

From Global South to Underrepresented Geographies Changing Perceptions of the North/South Divide

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Rethink the City:

New Approaches to
Global and Local
Urban Challenges

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Rethink the City Massive Open Online Course

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PART I.

Learning from Online Education

1 From Global South to Underrepresented Geographies: Changing Perceptions of the North/South Divide

Dr. Igor Pessoa, Anja van der Watt, Dr. Luz María Vergara and Dr. Caroline Newton

2 Rethink the City Course: Facts, Global Community and Pressing Urban Challenges

Dr. Luz María Vergara, Anja van der Watt, Dr. Igor Pessoa and Dr. Caroline Newton

Ch.1 From Global South to Underrepresented Geographies

Changing Perceptions of the North/South Divide





In light of rapid urbanisation and the accelerating threats of climate change, scale and multitude are what set the Global North and South apart. Yet, as this course exposes, the issues faced by urban areas have resembling themes and characteristics, regardless of economic status or geographic location. Therefore, in the context of sustainable urban development, the binary dichotomy of the terms 'Global North' and 'Global South' must be contested. While a focus on Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, and the MENA region, Rethink the City attempts to understand the transboundary nature of urban issues and provide a platform to gather insights beyond borders. It is only by learning from other narratives that we can collectively address the complex challenges ahead.

Keywords:

Global South, Global North, language, underrepresented geographies, unbalanced, imaginary, perceptions, place-based, decolonise

Written by the editorial team:

