

Revisiting Dependency Theory in the Age of South–South Cooperation

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Abstract

The emergence of South–South Cooperation (SSC) has been represented as a necessary corrective to hierarchical aid models with numerous conditions of traditional North–South cooperation. This paper draws from dependency theory to ask if emerging powers - most notably, China, India, and Brazil are transforming or reproducing dependency dynamics within the model of cooperation offered through SSC frameworks. The core research question is: Does SSC truly challenge the tenets of dependency, or simply construct a new set of dependency relationships under an emergent metageopolitical context? Using a comparative qualitative methodology, the paper will offer a critical look at practices of development cooperation, through the examination of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Africa, as compared to India’s Lines of Credit and International Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC), and Brazil’s more limited technical assistance in agriculture. Findings report that while SSC often circumvents conditionalities, SSC cannot be stripped of strategic interests or asymmetries present in the dynamics of cooperation. That said, recipient countries seem to be exhibiting negotiated agency and are able to unsettle or reshape dependency from below. The paper concludes with a call to re-theorize dependency in a multipolar world - one that accepts the mobility of dependencies but also accounts for the changing capacities of Global South actors to resist and reconstruct development cooperation on their own terms.

Keywords: Dependency Theory, South–South Cooperation, Power Asymmetries, Aid

South–South Cooperation (SSC) has emerged as critical mechanism in global development, offering an alternative to hierarchical North–South aid frameworks. Traditional aid models often involve stringent conditionalities, policy prescriptions, and embedded asymmetries that reflect historical patterns of dependency between developed and developing nations (Prebisch, 1950; Frank, 1967). In contrast, SSC is frequently framed as

a more horizontal, mutually beneficial partnership, emphasizing solidarity, knowledge sharing, and capacity building among countries of the Global South (UNDP, 2010; Fues et al., 2016). Over the last two decades, major emerging powers such as China, India, and Brazil have significantly expanded SSC initiatives, reshaping development cooperation patterns across Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Bräutigam, 2009; Riggirozzi &

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Tussie, 2012).

Despite its purported egalitarian nature, SSC raises important questions regarding the persistence of dependency. Dependency theory, first developed by Raul Prebisch and further articulated by scholars like Andre Gunder Frank, provides a framework to analyze structural inequalities in global economic and political systems. The theory argues that peripheral nations remain dependent on core countries for capital, technology, and markets, limiting autonomous development and perpetuating underdevelopment (Frank, 1967; Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). While classical dependency theory was primarily applied to North–South relationships, the rise of emerging powers as major development actors necessitates reconsideration of these dynamics. SSC could represent a significant shift in global power structures, or it could merely reproduce similar dependencies under a new guise (Fues et al., 2016).

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India's Lines of Credit and International Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC), and Brazil's technical assistance in agriculture provide illustrative cases to examine this question. The BRI emphasizes large-scale infrastructure and investment projects across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. While explicit political conditionalities are limited, these projects often serve China's strategic and geopolitical interests, raising concerns about subtle forms of dependency (Bräutigam, 2009; Corkin, 2013). India's SSC programs focus on capacity building and concessional loans for infrastructure, education, healthcare, and renewable energy.

Theoretical synthesis

Dependency Theory emerged in the mid-20th century as a critical framework to understand the persistent underdevelopment of peripheral nations within the global capitalist system. Scholars like Raúl Prebisch (1950) and André Gunder Frank (1967) posited that the economic structures of developing countries were shaped by ex-

ploitative relationships with developed nations, leading to a cycle of dependency and underdevelopment. Prebisch's work emphasized the need for structural changes to break free from this dependency, advocating for import substitution industrialization and regional integration as strategies for economic autonomy.

South–South Cooperation (SSC) refers to the collaborative efforts among developing countries to address common challenges and promote mutual development. The concept gained prominence in the post-World War II era, with initiatives like the Bandung Conference of 1955 serving as a precursor to formalized cooperation among the Global South (UNDP, 2010). SSC was initially viewed as a means for countries in the Global South to assert their agency and reduce reliance on traditional Western-dominated aid structures.

In recent decades, SSC has expanded significantly, driven by the growing economic and political influence of emerging powers such as China, India, and Brazil. These countries have increasingly engaged in development cooperation through mechanisms like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India's Lines of Credit, and Brazil's technical assistance programs (Bräutigam, 2009; Kumar, 2017; Carvalho, 2018). These initiatives are often framed as alternatives to North–South aid, emphasizing mutual benefit, respect for sovereignty, and non-interference in domestic affairs.

