assumptions are not always explicit, but they exert powerful influence over eligibility criteria, role assignment, and the duration of cooperation arrangements.

A core issue is that cooperation is still widely understood as appropriate only between countries at similar income levels, or from "rich to poor" within a donor-recipient frame. The underlying assumption – that countries in the Global North have solutions and countries in the Global South have problems – continues to shape the design of many cooperation instruments. Mutuality is assumed to require symmetry or proximity of power or wealth.

This assumption is reflected in funding flows, institutional arrangements, and even language. Development programming is often designed in Northern capitals, executed by Northern consultants, and evaluated against Northern benchmarks. When Southern countries contribute knowledge, it is frequently seen as "contextual insight" rather than system-shaping expertise. The implications in both the Global North and the Global South

studies of Edward Said, the single word "Orientalism" will summarise the substance of this fallacy.

But this notion was never correct and collapses when we confront two realities: first, that the Northern development model is neither universal nor sustainable; and second, that the Global South possesses both valuable experience and strategic insight into challenges that now confront the entire world – such as climate resilience, community cohesion, demographic fragility, and social cohesion.

This idea that development is a final state achieved by a few and pursued by the rest distorts policy by assuming that solutions flow in one direction, and that expertise is concentrated in the North. Yet many of today's most pressing social and global problems are emerging from countries that the traditional model would classify as "developing."

The so-called "developed" world is struggling with forms of crisis and fragility – rising homelessness, demographic buckling, mental health crises, ageing populations – that cast serious doubt on the development model itself. The OECD reports that income inequality in many high-income countries has reached levels not seen since the early 20th century (OECD, 2023). Mental health issues have reached crisis levels across wealthy nations, with the WHO estimating that over 280 million people worldwide suffer from depression, with higher rates often found in high-income countries (WHO, 2023). Meanwhile, the UN projects that the number of people aged 65+ will more than double globally by 2050, with the most rapid ageing occurring in developed countries (UN DESA, 2023). Life expectancy has declined in recent years in several high-income countries, including the United States, reversing decades of progress (OECD, 2022).

In this context, countries in the Global South possess a wealth of experience managing complex challenges with constrained resources. These are precisely the capabilities that high-income countries increasingly need. Southern knowledge is not only relevant – it is pioneering.

The time-limited fallacy

A second misleading assumption in international development is that cooperation has a natural endpoint. Once a country crosses an arbitrary income threshold – typically defined by GDP per capita – it is expected to "graduate" from concessional finance, non-rely, and other forms of development cooperation. According to this logic, development cooperation is a temporary scaffold: necessary during a country's ascent, but to be dismantled once the statistical signal of "success" is triggered.

This idea is embedded in many institutions and policies. Multilateral development banks often restrict access to concessional finance based on income classification. Traditional donors tend to set time-limited funding cycles that prioritize "graduation" and "self-reliance" over sustainable, long-term partnerships. Graduation from the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) recipient list is treated as a milestone of maturity, if not self-sufficiency,

with the expectation that former recipients will transition seamlessly to donor status (OECD, 2024).

But the challenges that define our century are persistent and cross-border. Climate change, pandemics, artificial intelligence governance, cyber security, and financial contagion are not problems any country can manage alone. They require long-term, co-financed, and co-governed responses that transcend traditional notions of development assistance. The COVID-19 pandemic eliminated decades of global development progress in less than 18 months, regardless of income level (UNDP, 2023). Similarly, climate finance remains heavily concentrated in high-income countries despite vulnerability being highest elsewhere, with adaptation finance flows to developing countries reaching only $28.6 billion in 2022 (OECD, 2024).

Second, inequality will not vanish with rising averages. Many countries now classified as middle-income continue to face high proportions of the world's poor. Both of these realities challenge the wisdom of fixed income thresholds and time-limited cooperation frameworks (Sumner, 2012). These countries also face profound structural challenges: weak tax bases, fragile institutions, low productivity, and persistent debt burdens that cannot be resolved through income growth alone.

Third, countries remain interdependent even after they "graduate." Richer states still have much to gain from ongoing cooperation: access to innovation, enhanced legitimacy, regional stability, and solutions to shared problems like ageing, migration, and climate adaptation. Migration patterns, for instance, demonstrate that wealthy countries face similar demographic and social challenges that require collaborative responses (UN DESA, 2023). Global financial crises, cyber threats, and climate impacts often originate or spread unpredictably across income levels, undermining assumptions that "graduated" countries pose no risk or offer no benefit to global systems (World Bank, 2023).

Development cooperation is not just about "helping others" – it is about building resilient global systems that work for everyone. The time-limited approach fails to recognize this interdependence and wastes opportunities for sustained, mutual benefit.

Towards universality: the logic of the post-2015 development agenda

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 marked a conceptual breakthrough in international cooperation. Unlike the Millennium Development Goals, which largely framed development as something to be delivered to the Global South by Northern donors, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were founded on the principle of universality: a shared global agenda in which every country, rich or poor, is responsible for progress and affected by failure. The SDGs reframed development as a collective endeavour, “a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity” (UN, 2015; iris carbon, 2024).

As Adolf Kloke-Lesch has argued, the SDGs “require a new logic of cooperation” that moves

beyond transfers and toward systems of mutual benefit and co-responsibility. “Development only begins,” he has said, “when extreme poverty is eradicated” (personal communication). The World Economic Forum (2023) estimates that over 60% of global risks with highest perceived impact are systemic and cross-border in nature, reinforcing the need for cooperation frameworks that transcend traditional North–South divisions (World Economic Forum, 2023).

The SDG logic calls into question the very concept of “development” as historically defined. The division of the world into “developed” and “developing” countries was always reductive; it is now actively misleading. It implies a linear progression from backwardness to modernity, as if some countries have arrived and others are catching up. Yet in today’s world, no country can credibly claim to have completed the journey (UN, 2015; UNDP, 2024).

Despite these conceptual advances, the practice of international cooperation still lags behind. Most global institutions – including the World Bank, IMF, OECD DAC, and bilateral donors – continue to allocate resources and define roles based on outdated income categories (UNDP, 2024; OECD, 2024).

Moreover, the principle of universality has yet to reshape the political discourse in high-income countries. Although rich countries have formally endorsed the SDGs, they rarely treat them as domestic policy imperatives. Only a handful of OECD countries have fully integrated SDG targets into national budgeting frameworks, with many failing to report regularly or transparently on domestic progress. Development is still seen as something that happens elsewhere. When institutions like UNICEF or UNDP publish reports on poverty, exclusion, or resilience in OECD contexts, they are often marginalised or met with discomfort. This continued reliance on a spatial imaginary of North giving to South risks further alienating Southern actors, especially in a moment when global fiscal space is narrowing, and the legitimacy of multilateralism is under strain.

The SDGs offered the architecture for a new kind of cooperation – one grounded in shared challenge, mutual accountability, and collective action. But for that vision to be realised, it requires more than rhetorical commitment. It demands a fundamental rethinking of the frameworks, assumptions, and language that still structure international cooperation today.

Circular Cooperation: rewriting the terms of global engagement



In this moment of change, as international cooperation continues to evolve for a modern era, the idea of Circular Cooperation emerges not simply as a variation on existing models, but as a conceptual and normative departure. Where vertical, horizontal, and triangular cooperation each reflect specific roles and directional flows, Circular Cooperation is defined by mutuality, reciprocity, and universality. In this model, every country – regardless of income level or historical role – is seen as a potential contributor, beneficiary, and co-decision-maker.

Three core principles of Circular Cooperation

At the heart of Circular Cooperation are three core principles – all contribute, all benefit, all decide – shared with the emerging framework of Global Public Investment. Together, they offer a shift away from traditional donor–recipient dynamics toward a more participatory, reciprocal, and future-fit model of global collaboration. They are not just ideals, but practical design principles that can guide projects, institutions, and financing systems.

All contribute

Circular Cooperation begins from the premise that every country and actor involved in a cooperative initiative has something valuable to offer. Contribution is not limited to financial resources; it includes technical expertise, political leadership, legitimacy, institutional access, lived experience, data, and creativity. What matters is not volume, but recognition.

Historically, international cooperation has centred on Northern resources and Southern needs. Circular Cooperation disrupts this framing by elevating contributions such as Brazil's approaches to food sovereignty, Kenya's community health systems, or Indonesia's digital ID infrastructure – showing they can be as globally relevant as any Northern innovation. This reframing widens the pool of usable expertise, enabling more tailored, resilient, and innovative responses to today's interconnected challenges.

To operationalise this principle, cooperation initiatives should actively identify and value diverse forms of contribution. For instance, in Japan–Mexico–El Salvador cooperation on disaster risk reduction, Mexico – not the financial lead – provided most of the technical know-how (JICA, 2024; GPI, 2023).

All benefit

Perhaps the most transformative feature of Circular Cooperation is its insistence that all participants benefit – concretely, measurably, and visibly. This is not rhetorical "win-win" optimism, but a design requirement: cooperation must be structured to deliver returns to every country involved, whether through institutional learning, strengthened systems, access to innovations, or increased global influence.

This principle directly challenges the traditional notion that only recipients gain from cooperation. In a circular model, high-income countries also stand to benefit – by improving their own systems through exposure to innovative practices, enhancing resilience through stronger global partners, or strengthening diplomatic relationships rooted in mutual respect. Project designers should therefore ensure that the intended benefits for each party are explicitly identified and agreed upon from the outset. These may include technical knowledge, visibility, market access, policy tools, or public trust – but they must be real, relevant, and reciprocal.

All decide

The third principle – shared decision-making – is both a value and a practical condition for durable cooperation. Rather than consulting partners after priorities have been set, Circular Cooperation embeds joint governance from the start. That means shared agenda-setting, co-implementation, and co-authored evaluation frameworks.

Critically, decision-making power is not tethered to financial contribution. Instead, it is based on relevance, participation, and mutual stake. Traditional models have often allowed financial weight to dictate influence, perpetuating hierarchies and undermining ownership. Circular Cooperation insists that all partners – regardless of income or status – have a seat at the table. Institutional practices that support this include rotating leadership roles, multi-stakeholder steering committees, and participatory budgeting mechanisms. These approaches are proven to enhance trust, legitimacy, and the effectiveness of global problem-solving.

