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PANDEMIC PERSPECTIVES: WHY DIFFERENT VOICES AND VIEWS MATTER

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The Covid-19 Pandemic as an Opportunity for Leveraging Global South Research and Knowledge*

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Abstract The Covid-19 pandemic brought a wave of uncertainty that created a demand for different kinds of knowledge worldwide, the global South included. The digitalisation of international debates unleashed some barriers to participation and facilitated the integration of global South researchers. This article reflects on the review of global South research projects and information from Southern Voice's digital knowledge hub. It shows examples and argues that further recognition from external actors of global South research and findings and the possibility of exerting leadership set new precedents for knowledge production and sharing. We conclude that the continuation and encouragement of these trends can help to reduce the knowledge asymmetries between the global North and the global South.

Keywords knowledge generation, research, global South thinktanks, leadership, inclusive debates, Covid-19.

1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted all aspects of life. Against this backdrop, timely knowledge became crucial to set a course of action for the response and recovery from the pandemic.

Knowledge producers, including thinktanks, which are the focus of this article, responded differently to the Covid-19 crisis according to their context. Thinktanks are organisations that aim to bridge research and policymaking processes. They can be catalysts for new ideas and conveners of a range of perspectives. Scientific research capability is crucial to foster economic development and, therefore, to prompt a healthier recovery from the pandemic (Albanna, Handl and Heeks 2021). Thus, the role of thinktanks and other knowledge generation actors is even more crucial in times of crisis when new perspectives can provide solutions that make a life-or-death difference.

Knowledge producers had to adapt their research and policy analysis strategies due to a demand for swift answers. For thinktanks in the global South, the pandemic period became a testing ground for new ways of collaborating with foreign stakeholders, including donors, global decision makers, and other researchers. This article focuses on the latest knowledge production and dissemination approaches among global South thinktanks triggered by the pandemic. Among the factors affecting the functioning of these organisations are the limitation of international travel, the need for rapid responses, and the consolidation of online events. This article argues that the Covid-19 crisis empowered global South researchers to play a more active role in generating and disseminating knowledge.

We assert that, due to the pandemic, actors at different levels became more aware of the importance of knowledge produced in the global South and became more frequent consumers of it. This was reflected in the increased number of demands of experts from the global South that Southern Voice – a network of 59 organisations across Africa, Asia, and Latin America – received and the success stories from the network member organisations. The pandemic created opportunities for thinktanks to take on leadership roles to set their research priorities and respond to policy challenges. We argue that if these trends persist and are further encouraged, they can help to balance the knowledge generation ecosystem and bring in much-needed new perspectives from the global South that inform better evidence-based policies at all levels. This article builds up on the experiences of the 59 thinktanks of the Southern Voice network.

2 What are we missing when global South knowledge is missing?

International development research is overwhelmingly produced by researchers based in the global North (Amarante *et al.* 2021). Similarly, global South researchers have a low participation in international development policy debates. For example, only 12 per cent of contributors to the United Nations Development Programme's *Human Development Report* (1990–2020) were working in lower-middle-income countries at the time of its publication and the percentage was even lower for the World Bank *World Development Report* (1978–2020). Out of these numbers, most global South contributors were rather activists or politicians as opposed to researchers, which was not the case for global North contributors (Ranconi *et al.* 2021). These findings suggest that bringing global South perspectives and research contributions is an unfinished business.

According to Karlsson, Srebotnjak and Gonzales (2007), the lack of inclusion of global South perspectives in research reduces intellectual capital, influences research priorities, and prioritises some views over others. Also, it affects how research is designed, interpreted, and applied. Increasing the number of quality contributions from the global South is pivotal to ensure that

Southern researchers' perspectives, ideas, and solutions are not overshadowed and to foster inclusive and, hence, better and impartial knowledge (Blicharska *et al.* 2017).

