

INTEGRATING DEVELOPMENT JUSTICE, SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS, AND THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT

by Gita Sen



DEVELOPMENT
ALTERNATIVES
WITH WOMEN
FOR A NEW ERA

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1- This is an edited version of the trigger paper written for the Inter-regional Meeting of the Global South Coalition for SRHR & Development Justice, Johannesburg, 1-3 September 2025. Originally intended as an internal document to trigger discussion, it has been edited for a wider audience. It is not comprehensive but selective in its choice of issues. With many thanks to the participants at the Johannesburg meeting, and especially to Laura Laski, Rajat Khosla and Alexa Johns. Any errors of fact or interpretation are mine alone.

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KEY MESSAGES

- 1. Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and Development Justice (DJ) are inseparable. Each depends on the other.**
- 2. The South–North divide on Right to Development (RtD) and DJ has deep historical roots. It is exacerbated today by a huge rise in inequality, North dominance of global economic institutions, and support for the interests of their TNCs.**
- 3. Opposition to SRHR has grown and exploited this divide.**
- 4. But while the paper focuses on the South-North divide, many of the consequences of poorly regulated globalization and financialization are not only experienced in the South but are chickens coming home to roost in the North.**
- 5. Global crises such as COVID19 have exposed systemic injustice and link SRHR to DJ everywhere.**
- 6. A new narrative and coalition are urgently needed.**

I. Motivation & Background

In late 2024, catalysed in part by the prospect of a returning Trump administration in the United States energised by a renewed right-wing blueprint for action (Project 2025), a small group of feminists from the Global South and their allies began working towards a refreshed agenda for development justice, gender equality and human rights including sexual and reproductive health and rights. This paper is a contribution to that journey.

Individuals and their environment

When we think of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), we think first and foremost of individuals “...born free and equal in dignity and rights...entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, without distinction of any kind...” (United Nations Population Fund 2014; ICPD POA: Principle 1). While the POA stated that it was not creating any new human rights, it affirmed the application of human rights standards to all aspects of population programmes (ICPD POA; 1.15). It was the first major population conference to focus on human rights.

At the same time, women’s movements and their allies who together were the major movers of the ICPD, were well aware that the human rights of individuals, including their SRHR, require an enabling environment for their fulfilment. **Development Justice is at the heart of such an environment**². It requires on the one hand global and national social and economic policies, institutions and governance that are not a barrier, but directly and indirectly promote availability, affordability, accessibility and quality of programmes and services, and thereby fulfil the right to development (RtD) and development justice (DJ)³ more broadly. On the other hand, it requires that

2- The Rio Statement that was the consensus outcome of 215 women from 79 countries who took part in “Reproductive Health and Justice International Women’s Health Conference” (Rio de Janeiro, January 24 – 28, 1994) in preparation for ICPD did not use the term development justice as such but understood the importance of an enabling environment, stating clearly that “External debt, structural adjustment programs, and international terms of trade sustain Northern domination, increase inequalities between rich and poor in all countries, aggravate civil strife, encourage the corruption of government leaders, and erode the already meager resources for basic services” (pp 4-5).

3- The terms ‘right to development’ and ‘development justice’ are both used in this paper. While RtD is an internationally recognized human right (both individual and collective), DJ refers to the set of structural and systemic issues, socioeconomic policies and environments that promote equality and justice between and within countries.

national laws and policies will advance the well-being of all individuals and protect and promote their human rights free of coercion, discrimination and violence.

The right to development was clearly affirmed as Principle 3 of the ICPD Programme of Action (ICPD POA)⁴. Chapter III of the POA, which was the first substantive chapter, built on this Principle and connected the dots between Population, Sustained Economic Growth and Sustainable Development. This leveraged Agenda 21 on sustainable development that had been agreed to just two years previously in 1992 at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio.

The actions spelled out in chapter III highlighted investment in human resource development including *inter alia* reproductive health services, family planning, and sexual health care; eliminating inequities and barriers to women in the workforce; strengthening food security and nutrition policies; fair trade policies; creation of employment; and international responsibility to create a supportive economic environment, viz., equitable and non-discriminatory trade, FDI promotion, reduced debt burdens, new and additional financial resources, access to technologies, and structural adjustment programmes responsive to social and environmental concerns.

One might argue that a major factor for the outstanding success by ICPD in reaching consensus among 179 governments was its ability to combine the human rights of all individuals with critical elements of development justice⁵.