Despite the rhetoric of equality and mutual benefit, scholars have questioned whether SSC truly transcends the dependency patterns characteristic of North–South relations. Some argue that emerging powers may replicate similar exploitative dynamics under the guise of cooperation. For instance, China's BRI has been critiqued for creating debt dependency in participating countries, raising concerns about neocolonial practices (Corkin, 2013). Similarly, India's Lines of Credit, while less coercive, have been scrutinized for serving strategic interests that may not align with the development priorities of recipient countries (Pant, 2018). The

concept of “neo-dependency” has been introduced to describe these new forms of dependency within SSC frameworks. This perspective suggests that while SSC may reduce overt conditionalities, it does not eliminate power asymmetries and may even introduce new forms of dependency through economic leverage and strategic influence (Fues et al., 2016).

Contrary to the notion of passive recipients, many studies highlight the agency of countries engaged in SSC. Recipient nations often negotiate terms, adapt projects to local contexts, and seek to leverage SSC for their own development goals. This dynamic challenges the deterministic view of dependency, suggesting that countries can exercise autonomy and reshape cooperation to align with their interests (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012).

However, the extent of this agency varies. Factors such as political stability, institutional capacity, and alignment of interests with donor countries influence the ability of recipient nations to assert their autonomy. In some cases, strategic partnerships within SSC have enabled countries to diversify their development partners and reduce over-reliance on traditional Western donors (Gray, 2016).

The evolving landscape of global power necessitates a re-examination of Dependency Theory. The rise of emerging powers has introduced new complexities to the traditional North–South dichotomy. Scholars argue for a nuanced understanding of dependency that accounts for the shifting power dynamics and the multiplicity of actors involved in development cooperation (Nilsen, 2025).

This re-theorization involves recognizing the fluidity of dependency relationships and the capacity of countries to navigate and negotiate these dynamics. It also entails acknowledging the diverse forms of cooperation and the varying degrees of influence exerted by emerging powers, thereby challenging the binary categorization of countries as either donors or recipients (Palacios-Cívico, 2023).

Research Hypotheses

This study is guided by three central hypotheses that interrogate the dynamics of South–South Cooperation (SSC) in relation to dependency theory.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): SSC reduces aid conditionalities compared to North–South cooperation. Traditional North–South aid has long been associated with explicit policy conditionalities, often limiting the autonomy of recipient countries and reinforcing dependency (Prebisch, 1950; Frank, 1967). SSC, by contrast, is framed as a horizontal partnership emphasizing mutual benefit and respect for sovereignty (Fues et al., 2016). H1 posits that SSC mechanisms, such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India’s Lines of Credit, and Brazil’s technical assistance programs, are less coercive and allow recipient countries greater discretion in program design and implementation.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Emerging powers’ strategic interests reproduce new forms of dependency. SSC still reflect asymmetrical power relations, where donor countries leverage economic or strategic influence to achieve national objectives (Corkin, 2013; Pant, 2018). H2 suggests that SSC can create “neo-dependency,” where recipients remain influenced by donor priorities even in ostensibly horizontal arrangements.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Recipient countries exercise agency to negotiate and reshape cooperation. Scholarship increasingly emphasizes the role of recipient states as active participants capable of negotiating terms, adapting programs to local contexts (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012; Gray, 2016). H3 posits that SSC provides space for recipient countries to exercise agency, thereby partially mitigating dependency and transforming development outcomes.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative qualitative research design to examine the dynamics of South–South Cooperation (SSC) and its relationship with dependency

theory. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for exploring complex social and political phenomena, as they allow for a detailed understanding of processes, strategies, and the exercise of agency in development cooperation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By comparing SSC initiatives undertaken by China, India, and Brazil, the study seeks to identify patterns of conditionality, strategic interests, and recipient autonomy, and to assess whether SSC reproduces or mitigates dependency.

The first case, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Africa, exemplifies large-scale infrastructure and investment programs, which are strategically and economically significant for both China and recipient countries (Bräutigam, 2009; Corkin, 2013). The second case, India's Lines of Credit and International Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC), focuses on concessional loans and technical assistance across sectors such as education, healthcare, and renewable energy (Pant, 2018; Kumar, 2017). The third case, Brazil's technical assistance in agriculture, involves smaller-scale programs aimed at knowledge and technology transfer, emphasizing capacity building over strategic leverage (Carvalho, 2018).

