

## THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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What term do we use when we wish to discuss the collectivity of countries that constitutes the poorer world? There are quite a few possibilities to choose from:

- The Global South
- The Less-developed World
- The Majority World
- The Non-Western World
- The Poor World
- The South
- The Third World
- The Undeveloped World

In 2007 I wrote a book with the title [An everyday geography of the global South](#) (Routledge). I could have used any of the terms listed above, yet plumped for the Global South. Why?

To answer this question it is necessary to take a short terminological journey. If I had written the book in the 1970s or 1980s I might well have titled it *An everyday geography of the Third World*. Strictly speaking, at least as it was initially formulated, the Third World was the non-aligned World, distinct from the First (capitalist) and Second (socialist/communist) Worlds. But pretty quickly the Third World became a quick-and-easy referent for the poor world. There are many great books with “Third World” in the title; most were published before 1990, and in large part they used “Third World” to denote the Poor World. Looking across my shelves as I write this piece, for example, I can see the third edition of Michael Todaro’s highly influential [Economic Development in the Third World](#) (1985), P.T. Bauer’s polemic [Equality, the Third World and Economic Delusion](#) (1981) and, at the more populist end of the spectrum, the second edition of Paul Harrison’s widely read [The Third World Tomorrow](#) (1983).

The 1980s, however, not only saw the fragmentation of the First/Second World dualism with the collapse of the former Soviet Union at the end of the decade, but also – and perhaps more importantly – the embracing of market reforms by most command economies (China in 1978, Vietnam and Laos in 1986, and the

Soviet Union in 1987, for example), which in the process became so-called “transition” economies. The Third World was always non-aligned more in word than in deed, and to add to this much of the Second World was embracing capitalism with alacrity, notwithstanding some governments continuing to pay lip service to the rhetoric of Socialism. As Deng Xiao-ping, the architect of China’s reforms, is said to have remarked, “it doesn’t matter whether a cat is white or black, so long as it catches mice”. Pragmatism rather than ideology became the order of the day.

To compound these geo-political complications, the key unifying characteristic of the Third World – that it was the poor world – was also losing its explanatory and empirical bite. Nowhere did this have more traction than among the “tiger” economies of East Asia. The East Asian “miracle”, the term used to describe the extraordinary economic expansion of Asia, began with the Newly Industrialising Countries (NICs) of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. In fairly short order these early developers were then joined by Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, and they in turn by the late developers, namely Vietnam and – most notably – China. Many people in these countries began to push against the idea that they were part of a Third World, objecting to its pejorative undertones. They were also, self-evidently, becoming more rich than poor.

This last point, of course, also made some of the alternative terms that scholars and commentators had begun to use equally problematic: “Poor World”, “Less-developed World” and “Undeveloped World”. These terms failed to reflect the degree to which this grouping of countries was becoming increasingly differentiated and therefore less and less amenable to easy categorization.

There are sometimes quite nuanced distinctions that betray where people stand on key issues. Take, for example, the decision whether to refer to the Less-developed World, Undeveloped World, or Poor World. On the face of it these seem to be interchangeable. “Undeveloped World”, however, pays heed to the belief that the “Poor World” is poor because it has been under-developed by the “Rich (or First) World”, through processes of globalization and capitalist expansion. This links the

terminology to dependency theory. “Less-developed World” and “Poor World” are less ideologically loaded, and can be seen as largely descriptive statements turned into collective terms (critics, however, would say that this narrowness, in itself, betrays the ideology of the user by its tacit assumption that there is no history or politics to the patterns of development that we see arrayed around the globe).

In 1983 the Brandt report was published by a commission chaired by the former German Chancellor Willy Brandt. This report identified a North/South line (or Brandt line), and thus popularized another term, namely “The South”. The South is a geographical convenience based on the fact that most of the Poor World lies south of latitude 30° North. There were exceptions, most notably Australia and New Zealand, but nonetheless it worked for many people: scholars, politicians and the media. Critics, however, objected to the fact that once again it hid from view the political and economic processes and historical inheritances that rendered these southern countries poor in the first place. It portrayed their poverty as a geographical accident (although the New Environmental Determinists would argue otherwise). Within a decade, however, even the term the South was showing evidence of losing its definitional appeal because of the differentiation processes noted above.

By the 1990s, then, scholars were in a bit of a pickle. We need from time to time to refer to the Third/Poor World, or some such thing, to avoid long-winded inclusions and exclusions. And yet this world was becoming harder and harder to pigeonhole as the political and economic certainties of the past were fraying. However, it is also one of those cases of “we know it when we see it”, and it can be become rather trying when people point out “Ah yes, but what about Singapore ...”, or “but Australia is also in the South”. There were a few alternative attempts to arrive at terms that downplay the poor/undeveloped character of this region of the globe. Some scholars took to referring to the “Majority World” on the basis that the South supports some 80 per cent of the globe’s population and a large proportion of

UN-recognized states. But this term hasn’t caught on, I sense because it is obtuse and its meaning is less than clear. Another option that has found favor in some quarters is the “Non-Western World”, which separates Europe and North America (the West), from the rest. This has fallen foul, I think, of its own geo-cultural inclinations.

And so we return to the question: why “the global South” rather than just “the South”? The reasoning here, as I explained in my 2007 book, is that the addition of the word “global” makes it clear that this is not a strict geographical categorization of the world but one based on economic inequalities which happen to have some cartographic coherence. It also emphasizes that both North and South are, together, drawn into global processes rather than existing as separate slices of the world. Conditions in the Global South are only understandable when they are set against those in the Global North; global processes and structures make all countries part of an increasingly integrated world.

All that said, I doubt very much that the story ends here. The Global South, too, will in time get tripped up by events.

*Jonathan Rigg is the author of [An Everyday Geography of the Global South](#)*

