

Global South's Qualitative Development: From Quantitative Growth to Sustainable Transformation

GUO Jie

School of International Studies
Peking University
China

ORCID: 0009-0001-1074-9352
guojie@pku.edu.cn

Abstract

This paper critiques post-World War II development strategies in the Global South centered on GDP-driven, resource-intensive growth financed by foreign capital. While driving economic expansion, this model has intensified structural inequality, environmental degradation, and external dependence. Integrating development economics, dependency and world-systems theories, and New Developmentalism, the study advances “qualitative development”, emphasizing endogenous innovation, ecological sustainability, social equity, and South-South cooperation. Comparative evidence from Latin America, Africa, and Asia suggests that institutional reform, strategic industrial diversification, and transparent governance can strengthen resilience and autonomy. Sustainable progress requires balancing market dynamics with proactive state intervention and regional coordination.

KEYWORDS: Qualitative Development, Global South, Structural Inequality, Green Transition, Inclusive Growth.

Desarrollo cualitativo del Sur Global: Del crecimiento cuantitativo a la transformación sostenible

Resumen

Este artículo critica las estrategias de desarrollo posteriores a la Segunda Guerra Mundial en el Sur Global, basadas en el crecimiento del PIB, en recursos y financiadas por capital extranjero, argumentando que ha intensificado la desigualdad estructural, la degradación medioambiental y la dependencia externa. Mediante un enfoque interdisciplinario que incluye el nuevo desarrollismo, se propone el “desarrollo cualitativo”, haciendo hincapié en la innovación endógena, la sostenibilidad ecológica, la equidad social y la cooperación Sur-Sur. Un análisis comparativo en América Latina, África y Asia sugiere que la autonomía económica requiere reformas institucionales, diversificación industrial y una intervención estatal proactiva coordinada regionalmente.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Desarrollo cualitativo, Sur Global, desigualdad estructural, transición ecológica, crecimiento inclusivo.

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1. Introduction

Since the end of World War II, most countries in the Global South have sought economic growth using a traditional model centered on quantitative indicators such as GDP—often relying heavily on resource-intensive industries and foreign investment. Over time, however, the deepening structural inequalities in the global economy, combined with rising resource consumption and environmental degradation, have underscored the shortcomings of this model. An increasing number of nations are thus endeavoring to shift from purely quantitative growth toward “qualitative development”, aspiring to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth through endogenous innovation, green development, and South-South cooperation. In both theory and practice, this study explores how these Global South countries navigate structural challenges in this transition, gradually forging independent and sustainable development models.

2. Developmentalism: From Linear GDP Growth to the Core Tension of Global Structural Inequality

Shortly after World War II, the reconstruction of the global economic order fundamentally transformed the architecture of the capitalist system. Nations in the Global South—confronting intense pressure to catch up economically—turned to development theories as they sought paths consistent with their own conditions. The emergence of developmentalism thus reflects not only the entrenched inequalities within global capitalism but also the Global South’s broader ambition to secure economic autonomy within a globalizing world. Tied to this ambition is the crucial role played by quantitative growth—a concept embodied in linear indicators such as GDP—which starkly illustrates the contradictions and inequalities embedded in the system’s resource allocation.

On the one hand, the notion of linear GDP growth underpins a quantitative model that equates progress with ever-increasing economic output. On the other, scholars have highlighted how global economic structures perpetuate widening inequalities, resource exploitation, and environmental decay. Theoretical debates over these two visions expose

both the skewed distribution of power in global capitalism and the deeper limits of mainstream development patterns. While cross-border capital flows, technology transfers, and worldwide divisions of labor have driven growth in certain nations, they have also widened gaps between countries and regions—particularly between core and peripheral economies.