Right to development – a tortured history

These consensual commitments notwithstanding, global South versus global North disagreements over RtD had been present from the time of its adoption through UNGA resolution 41/128 in 1986. While 146 member states voted in favour of RtD, there were 8 Northern abstentions including key Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Japan, Sweden, UK) and one negative vote (USA)⁶.

4- “Principle 3: The right to development is a universal and inalienable right, and an integral part of fundamental human rights, and the human person is the central subject of development. While development facilitates the enjoyment of all human rights, the lack of development may not be invoked to justify the abridgement of internationally recognized human rights. The right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet the population, development and environment needs of present and future generations.” ICPD POA, chapter 2.

5-The concept of development justice and its key elements are explored further in section III below.

6- The US voted against RtD in 1986 during the Reagan presidency but switched to supporting it under Clinton in 1993 at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. Under Trump of course the US opposes RtD again. This makes it apparent that US positions can flipflop not only on SRHR but also on RtD (and possibly other issues?).

Key elements of RtD include that it:

- Recognises the agency of individual human beings
- Highlights the importance of collective dimensions of human rights
- Demonstrates indivisibility, interdependence and interrelatedness of human rights
- Stresses the importance of active, free and meaningful participation
- Provides a process to realise all other human rights
- Emphasises the importance of disarmament to peace and development
- Underscores States' duty to cooperate
- Promotes the creation of a fair international economic order to address injustices.

(United Nations Human Rights Council Special Procedures 2025)

Why the South versus North divide on RtD even though many, if not all, of its key elements would each probably be supported by the North?

The post-World War II origins of the divide could be seen in the long battle between civil and political rights espoused by Northern countries versus economic, social and cultural rights supported initially by the Soviet bloc and allies, but increasingly by a South emerging from the depredations of colonial domination and wealth transfers. As a result, although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) itself had been passed in 1948, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural rights (ICESCR) could not come into force until 1966, thanks to these divisions⁷.

The South continued to be resurgent during the 1970s. Southern countries of Asia, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and Africa in the flush of independence from colonization came together with their allies in Latin America to call for a more just New International Economic Order in 1974. This had been preceded by UNGA resolution 2626 in 1970 setting the ODA target of 0.7% of GDP. One might speculate that Northern countries became wary after the decade of the 1970s. RtD may have seemed to the North to be going too far by providing a broad frame for more such actions under a human rights

7- ICCPR includes a range of rights among them the right to life, to freedom of speech, assembly, and association, to life, to privacy, to freedom from torture and arbitrary detention, and to equality before the law. ICESCR on the other hand includes many elements that could be seen as the human rights underpinnings of RtD - right to an adequate standard of living (food, housing, clothing), to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, to education, to work, including fair wages and decent working conditions, and to social security.

umbrella. One can comprehend the fears about reparations of erstwhile colonial powers such as the UK, Germany and Japan, but the position of the Nordic group is harder to explain except for their general concern about RtD being too broad.

Be that as it may, the South versus North divide on RtD/ DJ was present during the UN conferences of the 1990s, including the ICPD, and has not only persisted, but grown into a yawning chasm in the intervening years.

Many factors have been responsible for this worsening, but two bear special emphasis. *First*, increasingly unfettered globalization, liberalization of economies and corporate-led privatization in multiple guises have hugely increased the inequalities between South and North, the haves and have-nots in the global economy. This trifecta has turned increasingly into a quadrifecta of globalization, liberalization, privatization and poorly regulated financialization (GLPF) after the 2008 financial crisis⁸. The South increasingly sees global institutions and processes (especially the IMF, World Bank, and World Trade Organization) as working to benefit the North and especially the North's private corporations including banks and financial intermediaries. Without a doubt, some South countries have benefited more than others from these mega economic changes, altering interests and alignments. However, Northern intransigence about key elements of global economic governance – debt, taxation, trade, financial flows, and technology transfers, among many – have worsened the political divide between South and North.

Second, this divide has been exacerbated by the North's foot-dragging on 'common but differentiated responsibilities' for environmental problems (especially global warming), even though it had been agreed as Principle 7 of the Rio Declaration at the Earth Summit in 1992 (United Nations 1992).

