Imperialism and the North-South Divide

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Abstract

The North-South divide embodies one of the most continuing and significant patterns of global inequality, primarily shaped by centuries of imperial domination and exploitation by the global North against the global South. This paper examines the historical relationship between imperialism and the contemporary global economic hierarchy analyzing how colonial extraction, institutional manipulations, and systemic dependency have created and perpetuated unambiguous disparities between the global North and South nations. Anchoring on dependency theory, this study demonstrates that the North-South divide is not merely a product of natural development differences, but rather, the result of deliberate imperial policies and programmes that established extractive economic relationships, not exonerating inept and corrupt leadership of most countries in the periphery and the docile followership. Through examination of historical patterns, institutional legacies, and modern manifestations of imperial influence, this paper reveals how past colonial relationships and third world socio-political trajectory continue to shape the present-day economic, political, and socio-cultural disparities between the global North and global South. It is recommended that the global South must extricate itself from the policies and programmes of the global North. They must evolve home growth developmental

programmes for sustainable development and not to rely on foreign policies and hope to survive.

Keywords: Imperialism, North-South divide, dependency theory, colonialism, global inequality.

Introduction

The contemporary global landscape is characterized by profound inequalities between nations, with a relatively small number of wealthy countries in the global North maintaining significant economic, political, and technological advantages over the majority of nations in the global South. This pattern of inequality, commonly referred to as the North-South divide, has its foundation deeply rooted in the historical processes of imperialism and colonialism that have shaped the modern world systems (Rodney, 1972).

Akpuru-Aja (2002) has divided the global South into three categories including the developed; Japan, China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Africa. The developing nations consist of the fast industrializing countries in the South including; South and North Korea, Argentina, Brazil, India, Pakistan, Singapore and Philippines. He further stated that the third group comprises the well-known underdeveloped countries to the extent that there are no real indicators of industrialization processes. Together, they are economically in crises, low life expectancy, technologically backward, uncontrolled population, socially disharmonious, corruption ridden, poor governance, with electoral processes that are embedded with gross dishonesty among others. Nigeria is leading this group with other countries like; DR Congo, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Yemen and Haiti including others.

This paper argues that the North-South divide cannot be adequately understood without a thorough examination of imperial history and its continuing negative effects. While conventional development theorists often attribute global inequalities to differences in natural resources, cultural factors, or institutional quality, a critical analysis reveals that these disparities are fundamentally the product of centuries of systematic exploitation and extraction under imperial rule. Yet, placing the whole blame on the North would be uncharitable (Young, 2001,

Roberts & Parks, 2007). For example, 65 years after independence, Nigeria like many other countries in the South are still grappling with basic developmental issues including, poverty, dysfunctional electoral processes, corruption, among others.

Sources of Data

The data that was used in this study were primary and secondary. The primary data was obtained directly from the respondents (i.e. firsthand information). In order to enrich the research work, the secondary sources of data including government publications/reports/gazettes, surveys and polls, books, academic Journals and articles were also employed. Doing this greatly helped to improve the quality of the research work and ensured that it meets up with the required standard of the university.

Conceptual Clarifications

i. **Imperialism:** Imperialism s the practice of extending a country's power and influence

through colonization, use of military force, or other means of control. Historically, imperial powers have sought to dominate weaker nations or territories to exploit their resources, markets and strategic locations. Features of imperialism economic exploitation, political domination and cultural imposition. The negative impact includes; exploitation and inequality, cultural destruction, resistance and liberation movements, as colonized peoples have fought for independence and self-determination.

ii. **Colonialism**

Colonialism refers to the practice of establishing and maintaining colonies in distant territories, often through conquest, settlement or economic domination. It has become a feature of human history for centuries, with various European powers establishing colonies around the world. The key features include; settlement and conquest, economic domination and cultural assimilation. The impacts include; economic underdevelopment, cultural destruction and legacy of inequality.

iii. North-South Divide

The North-South Divide refers to the economic and social disparities between the developed countries of the North (primarily located in Europe and North America) and the developing countries of the South (primarily located in Africa, Asia and Latin America). The features include; economic inequality, global economic governance, cultural and technological differences resulting in poverty and inequality, global instability and sometimes, opportunities for cooperation.