Beyond geography and income status

Circular Cooperation is not defined by geography or income status. It is not a "new kind of South–South cooperation" or a "reformed donor model." Rather, it is a structural logic that can be embedded in any cooperation initiative – climate, health, education, digital governance – where mutual interest exists and where countries are willing to move beyond roles inherited from the 20th century.

Unlike triangular cooperation, Circular Cooperation does not assign fixed roles to each actor (e.g., donor, implementer, beneficiary). Instead, it allows for dynamic roles that evolve over the lifecycle of a project or partnership. For instance, a low-income country may contribute technical insight based on local innovation, while a high-income country may benefit from policy lessons or institutional reform models.

What sets Circular Cooperation apart is not only its structure, but its intent. It seeks to restore legitimacy to international cooperation by grounding it in shared vision and shared ambition. It invites a broader range of actors into cooperation processes, recognising that solving global problems requires the wisdom and commitment of all.

Circular Cooperation challenges the hierarchy of knowledge that underpins much of traditional development practice. It affirms that all countries have something to learn and something to teach. Expertise flows in every direction. The question is not who has the knowledge, but how cooperation systems can be redesigned to enable its exchange, uptake, and co-creation.

This reframing is not just about dignity and modernity – it is about effectiveness. Solutions to global challenges will only be found when all sources of insight are valued, and when countries are treated as peers in a shared endeavour. Just as no single country can solve climate change or digital regulation alone, no single region has a monopoly on how to govern justly, care sustainably, or build resilience in the face of disruption.

Cooperation is not about closing a "knowledge gap" between North and South – it is about building a global knowledge commons where ideas, practices, and innovations circulate freely, respectfully, and productively. Circular Cooperation offers the theoretical underpinnings and institutional architecture to make this real.

Circular Cooperation also challenges the myth of time-limited cooperation head-on. It replaces the logic of graduation with a logic of dynamic participation – where cooperation is not something to exit, but something to evolve within. It proposes that cooperation should be permanent, flexible, and inclusive, adapting over time to changing needs and capacities, but never disappearing.

The implication is profound: cooperation is not a stage to pass through on the way to self-reliance. It is a foundational pillar of global public life. Just as countries never "graduate" from diplomacy, trade, or security cooperation, they should not be expected to graduate

from development cooperation either. In a complex and fragile world, the need for cooperation is permanent – even as its forms evolve.

Intellectual and normative foundations

Circular Cooperation is also grounded in a rich and evolving body of intellectual thought. Its architecture draws on multiple schools of critique and reconstruction, particularly from the Global South and from alternative visions of international relations, development, and justice. Three key strands offer insight into the deeper normative claims underpinning Circular Cooperation: post-development theory, International Relations (IR), and a reframing of justice around co-creation and contribution.

Post-development theory: beyond charity, beyond salvation

Emerging in the 1980s and 1990s through thinkers such as Arturo Escobar and Wolfgang Sachs, post-development theory challenges the very premises of "development" as traditionally conceived (Klein & Morreo, 2019). It argues that the development industry has often functioned as a vehicle for cultural domination, epistemic violence, and the reproduction of colonial hierarchies (Sachs, 1992). In this view, the Global South is not a site of deficit to be corrected, but a source of knowledge, agency, and resistance to imposed models (Gudynas, 2021). As Escobar (2012) argues, "development" as a singular vision risks flattening cultural and epistemological diversity into a narrow economic trajectory defined by the West (Escobar, 2012).

Circular Cooperation responds directly to this critique. It does not assume that solutions flow from North to South, or that development is a linear process defined by the trajectory of already-industrialised nations (McKinnon, 2008). Instead, it begins with the recognition that all countries possess forms of value – policy innovation, institutional creativity, social cohesion – that are essential to global progress (Gudynas, 2021). By placing reciprocity and respect at the centre of cooperation, circular models offer a way to operationalise post-development thinking without abandoning the global solidarity impulse (Klein & Morreo, 2019).

IR and the multiplex world

Amitav Acharya's call for a "Global International Relations" challenges the dominance of Western theories in shaping how global order is understood. His concept of a multiplex world describes a system in which multiple centres of authority, norms, and legitimacy coexist – without a single hegemon or universal ideological frame (Acharya, 2017; Acharya & Goodman, 2023; Schoeman & Alden, 2024). In this world, cooperation must be plural, context-sensitive, and based on shared authorship. As Acharya (2017) contends, legitimacy in international relations is increasingly earned through inclusivity and regional agency rather than imposed hegemonic order (Engel, 2022).

Circular Cooperation fits naturally within this vision. It assumes that no single country or bloc has a monopoly on solutions or legitimacy, and that international systems must reflect the diversity of experiences and actors shaping the 21st century (Acharya & Goodman, 2023;

Schoeman & Alden, 2024). It also helps reframe multilateralism not as a legacy of Western liberalism, but as an evolving, decentralised, and participatory practice grounded in mutual recognition and negotiated interdependence (Acharya, 2017; Engel, 2022).

Contributive justice and co-creation

Mainstream theories of justice – such as those advanced by John Rawls – have often focused on distributive outcomes: who gets what, and on what terms (Rawls, 1971; Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics, 2021). Circular Cooperation draws on an alternative ethical tradition emphasising contributive justice: the idea that justice requires not only fair outcomes, but fair opportunities to contribute to collective endeavours (Sangiovanni, 2007; Kirchherr, 2021). Everyone has the right to shape the processes and institutions that affect them. Sandel (2010) and Young (1990) have both argued for more participatory frameworks of justice that value democratic engagement and recognition over efficiency or redistribution alone (Young, 1990; Sandel, 2010).

This reframing aligns with Circular Cooperation's emphasis on shared decision-making and co-creation. It insists that all countries – regardless of size, wealth, or historical power – deserve a voice in setting agendas and designing solutions. In doing so, it challenges both technocratic models of efficiency and instrumental models of aid, arguing instead for legitimacy grounded in participation (Kirchherr, 2021; OpenLearn, 2024). As the UN's High-Level Political Forum has noted, participatory governance is not just a democratic ideal but a functional necessity in addressing complex global challenges (UN DESA, 2021).

Beyond GDP: questioning the foundations of eligibility

One of the most contested features of the existing international cooperation architecture is the reliance on gross domestic product (GDP) per capita as the principal determinant of eligibility for official development assistance (ODA), concessional finance, and technical support. While income classification may offer a rough proxy for macroeconomic capacity, its dominance as a policy tool has come under sustained critique – both for what it measures and, more importantly, for what it misses (UNSCEB, 2023; UNDP, 2023).

In recent years, a growing coalition of governments, researchers, and international organisations have argued that GDP-based thresholds obscure structural vulnerabilities, generate perverse incentives, and contribute to premature "graduation" from cooperation frameworks. Countries with high exposure to climate shocks, food insecurity, pandemics, or migration pressures may surpass an income threshold but still lack the fiscal space or institutional resilience to manage these risks effectively. For example, the 2023 Global Human Development Report highlights how countries like the Philippines and Sri Lanka, though classified as middle-income, face compound risks that demand continued international support (UNDP, 2023; IFRC, 2024).

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) has been a leading voice in this critique. Its work on "development in transition" shows that middle-income countries – which now comprise the majority of the world's poor – face complex challenges

that are not well captured by per capita income alone (ECLAC, 2018; ECLAC, 2022). These include inequality, informal employment, governance fragility, and technological exclusion. Yet these same countries are increasingly excluded from concessional finance and multilateral support.

This debate has intensified in the wake of global shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the inadequacy of income-based eligibility in determining vulnerability or resilience. The G20's 2022 review of pandemic response noted that GDP per capita provided "no predictive power" in assessing countries' ability to respond to the health crisis (G20, 2022). Similarly, the escalating debt crisis has shown how misleading GDP can be as a guide for policy intervention. A 2023 IMF study found that 45% of countries classified as middle-income are at high risk of debt distress, with significant concentrations in regions such as the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa (IMF, 2023; CEPR, 2025).

Countries such as Barbados and Costa Rica have called for new frameworks that integrate multidimensional indicators of need, including environmental, social, and fiscal fragility. Barbados's Bridgetown Initiative, for example, is proposing reforms to the international financial system to ensure that climate-vulnerable countries can access long-term sustainability finance on fairer terms (World Economic Forum, 2024).

Circular Cooperation offers a clear alternative. It rejects the logic that cooperation should be gated by income thresholds, and instead advances the idea of universal and differentiated participation. All countries are eligible to participate, based not on GDP status but on relevance, interest, and capacity to contribute. Cooperation becomes not a matter of charity, but of mutual interest and joint investment. Countries may contribute in different ways – financially, technically, politically – but all have a right to be at the table and to benefit from collective action (UN, 2024; OECD, 2021).

By removing artificial barriers to participation, Circular Cooperation supports a more inclusive and effective model of global governance – one that reflects the complexity of today's world and the inadequacy of simple metrics to guide institutional design. It aligns with ongoing calls to move "beyond GDP" as a measure of development success and reorient cooperation toward shared purpose rather than statistical classification. As the OECD and European Commission have argued, a multidimensional approach – combining measures of well-being, resilience, and inequality – is strongly needed to ensure policy relevance in a post-GDP world (OECD, 2021; European Commission, 2022; UN, 2024). This vision also resonates with the work of Sabina Alkire and others in the field of multidimensional poverty measurement, whose efforts have highlighted the importance of capturing the full range of human experience – health, education, empowerment, and dignity – when shaping development policy and assessing impact (Alkire et al., 2015; UN, 2024).

Box: Lessons from the EU Funds

The EU Funds model shows that it is possible to build a cooperative, long-term, rules-based

funding system in which all countries contribute, all countries benefit, and all countries govern. This model aligns closely with the vision of Circular Cooperation: one that eschews hierarchy, embraces interdependence, and builds legitimacy through reciprocity (Glennie & Hurley, forthcoming).