As a result, Northern countries have emerged as SRHR and gender equality (GE) champions⁹ without seriously addressing the broader development drivers –

8- Financialization refers to the growth in volume and complexity of markets in financial securities in global markets. Banks and financial institutions trade billions in security markets daily. While modern financialization probably goes back to the 1970s, it is generally agreed that the repeal in 1999 of the US Glass-Steagall Act of 1932 gave a huge push towards uncontrolled and poorly regulated financialization (Stiglitz 2010). If the focus of the prior globalization had largely been free trade and downsizing the public sector, the focus in the GLPF era became free capital flows and inflation targeting through austerity policies.

9- Of course, early in the 2000s the G77 and China group stopped negotiating as a group at CPD, recognizing that there was considerable internal division on SRHR and GE. The Some Latin American and Caribbean (SLAC) group of countries emerged as a voice at CPD as a Southern group of SRHR champions.

inequitable financing, austerity policies, trade and technology barriers, *inter alia*, that create a disabling environment for SRHR and reinforce systems of inequality. Many South countries see this as creating considerable dissonance between the North's human rights espousal and its refusal to support DJ.

On the side of SRHR, its opponents have grown from a small number at ICPD (consisting mainly of supporters of Islamic *sharia*, Christian anti-abortionists as well as the Holy See¹⁰, an observer state) to a larger group. Some Islamic-majority countries such as Egypt (the host government) and Iran had played important roles in building the ICPD consensus, but have shifted towards more conservative stances thereafter. Many countries in the South face severe SRHR deficits from long-standing cultural norms and practices e.g. female genital mutilation / cutting (FGM/C) or early / child marriage, and their governments have mixed records in eliminating them¹¹. They are also under siege from right-wing forces demonizing LGBTQI+ people even in historical contexts of greater tolerance (Datta 2026; IDS Bulletin 2024).

Considerable documentation exists on the heavy investment of money and human resources by the US Christian right-wing (both Catholic and evangelical) in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific as well as in Russia and former Soviet countries after the fall of the Soviet Union (Moraes Teixeira and Bulgarelli 2023).¹² A number of these governments have embraced the conservative condemnation of LGBTQI+ rights and abortion for domestic political reasons (Putin in Russia, and Museveni and others in Africa, the Pacific, and LAC). They often do this while supporting other SRHR programmes within their own countries, creating thereby ambiguity and contradictions between their domestic programmes and their global stances. But they continue to align with broad DJ agendas as long as this excludes certain SRHR issues.

10- Religion-based hardliners such as these rely on conservative interpretations of their religions that are inherently opposed to gender equality since they view women as created by God to be subordinate to men, and motherhood as their central role. While they face significant opposition from within their own religions, it is difficult for women's organizations and their allies to negotiate with them because of their doctrinal views.

11- For instance, in early 2025, Iraq, under pressure from religious conservatives, reduced the age at marriage for girls to nine years under certain circumstances to be religiously determined. Iraq was a recent Chair of G77 and China.

12- Asia's religious diversity has acted as a limited barrier to the Christian fundamentalist onslaught but there is considerable risk from the conservative right-wing of other religions – Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist (Justice For Prosperity Foundation 2024).

Hardline conservatives like the Holy See have successfully exploited the divide between RtD / DJ and gender/SRHR, framing it as a South versus North battle driven by the North's opposition to DJ and espousal of so-called "gender ideology." The Holy See presents itself as a champion of key elements of DJ – poverty removal, debt reduction¹³, fair taxation – in global negotiations, recently at the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development (Sevilla, June-July 2025). Absent real advances toward development justice in global negotiations, culture/ religion/ nationalism including gender systems and gender identity have become a political wedge against SRHR, used by the far-(and not so far) right in countries in both South and North.¹⁴ There is growing opposition to SRHR and gender equality among sections of people (especially young men susceptible to the 'manosphere') who have less education, few prospects for stable employment, and who blame women, migrants and minorities for their economic woes. Even countries that had earlier made strong progress towards SRHR (e.g. Argentina under Milei or Brazil under Bolsonaro) have been susceptible to such political swings to anti-gender extremism, not to mention the US under Trump, or Hungary and Poland in Europe.

The push by the global North for SRHR in isolation from DJ has led to its marginalization and disconnection from broader agendas. This has reached crisis proportions in the current Trump era as development assistance (ODA) appears to be falling off a cliff and US tariffs impose hardships that are beginning to be felt acutely in the global South.