History of imperialism

The emergence of the North-South divide can be traced to the systematic expansion of European empires beginning in the late fifteenth century, establishing patterns of extraction and dependency that would fundamentally alter global economic relationships. The initial phase of European expansion was characterized by what Acemoglu & Robinson (2012) termed "primitive accumulation," whereby European powers extracted vast wealth from colonized territories through forced labor, resource exploitation, and the destruction of existing economic systems. This process was not merely opportunistic but represented a deliberate strategy to redirect global wealth towards the global North (Prebish, 1950, Ferguson, 1994 & Farmer, 2004).

The establishment of colonial economies was predicated on the transformation of diverse and often sophisticated economic systems into simplified extractive arrangements designed to serve metropolitan interests (Lenin, 1917). Frank (1967 demonstrated how Spanish colonial masters in Latin America systematically dismantled existing economic networks and replaced them with export-oriented systems focused on precious metals and agricultural commodities. Similarly, the British colonial system in India destroyed thriving textile industries and forced the subcontinent into suppliers of raw materials to British manufacturers, illustrating what was described as ‘deindustrialization’ under colonial rule (Fanon, 1961, Bagchi,1982 & Chang, 2002).

The Atlantic slave trade represented perhaps the most extreme manifestation of imperial extraction, involving the forced transportation of millions of Africans to provide labour for colonial plantations. This system, analyzed comprehensively by Acemoglu & Robinson (2012), generated enormous profits that fueled

European industrialization while simultaneously devastating African societies and economies. The long-term effects of this exploitation extended far beyond the formal abolition of slavery, creating demographic disruptions and economic dislocations that continue to influence African development patterns today (Banchi, 1982).

Imperial powers also systematically altered land tenure systems and agricultural practices in colonized territories to facilitate extraction and control. In many African colonies, colonial administrators imposed taxes and other monetary obligations that forced subsistence farmers into cash crop production, fundamentally altering traditional economic relationships and creating dependencies on global commodity markets (Cooper, 2002). The replacement of local currencies (manila, cowries, salt, trade-by-barter among others) with European currencies created the need for commodity production. And finally, the North distorted, disarticulated and disoriented the African economies to further the prosperity of the North.

Theoretical Framework

The study will be anchored on the dependency theory. It was developed primarily by Latin American scholars in the 1960s and 1970s as a critique of the modernization theory. Prominent German economist, Andre Gunder Frank significantly contributed to the theory's development. It provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding how imperialism created and maintains the North-South divide. The theorists believed among other things, that the world is divided into the core nations and the periphery. The core exploits the periphery. The unequal exchange in terms of trade between the core and the periphery has further impoverished the South. The theorists believed that the global economic systems are structured in ways that prevent the peripheral from developing, and finally, the development of the North is linked to the underdevelopment of the South (Dunne, et al., 2010).

Andre Gunder Frank's (1966) influential work on the 'development of underdevelopment' has demonstrated that the poverty and economic difficulties experienced by many former colonies were directly produced by their incorporation into global capitalist networks under conditions of extreme

inequality. This analysis revealed that the wealth of the North and the poverty of the South are not separate phenomena but rather two sides of the same coin. Though, critics have faulted the theory for overly simplistic, lacking empirical evidence, and too focused on external factors, yet overall, the dependency theory remains an important framework for understanding the relationships between the global North and the global South. Nevertheless, the theory has established the nexus between it and the present study.

Contemporary manifestations of imperial relationships

Contemporary global relationships continue to exhibit many characteristics of imperial domination, albeit through subtler and complex mechanisms than direct colonial rule. The phenomenon of neocolonialism exhaustively examined by Nkrumah (1965), describes how the North maintains domination over the South through economic, political, and socio-cultural means rather than direct military occupation. These contemporary forms of imperial influence operate through international institutions, economic policies, and socio-cultural hegemony that perpetuate dependent relationships while maintaining the appearance of sovereign equality.