1. Mutual contribution and benefit – not donor/recipient logic
The EU Funds are underpinned by strategic mutuality: all countries contribute, all benefit. Even wealthier countries (e.g. Germany, France) receive funding – targeted at specific challenges like regional inequality or climate resilience. This dismantles the logic of one-directional aid and reinforces the circular principle that every actor can both give and receive, regardless of income status.

2. Convergence, not just poverty reduction
The EU aims not merely to eliminate poverty but to close development gaps across the Union. This convergence logic is broader than the common poverty-reduction frame in much "aid" rhetoric, allowing for funding in relatively advanced contexts to support innovation, infrastructure, or youth employment. Circular Cooperation emphasises relative, not absolute, development goals – framing progress as convergence between regions, not mere "uplift" of poorer ones.

3. All countries are stakeholders – with voice and vote
EU Fund governance treats all countries as equal stakeholders. Everyone has a seat at the table, regardless of their net contribution. Policies and programmes are co-designed, with shared oversight and accountability. Governance of Circular Cooperation should follow this model – joint agenda-setting, inclusive steering committees, and shared ownership, even if financial contributions vary.

4. Inclusivity across income levels – no forced "graduation"
Countries in the EU do not "graduate" from concessional finance due to income thresholds. Even high-income countries continue to receive structural support if they face regional inequality or policy challenges. This reinforces the idea that cooperation is permanent and problem-driven.

5. Territorial and multi-level governance
EU Funds are managed not only at national level, but also by regions, municipalities, and local stakeholders, fostering responsiveness and place-based policy. Civil society and private sector actors participate in delivery and monitoring. As Circular Cooperation evolves, it must expand beyond governments – including cities, rural communities, Indigenous groups, and civil society as core partners in project design, funding, and oversight.

6. Political legitimacy through visible benefits
EU cohesion funds have helped sustain public support for redistribution by delivering tangible benefits in visible ways. Regions receiving funds experience job creation, infrastructure upgrades, and institutional strengthening that citizens associate with EU

membership. For Circular Cooperation to win long-term legitimacy, it too must deliver visible, shared gains for middle- and high-income as well as low-income partners.

Dignity above all things

Dignity is rarely addressed explicitly in the design of international cooperation, yet it is one of the most powerful – and most overlooked – forces shaping its effectiveness and legitimacy. For decades, development cooperation has been framed, funded, and delivered through an architecture that places some countries in the position of permanent recipients, while others assume the role of providers. This structural asymmetry has had deep psychological, cultural, and political impacts on individuals, communities, and nations (PSJP, 2018; Glennie, 2015; Anderson et al., 2012).

At the individual and community level, long-term dependency on external assistance can erode confidence, agency, and initiative. It risks reinforcing the internalisation of inferiority: the belief – often subtle and unspoken – that solutions must come from outside, that domestic expertise is insufficient, and that change is contingent on external approval. Even when aid supports real gains in health, education, or infrastructure, it can carry with it a social cost: the loss of narrative control, of professional pride, and of the right to be seen as a full participant in shaping one's future (Anderson et al., 2012; PSJP, 2018).

At the national level, these dynamics compound. Countries classified as "recipients" or "developing" are often excluded from agenda-setting, treated as policy laboratories, or subjected to intrusive conditionalities. The language of development policy may speak of partnership, but the practices of hierarchy persist – undermining the trust needed for long-term collaboration (Glennie, 2019; Anderson et al., 2012). This creates a dual burden for governments: the practical challenge of meeting domestic development needs, and the political cost of appearing subordinate in the international arena (Glennie, 2021; Palmer & Warner, 2022).

For many states – particularly in the Global South – legitimacy is intimately tied to dignity and to the struggle for equal recognition in a system that has long operated on implicit hierarchies (SciELO, 2017; UN, 2015). Dignity is not a soft value or optional extra – it is the basis of cooperation, intimately linked to agency, respect, and sustainability (PSJP, 2018; UN, 2015). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms dignity as an inalienable right, and the UN's 2030 Agenda places dignity at the core of its vision for sustainable development (UN, 2015). The "Time to Listen" study, which gathered the views of over 6,000 aid recipients, found that people consistently value respect, voice, and partnership above material assistance, and that failure to listen deeply erodes trust and effectiveness (Anderson et al., 2012).

Dignity, then, is not a soft value or optional extra – it is the basis of cooperation. It is intimately tied to legitimacy, ownership, and sustainability. Cooperation that undermines dignity may deliver technical outputs, but it rarely delivers durable transformation. Circular Cooperation

directly addresses this challenge by inviting partners to bring their knowledge, priorities, and values into the process from the start – not as recipients of generosity, but as co-creators of solutions. In doing so, it reverses the psychology of dependence and builds a cooperation system where dignity is not an outcome, but the point of departure. (Glennie, 2021; Glennie, 2019).

Whose voices shape cooperation?

In global development, voice is power. It determines who sets the agenda, who defines success, who allocates resources, and whose knowledge counts. Yet despite decades of rhetoric around partnership and inclusion, decision-making in international cooperation remains heavily centralised among a small group of donor governments, multilateral institutions, and Northern-based actors (Mawdsley, 2012; Severino and Ray, 2009). This imbalance of voice not only undermines legitimacy – it limits effectiveness.

Voice is more than participation. It is about agency and authorship. A country, community, or organisation has voice when it helps shape the goals, strategies, and terms of engagement – not merely when it is consulted after the fact. Too often, recipients of aid are invited to participate in processes whose parameters have already been defined. This creates the appearance of inclusion without power-sharing – offering a seat at the table, but not the ability to set the menu. The result is often frustration, reduced ownership, and stalled implementation (Eyben, 2013).

Even forms of cooperation that claim to prioritise partnership frequently fall short. They invite input, but do not assume equality. They ask for feedback, but do not start with co-authorship. They use the language of shared endeavour, while retaining control over frameworks, funding, and final decisions. In this way, participation is permitted but not presumed – and certainly not structured as a right (Banks et al., 2012). As Sanahuja (2020) argues, development cooperation that fails to reflect the priorities, capacities, and values of partner countries – even if technically efficient – can reproduce power imbalances and undermine long-term trust. This is not simply a matter of governance mechanics, but of relational equity.

The exclusion of voice also has epistemic consequences. Southern countries and communities frequently bring ideas, strategies, and lived experiences that challenge dominant models of growth, sustainability, and governance. Yet these contributions are often treated as anecdotal or secondary, while Northern approaches are assumed to be universal, rigorous, and transferable. This asymmetry in knowledge politics reinforces deeper structural inequalities and sidelines the actors closest to the challenges being addressed.

Restoring voice requires more than adding new seats to old tables. It demands a fundamental redesign of how cooperation is conceived, financed, and governed – from project terms of reference to board composition to evaluation metrics. It means embedding co-creation, shared leadership, and mutual learning as standard practice, not as optional

add-ons. Studies on the governance of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, suggest that more inclusive decision-making has helped it maintain legitimacy and adaptability over time (Storeng, 2014).

By asserting that all contribute, all decide, and all benefit, Circular Cooperation commits to governance arrangements that are inclusive from the outset – not just cosmetically inclusive. Whether through rotating convenorships, co-authored frameworks, or joint evaluation mechanisms, Circular Cooperation treats voice not as a symbolic gesture but as a structural principle. A cooperation system where many are asked to act but few are allowed to decide cannot meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Effectiveness and impact

Circular Cooperation is not only a matter of narrative, dignity, or legitimacy – it is also a strategy for improving real-world outcomes. As the 2023 midpoint review of the 2030 Agenda revealed, only 12% of Sustainable Development Goal targets were on track – a sobering indication that the crisis is not only one of ambition but of delivery. If global cooperation is to close the ambition-implementation gap, it must harness the full diversity of global knowledge, leadership, and experience (UN, 2023; UN, 2024).

The Global South is not merely a recipient of development solutions – it is a generator of them. In health systems, social protection, digital infrastructure, education, and climate adaptation, countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America are pioneering models with proven results (Glennie, 2021; UNDP, 2023). These are not only context-specific successes – they offer insights with global relevance.

Circular Cooperation enables these models, innovations, and approaches to circulate more widely and equitably, strengthening not just Southern systems but also institutions in the North, where many of the same challenges are becoming increasingly urgent. It reframes knowledge flows as multidirectional, replacing the outdated logic of "capacity-building" with practices of co-creation and peer learning (Eyben, 2013).

Importantly, the impact of Circular Cooperation is not limited to technical gains. The innovations emerging from the Global South also reflect alternative philosophical and cultural approaches to human well-being, solidarity, and governance. Embedded in circular frameworks, these approaches are not treated as footnotes to a dominant model, but as equal inputs into a shared search for betterment. The result is a more diverse, resilient, and adaptive cooperation system.

If the goal is to accelerate progress toward human development and planetary sustainability, then cooperation itself must become more ambitious – more circular in design, more inclusive in authorship, and more effective in impact.

Key areas of application

Circular Cooperation works best where there is an assumption – or an emerging recognition

– that expertise, experience, and innovation are distributed, rather than concentrated. In particular, Circular Cooperation shines in areas where no single region or income group holds a monopoly on knowledge, especially for problems that require:

- Mutual understanding and cultural exchange
- Diverse forms of expertise (technical, social, political)
- Long-term relational engagement
- Democratic legitimacy and public support across societies

In each of the following domains, countries across the income spectrum face challenges, have developed context-specific solutions, and can learn from one another (UNDP, 2021; Glennie, 2021). Circular Cooperation offers a framework in which these exchanges take place without a presumption of hierarchy, and with shared decision-making and mutual benefit embedded from the outset.

Human rights and equality

Many of today's most dynamic human rights innovations – whether in gender justice, racial equity, or LGBTQ+ inclusion – have emerged from the Global South. Circular Cooperation enables such solutions to circulate globally, not just as South–South best practices, but as contributions to shared global struggles, offering practical, grounded models relevant to societies in the North facing backlash and democratic erosion. For example, Latin America's adoption of gender parity laws has set new global standards for women's political representation, South Africa's constitution was the first in the world to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, providing a model for LGBTQ+ rights and Indigenous-led anti-discrimination movements in Colombia have united communities in the pursuit of justice and equal rights.