Dr. Igor Pessoa, Anja van der Watt, Dr. Luz María Vegara and Dr. Caroline Newton

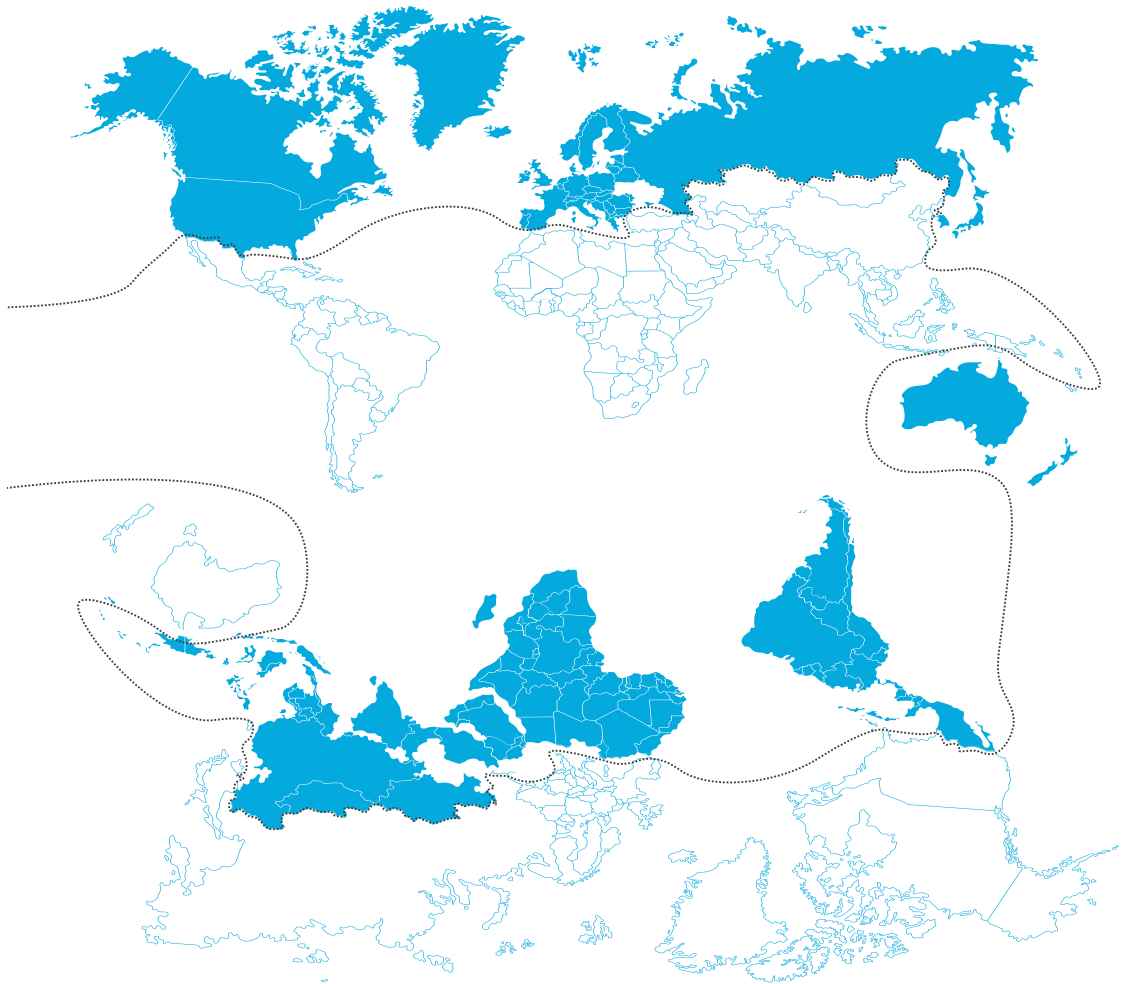


Figure 1: The imaginary line of the Global North/South divide. Which way up?
Visual created by Anja van der Watt



Figure 2: Same world, different view - the Equal Earth projection demonstrating true sizes of nations relative to one another, set at 150 East
Questioning world view and Western bias. Map taken from EqualEarth.com

What is the Global South?

A disclaimer about a limited terminology

During the creation, development, and delivery of the Rethink the City course, one of the most common questions that arose among the lecturers was: What is the Global South? The term seems inadequate to highlight a group of wildly diverse countries and we cannot clearly identify which commonalities to take into account. In a recent on-campus course, we developed a simple poll for students, gave them a list of countries, and asked them to identify which ones belong to the Global South. Some countries, like Brazil, Kenya, or Indonesia, were commonly linked to the Global South, but things became more complicated when we added such countries as North Korea and South Korea, or Guyana and French Guyana, or China and Taiwan. It is clear, to some extent, that the term builds not only on economic development, but also on political values. Additionally, in the public imaginary, the term seems to directly replace the notion of countries that at some point were referred to as 'third world' and later on as 'developing nations' – two terms coined in different periods (and international contexts) that seem less pertinent nowadays. Perhaps 'Global South' is slightly less archaic than its predecessors, and even though we used it in our course, it still feels limited, inaccurate, and counter-productive. Another alternative is 'majority world', referring to where the majority of the population resides in contrast with the 'minority world'; however, this term emerged organically within the discourse of social scientists, policy makers, and activists as a critical response to traditional terminologies, but remains a niche term in literature.

The Rethink the City team, being mostly based in Europe, noticed that there are many similar challenges being faced in European cities and those in the so-called Global South. Social and economic inequality, gentrification, and poor representation of marginalised groups are but a few examples of challenges faced in both the Global North and South. The aggregation of countries or cities under one label that inefficiently defines a collective of countries or trigger an old-fashioned imaginary seemed inappropriate. Internally, and in many discussions of the course, we adopted the term 'underrepresented geographies' that emerged organically in one of our early, preparatory discussions. We believe that the term is more appropriate for defining places that do not necessarily fall into the dichotomy South or North, while having less of a political connotation.

The contextual scale that students were working on also played an important role in determining the terminology we used. Despite many of the challenges discussed occurring in cities globally, we wanted the assignments to be place-based. During the course, we worked on the scale of cities and neighbourhoods. In such a local scale, especially with the global trend of increased inequality, the representation

of an underdeveloped South and developed North can not only coexist in the same city, but perhaps also lie next to each other. In order to acknowledge these nuances, we must understand ‘underrepresented geographies’ as a term that can also represent different fragments of a city.

We decided to use ‘Global South’ in the beginning of the course, at which point we believed it would better communicate the course’s geographical focus. It also worked well to communicate to a massive audience and attract more participants to debate since it is a more familiar term. Nevertheless, as the course develops and improves through time, we believe that the terminology should evolve with it.

Learning from underrepresented geographies

Planning researchers have long defended a southern shift on planning studies, including Watson, Caldeira, Carollini, and Santos. Not only is this based on the much-highlighted fact that the world is now majorly urban and that this accelerated urbanisation is concentrated in the Global South, but also because there is much to be learned from these underrepresented geographies.

Carollini (2018) shed some light on the unbalanced production of planning research and education focused on the Global North. She emphasised that this lack of focus on the Global South has generated poorly-trained professionals unaware of the local dynamics, and who have unsuccessfully tried to apply concepts and strategies from their North-American and Eurocentric training to cities in the Global South. According to Carollini, this leads to the replication of failed projects or the creation of developments that are disconnected to local identities and realities. The concentration of planning education and research in the Global North is fostering a second wave of colonisation of planning practices similar to the internationalisation of the modernist planning in the 1950s. This is what Vanessa Watson (2016) refers to as a reproduction of monoculture with increased ‘inter-referencing of cities visions around the globe’, which can be seen in new developments, such as towns which are ‘look-alikes’ of Dubai.