Walter Rostow’s modernization theory—*The Stages of Economic Growth*—remains a classic articulation of developmentalism, describing a linear, stage-based progression fueled by industrialization, capital accumulation, and technological advancements. Rostow argued that societies must pass through five phases—ranging from a *traditional society* to a *mass-consumption* stage—to complete their transformation into modern, industrial economies. This model draws a clear road map for developing nations, highlighting industrialization and technology as key drivers of growth (Rostow, 1960)¹. Yet its assumptions have proven overly rigid.

South Africa illustrates some of these flaws. While the end of apartheid in 1994 brought neoliberal reforms that nominally introduced market mechanisms, colonial legacies of land ownership survived. By the end of 2017, a report from the Department of Rural Development and Land Reforms indicated that, in terms of individual land ownership, the white minority still held 72% of the nation’s farmland (over 26 million hectares), while black South Africans—who form the majority—occupied less than 5% (Sabi, 2020, p. 138). This “institutional hybridity” complicates any endeavor to promote inclusive growth. Rostow’s framework also presumes each transitional phase is supported by clear social consensus, but South Africa instead displays conflicting “multiple modernities”: while rapid urbanization occurs, an expansive informal economy emerges in parallel; persistently high unemployment is compounded by patronage networks diverting educational resources, creating a persistent mismatch between skill supply and the extractive-industrial core controlled by mining oligopolies; tensions between tribal patronage systems and a modern rule-of-law state are further stoked by “shadow governance,” in which rent-seeking bureaucrats collude with capital interests (Lundahl & Petersson, 2004, pp. 727–742). These multi-layered realities undermine Rostow’s linear assumption

and illustrate how colonial legacies, global power structures, and the reproduction of social relations profoundly shape development outcomes.

This backdrop paves the way for theories such as structuralism, dependency theory, and world-systems theory, which delve more deeply into the built-in imbalances of the global economy.

In *The Economic Development of Latin America and Its Principal Problems*, Raúl Prebisch develops an analytical model of an asymmetrical global economic hierarchy. Contrary to neoclassical assumptions of homogeneous trade among independent, atomistic markets, Prebisch argues that industrialized core nations leverage monopolistic technology, capital, and institutions to set up a “gravitational field” that draws surplus value from peripheral exporters of primary goods. These peripheral economies, locked into rigid production structures and less favorable demand elasticities, experience “deteriorating terms of trade,” losing out on the benefits of technological diffusion. Prebisch reframes this outcome as a manifestation of “structural violence,” introducing a fundamental shift in development economics: he rejects static comparative advantage in favor of historicized, institution-oriented explanations and urges peripheral nations to embrace strategies—like import-substitution industrialization—that counter colonial-era inequities (Prebisch, 1949, 1963; Ocampo, 2001, pp. 23–37).

In the 1960s, dependency theorists further radicalized this critique. They observed that import-substitution industrialization often degenerated into “dependent industrialization,” with multinational capital retaining dominant ownership of strategic industries in peripheral nations through patents, licensing, and financial influence (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979, pp. 149–171). Andre Gunder Frank’s “The Development of Underdevelopment” reframed underdevelopment as an active by-product of the global capitalist expansion—fostered by colonial dispossession—rather than a residual of traditional pre-capitalist structures (Frank, 1966, pp.17–31). Ruy Mauro Marini’s reinterpretation of Marx’s international value theory revealed how global commodity pricing systematically distorts labor-value relations, transferring surpluses to core countries (Marini, 1972, pp. 35–51). Meanwhile, Theotonio Dos Santos contended that dependency is not a

transient anomaly but rather a structural mechanism of global capitalism that reproduces peripheral disadvantage socially, economically, and politically (Dos Santos, 1970, pp. 231–236). Methodologically, dependency theory extended Marxist class analysis onto a global scale, revealing how a transnational capitalist class enforces control through global value chains, and, at the same time, proposed “delinking” from the capitalist system—whether partially or fully— as a radical alternative for developing nations seeking autonomy.