Urban sustainability

Cities in the Global South are pioneering solutions to challenges that Northern cities increasingly face, such as rapid urbanisation, housing crises, and social exclusion. Circular Cooperation formalises the exchange of such ideas between peers – London can learn as much from Nairobi as the other way around. Urban networks like C40 already reflect these dynamics, where global cities act as equals, regardless of income status. Participatory slum upgrading in Durban demonstrates how community-centred approaches can address local inequalities and improve livelihoods through collective action and inclusive planning. Public transit innovation in Bogotá has become a global reference for sustainable and accessible urban mobility, inspiring cities worldwide. Waste cooperatives in Pune showcase how informal sector workers can be integrated into city waste management systems, improving recycling rates and social outcomes through cooperative models. These examples illustrate how urban innovation, when shared through Circular Cooperation, benefits cities everywhere by fostering resilience, equity, and sustainability.

Mental health, drug policy, and loneliness

Global South countries have long developed holistic, community-based approaches to mental health and drug policy – often out of necessity, due to limited biomedical

infrastructure. In South Africa, Brazil, and Colombia, social psychiatry, peer-led recovery networks, and family-based care models have emerged as powerful alternatives to institutionalisation. These approaches emphasise connection, dignity, and collective healing – principles increasingly relevant to Northern societies facing mental health crises, rising loneliness, and overstretched clinical systems. Studies show that community-based interventions, including peer support and family-based care delivered by non-specialists, are feasible, effective, and culturally appropriate in low- and middle-income countries, offering valuable lessons for scaling up mental health support globally.

Social programmes to reduce hunger and malnutrition

Many of the most effective and inclusive food security programmes have emerged from the Global South. Brazil's Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) strategy, for example, combined cash transfers, support for family farming, and social participation to lift millions out of poverty and significantly reduce hunger. Similarly, school meal programmes in the Philippines and India have shown how community-driven, locally sourced food systems can reduce hunger while supporting local livelihoods, with school meals now reaching over 400 million children globally and providing a crucial market for small-scale farmers. These approaches emphasise state responsibility, local participation, and dignity – principles that are increasingly relevant as food insecurity rises in high-income countries. In contrast, reliance on food banks in the UK and US reflects a charitable model that often lacks structural coherence and long-term resilience. Community-based and social protection approaches, such as adaptive social protection and farmer field schools, have further demonstrated that empowering local actors and integrating social policy with food systems can sustainably address hunger and malnutrition.

Education and pedagogical innovation

Innovative educational practices from the Global South offer crucial insights for revitalising learning systems globally. Countries like Cuba have pioneered inclusive literacy campaigns and digital learning platforms, while India and Kenya have led in child-centred, multilingual, and community-based pedagogy. These approaches often emphasise flexibility, equity, and social purpose – features lacking in increasingly marketised education systems in the North, where disengagement and inequality are rising. Circular Cooperation allows educators and policymakers to collaborate across borders not through a logic of export, but of mutual problem-solving, challenging the assumption that pedagogical innovation flows only from elite institutions and repositioning learning as a shared global endeavour shaped by diverse contexts and collective insight.

Conflict prevention and peacebuilding

Some of the most effective peacebuilding innovations have emerged from societies in the Global South confronting complex, protracted conflicts. These lessons are increasingly relevant in Northern contexts facing social fragmentation, political polarisation, and rising far-right violence. Circular Cooperation reframes peacebuilding as a mutual endeavour, where countries historically seen as "fragile" offer adaptable, culturally rooted models for conflict resolution that prioritise community agency, memory, and dignity. For example,

Colombia's local peace councils have fostered dialogue and reconciliation at the grassroots, empowering communities to address disputes and build sustainable peace. Rwanda's Gacaca restorative justice system blended traditional and modern approaches to address the aftermath of genocide, focusing on truth-telling, accountability, and reconciliation through participatory, community-based courts. Across West Africa, grassroots reconciliation initiatives – often grounded in cultural practices and local mediation – have proven effective in resolving conflicts, promoting healing, and building social cohesion.

Migration and trafficking

Some of the most humane and innovative responses to migration and trafficking have come from the Global South. A leading example is Colombia's approach to Venezuelan displacement – granting over two million migrants temporary protection status, enabling access to health care, education, and legal employment. This inclusive, rights-based strategy contrasts sharply with many Northern policies focused on deterrence, detention, or exclusion. Similarly, countries like the Philippines and Mexico have developed migrant protection programmes, diaspora engagement frameworks, and anti-trafficking networks that combine community leadership with state support. In a global context of rising anti-migrant sentiment and policy retrenchment, these Southern models offer powerful lessons in dignity, resilience, and pragmatism.

Science and technology

Circular Cooperation can significantly strengthen the global science and technology ecosystem by recognising and integrating innovations from the Global South. Countries such as Uruguay, with its pioneering *Plan Ceibal*, have demonstrated how public investment in digital inclusion can radically transform education and access to knowledge. These models provide valuable insights for both North and South, especially as digital equity becomes a global challenge. Similarly, India's low-cost digital health technologies and Brazil's bioeconomy strategies exemplify context-driven innovations with universal relevance.

Climate adaptation

Circular Cooperation can accelerate global progress on climate adaptation by valuing and systematising knowledge from communities historically overlooked in formal policy processes. Indigenous knowledge systems and locally rooted adaptation strategies – especially from regions in the Global South – are now increasingly recognised in IPCC reports for their effectiveness in risk reduction, biodiversity preservation, and resilience-building. From Andean water management to Sahelian agroecology, these approaches offer scalable, low-cost, and sustainable alternatives to technocratic interventions. Circular Cooperation breaks the false divide between "modern science" and "traditional knowledge."

Comprehensive care systems (active ageing, community health)

Countries in the Global South have long relied on community – and family-based elder care models that emphasise dignity, intergenerational connection, and social integration. In contrast, many high-income countries depend on institutional care systems, which, while

technically advanced, can lead to isolation and declining mental health among older adults. Integrated and community-anchored care approaches – such as grassroots health networks in South Asia – show how limited resources can deliver holistic, person-centred support. Countries like Thailand and Costa Rica are developing hybrid models that blend public policy with community solidarity, providing not just cost-effective care but also support deeply rooted in local trust and relationships. These models offer valuable insights for ageing societies in the Global North, where care systems are often fragmented and medicalised. Rather than viewing the Global South as simply a recipient of ageing policy solutions, Circular Cooperation reframes it as a source of models and principles that can help all societies navigate demographic change with greater resilience and care.

Beyond North and South: Circular Cooperation within regions and countries

Circular Cooperation has thus far been framed primarily as a response to the structural asymmetries between the Global North and Global South. But the transformative potential of Circular Cooperation extends beyond international relations. Its core principles of mutuality, reciprocity, and shared authorship can also be applied to domestic and regional hierarchies, where power imbalances are just as entrenched and often just as damaging to equitable cooperation (OECD, 2020).

One of the clearest examples is the dynamic between urban and rural areas within countries. Across both the Global North and South, national development strategies have long privileged urban centres – not only in terms of resource allocation but also in whose knowledge counts. Cities are viewed as hubs of expertise, innovation, and modernity; rural or Indigenous communities are often framed as sites of need, tradition, or delay. This narrative plays out in climate policy, public service reform, education, and digital infrastructure – where urban solutions are exported outward, while rural voices are marginalised in national debates (UNESCO, 2025).

Even within progressive policy circles, cities often assume epistemic superiority. Mayors and metropolitan leaders are increasingly prominent in global forums – from climate diplomacy to innovation governance – where they often speak not only for their cities, but implicitly for their countries. While this activism has opened important political space, it also risks replicating the same vertical logic that Circular Cooperation seeks to dismantle internationally: the idea that some actors define the problem, while others simply absorb the solution (Tacoli, 2003).

This dynamic is further complicated in countries with significant Indigenous, Afro-descendant, or ethnic minority populations, whose governance systems, social practices, and ecological knowledge are often dismissed as incompatible with modern development frameworks. Despite the global turn toward sustainability and climate resilience, Indigenous knowledge systems remain underutilised, undervalued, or tokenised in both domestic policy and international cooperation. When engagement occurs, it is often consultative

rather than co-creative – and rarely structured around mutual learning. UNESCO has called for the formal integration of Indigenous knowledge into education and sustainability systems, but only a small fraction of national adaptation plans submitted under the Paris Agreement explicitly reference Indigenous governance models (UNESCO, 2025; UNFCCC, 2023).

Circular Cooperation offers a different approach. It suggests that cooperation – whether across countries, regions, or social groups – should be built on reciprocal respect, not hierarchical assumptions. It implies that a city can learn from a rural health network, just as a Northern donor might learn from a Southern public policy innovation. It invites governments to design cooperation frameworks where local and Indigenous communities are not only implementation partners, but strategic co-authors, with agency in defining priorities, shaping metrics, and sharing results.

There are promising signs. In Colombia, peacebuilding efforts in Indigenous territories have incorporated circular principles – co-designed programmes, shared benefit, and recognition of ancestral governance. In Canada, some municipalities have begun working with First Nations communities on shared climate adaptation plans, acknowledging that western engineering and Indigenous ecological knowledge must be combined, not sequenced. In India, community-based health systems in tribal areas have generated models later adopted by state governments and shared internationally.

But these remain the exception, not the rule. Too often, even within countries committed to decentralisation or participatory development, power flows in one direction: from capital cities outward, from technocrats downward, from the "modern" to the "traditional." Applying Circular Cooperation domestically and regionally requires institutional reform, narrative change, and the redistribution of agenda-setting power. It also demands a broader understanding of what counts as knowledge, who is recognised as an expert, and how cooperation is measured.

Beyond national government: A cross-sectoral approach

Circular Cooperation can furthermore reshape how cooperation is structured across all sectors of society. If the model is to be truly transformative, it must move beyond intergovernmental spaces to embrace a whole-of-society approach – one that fully includes civil society, academia, the private sector, Indigenous and grassroots communities, and citizens themselves.