Data for this study were collected from multiple sources to ensure triangulation and enhance credibility. Primary sources included official policy documents, government reports, and programmatic statements from both donor and recipient countries. Secondary sources consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports by international organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2010). Supplementary information was drawn from news articles and case studies to provide contextual understanding of each initiative. This combination of sources enables a comprehensive analysis of both the stated objectives and the practical implementation of SSC programs.

The data were systematically analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns across cases, including the presence or absence of conditionalities,

strategic interests of donor countries, evidence of recipient agency, and socio-economic outcomes for recipient countries (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Cross-case comparisons were conducted to assess similarities and differences, highlighting how SSC mediates dependency and agency in various contexts.

Reliability was enhanced through systematic documentation of data collection procedures and analytical coding. While qualitative research is context-specific and not fully generalizable, the selection of well-documented SSC initiatives provides transferability to similar settings. Several limitations should be acknowledged: the reliance on publicly available documents may overlook informal negotiations or undocumented practices, and the focus on three case studies limits broad generalization. Additionally, SSC initiatives are dynamic, and findings may evolve as programs develop or new partnerships emerge

Key Findings

The analysis of South–South Cooperation (SSC) initiatives across China, India, and Brazil reveals a complex interplay of agency, strategic interests, and dependency. SSC initiatives generally circumvent the overt conditionalities characteristic of North–South aid, providing recipient countries with a higher degree of operational autonomy. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) exemplifies this pattern, as it emphasizes infrastructure development and investment without explicit policy prescriptions (Bräutigam, 2009). Recipient governments are largely free to design project execution strategies and select local partners, which contrasts sharply with the structural adjustment programs historically associated with North–South aid (Corkin, 2013). India's Lines of Credit and International Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programs similarly reduce formal conditionalities, providing concessional loans and technical assistance for sectors such as education, healthcare, and renewable energy (Pant, 2018; Kumar, 2017).

Brazil's technical assistance in agriculture is even less coercive, focusing primarily on knowledge transfer and agricultural innovation (Carvalho, 2018). In each case, SSC initiatives are presented as partnerships grounded in principles of mutual benefit, non-interference, and respect for sovereignty (UNDP, 2010; Fues et al., 2016). Despite the reduction in explicit conditionalities, emerging powers often embed strategic and geopolitical interests in their SSC programs, creating new forms of dependency. The BRI illustrates this dynamic most vividly. While projects are presented as development-oriented, they frequently involve significant debt financing, which increases recipient countries' exposure to financial leverage and influence from China (Corkin, 2013). In several African countries, high levels of debt incurred under BRI projects have led to concerns about long-term economic dependency, raising questions about the asymmetry of power between donor and recipient (Bräutigam, 2009). India's SSC programs, though smaller in scale, similarly serve to enhance its regional influence, particularly in South Asia and Africa. Concessional loans and technical assistance often align with India's strategic goals, such as strengthening political ties, accessing markets, or promoting regional security interests (Pant, 2018). Brazil's technical assistance, while limited in scope, also serves its soft power objectives, enabling Brazil to consolidate its leadership within regional blocs like MERCOSUR and the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) (Carvalho, 2018).

Evidence suggests that many recipient nations actively adapt SSC programs to local contexts, negotiate terms, and leverage partnerships for domestic development priorities. For example, in Ethiopia and Kenya, governments have strategically aligned BRI projects with national development plans, selectively engaging with sectors that maximize local employment, infrastructure connectivity, and technological capacity (Corkin, 2013). Similarly, India's Lines of Credit have been used

by countries such as Sri Lanka and Nepal to support critical infrastructure projects while retaining significant discretion over project management and implementation (Kumar, 2017). Brazil's agricultural assistance programs demonstrate recipient-driven adaptation through pilot projects and knowledge transfer, enabling local institutions to integrate Brazilian technical expertise into their own agricultural systems while maintaining control over decision-making (Carvalho, 2018).

A comparative analysis of the three cases highlights nuanced differences in the exercise of agency and the extent of dependency. China's BRI projects, due to their scale and financial complexity, tend to limit recipient autonomy relative to India's and Brazil's programs. However, even within the BRI, some countries have demonstrated remarkable negotiation capacity, using project financing to attract additional investment from other partners or to negotiate favorable local employment and procurement conditions (Bräutigam, 2009). India's programs, being smaller and more flexible, allow for greater recipient negotiation and alignment with domestic development priorities. Brazil's programs, though modest in scale, offer the highest degree of recipient-driven adaptation, emphasizing technical collaboration over strategic influence, suggesting that smaller SSC initiatives may provide more genuine avenues for mitigating dependency.