Building on dependency insights, Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein’s *Modern World- System* interprets capitalism as a single, ever-expanding global structure forged since the sixteenth century. It underscores a core–semiperiphery–periphery hierarchy in which core nations, adept at technology and market rules, lock peripheral states into dependent relationships, thus consolidating unequal exchanges and systematically reproducing internal disparities. This approach discards the notion that nation-states are self-contained economic units, instead highlighting international networks and labor divisions as the real loci of analysis. Notably, the “semiperiphery” nuance clarifies how some nations may exploit weaker regions while remaining subordinate to the core’s dictates. Wallerstein also points out that global capitalism thrives on uneven appropriation of labor and resources—an exploitation trajectory persisting from colonial slavery to modern supply-chain integration (Wallerstein, 1974/2011, 1980/2011, 1989/2011, 2011).

In the 1970s, mounting resources and ecological constraints spurred another theoretical pivot. The Club of Rome’s *The Limits to Growth* applied system dynamics modeling to expose how resource overuse, climate change, and exponential consumption challenge the assumption of infinite growth in capitalism and classical developmentalism (Meadows et al., 1972). Data confirm that fossil fuel consumption has soared by about eightfold since 1950, with the International Energy Agency forecasting that by 2030, three-quarters of global energy demand may still rely on fossil fuels (International Energy Agency [IEA], 2024, p.11; Meadows et al., 1972, chap. 5). Intensive resource extraction, whether reflected in deforestation

in the Amazon or desertification in sub-Saharan Africa, increasingly jeopardizes the ecological and social underpinnings of global economic expansion. More fundamentally, *The Limits to Growth* spotlights a systemic imbalance linking the global economy, environment, and social equity. Traditional growth-oriented developmentalism hinges on highly uneven resource distributions that concentrate wealth yet fail to broaden social welfare. This process perpetuates “middle-income traps” in many developing countries, fueling further inequality while restricting their policy options in a system dominated by transnational capital mobility.

Collectively, the shift from developmentalism to growth limits reveals a fundamental quandary: should linear expansion continue under conditions of intensifying resource scarcity and structural inequalities, or must the notion of “development” be rethought to integrate sustainability and justice? This challenge not only tests economic theory’s boundaries but also forces deeper reflection on global governance and future trajectories of development.

3. From “Developmentalism” to “New Developmentalism”: The Latin American Case

Latin America’s developmentalist predicament and its pivot toward new developmentalism highlight a turning point for the Global South. By reviewing this history through pertinent theoretical frameworks, we see that the main question is not merely deriving universal principles from Latin American experiences but also analyzing how these experiences reflect a broader tension—one that emerges when peripheral economies attempt to leap forward in a global capitalist structure that tends to reinforce their subordinate position.

Developmentalism in Latin America was not just a policy bundle but an economic imagination that evolved under particular historical conditions. From the 1930s to the 1970s, countries like Brazil witnessed substantial economic growth as they enacted policies geared toward import-substitution industrialization (ISI). High tariffs, state-led credit, and exchange-rate controls shielded incipient industries, forging a nascent industrial base. Though it mobilized significant resources, this model also hinged on a

power nexus involving state officials, oligarchic capital, and landed elites, often restricting competition and generating rent-seeking. While tariffs and domestic market protection did generate industrial growth, an enduring reliance on primary exports and external capital flows persisted, entrenching the region in semi-dependent ties with global markets. Moreover, external shocks—from commodity downturns to debt crises—consistently tested the viability of “developmentalist” policies (Bresser-Pereira, 2006, pp. 29–44; Gamble, 2001, p. 132; Harvey, 2007, pp. 27–30; Payne & Phillips, 2010, pp. 86–92).

By the early 21st century, “new developmentalism” began to gain traction as a middle path between traditional state-centric industrialization and neoliberal orthodoxy. In a 2004 *Folha de São Paulo* column, Brazilian economist Luiz Carlos Bresser-Pereira formally introduced the concept (Bresser-Pereira, 2004). He later elaborated upon it, defining new developmentalism as both “a response to the crisis of Post-Keynesian Economics” and “an alternative to the dominant Neoclassical Economics and its liberal orthodoxy” (Bresser-Pereira, 2020, p. 115).

