



WIKI n°8: The Persistence of the North-South Divide

The North-South divide remains a significant source of political tension in global governance, pitting the developed nations of the North against the developing and emerging economies of the South. This divide is evident in fundamental issues such as poverty, inequality, priorities for economic growth, and the need for reforms in global institutions.

The North benefits from a long-standing tradition of leadership in global affairs, while the South shares a common history of political subordination. This shared past fuels widespread mistrust of the values and practices promoted by developed countries. Institutionally, the divide is entrenched in the UN system, where bloc voting, and coordination often reflect North-South dynamics³¹.

During the establishment of the United Nations Human Rights Council, North-South tensions centered on the scope of rights to be protected, stemming from differing ideological perspectives. Developed countries advocated for a universalist approach, emphasizing civil and political rights. Conversely, developing nations prioritized social and economic rights, reflecting a more relativist perspective. These tensions were also pronounced during negotiations for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where disagreements between the two blocs were particularly evident.

This divide permeates numerous areas of global policy, most notably international economics and environmental issues. Decisions made by the World Trade Organization (WTO) and international financial institutions—regarding tariffs, intellectual property rights, investment rules, or financial aid—are based on models of mutual concessions between developed and developing nations.

In climate diplomacy, the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) exemplifies the North-South divide. This principle acknowledges differing responsibilities among states based on their historical contributions to environmental degradation and the production and consumption patterns of developed nations. While Northern countries attempt to limit the application of this principle, Southern countries—including major greenhouse gas

³¹ Pouliot, V. et Thérien, J. (2024). Chapitre 6. Les grandes tendances dans la fabrique des politiques mondiales. *Comment s'élabore une politique mondiale Dans les coulisses de l'ONU.* (p. 219 -255). Presses de Sciences Po. <https://shs.cairn.info/comment-s-elabore-une-politique-mondiale--9782724642001-page-219?lang=fr>

emitters—continue to criticize developed countries for failing to honor their commitments.

Beyond economics and the environment, the North-South divide influences international negotiations on disarmament, internet regulation, and corruption.

The perception that the North-South divide is becoming obsolete only partially aligns with the realities of international relations. Economically, some nations, such as the "Asian Four Dragons," newly industrialized countries, and other emerging economies, have joined the ranks of the industrialized West.

Politically, not all emerging countries align with the Western bloc. Some align with China, others occupy intermediary positions or navigate between both, while still others, regardless of their socio-economic systems, seek a new non-alignment and advocate for equitable global governance.

Many Southern countries, facing violent internal conflicts, destabilizing foreign interference, natural disasters, and poor governance that diverts resources and wealth to Northern and other Southern countries, struggle to meet their populations' basic needs, particularly food security. These countries experience limited progress in development and growth and are often classified as Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Politically, some previously aligned with the North have recently ³² asserted their "liberation" through coups d'état and shifts in foreign aid partnerships. However, the long-term consequences of these changes remain uncertain.

³²Some of them ended this order, proclaiming their "liberation"... through coups d'état..