SUMMARY

GLOBAL COOPERATION INSTITUTE

Circular cooperation

Evolving international partnerships for the 21st century

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This paper introduces Circular Cooperation as a bold new model for international collaboration, which reflects the complexity, urgency, and mutual interdependence of today's world.

It challenges the outdated donor–recipient mindset that still shapes vertical, horizontal, and triangular cooperation alike, and sets out a compelling alternative: a system built on shared responsibility, mutual respect, and co-created solutions, in which countries of all types contribute to and benefit from each other's expertise and ideas.

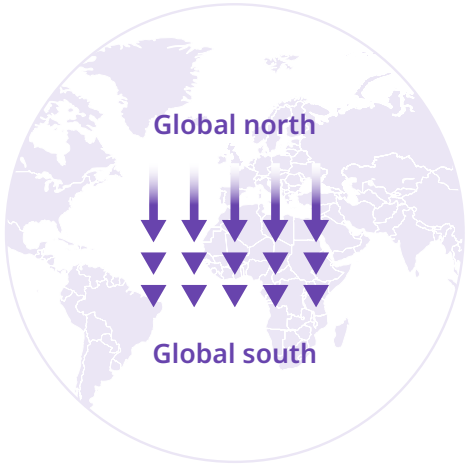
The paper links the emerging practice of Circular Cooperation to broader changes in global development thinking, especially the momentum behind Global Public Investment, which echoes circular cooperation's founding principles: *all contribute, all benefit, all decide*. Together, these frameworks signal the dawn of a more equitable, effective era of cooperation.

The paper closes with concrete proposals to mainstream circular cooperation, embedding it in cooperation projects in all sectors and in the narratives that shape our planet's future.

Access to the full report →

Vertical cooperation

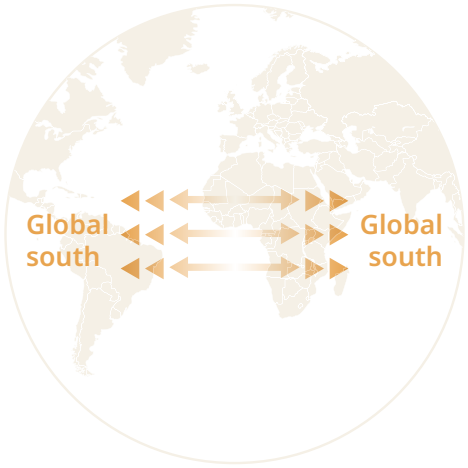
Vertical cooperation, the dominant model since World War II, is marked by a top-down, donor-recipient dynamic where resources and decisions flow from high-income to low- and middle-income countries. It is commonly described as “aid”. Despite decades of reform rhetoric, governance and strategic control remain heavily concentrated in Northern institutions. This model often reflects outdated assumptions of Southern incapacity, perpetuates conditionality and short-termism, and undervalues contributions from the Global South. Having said that, the structural need for redistribution persists: the global North holds the majority of wealth, while historical injustices have left many countries without sufficient means to respond to climate and development challenges.



Wealthier countries contribute; poorer countries benefit.

Horizontal cooperation

Horizontal cooperation arose to counter the hierarchies of traditional aid, promoting partnerships between countries with shared development levels or regional ties. It is most commonly associated with South–South cooperation (although could also describe North–North cooperation) and is grounded in the idea of peer-to-peer exchange, evident in both, through mutual learning, technical assistance, and regional collaboration. The reality often diverges from the ideal: some South–South arrangements reproduce imbalances, with dominant partners driving agendas. Nevertheless, horizontal cooperation has broadened the geography of expertise and challenged the notion that development knowledge flows only from North to South.



Countries of a similar type contribute & benefit.

Triangular cooperation

Triangular cooperation blends traditional donors’ resources with middle-income countries’ expertise to support a third, often lower-income, partner. Conceived as a hybrid between vertical and horizontal models, it promises broader ownership, knowledge co-creation, and enhanced legitimacy. It has grown in popularity in recent decades. Despite its promise, triangular cooperation often reinforces traditional hierarchies: Northern partners typically fund and initiate projects, while rarely adopting the role of learner or beneficiary. Conversely, Southern partners tend not to contribute their expertise northwards. Thus, triangular cooperation seems to be a transitional model, advancing pluralism but still tethered to donor–recipient logics.



Countries have different roles according to level of “development”.

Circular cooperation

All types of countries (North and South) contribute & benefit, according to different capacities and knowledge.

And all have an equal say in how a project is conceived and managed.



Circular Cooperation is a new paradigm for international development. It argues that current cooperation systems remain constrained by outdated donor-recipient frameworks, rooted in hierarchical assumptions that fail to reflect the realities of a multipolar, crisis-prone, and deeply interdependent world.

Circular Cooperation proposes an alternative based on three core principles: *all contribute, all decide, all benefit*. This approach emphasises reciprocal learning and co-creation between countries, institutions, and communities regardless of income level or geography. Rather than treating the Global South as a recipient or the Global North as a provider, Circular Cooperation recognises that every actor has knowledge, expertise, and resources to offer. Projects designed by government agencies, INGOs and multilateral organisations should embed this circular approach from the outset. Financing would still come from those countries best placed to provide it.

The Circular Cooperation approach positions cooperation as a continuous process of mutual development, and underscores the contributions of the Global South not only to their own progress but to global solutions—from education innovations in Latin America to health responses in West Africa.

Circular Cooperation is rooted in three key intellectual traditions: post-development theory, which rejects hierarchical development and values diverse knowledge systems; Global IR, which embraces a multiplex world of plural legitimacy and regional agency; and contributive justice, which emphasises fair participation and co-creation over mere redistribution.

Circular Cooperation could improve outcomes, strengthen systems, circulate innovation globally, and enhance both relevance and trust. Crucially, it positions dignity not as an outcome of cooperation but as a point of departure.

A strength of the international cooperation ecosystem is its diversity of modalities. To begin with, at least, circular cooperation should not be understood as a replacement for other models - but as an additional string in the bow of international cooperation.

Ultimately, circular cooperation is both a normative and operational framework for reimagining how countries and communities collaborate to address shared risks and pursue common goals. It provides a new logic of global development.

By embedding Circular Cooperation in the work of development agencies and INGOs, and in global governance (e.g. UN frameworks, multilateral development banks, new financing mechanisms) we can build a system that reflects today's world.

Circular Cooperation creates tangible and far-reaching benefits for countries in the South and North alike, and for the world as a whole.

For the Global South: dignity, agency, and opportunity

- A narrative based on dignity and respect
- Better positioning in global debates
- Participation in managing their own development
- Social and capacity-building benefits
- Economic and commercial gains

For the Global North: legitimacy, innovation, and mutual learning

- Access to practical solutions and new thinking
- Cultural exchange and mutual enrichment
- Improved public support for international cooperation
- Social and environmental gains
- Long-term relationships to address deep-rooted challenges

For the world: shared solutions and stronger systems

- Global solutions from all corners of the world
- A more sustainable and legitimate cooperation system
- Stronger collective action

About Global Cooperation Institute

The Global Cooperation Institute works with partners to create modern approaches to global cooperaton in the 21st century, combining the *latest evidence* with *compelling narratives* and *practical solutions*. At the heart of all our work are three words: **mutuality**, **dignity** and **sustainability**.