Also, when global South knowledge is missing, society is missing out on local and global expertise. Global South thinktanks from the Southern Voice network across Africa, Asia, and Latin America reacted swiftly to urgent and changing evidence needs. They provided data and timely analysis and engaged in digital platforms for dialogue. During the critical stages of the pandemic, global South thinktanks provided policymakers with short-term solutions to alleviate its consequences, such as mechanisms to target beneficiaries of food assistance programmes (Southern Voice 2021a).

Considering that local knowledge provides holistic solutions to a specific problem (Kolawole 2015), it is decisive to ensure accurate and context-specific answers crafted to face the Covid-19 crisis and recovery; hence, the importance of providing developing countries' policymakers and other stakeholders with solutions led by local researchers. While global South knowledge is relevant to crafting targeted solutions, it is worth recognising that it is more than just local knowledge. An internal review of the research produced by thinktank members of Southern Voice reveals that, despite the diverse settings, there are significant commonalities in the issues countries have been facing across the global South. This suggests substantial opportunities for knowledge aggregation and sharing to inform international debates.

3 Covid-19 disruptions and opportunities

The pandemic has disrupted knowledge production and shed some light on alternatives to doing things differently. While it is unrealistic to think that this disruption affected knowledge generation trends once and for all, it might have fostered changes in practical factors, such as access to funding or leadership in North–South research partnerships. Donors are crucial actors when talking about doing things differently. They often set the pace and the agenda of these partnerships in either academic research or international development cooperation (Carbonnier and Kontinen 2014). Similarly, overfocusing partnerships on Northern organisations neglects national or regional research networks (Tan–Torres Edejer 1999) and influences agenda-setting and research prioritisation. Even though quantitative literature is rather silent on the impacts of these practical factors, one could argue that they have the potential to remove barriers for more inclusive knowledge generation.

This article does not pretend to assess the influence of global South researchers in national, regional, or global research and discussions. Instead of narrowing the analysis to scientific publications, we propose focusing on other types of knowledge or evidence outputs. Rigorous analyses, reports, case studies,

and other publications from researchers across the network have broadened the knowledge of the pandemic's impacts on different economic and social sectors and elucidated the role of these practical factors.³ This article is based on informal discussions with some of our member organisations and is complemented by information from Southern Voice's projects.

4 Global South leadership in Covid-19 times

The pandemic gave global South thinktanks an opportunity to exert new forms of leadership by identifying problems in a timely manner, providing evidence of policy issues, or envisioning future solutions.

This leadership was visible through the ideas that thinktanks have brought forward. For example, when lockdowns started in Peru, Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE) raised early alarms about how traditional marketplaces were potential sources of contagion. With rapid geospatial analysis and existing evidence from research projects, it was possible to identify the riskiest markets in Lima's vulnerable neighbourhoods. With this evidence, GRADE positioned this issue in the public domain. They raised awareness of the problem while at the same time facilitated discussions on alternatives to prevent the spread of the virus in high-risk places.

In India, preliminary results from a study by the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA) provided feminist organisations, women's rights groups, and civil society organisations with the necessary evidence to author a position paper on making remote learning accessible to girls. This information also allowed the organisations to propose measures to make policies on teacher training and teacher and student welfare more gender responsive.⁴

Furthermore, thinktanks also provided new visions for the future. For example, Espacio Público (Chile), in alliance with Ethos (Mexico) and Transforma (Colombia), seized the momentum of the pandemic to begin discussions about the necessary transformation to foster resilient and fair economic recovery. Recommendations were very context specific and emphasised the need to implement measures without sharpening regional social, environmental, and economic crises (Latinoamérica Sostenible 2020).

These are just a few examples of how the pandemic enabled global South thinktanks to take a leading role in providing ideas to better respond to Covid-19 and propose solutions to face the challenges.

5 What are the factors enabling more leadership?

Three enabling factors to exert more leadership stand out: flexibility on new funding or ongoing projects; new partnership arrangements; and innovation opportunities.