In the Rethink the City MOOC, we aimed to invert this logic and promote the use and exchange of Southern theories and case studies from underrepresented geographies that could also serve to inform the cities of the Global North. Despite being based at TU Delft, the course team was almost exclusively from the Global South and the course counted with many contributions from partners outside of the Netherlands. The MOOC format naturally helped with this collaboration because not only were the lecturers from the Global South, but so were a great

number of participants, who contributed with their lived local experiences and practices. They acted as facilitators and curators of these contributions, fostering a horizontal, lecturer–student collaboration rather than a traditional, top-down approach. This inverted flow of knowledge and way of practice is needed for a more inclusive and representative planning education.

Is the Global South hard to sell?

In *Go South, Young Planner, Go South!* (2018), Carrollini argued that focusing on the Global South is somewhat hard to sell to on-campus students in the United States of America. However, the experience of the Rethink the City MOOC confirmed our impression that this is not the case when you go online. The course attracted many students from around the globe and, interestingly in each run, the USA was consistently ranked among the top 3 countries in terms of participation numbers (see Chapter 2). One could argue that online education offers the opportunity to reach other types of participants. Perhaps it is just the lower financial cost of attending a MOOC that generated the opportunity to reach a different audience. It is not possible at this stage to concretely determine why this happened, but our experience showed that online students seem to be open, curious, and motivated to learn from different and distant locations.

It is hard to define why many universities struggle to implement more diverse curricula for planning education on-campus. It could be that there is no demand due to the structural changes that need to happen for southern urbanism knowledge to be more appreciated. Rolando Vázquez (2021) defended that a critical analysis of modernity, broadly understood broadly as the Western project of civilization, could contribute to the decolonisation of knowledge in education. The Rethink the City MOOC hints on how to contribute, within a traditional Western structure of planning education, to a more diverse planning debate.

The perks of an online community

Building an online community is radically different from an on-campus community of students. What unites the students is not their shared backgrounds, the way they look, or the music that they listen to, but rather their interest in, and positions on, urban challenges. Hidden by the relative anonymity of an online platform, students were able to share their impressions and receive feedback from peers working on the same topic. Despite challenges being place-based, there were many similarities and differences to learn from that were not location-dependent.



The course managed over 2,000 active students who were simultaneously adding their views to the debates proposed by the course team. This massive number of contributions created a strong network of knowledge exchange which forced the lecturers to act more as facilitators than as traditional educators. As educators, this is a change to which we are still trying to adapt. This will require time, as fostering knowledge exchange takes quite a different set of skills to only providing it. It also means that we need to rely more on collective knowledge and open ourselves to knowledge sources which differ from those of typical academic production. For example, many participants referred to alternative knowledge networks that have collected information about studies and practices in the Global South. Carolini (2018) also highlighted some of these: the Cities Alliance Network (<https://www.citiesalliance.org/resources/knowledge-library>), the United Cities and Local governments (<https://learning.uclg.org>), and the Slum Dwellers International knowledge hub (<https://sdinet.org/publication/>). These platforms are important sources of grounded knowledge that, despite being extremely useful, are not commonly used in traditional planning education. Rethink the City participants not only contribute to shaping the course itself, but benefit from this exchange of tips and alternative knowledge sources which aim to bring more diversity to planning education.

Final thoughts

In this chapter, we wanted to share some thoughts that challenge traditional perceptions on the knowledge flows and exchanges between the North and South. On the one hand, the term ‘underrepresented geographies’ adds the nuance of defining places that do not necessarily fall into the South/North dichotomy. On the other hand, a place-based understanding of our cities and neighbourhoods allows us to identify common urban challenges by considering territories from their local characteristics.

Conducting planning education within an online environment, as with the Rethink the City course, can offer an international perspective on current urban challenges without necessarily undermining local values of context-specific knowledge and understanding. Online educational tools can provide an open platform to encourage debates and explore Southern perspectives on current global issues, ranging from climate resilience to human rights and inequalities to participatory practices.

As educators and researchers, we must encourage the exploration of alternative learning experiences from contexts that are less portrayed in mainstream education. This provides an opportunity for urban practitioners to lift each other up and work together towards achieving a fairer and more sustainable urban future. It can encourage us to question the imaginary line that was drawn between the global 'North' and 'South' by our colonial past and embrace a shift in perspective. Through the pursuit of equitable access to, and representation in, educational processes, regardless of geographic location, we can achieve a fairer and more holistic approach when addressing the pressing issues ahead.



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