Our motivation for this Global South Coalition for SRHR and Development Justice is to bridge these divides between RtD /DJ and SRHR. We believe there are a significant number of countries in both South and North that believe in both (to a greater or lesser extent). With effective analysis and advocacy, they could

13- For example, in February 2025, the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences and Columbia University's Initiative for Policy Dialogue announced the formation of a commission of experts to produce a Jubilee report on addressing debt and development crises. Chaired by Joseph Stiglitz, its 33 members are a who's who of progressive economists. "The report will provide an assessment of the current situation as well as a blueprint for reforms to the international financial architecture that would enable countries to achieve sustainable debt levels that allow them to increase investment in healthcare, education, clean energy, and climate adaptation in countries across the Southern Hemisphere" (https://www.pass.va/en/events/2025/tax_justice/press_release.html; Initiative for Policy Dialogue 2025)

14- It is important to note that economic justice challenges within the North – loss of jobs, austerity, the paring down of social protections and more – have become ever more serious in the GLPF era, driving significant sections of people into the arms of religious patriarchies, political cults and authoritarianism. But such issues rarely enter global population and development discussions, with the exception being recent concerns about low fertility and its economic implications (UNFPA, 2025).

work together as part of a new entente. Such a coming together would require a new narrative for SRHR and development justice that can be leveraged to marginalize the global right-wing religious patriarchs and authoritarians, as well as hardnosed nay sayers on development justice.

In the next section of the paper, we trace in summary form the evolution of discourses and agendas on population on the one side and development on the other. Our aim is to show how they have been framed in contradictory and complementary ways in the post-World War II decades, creating divides, but also possibilities for change.

II. Population concerns and development processes – the evolution

Links between population and development have had a convoluted history in the decades since World War II that saw the rise of human rights discourses and jurisprudence; a major impetus towards decolonization in the global South followed by a push towards development in former colonies; and new concerns about the growth of their populations. Through this period the meanings and languages of both development and population policies have undergone considerable debate, controversy, and modification.

The table below maps the population – development progression in summary form to highlight these ups and downs from the 1950s onwards. **No simple correlation can be made between the two sides because each has its relative autonomy.** The table highlights the swings in US politics as reflected by US presidencies because the US has been both the dominant player on population policies, and in the global economy. Our argument is that the evolution can be seen through 5 phases:

- i. **1950s - 1960s:** dominated by development planners and technocrats on one side, and population demographers on the other. South – North economic relations were relatively smooth, but former colonies were coming together through the Non-Aligned Movement. Sensitivities were also becoming sore due to family planning (FP) programmes driven by ‘population bomb’ rhetoric.

- ii. **1970s:** the heyday of the South's push for fairness in the global economy, and rise of the slogan of 'development is the best contraceptive'.
- iii. **1980s:** era of globalization and structural adjustment programmes, debt repayment via austerity policies; Reagan-era Mexico City policies on abortion and pull-back on FP. New South versus North rifts emerge on debt and austerity.
- iv. **1990s – 2000s:** financialization begins to dominate the global economy; austerity hits the North especially after 2008 financial crash. As globalization with its push for free trade became increasingly dominated by the financial sector (especially after the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act in the US in 1999) leading to the crash of 2008, austerity policies spread in both the South and the North. The rust belt phenomenon of deindustrialization in the North was worsened by the breakdown of social protections. Ironically, the repeal of Glass-Steagall happened under "third way" Clinton, and the effects of the 2008 financial crash hit hard during the Obama presidency. Both were US Democrats and strong supporters of SRHR.

This was the phase of Clinton era UN conferences including ICPD with its focus on human rights. South – North cooperation in UN conferences gave ground for optimism. But underlying economic tensions continue especially around the functioning of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) which the South saw as biased and opaque not only in its rules but in its functioning.

- v. **2010s – 2025:** significant worsening of South – North relations on all major economic issues as financialization continues to result in sharply widening inequalities between and within countries. COVID19 was a stark illustration of the injustices of global trade as vaccine access was severely skewed across North versus South. It also showed the links to SRHR as austerity policies hit overstretched health systems, and SRH services were seriously affected.

The Trump era with its reliance on MAGA and the religious right wing affect SRHR both domestically and internationally.