The legitimacy and effectiveness of cooperation depend not only on equitable relations between countries but also on inclusive governance within them. In too many instances, international cooperation is mediated through narrow diplomatic or bureaucratic channels, with limited engagement from the people and institutions most affected by the issues at stake. Civil society is often relegated to consultation rather than co-creation.

This exclusion reduces the quality of cooperation. Civil society organisations, especially

those rooted in communities, often have the deepest knowledge of local conditions, the trust required to implement effectively, and the creativity to adapt. Social movements are often the first to identify emerging problems – whether related to gender, environment, health, or inequality – and the most willing to push for ambitious solutions. Yet they remain underfunded, underrepresented, and frequently marginalised in both national development plans and global initiatives (EESC, 2019).

This is particularly important in addressing complex, multi-dimensional challenges like climate change, migration, social protection, and digital governance. These are problems that require multi-actor coalitions with shared responsibility and shared benefit. Circular Cooperation should be designed to reflect this reality – embedding inclusive governance structures, allocating resources to support participation, and ensuring that decision-making spaces are open to a plurality of actors.

There are promising models to build on. The governance structures of some global health and education funds, while imperfect, have included civil society and affected communities in decision-making processes. Multi-stakeholder initiatives such as the Open Government Partnership or the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation have sought to rebalance power between states and non-state actors (OGP, 2023; GPEDC, 2022).

However, these remain partial and uneven. Too often, inclusion is symbolic rather than substantive. Circular Cooperation demands more: a new operating logic where participation is foundational, not performative. Operationalising this will require changes in how projects are funded, designed, and evaluated. Budgets must allow for co-creation processes. Governance structures must have formal mechanisms for diverse actor representation. Results frameworks must value social dialogue and community empowerment alongside technical outputs. If Circular Cooperation is to realise its full potential, it must expand its circle to include all who have a stake – and a voice – in our shared future.

It is important to recognize the valuable contributions of research institutes and scientific organizations in smaller countries of the Global South, which are increasingly advancing thought leadership, innovation, and high-impact research. Institutions such as the Jindal Centre for the Global South in India and the newly established Global South Research Center in Beijing are fostering interdisciplinary research, convening international policy dialogues, and supporting the development of new patents and technologies relevant to sustainable development and global challenges (Jindal Centre for the Global South, n.d.; China Daily, 2025).

But it is not just the major powers. For instance, Cheikh Anta Diop University in Senegal has pioneered advanced research in material sciences and trained the country's first generation of PhD students in this field, despite resource constraints (Nature, 2023). In Haiti and Cambodia, local researchers are leveraging international partnerships to build technical expertise and develop contextually relevant solutions for sustainable development, highlighting the importance of cross-border collaborations (Nature, 2023). And the African

Doctoral Dissertation Research Fellowship programme has supported the growth of research leaders and strengthened university systems across several smaller African countries, thereby fostering high-quality, locally led research (PMC, 2022).

These examples demonstrate that, even in resource-constrained settings, local institutions can drive scientific progress, generate new knowledge, and influence both national and international development agendas. Their achievements underscore the need for greater recognition and support for such organizations within global research and cooperation frameworks.

Circular cities

While national and multilateral systems of development cooperation remain largely constrained by hierarchies and outdated donor-recipient paradigms, cities have already begun to embody the principles of Circular Cooperation – often without naming them as such. Networks like the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group offer a compelling case in point. Bringing together nearly 100 of the world's leading cities – from São Paulo and London to Nairobi and Dhaka – C40 fosters a model of collaboration that is fundamentally non-hierarchical. All participants are peers. Solutions are shared in all directions. Leadership is contextual, not predetermined by income. In fact, more than one-third of C40 members are from the Global South, and leadership roles rotate among cities regardless of GDP (C40, 2023).

In this space, Global South cities are not mere recipients of "best practice"; they are co-creators of climate solutions that resonate globally. São Paulo's groundbreaking "Clean City Law," for instance, which banned outdoor advertising to reclaim public space and reduce visual pollution, has inspired urban design conversations far beyond Brazil (Cities Alliance, 2012). Similarly, Dhaka's flood management strategies and Nairobi's community-led informal settlement upgrades are being studied as viable models for resilience and inclusion in other megacities facing parallel challenges. For example, Nairobi's Mukuru Special Planning Area has been cited by UN-Habitat as a model for integrated upgrading of informal settlements (UN-Habitat, 2022).

This urban equality is not accidental. Cities are defined more by their challenges than their GDP. Mayors and urban policymakers face shared, immediate concerns – air pollution, transport, housing, waste management – that transcend the North-South binary. In this context, mutual respect and pragmatic learning become the norm, not the exception. Surveys from the Global Covenant of Mayors show that over 70% of participating cities have engaged in peer learning exchanges, with Southern cities frequently contributing technical expertise on issues like waste recycling and transport planning (GCoM, 2021).

The experience of cities reveals what national and international systems too often deny: that knowledge and innovation are everywhere, and that the fastest route to meaningful, scalable progress is through horizontal cooperation built on shared challenges and mutual respect. Cities are showing the world what Circular Cooperation looks like in practice – cooperation

without hierarchy, learning without condescension, solutions without borders. It is time for national and global development systems to catch up.

Box: Circular Cooperation and Global Public Investment

Circular Cooperation and Global Public Investment (GPI) are complementary paradigms that together offer a powerful alternative to the outdated aid model. Both aim to shift the foundational logic of international cooperation – from temporary, charity-based transfers to sustained, rules-based systems grounded in mutual responsibility and shared benefit (Glennie, 2021; Glennie, 2025; GPI Network, 2025).

At its core, GPI proposes that all countries should contribute according to ability, benefit according to need, and decide collectively how resources are raised and allocated to advance global public goods and shared development goals. It offers a public finance model that mirrors the principles of effective domestic taxation and spending: legitimate, transparent, and accountable to all who are affected.

Circular Cooperation provides the relational architecture to deliver GPI in practice. Where GPI focuses on the flow and governance of funds, Circular Cooperation focuses on the governance of relationships – ensuring that decision-making is inclusive, that knowledge flows in all directions, and that cooperation is co-created rather than imposed.

Together, the two paradigms reinforce a move:

- **From charity to mutual interest:** Rejecting the donor–recipient binary, both GPI and Circular Cooperation recognise that every country has something to offer – not only money, but ideas, legitimacy, and leadership.
- **From conditionality to legitimacy:** Decision-making should be inclusive and democratic, not imposed by the largest funders. Both GPI and Circular Cooperation centre legitimacy as a precondition for effectiveness.
- **From exit to continuity:** Cooperation is not a phase to "graduate" from but a permanent feature of a shared global ecosystem. GPI provides the fiscal logic; Circular Cooperation provides the social and political logic to sustain it.

When combined, these approaches lay the groundwork for a next-generation global cooperation system – one that is future-proof, fair, and firmly rooted in mutual commitment.

Implementing Circular Cooperation

Having examined the structural limitations of the current cooperation system we now turn to the constructive agenda: what would it mean to design cooperation differently? Circular Cooperation offers not just a rhetorical shift, but a structural one. Its key innovation is institutionalised reciprocity – not merely shared voice, which even traditional modalities now claim to provide, but the recognition that all participants in a cooperation process contribute meaningfully to each other's development and, as such, all must benefit in return. This reverses the inherited logic of one-way assistance and reimagines cooperation as a system of co-creation. In such a model, knowledge is not commodified, but co-produced. Problems are not solved for others but tackled together. The result is a more dynamic and adaptive system, capable of generating new models and practices that serve both local and global agendas.

Although Circular Cooperation is emerging in practice it lacks formalisation and widespread uptake. One of the most urgent tasks ahead is to name what is already happening under different banners, and to connect these innovations under a coherent framework. This is not about building a new bureaucracy, but about recognising a shift already underway and giving it institutional and narrative weight.

Scaling Circular Cooperation will require investment – financial, intellectual, and political. But more than anything, it will require a shift in mindset: from helping others to advancing together; from narrow definitions of development to shared global flourishing; from competition over credit to collaboration for impact. These are difficult shifts. But they are essential if international cooperation is to remain legitimate, effective, and relevant in the 21st century.

Circular Cooperation is not just a philosophy – it is a design logic that can be applied to real-world projects and programmes. For cooperation agencies seeking relevance in a changed world, Circular Cooperation offers a concrete, operational pathway to a more inclusive, effective, and resilient model of global partnership. It can be built into the DNA of new projects with intentional design and inclusive processes.

And while it may not have been the starting point for existing initiatives, most existing cooperation projects – whether vertical (donor–recipient), horizontal (South–South), or triangular – can evolve toward Circular Cooperation with modest but deliberate changes.

Start by reviewing project objectives and asking whether they address challenges shared across contexts. Then revise governance and design structures to ensure each partner plays a role in defining the agenda, shaping implementation, and benefiting from results. Identify the unique contributions each actor brings – technical insight, contextual understanding, networks, or resources – and make these visible and valued.

Equally important is ensuring that all partners gain from the cooperation – whether through improved policy, professional development, institutional capacity, or international recognition. If only one party benefits, it isn't circular. But if all parties learn, grow, and influence one another, the project is already becoming part of the Circular Cooperation paradigm.

The key is to move step by step, embedding the principles of mutual benefit, contribution and decision-making all the way through from problem definition to evaluation.

Box: Making your project circular – 7-point roadmap

1. Co-create

From the earliest stages of problem identification, involve all partners in shaping the agenda. Projects should focus on challenges shared across diverse contexts – such as education, health, ageing, or environmental justice – where no single country or region dominates in expertise. Terms of Reference (ToRs) should be jointly authored, with each partner articulating what they bring and what they seek to gain.

2. Value diverse forms of contribution

Financial input should not define influence. Countries and institutions may contribute data, personnel, technical expertise, networks, hosting capacity, or political legitimacy. These inputs must be recognised and valued equally, even if not monetised. This avoids privileging Northern financial power and enables balanced engagement.

3. Share implementation and delivery

Project teams should reflect the full diversity of participating countries – not as subcontractors, but as equal actors in strategy and delivery. This strengthens professional capacity, builds trust, and facilitates genuine co-production of results. Activities should include knowledge exchange and peer learning mechanisms for all.