Economic neocolonialism manifests through various mechanisms including structural adjustment programs, conditional aid, and trade agreements that effectively hinder developing countries' policy autonomy and force them to adopt economic models that serve the interests of the global North. The Washington Consensus policies promoted by international financial institutions since the 1980s closely resemble colonial economic policies in their emphasis on export orientation, privatization, and the reduction of government intervention in the economy (Stiglitz, 2002). These policies have often increased rather than reduced dependency on foreign markets and capital, demonstrating the continuity between colonial and neocolonial economic strategies. Military intervention and the threat of intervention continue to serve as mechanisms for maintaining imperial influence, particularly in resource-rich regions of the global South. The concept of 'humanitarian intervention' has sometimes been used to justify military actions that serve the strategic and economic interests of powerful countries while claiming to promote human rights and democracy. As analyzed by Chomsky (1999), such interventions often follow patterns established during the colonial

epoch, whereby claims about civilizing missions or humanitarian concerns mask underlying economic and geopolitical motivations. Cultural and technological dependencies also perpetuate imperial relationships in the contemporary period. The dominance of global North in technological innovation and intellectual property creation gives them significant leverage over the South, which must often accept unfavorable terms to access essential technologies and knowledge. The global digital divide reflects and reinforces existing patterns of inequality, with most internet infrastructure, digital platforms, and technological standards controlled by companies and institutions by the global North (Castells, 2015).

International development assistance, despite its ostensible humanitarian goals, often serves to perpetuate rather than challenge imperial relationships. The conditions attached to development assistance often require recipient countries to adopt policies that serve donor interests, replicating the coercive aspects of colonial rule through economic rather than military means (Anghie, 2005).

Contemporary mechanisms of dependency

Contemporary global economic governance reflects and perpetuates many aspects of imperial hierarchy through international institutions and agreements that systematically favor developed countries while constraining developing countries' policy options. The World Trade Organization's Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), for example, establishes intellectual property standards that primarily benefit global North while limiting the South's access to essential technologies and medicines (Sell, 2003). These arrangements suggest that countries at the peripheral are required to provide resources and markets for the North, while being denied access to the technologies and knowledge necessary for autonomous development. Structural adjustment programs implemented by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank since the 1980s have systematically promoted economic policies that increase developing countries' integration into global markets while reducing their capacity for independent economic planning and social protection. The conditions attached to these programs effectively limit the North's sovereignty over economic policies in ways that closely resemble colonial administrative control. Global supply chains represent another mechanism through which imperial-style relationships persist in the contemporary economy. The global South remains

locked into roles as suppliers of raw materials or low-wage manufacturing for global North markets, with limited opportunities to move up in the value chain or develop indigenous technological capabilities.

Climate change and environmental degradation also reflect imperial legacies and contribute to contemporary North-South inequalities. Developed countries have been responsible for the majority of historical greenhouse gas emissions while developing countries bear disproportionate costs from climate change impacts. Contemporary climate governance mechanisms often fail to adequately address these historical responsibilities or provide sufficient support for the South to adapt to climate change and pursue sustainable development pathways.

Process of decolonization

The process of decolonization, while achieving formal political independence for most former colonies, has faced significant obstacles in dismantling the economic, socio-political, cultural, and institutional structures that maintain North's dominance and the South subordination. Political independence often occurred within international frameworks and under conditions that limited newly independent countries' ability to fundamentally restructure their relationships with former colonial powers and the rest of the global world. The timing of decolonization, occurring primarily during the Cold War period, meant that newly independent countries often faced pressure to align with either the United States or Soviet Union, limiting their ability to pursue truly autonomous development strategies with its attendant negative effects. This challenge prevented many countries from developing the regional cooperation and South-South relationships that might have provided alternatives to the continued dependency on the global North.

Economic decolonization has proven particularly difficult due to the structural nature of global economic relationships and the power of international markets and institutions. The continued control of global commodity markets, shipping networks, and financial institutions by the global North has limited the global South's options for economic transformation and emancipation, thereby making them vulnerable to external economic shocks and manipulations.