The findings indicate that SSC contributes to a reconfiguration of dependency relationships rather than their elimination. While traditional conditionalities are less pronounced, the interplay of strategic interests, financial leverage, and technical expertise creates a complex web of interdependence. This reconfiguration is characterized by fluid dependencies, where recipient countries may simultaneously rely on multiple donors, leverage competition among them, and exercise local agency to reshape outcomes (Nilsen, 2025; Palacios-Cívico, 2023). SSC, therefore, cannot be interpreted simply as a departure from dependency; rather, it represents a

transformation in the modalities through which dependency is expressed and managed.

Asymmetrical relation

The findings of this study reveal that South–South Cooperation (SSC) operates within a complex spectrum of autonomy and dependency, challenging traditional assumptions of the Global South’s passivity in development partnerships. SSC initiatives, as exemplified by China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India’s Lines of Credit and ITEC programs, and Brazil’s technical assistance in agriculture, largely minimize the overt conditionalities characteristic of North–South aid. This reduction of formal conditions provides recipient countries with greater flexibility in designing and implementing projects, aligning external support with domestic development priorities (Fues, et. al., 2016; UNDP, 2010).

A central theme in the discussion is the persistence of asymmetrical influence despite reduced conditionalities. The BRI, for example, while ostensibly a development-oriented infrastructure initiative, enables China to secure market access, strengthen political ties, and consolidate regional influence (Bräutigam, 2009; Corkin, 2013). Financial mechanisms, including debt financing, create long-term obligations that can increase recipient dependence, highlighting a form of “neo-dependency” that operates through leverage rather than explicit policy mandates (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2018). India’s SSC programs, though less resource-intensive, similarly pursue strategic objectives such as regional influence, economic partnerships, and soft power consolidation, while Brazil’s agricultural programs serve its leadership ambitions within Latin America and Lusophone countries (Carvalho, 2018; Pant, 2018).

Recipient agency emerges as a critical factor in moderating dependency. Evidence from Africa, South Asia, and Latin America demonstrates that countries actively negotiate SSC terms, adapt programs to local contexts,

and leverage cooperation for national development priorities (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012; Gray, 2016). For instance, African governments engaged with the BRI have selectively integrated projects with national development plans, emphasizing local employment, technology transfer, and infrastructure connectivity (Corkin, 2013). India’s Lines of Credit and ITEC initiatives similarly allow recipient states to prioritize sectors and projects that address domestic needs (Kumar, 2017). Brazil’s technical assistance programs enable recipient countries to integrate knowledge and skills into local agricultural systems while retaining decision-making authority (Carvalho, 2018).

Large infrastructure projects, like those under the BRI, entail financial, technical, and operational dependencies, potentially limiting recipient autonomy. Conversely, smaller-scale, knowledge-based initiatives, such as India’s technical cooperation and Brazil’s agricultural programs, enhance recipient capacity and provide greater space for negotiation (Fues et al., 2016). Multipolarity further modifies the dynamics of dependency. The emergence of multiple influential Global South actors enables recipient countries to diversify partnerships, increasing their negotiating power and reducing reliance on a single donor (Gray, 2016).

Conclusion

A critical contribution of this study is the recognition of recipient agency in shaping SSC outcomes. Evidence from multiple contexts demonstrates that recipient countries are active participants in the design, negotiation, and implementation of SSC initiatives. African nations engaging with the BRI have strategically aligned projects with national development plans, maximizing local employment, infrastructure, and technology transfer (Corkin, 2013). India’s Lines of Credit and ITEC programs provide recipient countries with discretion in prioritizing sectors and projects to meet domestic development goals (Kumar, 2017), while Brazil’s technical

assistance facilitates the integration of knowledge and innovation into local agricultural systems (Carvalho, 2018).

Sectoral focus and project scale further shape the nature of SSC dependency. Large-scale, finance-intensive infrastructure projects create higher potential for reliance on donor expertise and funding, whereas smaller-scale initiatives emphasizing technical assistance and knowledge transfer enhance recipient capacity and institutional development (Fues et al., 2016). Additionally, the multipolarity of SSC, characterized by the involvement of multiple emerging powers, allows recipient countries to diversify partnerships, leverage competition among donors, and strengthen negotiating positions (Gray, 2016; Palacios-Cívico, 2023). These dynamics challenge classical dependency frameworks, which emphasized a rigid North–South dichotomy, and call for re-theorization to account for the fluidity, negotiation, and agency evident in contemporary SSC.

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