	POPULATION EVENTS/ DISCOURSE	DEVELOPMENT EVENTS/ DISCOURSE
1950s	• 1954 Rome World conference; focus on demographic measurement	• Post WWII decolonization in Asia and some of Africa • 1955 Bandung conference towards Non-Aligned Movement • National devt planning – technocratic
1960s	• 1965 Belgrade World conference • Rise of ‘population bomb’ discourse • Push for ‘strong’ FP programmes • Focus on reducing fertility; little attention to human rights	• Decolonization spreads in Africa • 1965 UN Cttee for Devt Policy set up • Spread of devt planning with World Bank support • ECLAC – influence of Prebisch, Furtado; critique of unfair trade and dependent development
1970s	• 1974 Bucharest UN International conference on population • Slogan of “Devt is the best contraceptive” • FP programmes continue with little moderation	• 1970 UNGA resolution 2626 sets ODA target of 0.7% of GDP of North countries • ILO – ‘basic needs’ strategy • World Bank – “redistribution with growth” (Hollis Chenery era) • 1974 UNGA Declaration on establishing a New International Economic Order • Rise of oil cartels • IMF pressure through lending – Tanzania, Jamaica examples – to prevent South control over primary resources, e.g., bauxite in Jamaica • 1975 UN Centre on TNCs set up to monitor TNCs • 1978 Alma Ata conference on primary health care
1980s	• 1984 Mexico City UN international conference on population • Reagan – ‘Moral Majority’ anti-abortion political alliance → Global Gag Rule • US govt switch away from support for FP • Spread of HIV / AIDS and rise of gay men’s movements • Rise of women’s movements for reproductive rights	• Reagan – Thatcher led push to downsize the state in UK /US • Transformation of WB from Hollis Chenery era to SAPs and austerity policies • Increasing control by banks • IMF led austerity in global South – inflation targeting • UNICEF – call for adjustment with a human face • 1986 RtD agreed at UNGA with US opposition and key North abstentions
1990s	• UN conferences – Rio, Vienna, Cairo, Beijing, Copenhagen • Women’s movements role in all above conferences • 1994 Cairo UN international conference on population and development • New focus on human rights, SRHR, gender equality, and the rights of adolescents • Recognition at ICPD of SRHR – development justice links • 1996 UNAIDS established • 1993 – 2001 Clinton presidency	• From hard SAPs to softer SAPS but still focused on globalisation, liberalisation, privatisation and downsizing and privatising the state • Financialization unleashed through weakened financial and banking controls (repeal of Glass-Steagall Act in 1999 under Clinton) • Public – private partnerships put forward as panacea but weak regulatory capacity or controls • 1992 UN CTC abolished; loss of data base on TNCs • 1995 WTO set up • Growing resistance to the effects of globalization from civil society including women’s movements • Rapid economic growth of China and to a lesser extent, India • Collapse of Soviet power

	POPULATION EVENTS/ DISCOURSE	DEVELOPMENT EVENTS/ DISCOURSE
2000s	• Softening of FP programmes; inclusion of human rights-based approaches; new programmes to promote adolescent health, reduce maternal mortality, reduce GBV and VAWG • Significant advances towards SRHR in many countries • 2010 UN Women set up • 2001 - 09 Bush Jr presidency -> return of the religious right wing to power in US	• United Nations led MDGs • SDGs with gender equality and SRH • Rise of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) approach • 2008 financial crisis and the Great Recession • 9/11 fall out of Afghan and other wars; War on Terror and rise of the security state • 2003 Iraq invasion for control over oil -> army recruitment for unemployed young ; presence until 2011
2010s	• 2009 – 17 Obama presidency -> push back of religious right wing • Spillover of refugees into Europe • Rise of anti-immigrant and anti-gender ideologies in both US and Europe • 2017 – 21 Trump presidency -> return of religious right wing	• Continuing financial crisis; too big to fail – moral hazard under Obama • Crumbling economic growth; ODA declines further • North positions harden even more on trade, finance, taxation, migration, etc • Continuing effects of Middle East wars – invasion of Libya and Syria in 2011 (support for Netanyahu’s 7 wars in 5 years – Jeff Sachs) • After 2011 US troops begin to come home to financial crisis, lost homes, unemployment, devastating inequality • Rise of China as a global power
2020s	• 2021 – 25 Biden presidency -> push back of right wing • 2025 Trump returns -> return of right wing empowered by Project 2025 • Dobbs anti-abortion decision by US Supreme Court • Attack and attempt to dismantle the UN -> funding cuts and UN ‘reforms’ • Opposition by the US government to both the SDGs as well as SRHR • Growing concerns about ageing and low fertility	• COVID19 pandemic exposes global inequality; worsened South vs North divide on access to services • IMF response to pandemic is more austerity! • South countries turn increasingly to China • US young men without college degrees become MAGA and Christian nationalist fodder • Anti gender movements grow in many countries of both North and South • Zionist wars • Anti-migrant, anti-LGBTQ+, anti-women fever • Spread of electoral authoritarianism

As the table shows, the population discourse and agendas began with a demographic focus on measurement which evolved into a push for 'strong' FP programmes, followed by a reaction towards development by the global South. This was followed by a flip-flop by the Reagan administration allied with the US right wing, the rise of women's movements for SRHR, and finally the innovative human rights-based approach of the ICPD.