Cultural decolonization faces obstacles from the continued dominance of global North in global media, education, and knowledge production. The continued existence of colonial languages in education system and administration, the influence of global North universities and research institutions, and the dominance of Western cultural products in global markets all contribute to the ongoing cultural dependencies that complement economic and political constraints on developing countries' autonomy. The South continue to experience what amounts to indirect rule through economic conditions, cultural influence, and the political pressure that seem to limit their effective sovereignty and perpetuate their subordinate positions within the global system. International legal frameworks have also posed challenges to decolonization by embedding colonial-epoch property rights and contractual obligations in international law. These legal constraints demonstrate how imperial relationships can be perpetuated through ostensibly neutral legal mechanisms.

Several authors including Akpuru-Aja (2002) has posited that a great deal of the world's landmass, and virtually of three continents -South America, Asia and Africa- are part of the global South. The global North (developed countries) includes the America and European countries. About **77%** of the world's population live in the South, yet, they produce only **15%** of the Global National Product (GNP). Conversely, the 23% of the people who are geographically fortunate to reside in the North commands 85% of the world's wealth. Comparatively, while the North is heavily productive, the South is largely consuming. Though, this could have been altered by the emergence of the Asian Tigers. The influence of majority of the countries in the global South is minimal in the global interactions among the comity of States (Easterly, 2005).

Efforts by the global South in bridging the divide

There have been several efforts by the global South to bridge the divide including; the Non-Aligned Movement, the Regional integration including the African Union's Integrated Marine Strategy (2050) and recently Agenda 2063. The Union of South American Nations(UNSUR), a regional organization that aims to integrate and unite South American countries in cultural, social, economic and political affairs. Another one is the Community of Latin American and Caribbean

States (CELACs), which is an intergovernmental mechanism for dialogue and political agreement, comprising 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The South-South cooperation leading to the formation of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) with the sole aim of lifting the global South from poverty, diseases, lack and avoidable deaths. The civil and non-government organizations, and many poverty-ridden countries of the global South have not rested on their oars in calling for cancellation of debts, reparations, inclusive and active participation in global issues and repealing of obnoxious laws/treaties that tend to treat the global South as second class citizens.

Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated that though, the North-South divide is fundamentally rooted in the historical processes of imperialism and colonialism that reshaped global relationships from the fifteenth century onward, the leadership of most countries in the South should not be exonerated from blame. The systematic extraction of wealth, destruction of indigenous economic systems, and establishment of dependency relationships during the colonial and post-colonial epochs have created structural inequalities that persist despite formal independence. Contemporary manifestations of these inequalities, including unfavorable trade patterns, debt burdens, technological dependencies, and cultural marginalization reflecting in the continuation of imperial relationships through modified mechanisms rather than their elimination.

The dependency theory provides essential tools for understanding how imperial legacies continue to operate in the contemporary period. These approaches reveal that the apparent 'underdevelopment' of the global South is not a natural condition but rather, the product of systematic exploitation and the deliberate maintenance of exploitative relationships. The persistence of these patterns demonstrate that addressing global inequality requires more than technical solutions or increased aid or even agitations, rather, fundamental changes to the structures and institutions that perpetuate imperial-style relationships.

The challenges facing decolonization efforts reveal the depth and complexity of imperial legacies and the difficulty of creating truly alternative global relationships. The persistence of colonial borders, languages, legal systems, and

economic structures demonstrate that formal political independence is insufficient to overcome centuries of systematic exploitation and institutional manipulation. The success of these alternatives depends mostly on the South's ability to build solidarity and cooperation among themselves while also requiring reasonable changes in global North policies and institutions that currently perpetuate imperial-style relationships.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

i. International financial institutions must undertake fundamental reforms to address the imperial legacies embedded in the governance structures and policy frameworks including democratizing decision-making processes to provide the global South with greater voice and representation.

ii. The countries in the global South must build strong institutions that will promote good governance, accountable leadership and encourage citizens' participation in governance.

iii. The global South must develop knowledge systems and cultural products that aretechnology-based that will revolutionize the economy and place the global South at par with the global North.

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