Rather than fully shielding domestic markets from external competition, it stresses selective openness, strategic industrial policy, and prudent management of key macroeconomic variables—especially interest rates, exchange rates, and capital flows—so that industrial modernization and social equity can advance in tandem. In contrast to classic ISI’s emphasis on high tariff walls, new developmentalism supports macroeconomic stability, cautious capital controls, and regulated liberalization, reinforced by targeted public investments in infrastructure and social welfare (Bresser-Pereira, 2011a, pp. 108–129; Sicsú et al., 2007, pp. 507–524).

In theoretical terms, new developmentalism amalgamates structuralist and dependency critiques—such as persistent global inequalities and dependence on external forces—with institutional perspectives on how states might foster technological upgrades and fairer welfare outcomes. The approach seeks to harness domestic resources and foreign opportunities while averting financial shocks and external vulnerabilities.

Brazil's policy direction under President Lula's first two terms exemplifies new developmentalism in practice. Rejecting broad tariff barriers, the government kept inflation and fiscal deficits in check, yet steered substantial state bank credit (mainly via BNDES) to bolster targeted manufacturing sectors, infrastructure, and selected innovation projects. As a result, even without a closed market, industrial expansion received significant support. Moreover, ambitious social initiatives—such as Bolsa Família, increased minimum wages, and better public services—elevated domestic purchasing power, helping reduce inequality and poverty. During this period, Brazil's industrial bases did undergo partial upgrading in areas like aviation and oil equipment (Bresser-Pereira, 2011b, pp. 76–85; Ban, 2013, pp. 298–331; Barbosa & Souza, 2010, pp. 57–110; Carneiro, 2011; Mollo & Fonseca, 2013, pp. 222–239). Yet, the resilience of this strategy proved limited once global commodity prices began sliding around 2014, exposing overreliance on a few primary exports (iron ore, soybeans, petroleum) as well as governance challenges tied to rent-seeking coalitions. By 2015, Brazil's GDP growth had dropped to -3.5%, revealing underlying fragilities in its model of “selective openness plus social expansion” (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2025).

Other countries tried comparable strategies. Argentina under the Kirchners harnessed currency devaluation, trade controls, and social welfare expansions to reignite domestic industries, fueled by strong international demand for soy exports (Katz, 2015, pp. 224–249; Varesi, 2011, pp. 33–59; Curia, 2007; O'Connor, 2010, pp. 55–74). Bolivia and Ecuador took a route sometimes known as “new extractivism,” renationalizing resources (e.g., natural gas in Bolivia, petroleum in Ecuador) to secure state revenues for social programs and tentative industrial diversification. Early achievements in poverty reduction were noteworthy, but a continued reliance on global commodity cycles and limited technological innovation often stymied longer-term, sustainable development (Acosta, 2011, pp. 83–118; Svampa, 2015, pp. 65–82; Prada, 2011, pp. 227–256; Gudynas, 2015; Cypher & Alfaro, 2016, pp. 163–186; Larrea, 2013, pp. 1–23).

From these examples, new developmentalism's basic paradox becomes clear: it aims to reconcile domestic industrial policy, regulated openness, macroeconomic stability, and social inclusion, yet it can remain hostage to volatile global markets and local political constraints (Ordóñez & Sánchez, 2017, pp. 365–389). Many scholars agree that new developmentalism requires robust institutional frameworks—especially transparent governance and autonomous technological capacity—if it is to achieve durable gains that do not unravel when commodity prices fall or political coalitions shift.