4. Ensure inclusive and transparent governance

Create decision-making structures – such as joint steering committees or rotating convenorships – that guarantee all actors real influence. Transparency must extend beyond finance to include agenda-setting, performance metrics, and issue resolution, reinforcing shared accountability.

5. Enable equitable mobility and exposure

International engagement should flow in all directions. Technical visits, residencies, and joint workshops must be distributed fairly, with all partners hosting and participating equally. This avoids the common pattern of Northern experts travelling South while Southern actors remain static.

6. Redefine success: Evaluate process and impact

Evaluation frameworks should move beyond outputs to assess process indicators: the degree of shared ownership, fairness of decision-making, reciprocity of benefits, and sustainability of partnerships. These measures strengthen learning and legitimacy.

7. Plan for longevity and institutional anchoring

Circular Cooperation should not be episodic. Design programmes with long-term continuity in mind, embedding them in durable institutions such as public development banks, regional platforms, or city networks. Lasting cooperation requires institutional memory and evolving collaboration, not just short-term results.

Finance and voice: separating control from contribution

Circular Cooperation is grounded in the principle that financial capacity should influence the scale of contribution, but never determine control or voice. This echoes the doctrine of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR), which recognises shared responsibility for global challenges while accounting for historical and economic inequalities (Santiso, 2001; DGAP, 2023). Originating in climate negotiations, CBDR has shaped a broader consensus: financing power must not translate into decision-making dominance (Voelkerrechtsblog, 2021; Social Watch, 2016).

This means rethinking governance arrangements to ensure that contributions – whether financial, technical, or institutional – are all treated as legitimate sources of influence. Traditional aid has often reinforced hierarchies where funders dictate priorities, undermining ownership and reducing effectiveness (Jalloh, 2023; OECD, 2007). In contrast, Circular Cooperation promotes joint agenda-setting, co-design, and shared accountability through mechanisms like multi-stakeholder committees, rotating leadership, and consensus-based decision-making (MDG Fund, 2012; Digital Finance Inclusion, 2024).

The UN Sustainable Development Group, for instance, recommends inclusive governance in multi-country programmes, while multilateral development banks have piloted co-chairing and rotating presidencies to balance influence (UNSDG, 2021; Digital Finance Inclusion, 2024). Research confirms that when all partners participate equally, cooperation becomes more contextually grounded, community-supported, and sustainable (UKCDR, 2017; Social Development Direct, 2023).

This requires a funding logic that values all contributions – not just money. Non-financial assets like local knowledge, policy innovation, and delivery capacity are vital for success, yet often undervalued in traditional models (Jalloh, 2023; UKCDR, 2017). Circular Cooperation rebalances this equation. Financing modalities such as pooled funds and co-financing allow partners to contribute according to strength, while maintaining equity in decision-making (MDG Fund, 2012; UNCTAD, 2024).

Participatory budgeting – pioneered at the municipal level – has been adapted to

development contexts, making financial decision-making more inclusive and transparent (ECDPM, 2022; Sustainability Directory, 2024). Similarly, climate finance structures like the Global Environment Facility use consensus-based governance to ensure joint ownership and balanced representation (OUP, 2012; UNCTAD, 2024).

These innovations enhance both fairness and functionality. Transparent resource allocation and shared oversight encourage deeper engagement from all parties, fostering innovation and resilience (Digital Finance Inclusion, 2024; ECDPM, 2022). Ultimately, Circular Cooperation reframes financial participation not as a lever of control, but as one element among many in a broader ecosystem of mutual commitment and shared success.

Incentives and metrics

For Circular Cooperation to thrive, institutions must be incentivised to foster reciprocity and mutual learning, not just maximise their own financial input or control (UNSDG, 2021; Sustainability Directory, 2024). Traditional metrics – such as aid volume or donor-aligned outcomes – are insufficient. Instead, agencies should be assessed on their ability to enable two-way flows of expertise, co-create solutions, and support multidirectional knowledge exchange (Social Development Direct, 2023).

Key performance indicators should reward local co-authorship, reciprocal capacity development, and evidence of institutional learning across contexts (MDG Fund, 2012; Digital Finance Inclusion, 2024). For example, the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) recommends that joint programmes be evaluated not only on financial efficiency but also on the extent of partner engagement, knowledge transfer, and mutual benefit (UNSDG, 2021). Similarly, the World Bank and other multilateral agencies are increasingly adopting metrics that capture the quality of collaboration and the sustainability of outcomes (Sustainability Directory, 2024).

Building these incentives into funding agreements, reporting systems, and staff appraisals can help shift organisational culture towards genuine partnership. This approach not only improves project outcomes but also builds the resilience and adaptability needed to address complex global challenges. For instance, agencies that reward staff for facilitating South-North knowledge flows, supporting local leadership, or documenting lessons learned from diverse contexts are more likely to develop the skills and mindsets needed for effective Circular Cooperation (UKCDR, 2017).

Institutional reforms are also needed at the system level. Multi-level governance reforms must adapt to changing economic, social, and budgetary contexts, including the re-organisation of powers and responsibilities across levels of government (OECD, 2007). The OECD recognises that reviewing and restructuring multi-level governance systems is integral to public sector reform, and reforms should expand membership to include emerging donors while developing new metrics that capture mutual benefits (UNU, 2024).

Success also demands substantial investment in capacity building across all partner

countries, including technical assistance for developing professional consulting capabilities and knowledge brokerage platforms. Participatory investment projects show that investing "with" communities, not "to" them, leads to more sustainable and equitable outcomes. The goal is to create systems where expertise is valued regardless of geographic origin, while maintaining high professional standards (Social Development Direct, 2023).

By implementing these governance mechanisms and reforms, Circular Cooperation can achieve its vision of truly equitable partnerships, where financial responsibility and management authority remain appropriately separated, and all partners contribute their strengths while sharing decision-making power democratically.

Reimagining the role of INGOs

International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) have long played a central role in global cooperation. From humanitarian relief and human rights monitoring to health delivery and policy advocacy, INGOs have often filled critical gaps left by state and multilateral actors. Yet as the landscape of international cooperation evolves, so too must the role of INGOs. The rise of critiques about power imbalances, legitimacy deficits, and the extractive tendencies of parts of the development industry have prompted INGOs to reassess their purpose, methods, and legitimacy – particularly in relation to their counterparts in the Global South (Banks and Hulme, 2012; Peace Direct, 2021).

Circular Cooperation offers a framework through which INGOs can respond constructively to these challenges. Rather than reacting defensively to demands for localisation or "decolonisation," INGOs can proactively restructure themselves as enablers, participants, and co-creators in a truly reciprocal global ecosystem (Doane, 2023).

Traditionally, many INGOs have acted as intermediaries – designing programmes in Northern capitals, raising funds from donor agencies, and then subcontracting delivery to Southern partners. Even when done with good intentions, this structure reinforces verticality: agenda-setting remains concentrated, and partner organisations become vehicles rather than full participants in defining change. To adopt a circular approach, INGOs must reposition themselves as participants in shared processes, rather than primary agents of delivery. This means:

- Co-designing programmes from the outset, with local organisations, communities, and governments.
- Rebalancing power in partnerships, including equitable budgeting, joint staffing, and decision-making structures that ensure Southern actors are not junior implementers but strategic co-leads.

In practice, this approach reflects shifts seen in initiatives such as the "Pledge for Change," where leading INGOs commit to rebalancing their relationships with local actors through trust-based partnerships (Bond, 2023).

Who makes decisions, who is heard

Many INGOs retain governance structures rooted in the North, with headquarters in donor countries, boards drawn from Northern elites, and accountability systems aligned with donor priorities. This undermines both legitimacy and effectiveness in a world where knowledge, leadership, and solutions are dispersed (E-IR, 2020; Doane, 2019). Power imbalances persist, with INGOs often holding disproportionate authority over decision-making and resources, leading to calls for a genuine shift in power to local actors and affected communities (Charter4Change, 2019).

A Circular Cooperation mindset calls for internal transformation. INGOs should diversify their boards and executive leadership, ensuring meaningful representation from the regions and communities where they work. Decision-making structures should reflect distributed authority – including regional hubs with power to define strategy, not just implement head office plans. Global strategy processes must prioritise input from partner organisations and affected communities, not only funders or Northern analysts (Doane, 2019).

Some INGOs are already experimenting with "global governance" models, in which policy is shaped collectively across regions. These efforts are being advanced through initiatives like the Grand Bargain and Charter4Change, which promote localisation, increased funding for local actors, and shared decision-making power (IFRC, 2020).

From pass-through to partnership

Funding is one of the most unequal parts of the current system. INGOs often receive large, multi-year grants from bilateral donors or philanthropic foundations and then subcontract work to local organisations under rigid reporting conditions. Local partners are expected to "deliver," but rarely have equal access to funding systems or the overheads and flexibility needed to build long-term institutional strength.

To align with Circular Cooperation INGOs must advocate for and model equitable funding partnerships, where Southern actors are directly funded and share responsibility for resource allocation. They can relinquish control over parts of their budgets by co-creating pooled funding mechanisms or consortia where all actors have an equal say. They should invest in financial infrastructure in the Global South – helping build systems and credibility that enable local organisations to manage large grants themselves, without needing a Northern intermediary. In doing so, INGOs move from brokers of finance to enablers of institutional autonomy.

Amplifying southern knowledge: Who produces, who learns

Despite enormous growth in research, innovation, and evaluation capacity in the Global South, INGOs continue to dominate global narratives about what works in development and why. They are often overrepresented in international panels, cited disproportionately in donor strategies, and lead major knowledge products and evidence platforms. To advance Circular Cooperation, INGOs should:

- Center Southern voices in research and learning, through co-authored publications,

South-led evaluation frameworks, and collaborative knowledge production (OECD, 2021).

- Avoid extractive "data mining" from communities – ensuring that knowledge flows both ways and that findings are returned in usable formats (OECD, 2024).
- Support long-term investment in Southern think tanks, universities, and community research organisations, helping build an epistemic infrastructure that does not rely on Northern validation (IDOS, 2019).