Development processes were also complex and full of South versus North battles as the world moved towards GLPF. The decolonisation period of the 1950s and 1960s was followed by optimism in the 1970s about a New International Economic Order that would be fairer to the global South. But those hopes were belied from the early 1980s until today. Critically, while ICPD and the UN conferences of the 1990s seemed to herald a new era of human rights-based approaches to population, this was the period of continuing GLPF, austerity policies, the shutting down of the UN Centre on TNCs (and its data base for corporate accountability), as well as severe South versus North battles on the financing, technology and trade fronts. This was followed by the global financial crisis of 2008 and a widening chasm of inequality. **Implementation of the agreed actions of the 1990s conferences was therefore very challenging from the start.**

The US – government and politics – played a central role both in the ups and downs of the population agenda and discourse, and also in the development environment since until recently it has been the preeminent economic power. Its entanglement in wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East has had catastrophic effects by diverting resources towards militarization, creating masses of refugees, and the erratic nature of Trump's second presidency driven by Project 2025 has destabilized a global economy still struggling to recover from the COVID19 pandemic. Trump's very extremism may however be an opportunity to bring strategic players together from both South and North in support of both SRHR and DJ.

III. SRHR links to Development Justice

Bridging the South versus North divide on SRHR and DJ requires clarity on the links between SRHR and DJ. Key elements of DJ include:

- i. *Enabling elements:* finance (capital flows including illicit flows, SDRs, tax justice, ODA, governance of Bretton Woods Institutions and regional banks), technology, trade (bilateral, regional agreements, governance of WTO, digital commerce)
- ii. *Public goods / bads:* climate, energy, oceans, food security, waste / pollution, digital technology, militarization, zoonotic diseases
- iii. *Corporations and their control / regulation / accountability*
- iv. *Human development:* health, education, WASH, social protection
- v. *Social justice and human rights:* reduction of intersecting inequalities including gender inequality, removal of discrimination, oppression and violence along multiple dimensions; positive actions to advance the rights of different groups

Since the era of GLPF began in the 1970s, many of these elements that were formerly within national boundaries have been globalized. This is especially true for elements i, ii, and iii – macroeconomics, public goods, and corporate power and accountability. Increasingly, the struggles being waged by the South and by social movements and their allies for equity and justice on these fronts are waged both within and beyond national boundaries. Some examples of i – iii where current South versus North struggles are being waged include the following:

- *Greater fiscal space for national governments and against austerity policies to enforce debt repayment.* This is a major South versus North issue since the international financial institutions (IFIs) that are major lenders are dominated by the global North. “The debt crisis is not just a fiscal issue; it is a full-blown human rights crisis,” said the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, on the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (in 2024)... “The Special Rapporteur lamented the conditions

attached to bailout packages from IFIs which, with their demands for austerity measures, sale of state assets and, at times, surcharges already denounced by UN human rights experts, make it near impossible for states to comply with their human rights obligations and lock countries into unsustainable growth patterns that have only worsened poverty and inequality.” <https://www.srpoverty.org/2024/10/17/statement-international-financial-system-not-fit-for-purpose-to-address-catastrophic-debt-crisis-un-poverty-expert/> As mentioned earlier (footnote 12), debt and development is also the site of a major ongoing intervention by the Holy See in support of DJ.