First, the pandemic fostered the allocation of somewhat more flexible international funding and the quick adaptation of current projects. Beyond new grants, researchers had to adapt ongoing projects to the reality of the pandemic. An On Think Tanks survey (2020) corroborates that early on in the pandemic, most thinktanks approached their donors to discuss more flexibility in their funding arrangements. New flexible funding materialised only a few months after the lockdowns started. When funding was flexible, thinktanks set their research agendas based on national priorities. A survey shows that most thinktank members of the Southern Voice network adapted their plans to the Covid-19 context (Southern Voice 2021b), including the thematic focus of their work and approaches. A Southern Voice Covid-19 Hub review revealed that thinktanks responded creatively to the pandemic by repurposing research tools to answer new questions and using previous evidence to inform new issues. As highlighted by a Peruvian thinktank, the pandemic successfully tested their capacity to respond to emerging needs swiftly (On Think Tanks 2020).

Research partnerships were ubiquitous during the pandemic. Some research projects required thinktanks to apply for international funding as a consortium, which encouraged South–South and North–South collaborations. The proliferation of these partnerships empowers those who participate in them, increases information sharing, speeds up innovation (Hagedoorn, Link and Vonortas 2000), and enhances collaboration with less well-known organisations. These partnerships diversify and strengthen research findings and allow thinktanks to develop national and global potential solutions. For example, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), together with the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), two thinktanks located in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka respectively, crafted global recommendations to tackle the problem of the garment value chain. They convened private sector stakeholders and suggested that market players in the global apparel value chain consider a distributive approach to ensure that a minimum required number of orders and income is sourced from suppliers (Moazzem *et al.* 2021).

The adoption of virtual modalities for meetings also reduced the time and costs of partnerships. In the experience of Southern Voice, members have been successful despite the restrictions on in-person meetings. While in-person meetings have significant benefits, not having that expectation reduces costs and opens new possibilities for collaborations.

In the context of the pandemic, thinktanks had the opportunity to innovate in their work and explore a diversity of mechanisms to remain relevant. For example, Grupo Faro (Ecuador) prepared fact sheets to inform citizens about a range of topics, including public finance and macroeconomic stability and shared them through WhatsApp groups. This channel of communication

worked in both ways. People interacting in these groups used this information and provided thematic suggestions for upcoming fact sheets.⁵

Many thinktanks in the global South were able to implement diverse solutions on the ground and study their outcomes. One example is how the Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa (CSEA), a Nigerian thinktank, in an effort to research and propose education solutions for underprivileged children, paid low-cost private schools to provide supplementary teaching to support these children (Obiwulu 2021). Also, during the pandemic, when access to hygiene products and services was key to fight against the spread of the virus, BRAC established handwashing stations across Bangladesh and disseminated hygiene practices. This innovative approach allowed them to generate evidence that promoted better hygiene behaviour (Clark *et al.* 2021). These are just a few examples of innovative research projects that were developed to respond to the crisis.

6 Greater recognition of global South knowledge

Alongside leadership, greater recognition of the importance of global South knowledge is indeed another practical factor playing a role in the drive for more inclusive knowledge generation. We argue that since the pandemic, there has been greater recognition from global actors of global South knowledge. This was possible thanks to the opportunities brought by the pandemic and was evidenced in an increased demand for solid analysis and targeted information.

6.1 The bright side of the pandemic

The pandemic made in-person meetings impossible and online dialogues the norm. International development fora were cancelled or changed to a virtual setting. This new arrangement was an opportunity for global South researchers to participate in these debates. This change resulted in fewer participation constraints caused by planning and logistical arrangements (e.g. obtaining visas) or lack of travel budget. It therefore boosted the number of researchers participating in these spaces. Online collaborative platforms, such as We the People, were also crucial tools to capture and feature the views of a broader audience in written format (Igarapé Institute 2021). While it is difficult to track the impact of participation in these dialogues, one could argue that global South researchers reached out to a greater audience than in previous years, made their views known, and got more opportunities to position their findings and opinions.

In addition, thinktanks manage to convene larger national and international audiences using less resources. Regardless of the level of involvement of global South researchers in international debates, the extent to which these debates reflect their views, whether at the global or regional levels, is still unclear.