Evidence from initiatives like the Southern Voice on Post-MDG International Development Goals demonstrates the capacity and global relevance of South-led research when properly resourced and recognised. OECD research shows that centring local knowledge and expertise is essential for effective, sustainable, and inclusive development cooperation, and that peer-to-peer networks and triangular cooperation can help rebalance knowledge production and sharing. Locally rooted knowledge is often more accurate, adaptive, and politically grounded.

Demonstrating value to all actors

Finally, INGOs must better articulate and structure the mutual benefits of cooperation – both for themselves and for their partners. Circular Cooperation means acknowledging that all actors have something to gain: policy insights, legitimacy, innovation, or access to new networks. INGOs should frame partnerships as two-way: where their own learning and growth depends on interaction with partners. INGOs that have embraced mutual learning have reported improved internal innovation, increased trust with funders, and stronger field-level results (Pett, 2020).

INGOs should be open about how they benefit from cooperation – and use that honesty to build transparency and trust. By embedding Circular Cooperation into their strategies, structures, and cultures, INGOs can move from being vehicles of delivery to platforms for shared transformation. In doing so, they help build a global cooperation system rooted not in hierarchy, but in mutual respect, collective ambition, and enduring solidarity (LSE, 2022; Nordregio, 2023; Circular Economy Platform, 2025).

Building a professional ecosystem in the Global South

While this paper has emphasised the ethical, political, and institutional dimensions of Circular Cooperation, it also has significant economic potential. If fully embraced, Circular Cooperation could help catalyse a transformation in the international cooperation sector itself – unlocking new business, employment, and leadership opportunities in the Global South.

Today, a striking proportion of international cooperation contracts – whether for evaluation, technical assistance, policy design, or knowledge production – are awarded to consulting firms, think tanks, and universities based in the Global North. Even when projects are implemented in the South, the architecture of delivery remains dominated by Northern expertise. Northern institutions often serve as lead contractors, retain decision-making

authority, and receive the lion's share of budgets.

This system is reinforced by long-standing donor preferences, perceived credibility advantages, and the fact that Northern institutions are often better resourced, networked, and familiar with the complex reporting and bidding requirements of international agencies. But this pattern limits the growth of professional ecosystems in the South, reinforces epistemic inequality, and leaves untapped a huge reservoir of talent, contextual understanding, and innovative practice.

A shift toward shared delivery

Circular Cooperation opens the door to redistributing not only decision-making power, but economic opportunity. By building projects around principles of equal contribution and shared benefit, it naturally challenges the idea that only Northern actors are equipped to deliver complex technical assistance or strategic advice. In a Circular Cooperation framework:

- Southern professionals and institutions are engaged from the outset as co-creators, not sub-contractors.
- Budgets are designed to support equitable compensation and capacity-building, not token inclusion.
- Local and regional consulting firms, academic institutions, and NGOs are recognised as primary service providers, bringing deep contextual expertise and long-term engagement.

To make this possible, governments and development institutions in the Global South can proactively invest in:

- National and regional consulting firms and networks with expertise in policy advice, monitoring and evaluation, training, and systems design.
- Professional certification programmes, in cooperation with universities and international associations, to raise visibility and credibility.
- Bidding consortia and cooperatives that allow smaller Southern actors to pool capabilities and compete for larger contracts.
- Digital platforms and registries to showcase Southern experts and institutions to global clients.

In parallel, funders and multilaterals should reform procurement systems to incentivise inclusion of Southern-led entities, support longer-term institutional partnerships, and allow for flexible contribution models that are not biased toward legacy suppliers. The Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation has urged donors to move beyond compliance-heavy procurement toward partnership-based contracting.

The result would be a more diverse, competitive, and resilient global cooperation marketplace – where a health systems expert in Nairobi, a social policy adviser in Amman, or a digital public infrastructure specialist in Jakarta can win and lead international contracts based on expertise and relevance, not just institutional affiliation. Such a system would not

only deliver better, more context-sensitive outcomes. It would also ensure that the economic benefits of international cooperation are more equitably distributed, helping create professional opportunities for young people, strengthening national systems, and reducing brain drain.

Embedding Circular Cooperation in global governance

Circular Cooperation cannot remain a promising innovation on the margins – it must be embedded in the architecture of global governance and finance. This requires designing rules, norms, and funding mechanisms that reflect mutual contribution, co-decision, and shared benefit. Institutionalising Circular Cooperation is both a technical imperative and a political challenge, and it will be central to rebuilding the credibility and effectiveness of multilateralism in the years ahead.

The current context offers a rare opening for system change. Global cooperation mechanisms are under pressure from all sides: trust in multilateral institutions is low, traditional aid models are losing legitimacy, and the scale of interlocking global crises is exposing the limits of vertical, top-down responses. The 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer found that trust in global institutions remains fragile, especially among younger populations and in middle-income countries (Edelman 2024).

Major international processes are underway that can serve as launchpads for Circular Cooperation. The UN Summit of the Future and its associated Pact for the Future aimed to define the principles of an inclusive, networked, and effective multilateral system. This aligns directly with Circular Cooperation's emphasis on universality and shared authorship. António Guterres has called for a "new social contract between countries" that echoes the relational framing of circularity.

Meanwhile, the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4) in Spain in 2025 presents a historic chance to reimagine how global public finance is governed and deployed. Drafts of the Sevilla outcome document already point toward a need for universalism, mutual accountability, and shared stewardship. Circular Cooperation responds to that call – not just with abstract values, but with a tested, implementable approach that reflects the SDG logic that all countries contribute to and benefit from development. Rather than continuing to organise cooperation around outdated income thresholds or rigid eligibility criteria, Circular Cooperation encourages us to build financing systems around shared challenges, such as climate transition, ageing populations, inequality, and digital governance.

Institutional pathways for uptake

The United Nations system already offers multiple entry points. The ECOSOC Development Cooperation Forum could become a hub for tracking circular initiatives. The UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCFs) at the country level could adopt circular design principles, ensuring that project development and implementation are co-authored by all relevant actors. Recent UNSDCF guidance has called for "greater localisation and

mutuality in programme governance" – a call that Circular Cooperation is well-placed to answer. A Joint Declaration on Circular Cooperation at the Summit of the Future could signal high-level commitment to embedding this approach across UN operations.

Multilateral development banks (MDBs) will also be pivotal. Many are already involved in knowledge-sharing and multi-actor partnerships, but these efforts often retain donor-driven logic. Circular Cooperation offers a way for MDBs to deepen inclusion and distribute leadership more equitably. That might mean rethinking shareholding and voting rights, expanding non-financial forms of contribution, and designing programmes from the outset through co-creation units embedded within operational teams. It would also involve measuring success by the quality of relationships and diversity of benefits, not just financial disbursements. Regional development banks, particularly the Inter-American Development Bank and African Development Bank, are well placed to lead this shift. Both have experience with triangular and South–South modalities and could become champions of Circular Cooperation, making its logic visible in scalable, real-world practice.

Conclusion: Going circular

Circular Cooperation does not eliminate asymmetries, but nor is it bound by them. It acknowledges that the world is unequal, but insists that cooperation need not be. It offers a path from dependency to dignity, from legacy to innovation, from extraction to exchange. And in doing so, it holds open the possibility that international cooperation – long maligned, often misused – can be reimagined as a genuinely shared global endeavour.

Why aren't there more Bangladeshi organisations helping Germany with its flood defences? Or Bolivian institutions advising Norwegians on mental health? Or Zambian feminists contributing to public discourse on gender rights in the United States?

Anyone from the Global North who has spent time in the Global South knows how much they have learned – about resilience, community, governance, and care. These are often life-changing encounters, challenging narrow definitions of progress and development. And yet, the formal architecture of international cooperation remains almost untouched by these insights.

Despite new rhetoric, the system still largely assumes that knowledge and solutions flow from North to South, from rich to poor. The persistence of this one-way logic is one of the last great myths of development.

Yes, there are major differences in wealth and historical responsibility, and redistribution remains essential. But it is false to suggest that poorer countries have nothing to teach wealthier ones. And it is equally false – and damaging – to imply that communities in the Global South are not capable of contributing meaningfully to development elsewhere in the world, including in high-income countries grappling with deep and persistent challenges.

Strengthening the political case

Circular Cooperation offers an urgently needed alternative to traditional development models, but its political viability – especially in the Global North – requires a clear, interest-driven case that resonates with domestic audiences. As development budgets shrink and geopolitical rivalries sharpen, maintaining global cooperation demands more than appeals to altruism. It must be restructured around national priorities: economic competitiveness, migration management, innovation, and soft power. Circular Cooperation can deliver on all four fronts.

In an era of declining aid, Circular Cooperation allows Global North countries to reframe international engagement as a strategic investment rather than a moral obligation. It reduces irregular migration not just through temporary assistance but by supporting proven Global South-led solutions to root causes. These include community-based livelihood strategies, regional mobility frameworks, and climate resilience projects that offer deeper insight and

longer-lasting results than conventional approaches. By integrating this expertise into bilateral and multilateral programs, Global North governments can strengthen control of migration flows while reinforcing stability abroad.

Economically, Circular Cooperation enhances competitiveness by tapping into fast-growing markets and diverse problem-solving capabilities. Innovation increasingly depends on diverse perspectives and context-specific knowledge. Global South consulting firms and advisory bodies offer practical intelligence on public policy, infrastructure, digital governance, and urban resilience – knowledge directly relevant to Northern governments facing challenges of their own. Circular Cooperation thus becomes a channel for knowledge acquisition and adaptive policymaking.

From a soft power perspective, traditional aid has lost credibility. Many recipient countries view it as donor-driven, extractive, and disconnected from their priorities. Circular Cooperation rebuilds legitimacy by fostering mutual respect, shared leadership, and co-created solutions. The optics and outcomes of mutuality enhance public support for international cooperation at home while building trust abroad.

Making this work requires investment in the Global South's consulting and advisory capabilities. Northern institutions – both public and private – must support the development of professional intermediaries who can package and deliver Southern expertise in forms that meet international standards and expectations. This is not charity, but the creation of a more competitive, pluralistic global marketplace for policy advice and public innovation.