4. The Qualitative Development of the Global South and Its Future Prospects

Reflections on the Latin American turn from developmentalism to new developmentalism shed light on why many countries in the Global South increasingly recognize that pure GDP-centric goals fall short. Rapid environmental degradation, widening inequality, and deep-rooted dependence on foreign technology and capital have all brought into relief a fundamental “developmental vulnerability.” Hence, these countries are turning toward “qualitative development,” which calls for integrating sustainability, inclusivity, and autonomy into their growth models. This broader rethinking of development plays out amid tight resource constraints, the peripheral status of many Southern economies in global value chains, and diverse domestic political and institutional contexts.

Since the late 20th century, numerous Global South nations have leveraged external capital, resource-based exports, or their incorporation into international supply chains to grow quickly. During commodity booms or favorable capital inflows, GDP surges dramatically; once markets falter or financial volatility erupts, these countries face crises in public finance, industrial competitiveness, and social stability. Brazil epitomizes this pattern: driven by exports of iron ore, soybeans, and petroleum, it attained high foreign-exchange earnings and improved poverty indicators during the commodity “super cycle,” but slid into recession after 2014's global price drop. Although Brazil achieved a record trade surplus of US\$83.8 billion

in 2023, its export structure is still dominated by primary goods, leaving it exposed to external price shocks (Ministério do Desenvolvimento, Indústria, Comércio e Serviços [MDIC], 2025). Deforestation in the Amazon further undercuts environmental resilience. From 2019 to 2022, the region lost 45,612 km² of forest, including 13,038 km² in 2021 alone—a stark reminder that resource exploitation, ecological fragility, and industrial concentration can spiral into a vicious cycle (Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais [INPE], 2024; Margulis, 2003, pp. 9–16).

Similarly, India has seen remarkable growth since 1990—averaging 3.6% annual per capita income gains over three decades—but suffers from acute inequality. By 2022–2023, the richest 1% in India claimed 22.6% of national income and 40.1% of total wealth, levels surpassing even those under colonial rule (Bharti et al., 2024, pp. 2–3). Meanwhile, many African nations remain heavily reliant on unprocessed primary commodities—oil, minerals, and agricultural goods. This narrow export base not only leaves them vulnerable to global price swings but also depletes soils and forests, undermining future economic potential. Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, has experienced sharp declines in forest coverage, impairing agricultural productivity and magnifying food and social crises.

For these reasons, a traditional growth path that prizes high GDP expansion through resource extraction and investment inflows has proven unsustainable. Many Southern countries have begun to consider “qualitative development” as a potential alternative—one that transcends GDP statistics to encompass ecological stewardship, social equity, and genuine autonomy in innovation. China’s high-speed railway sector underscores how an economy can, through strategic policy support, evolve from importing all core technologies in the early 2000s to designing and manufacturing modern high-speed trains largely with domestic intellectual property (“Fuxing” EMUs) (People’s Daily Online, 2023). By September 2024, China’s high-speed rail lines exceeded 46,000 kilometers, roughly 70% of the global total, allowing the country to shape emerging global standards (Yan, 2024, p. 005). India’s “Digital India” campaign, launched in 2015, presents a parallel shift toward digital infrastructure, public services, and IT-driven innovation,

with the digital economy rising to 11.74% of GDP (approximately US\$368 billion) by 2022–2023 and projected to climb to 13.42% by 2024–2025, highlighting how local innovation ecosystems and governance reforms can reduce dependency on low-value exports (Mishra et al., 2025, p. 13).

Meanwhile, many countries have recognized that a green transition and circular economy can generate sustainable gains. Costa Rica stands out for deriving nearly 100% of its power from renewables and significantly reforesting its lands—forest coverage has risen from 21% to around 60%—all while its GDP grew from US\$4.53 billion in 1987 to US\$61.52 billion in 2020 (Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean [CAF], 2024, pp. 102–103; Groves et al., 2020, pp. 11–12; Castro Salazar, 2024; Ministerio de Ambiente y Energía de Costa Rica, 2024). Kenya’s forward-looking investment in geothermal energy, exemplified by the Olkaria Geothermal Power Station (which supplies more than 40% of its electricity), further illustrates how even countries without vast fossil-fuel resources can build resilient green industries (Knight, 2024).