7 Turning the pandemic into an opportunity for more voice

There is evidence of increased awareness about the need to have a balanced set of speakers in various international development fora, from academic conferences to global consultative processes, such as Our Common Agenda.⁶ The rising number of speaker recommendation requests that Southern Voice receives confirms this. There seems to be more awareness that a global discussion is incomplete without the participation and perspectives of the global South. In other words, there is a general understanding that the Covid-19 virus is a global problem and as such, it demands global solutions that include the views of both the global North and the global South. Therefore, cooperation between the global North and the global South is essential if we are to solve this and future global challenges (Buitendijk *et al.* 2020).

7.1 More inclusive and better-quality global debates

We claimed above that global South perspectives strengthen and improve the quality of the policy debates. Take as an example the discussion about the future of work. The Centre for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth (CIPPEC) in Argentina has been leading the development of perspectives grounded in the realities of the global South.⁷ The researchers identified that the main arguments and narratives on the global discussion of the future of work were irrelevant for the global South. While in the global North the focus is on how artificial intelligence will make specific jobs obsolete, in the global South, the debate focuses on the 290 million people who will be joining the labour market in these regions. Similarly, it is impossible to talk about the future of work in the global South without considering the 75 per cent of the population from the least developed countries who are not connected to the internet (ITU 2021).

Global South researchers know their context well and are better positioned to inform about local developments and enrich global discussions. The pandemic made this statement clearer. During the adoption of lockdown and social distancing measures worldwide, it was noticeable that the effectiveness of these measures varied from one place to another. Some global South scholars provided inputs to refine these measures and respond to challenging contexts. These contexts were often characterised by populations earning a living in the informal economy, dependent on daily wages to feed their families, and with children unable to meet their nutritional needs (ILO 2021; UNICEF 2021). This knowledge of the local situation and needs strengthens the value of global South knowledge generation. Organisation members of the Southern Voice network reported that their outputs were well received and often triggered more collaborations with policymakers and other stakeholders.

8 Conclusions and recommendations

Going beyond the role that global South thinktanks played at the national level, one could argue that leadership and recognition are also desirable qualities to integrate global South perspectives into international debates. While recognition comes from other actors such as national and global policymakers alike, leadership is an intrinsic quality of each organisation. Greater recognition of global South inputs creates demand and therefore allows room for other perspectives. Global South thinktanks have shown the potential to establish priorities and lead initiatives if they are provided with the right setting. Increased recognition and leadership could be considered global South levellers that help strengthen knowledge generation on the grounds of structural inequalities.

This new configuration, with more virtual spaces, the possibility to adapt the research agenda, and high receptiveness, among other factors, has made room for global South researchers' ideas and priorities. While the added value they bring as providers of local knowledge to craft policies and contextualise measures is unquestionable, their role as knowledge trend-makers remains unresolved. This transformation lies in a paradigm change rooted in the need to recognise the value and potential influence that global South knowledge could exert on global issues. And this change is manifested in how global South knowledge is perceived and then applied by other actors.

The following are some general recommendations for different stakeholders on what we believe is crucial to maximising the benefits of the current setting in the years to come:

- **For thinktanks:** take advantage of digitalisation. Even when events go back to in-person meetings, we can maximise the benefits of both formats and create hybrid spaces of dialogue that incorporate the best of both in-person and virtual configurations.
- **For global international development actors:** demand global South perspectives. Only a holistic range of perspectives legitimates global discussions. Global events genuinely interested in discussing global problems and finding solutions need to incorporate global South knowledge.
- **For donors:** provide global South thinktanks with the space needed to shape their research agenda and exert more leadership in North–South research partnerships.

Notes

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 - 3 Please visit [Southern Voice's digital knowledge hub](#).
 - 4 P. Kundu, unstructured interview, 2021.
 - 5 M.C. Ortiz, unstructured interview, 2021.
 - 6 The ***Our Common Agenda report*** looks to the next 25 years and represents the Secretary-General's vision on the future of global cooperation and multilateralism.
 - 7 See ***Future of Work in a (Post)Pandemic World – A FoWiGS Dataset***.

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