Circular Cooperation offers the Global North a renewed basis for internationalism. It aligns cooperation with core national interests while opening access to new sources of knowledge and legitimacy. The political case is simple: in a fractured, interdependent world, the countries that embrace two-way cooperation will be better equipped to govern, adapt, and lead.

Box: The advantages of Circular Cooperation

In a world of shrinking aid budgets, growing geopolitical tension, and domestic political pressures, global cooperation needs a new logic: one rooted in mutual benefit, national advantage, and strategic relevance.

For the Global South: dignity, agency, and opportunity

For countries and communities in the South, Circular Cooperation is a vehicle for long-overdue transformation in how development is conceived and delivered:

- A narrative grounded in equality and respect: The South is not a passive recipient of solutions but a contributor to global progress – recognised for its innovations, insights, and leadership.
- A stronger voice in global governance: Circular Cooperation empowers the South to shape international agendas, not just react to them – advancing policies aligned with

its own development priorities.

- Ownership and long-term results: Projects are co-designed and co-managed, increasing local legitimacy and impact. This reduces waste, builds institutional memory, and delivers more durable outcomes.
- Economic and professional gains: Southern firms and experts gain access to a pluralistic global market for policy services – helping build economies not just through aid, but through participation.
- Community and cultural resilience: Solutions rooted in local knowledge systems are more sustainable, trusted, and adaptable – particularly in areas like climate, health, and education.

For the Global North: competitiveness, soft power, and security

To be politically viable, cooperation must advance the interests of those in power – not just in principle, but in practice. Circular Cooperation does exactly that, delivering returns in the areas that matter most to today's decision-makers:

- Tackling migration at the source: Circular Cooperation strengthens Southern-led strategies to address root causes of irregular migration – livelihoods, climate resilience, and regional mobility. It offers more stable, cost-effective, and lasting results than border containment or reactive aid.
- Boosting national competitiveness: In a global economy defined by complexity and rapid change, competitiveness depends on policy agility. Circular Cooperation gives Northern governments access to insights and innovations from fast-growing contexts, particularly in digital governance, urban infrastructure, and social policy.
- Enhancing soft power and influence: Traditional aid has lost credibility in many parts of the world. Circular Cooperation rebuilds trust through co-creation and mutual respect – offering a more compelling narrative of global leadership and partnership.
- Contributing to global and domestic security: Investing in effective Southern solutions reduces fragility, mitigates conflict risk, and helps stabilise regions critical to global security – often at a fraction of the cost of post-crisis response or military intervention.
- Maintaining public support for global engagement: When international cooperation is framed as delivering practical, measurable benefits – migration control, job creation, climate resilience – citizen support increases, even in tough fiscal environments.

For the world: shared solutions and stronger systems

Globally, Circular Cooperation offers a foundation for repairing international cooperation and delivering on collective goals:

- Global solutions from all regions: Innovation is not geographically confined. Valuing contributions from all corners increases the range, relevance, and effectiveness of global responses.
- A more legitimate and stable system: Cooperation rooted in fairness and mutuality commands broader political support and is more likely to endure through geopolitical turbulence.
- Sustainability built into the model: Unlike transactional aid, Circular Cooperation

strengthens institutions and relationships that can adapt to new challenges over time.

- Stronger collective action: Trust is a prerequisite for solving shared problems – from climate to pandemics to digital governance. Circular Cooperation is trust-building in action.

Mobilising coalitions for change

Circular Cooperation is beginning to take shape – in policy conversations, pilot programmes, and political discourse. What is missing now is scale, vision and leadership.

Transformative change will require coalitions of the willing. Several countries – such as Colombia, Chile, Indonesia, and South Africa – are already adopting the language and logic of Circular Cooperation in their external cooperation strategies. These frontrunners could convene informal groupings to pilot projects, codify learning, and present joint reform proposals across platforms such as FfD4, ECOSOC, and the G20. Civil society organisations, think tanks, and academic institutions will play a vital supporting role, helping to build the evidence base, develop practical tools, and hold institutions accountable to the principles of inclusion, reciprocity, and mutual gain.

Ultimately, embedding Circular Cooperation is about more than any one process or platform. It is about building a new normative floor for 21st-century cooperation – one in which all countries are recognised as potential contributors, all are engaged in co-decision-making, and all share visibly in the benefits. If we succeed, the reward is a cooperation system not only more just, but also more effective, popular and sustainable – better equipped to tackle global problems that respect no borders and demand no less than shared leadership.

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Annex: Examples of Circular Cooperation in practice

While the concept of Circular Cooperation is still emerging, its core principles – shared contribution, collective decision-making, and mutual benefit – are increasingly evident in a range of real-world initiatives across diverse regions and sectors. The following examples, drawn from global practice and supported by published evidence, demonstrate that Circular Cooperation is both feasible and productive, even within existing institutional frameworks.

From digital innovation in Uruguay and India to health system innovations in Rwanda and Kenya, from environmental leadership in Costa Rica to urban governance innovations in Brazil, these initiatives show how knowledge, expertise, and resources can flow in multiple directions while ensuring all partners contribute according to their capacity and benefit from shared outcomes.

The diversity of these examples – spanning health, education, environment, governance, migration, and technology – illustrates the broad applicability of Circular Cooperation principles across sectors and contexts, with each example supported by verifiable documentation from authoritative sources.

Digital Innovation and Technology Transfer

Uruguay's Plan Ceibal

A pioneering initiative that provided one laptop per child and digital literacy training across Uruguay's entire primary education system (Kraemer et al. 2009). Plan Ceibal delivered 450,000 laptops to all students and teachers in the primary education system with no-cost internet access throughout the country (Trucano 2010). The program has been recognized internationally as a model for digital inclusion and has influenced similar initiatives worldwide (Kraemer et al. 2009).

India's Aadhaar Digital ID System

Digital identity system that has achieved record growth with over 150 billion authentication transactions to date (Biometric Update 2024). Aadhaar has seen 14 percent yearly growth in authentication and digital KYC transactions, with growing adoption across banking, finance, and other sectors making processes more seamless, secure, and efficient (Biometric Update 2024).
Health and Social Protection

Rwanda's Community Health Worker Program

Community-based health system that has significantly improved maternal and child health outcomes (CHW Central 2023). Rwanda's Community-Based Health Insurance (CBHI) contributed to achieving 91 percent health insurance coverage at its peak and is recognized

as a key factor in the country having the highest health insurance coverage rate in Africa (CHW Central 2023).

Kenya's Community Health Strategy

Community health worker system that aims to integrate CHWs formally into the health system to support universal health coverage (Johnson & Johnson 2023). The Kenya Community Health Strategy 2020-2025 was developed through a multistakeholder and multisectoral participatory process with input from county governments, civil society, development partners, and community members themselves (Johnson & Johnson 2023).

Brazil's Bolsa Família

Conditional cash transfer program that has reached over 50 million people and is recognized as a model for reducing poverty and inequality (World Bank 2023). The World Bank approved a US$300 million project in 2023 to support a new phase of Brazil's Bolsa Família program, acknowledging its effectiveness in protecting income and improving health and education outcomes (World Bank 2023).

Brazil's Zero Hunger (Fome Zero) Program

Comprehensive food security strategy that reduced Brazil's undernourished population from 17 million to 11.9 million between 2000-2002 and 2004-2006 (Inter-réseaux 2020). According to FAO data, the number of hungry people in Brazil was reduced from 19.9 million (2000-2002) to 10 million by 2014, representing a significant achievement in food security (FAO 2014).

Environmental Leadership and Climate Action

Costa Rica's Environmental Policy Leadership

Has demonstrated global leadership in environmental policy, achieving over 98 percent renewable energy and developing a detailed decarbonization plan to achieve net zero emissions by 2050 (UNEP 2019). Costa Rica was awarded the United Nations Environment Programme's Champions of the Earth award for policy leadership, recognizing its decades-long commitment to ambitious climate and environmental policies (UNEP 2019).

C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group

Global network that connects nearly 100 major cities for peer-to-peer learning and shared leadership on climate action (C40 Cities 2024). C40's networks facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing among cities, with the Good, Green Jobs and Just Transition peer group including representatives from 14 global megacities working to create equitable, sustainable local green jobs (C40 Cities 2024).

Indigenous Knowledge Systems for Climate Adaptation

Indigenous knowledge, particularly from the Amazon and Andes regions, is increasingly recognized for its contribution to global climate adaptation strategies (Practical Action 2024). The IPCC acknowledges that Indigenous peoples are effective forest protectors, with

forests managed by Indigenous peoples serving as strong carbon sinks and removing significantly more carbon than they emit (IPCC 2023).

Governance & conflict

Participatory Budgeting (Brazil and globally)

First developed in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989, participatory budgeting is now practiced in thousands of cities worldwide (Cabannes 2015). The process has spread beyond Brazil to cities in Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Bolivia, Mexico, Chile, and other regions, with extensive documentation of its democratic benefits and improved resource allocation (UNDP 2020).

Colombia's Response to Venezuelan Migration

Colombia's Temporary Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants (ETPV) represents one of the largest regularization programs globally, with nearly 2.5 million Venezuelans registering for the process and over 1.7 million receiving temporary protection permits (Refugees International 2023). This program has been internationally recognized as a "bold humanitarian gesture" that provides a model for inclusive migration policy (Refugees International 2023).

South Africa's Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Systems

Community-led dispute resolution mechanisms including community courts and mediation boards that are recognized for their effectiveness in peacebuilding and justice (IMIMediation 2023). These systems demonstrate how community-based approaches can provide accessible and effective alternatives to formal court processes (UNDP 2022).

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Related reading



This report presents global public investment (GPI) as a new paradigm for international public finance – one that reimagines how the world invests in shared progress.

Rooted in the principles of collective responsibility and inclusive governance, GPI offers a future-oriented approach to funding global public goods and sustainable development.

This report brings together global voices calling for Global Public Investment—a new, fairer way to fund shared challenges—arguing that public finance must be expanded, not diminished, to meet today's crises.



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