- *Fairer distribution of SDRs by the IMF.* SDRs (Special Drawing Rights) are a reserve asset, sometimes called ‘paper gold’ but their allocation is irrational and biased, being based on a country’s quota in the IMF (which depends on its weight in the global economy) rather than its vulnerability during a crisis. Thus, of the USD 650 billion in SDRs created in 2021 to provide needed liquidity during COVID19, barely 3% went to low income countries and only 30% to emerging markets. Even so, SDRs could be used by countries to give themselves more fiscal space, as Argentina did during COVID19. However, pressure from the IMF (which is dominated by the North) and changes in IMF accounting practices to classify SDRs as a liability rather than an asset currently reduce the ability of indebted countries to use them during a fiscal crisis. (<https://www.actionaidusa.org/publications/adapting-our-financial-architecture-in-a-crisis-prone-world-a-civil-society-proposal-for-special-drawing-rights-reform/>)
- *Fair UN Tax Convention* that shares tax proceeds from cross-border services equitably, curbs illicit financial flows¹⁵, and taxes high net worth individuals. Current estimates are that illicit financial flows – corruption, tax-evasion, money-laundering – drain USD 1 trillion each year from the South mainly to the North (<https://www.iisd.org/articles/explainer/united-nations-international-tax-convention-negotiations>).

15- Illicit financial flows are illegal transfers of capital or money across international borders, e.g., by drug or arms cartels, through trade under- or over-invoicing to avoid taxes, smuggling, trafficking, and/or transferring proceeds of crime through shell companies. Billions of dollars in “illicit financial from developing countries ultimately end up in banks in developed countries like the United States and United Kingdom, as well as in tax havens like Switzerland, British Virgin Islands, or Singapore. This does not happen by accident. Many countries and their institutions actively facilitate—and reap enormous profits from—the theft of massive amounts of money from developing countries.” (<https://gfintegrity.org/issue/illicit-financial-flows/>)

- *Equitable Pandemic Agreement* that ensures that its Pathogen Access and Benefit Sharing (PABS) Annex is fair, binding and effectively implemented. This is a major site of South versus North battles. Its history can be traced back to the attempt by a group of around 60 South countries to obtain an agreement at the WTO under which pharmaceutical producers would temporarily waive intellectual property rights during the pandemic in order to allow firms in the South to produce and export vaccines to other South countries that were experiencing severe shortages. The waiver attempt did not succeed in a glaring example of how WTO rules are tilted against DJ even during an extreme crisis such as COVID19. The current Pandemic Agreement is being negotiated under WHO. Its PABS Annex has become a major site for South versus North tensions on DJ as the North (at the behest of its own Big Pharma) jockeys for access to the data on pathogens from the South while providing minimal benefits in return.
<https://twm.my/title2/health.info/2025/hi250505.htm>

While these examples appear to be distinct, they have common elements – they are all part of South versus North battles over RtD / DJ. They also affect SRHR. The first three involve financing and national budgets, having direct impacts on health expenditures and priorities, and the strength and resilience of health systems within which SRH services are embedded. The third and fourth on the Pandemic Agreement affect how Northern private corporations are taxed, regulated and controlled. These can impact access to critical health commodities and services as became apparent during the COVID19 pandemic. The struggle with Big Pharma for access to vaccines, diagnostic kits and protective equipment hit the most vulnerable countries, people, and services hardest. As health services struggled to cope, routine SRH services like ANC during pregnancy tended to fall by the wayside.

Elements iv and v of DJ as spelled out above – human development and social justice and human rights – directly affect SRHR through national level laws, policies and programmes as enunciated at ICPD itself and in multiple regional and global sites thereafter. These links are not always obvious. For example, WASH is often seen as distinct from SRHR. But the intersections can be many. For instance, the simple, washable and reusable menstrual cup is now viewed as a potent answer to the menstrual hygiene challenges of girls and women in poor communities; an answer that is both user-friendly and environmentally sustainable. But without access to WASH – clean water and safe toilets – its use can be daunting, and its menstrual health promise can remain unfulfilled.

These elements of DJ also mesh directly with the core elements of RtD spelled out in footnote 3 above: people-centeredness, full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, participation, self-determination, non-discrimination and equity.

It is clear that SRHR and RtD / DJ are deeply connected through direct and indirect effects. The linkages work in both directions. Not only do SRHR need an environment where RtD /DJ are fulfilled. The reverse also holds true – SRHR affect RtD/ DJ. Half the human population consists of girls and women whose collective movements have for decades been claiming SRHR as part of the self-determination, non-discrimination and equity that are intrinsic to RtD. When other groups that are discriminated against and oppressed and whose SRHR are often marginalized such as inter alia LGBTQ+ people, people with disability, ethnic, racial, caste-based minorities are added, this becomes an overwhelming majority of people. If RtD /DJ are not to be applicable only to a narrow sliver of human populations, then SRHR must be fulfilled. We believe many South and North governments know this and may be willing or could be persuaded in this critical time to work together to create a new narrative and a new environment.

