

Demanding questions on the future of the social sciences

As we move forward in an ever-changing world, it is of critical importance that social scientists seek to understand global shifts and the consequent changing nature of the economic, social, cultural and political world. So argues *Prof. Olive Shisana*, taking notes from the transformative cornerstones of the forthcoming *World Social Science Report for 2013*, which aims to provide robust answers to social science problems.

The rise of the global South

Historical global dominance and wealth accumulation of what is often referred to as the global North – the high-income countries of Western Europe along with Japan, Canada, Australia and the United States (US) – have provided these countries with the economic power to control world trade, setting prices of commodities and natural resources, as well as the global political power that has allowed these select voices to determine the political direction of the world and related public policies, typically in a manner that suit their own interests.

It is now common knowledge that the 2008 financial crisis took a huge toll on the economies of the global North, resulting in stagnating economies, high unemployment, income disparities and other inequalities encouraged by austerity programmes and decreased social spending. It is expected that the negative repercussions of the 2008 recession on the economies of the North will have a resulting impact on who influences the global agenda. A new kid on the block has arrived – countries of the global South are experiencing rapid economic growth, and with that will come the power to influence the direction of global policy and politics.

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Emerging economies of the global South continue to grow while the economies of the global North were abruptly halted by the global recession. According to the UN Development Programme (UNDP 2013), the combined growing economies of China, India and Brazil will surpass that of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Great Britain and the US combined by 2020.

The 2013 World Bank report found that in 2012, economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa, excluding the region's largest

economy of South Africa, was at 5.8% – higher than the developing country average of 4.9%. An article in *The Economist* reported that sub-Saharan Africa accounted for six out of 10 countries with sustained economic growth in the last decade, i.e. Angola, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Chad, Mozambique and Rwanda.

The number of low-income countries globally was reduced from 63 in 2000 to 35 in 2011. In 2011, US\$1.1 trillion of investment capital flowed from developed to developing economies. These recent developments are evidence that the global South is rising. With this shift in global power comes the hope of structural transformation to a more balanced and equal world where the needs of citizens from all corners of the globe will be heard and met.


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It is expected that the rise of the global South will be accompanied by major global shifts in human development, patterns of resource consumption, regional expectations and ultimately the nature of global relations. New voices are beginning to shape the world we have come to know. What will these new entrants bring to the global stage? Importantly, what kind of world will they bring? What values will be driving this change? Who will benefit?

Development patterns

The post-colonial development path encouraged by the global North following the end of World War II has been that of capitalist accumulation of both financial and material resources – what is often referred to as 'getting ahead of the pack', or pursuing the American dream. This development model is not without benefit. Extreme global poverty was reduced in half between 1990 and 2012; an achievement met three years

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Luanda, formerly named São Paulo da Assunção de Loanda, is the capital and largest city of Angola, in Southern Africa.

before the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target of 2015. A sizeable middle-class population in the North has been well established, and there is a growing middle class developing in the South.

But these gains are coupled with serious consequences; most critical is the perpetuation of global inequalities. A global wealth distribution study conducted by the UN found that the top 10% of adults in the world owned 85% of global household wealth. In 2007, the wealthiest 61 million people (1% globally) had the same amount of income as the poorest 3.5 billion people (56% of people around the globe). Forbes reckons that by the end of this year, 1 426 billionaires would have amassed a record net worth of US\$5.4 trillion, while at the same time 20% of the world's population of 1.2 billion people would have been living on less than US\$1 a day. More than one billion people are without safe, clean water and 870 million people are hungry and suffering from chronic undernourishment – almost all of whom live in developing countries.

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These vast inequalities are to be expected from a neoliberal model that encourages wealth accumulation, whether for individual billionaires who profit off the backs of their workers or high-income nations that accumulate wealth from controlling resources and means of production in developing countries. Happiness has become associated with obtaining material resources; even our measurement of development is in the form of economic muscle. This current model of development encourages excessive use of natural resources without any regard for equitable distribution. The idea that as long as 'I have the means to purchase the resource I shall

do so even if it means that I will deplete it' has taken root in many economically endowed countries.

Such huge disparities in wealth, resource acquisition and general population well-being demand a shift in global structures. Can we create a new world order that is based on the values of sharing, as well-articulated by the organisation Share The World's Resources in its advocacy for sustainable economics to end poverty? Can we grow the world economy without thwarting the survival of the poorest?

Questions moving forward

Economic growth in the South will bring opportunities and challenges, as we have seen previously with the economic powerhouses of the North. New questions will arise as to the exact implications of these shifting global power structures. What will these voices from the global South bring to the world by way of alternative approaches to development and improving population well-being? Will they promote economic growth at the expense of human development – for instance, prioritising physical infrastructure by building highways that bypass poor communities?

Will they promote a model that enables the creation of more billionaires in the face of global abject poverty? Will the vision of new leading countries be captured by private sector interests or by population needs? Will private profit supersede public interest as evidenced, for example, in the early days of the debate on access to essential medicines? Will the emerging economic powers of the global South focus on developing new global economic structures based on a redistributive model that will bring justice for all, or will they perpetuate the same inequitable systems that encourage material resource accumulation for some, while others suffer? ■

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