Achieving such transformations often depends on cross-border collaboration, especially among Southern nations. China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), for instance, has catalyzed extensive infrastructure, manufacturing, and digital investments across Asia, Africa, and parts of Latin America (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2023). The World Bank estimates that “BRI transport projects could lift 7.6 million people from extreme poverty and 32 million people from moderate poverty (those earning less than \$3.20 a day)” (World Bank, 2019, p. xiii). In Africa, regional bodies such as the African Union, the East African Community (EAC), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), alongside the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), are setting the stage for more robust intra-continental trade in processed goods (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2025, p. 14). Latin America’s MERCOSUR, despite political vicissitudes, continues to strengthen intra-bloc trade and structural funds, offering a measure of resilience (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe [CEPAL], 2024, pp. 6–7, 20). ASEAN in Southeast Asia, bolstered by RCEP

(Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership), has seen its collective market expand and its digital economy multiply (Google et al., 2024, pp. 13–14; Hang et al., 2024, p. 4).

Ultimately, efforts toward qualitative development also hinge on more equitable global rules. Present arrangements in trade, finance, and intellectual property typically favor advanced economies, so Global South nations have used forums like climate negotiations to push for “common but differentiated responsibilities,” acquiring funding and technology transfers for a green transition. The 2024 G20 Summit in Rio amplified the Global South’s demand for equitable, sustainable finance, leading to commitments to enhance climate fund accessibility and better align green investments with developing countries’ priorities. Building on this momentum, G20 discussions under Brazil’s presidency also emphasized South-South cooperation and country-led strategies for sharing best practices in renewable energy and sustainable finance, reinforcing a fresh wave of Southern agency in global climate governance (G20 Sustainable Finance Working Group, 2024, pp. 5–7).

5. In conclusion: The Necessity and Potential of Qualitative Development

In today’s global political economy, the Global South’s critical reassessment of quantitative growth models has shifted from theoretical debate to practical urgency, straddling social, economic, and environmental concerns. Latin America’s trajectory, from early developmentalism to tentative experiments with new developmentalism, illustrates that an overreliance on global markets and primary exports leaves peripheral nations vulnerable to volatility, while failing to overcome entrenched power asymmetries. By contrast, “qualitative development” beckons as a more holistic paradigm—one that prizes endogenous innovation, fosters environmental protection, and promotes social inclusion.

Bringing this vision to fruition, however, demands coordinated steps across several dimensions. Macro and industrial policies must align to reduce dependence on external capital, generate domestic technologies,

and catalyze competitive manufacturing. Political and social governance must bolster inclusive institutions, ensuring that basic education, healthcare, and social security can support a growing consumer base and a skilled workforce. Equally, South-South cooperation and reform of global rules—covering trade, investment, and intellectual property—are essential if peripheral states aim to carve out sustainable niches in global value chains. Such changes require not only carefully tuned domestic measures but also sustained efforts at the regional and global levels to reshape the broader context of development.

Looking ahead, qualitative development offers an avenue for nations to address resource constraints and ecological pressures, while also spurring innovative thinking on global economic governance. Through comprehensive institutional reforms and broad-based international coordination, the Global South may finally translate “qualitative development” into a resilient, long-term engine of growth. In this sense, qualitative development is far more than a minor update of older paradigms; it represents a substantial theoretical and practical shift—one that empowers the Global South with greater autonomy, social equity, and capacity to flourish in a rapidly changing world economy.

Notes

- 1 Unlike structuralist development economics, which was grounded in formal models, New Developmentalism initially took shape as a set of policy proposals, with its theoretical framework only gradually consolidated around 2010. That May, twenty-five economists and political scientists from various countries met in São Paulo and adopted the “Ten Theses on New Developmentalism,” a milestone in shaping its conceptual foundations. See: “Ten Theses on New Developmentalism,” *Brazilian Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 31, No. 5 (125), Special Edition 2011, pp. 844–846.

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