IV. Implications for country / regional / global work

Some directions for strategic action include:

1. Expose the structural links between global (and national) economic governance and SRHR outcomes.
2. Build a coalition for SRHR and DJ that mobilizes civil society and governments, and is led from the global South.
3. Unite South and North actors who already support both agendas, to form a new “entente.”
4. Counter conservative narratives by showing that SRHR is intrinsic to equity, human rights, and development—not an external imposition.
5. Use evidence and country mapping to target diplomatic strategies at national, regional, and global levels.

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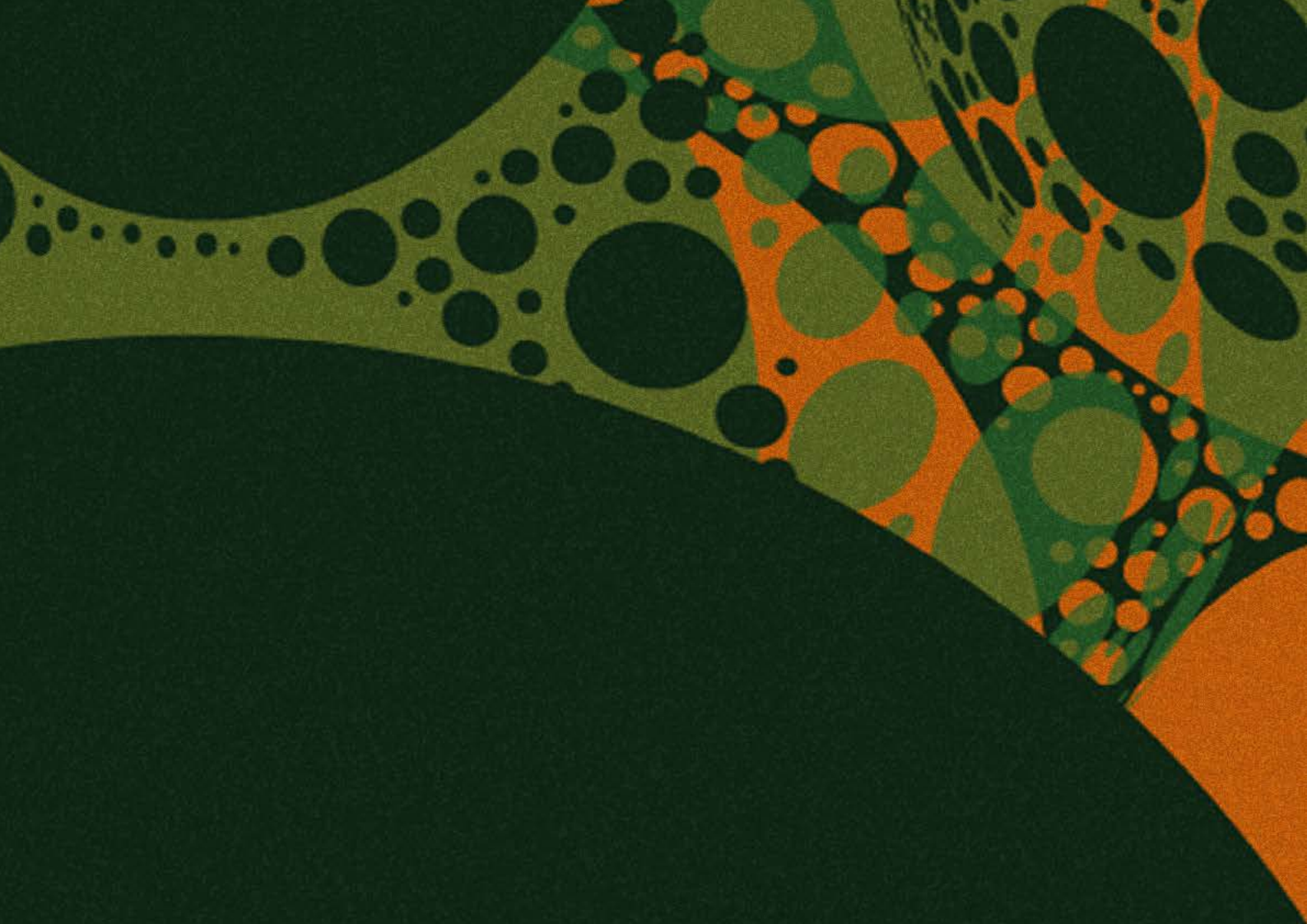
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