

Inequitable representation of developing country researchers at development economics conferences.



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Inequitable representation of developing country researchers at development economics conferences

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One-Sentence Summary: Developing country researchers are not fairly represented at conferences where their countries' development are discussed.

Abstract: We examined the representation of researchers from developing countries at seven of the top development economics conferences from 2009 to 2022. The studies presented at such conferences focus on poor and developing countries. Yet we found that on average only one in five presenters was from such a country. The rise in virtual conferences during the 2020-21 pandemic increased representation by only a small margin. We found no evidence of representation improving over time, but rather a slow but significant decline. This underrepresentation, and the resulting low level of involvement in research dialogue, will be to the detriment of socio-economic and policy research in these countries. In the interest of social justice and equity, we call for more attention to this topic.

Main Text:

Concern is growing that developing country researchers are not fairly represented in the spaces where their country's development, their problems and their future are being discussed. In this paper we present a specific example of such inequity: the low representation of developing country researchers at development conferences. Fair representation is vital because it enables critical engagement by researchers who have an intimate knowledge of the local social and political context. It is also a moral end in itself, because those who are directly affected by that context have a claim to be part of such conversations. Developing country researchers deserve to have a strong voice in dialogues about their region's future.

Our paper contributes to the dialogue on the focus and priorities of development economics research and the question of who is leading, conducting or participating in this research. As developing country researchers ourselves, attending development economics conferences, the poor representation of researchers from developing countries at these conferences concerns and puzzles us. We chose to investigate conferences because we regard these meetings as an important resource and a valuable platform. Equitable regional representation in journal publications is important (2), but regional representation at conferences is worth considering over and above this, because conference paper presentations take place so early in the research process and help to shape ideas and set research agenda priorities in development economics. Discussions at conferences interpret and assess new findings and help to shape the way those findings influence the priorities of global development decision-makers, such as funders and multilateral organisations (1). Conferences are important events because they function as a bridge, fostering dialogue and creating networks, both

between universities in different countries, but also more broadly between universities, think tanks and development partner organisations.

5 Developing country researchers miss out on an opportunity to receive high quality comments and suggestions to improve their research, which in turn skews the quantity and quality of journal publications from developing countries. Over the long term, inequity in regional access to high profile development conferences affects individual research careers and thus also skews regional distribution of research activity and outputs (3, 4). Conferences allow researchers to receive expert feedback, establish new collaborations, learn about new methods and theories and promote their own work and technical skills. Easier or more frequent access to conferences could be a big advantage to new researchers, which can affect the likelihood and the quality of ensuing journal publications and thus also their career trajectory. Inequitable conference representation, on the other hand, could reinforce existing skewed patterns of resource allocation in the form of funding and opportunities, and the patterns will be reflected in research activities and research outputs.

15 Our concern is not only with the inequity itself but also with the biases and blind spots that it gives rise to in development policy and practice. Skewed conference representation influences the quality, relevance and credibility of development policy research globally. Developing country researchers offer unique and valuable contributions to development policy dialogues because they are familiar with the social context and political economy of their countries. Without sufficient attention to the social context and the political economy of these countries, development policies run the risk of being inappropriate and ineffective.

25 We contribute to this important dialogue with an analysis of regional representation patterns across conferences and over time, based on a large database of conference participation. We analyse the representation of researchers from developing countries at seven of the top development economics conferences between 2009 and 2022 and also investigate whether the move to virtual conferences in 2020 and 2021 improved representation. Before the Covid-19 crisis, these conferences always required researchers to gather at a single venue. The choice of such venues has political implications. It introduces asymmetries in the time and financial costs of conference attendance, aggravated by the North-South asymmetry in funding for research travel and visa requirements for travel. We are, as far as we know, the first to conduct this analysis for these conferences.

35 **Method and data**

We could find no authoritative list of the most important international development economics conferences and therefore based our selection on the opinions of development economists. The seven prestigious international development conferences in our sample are: the World Bank's Annual Bank Conference on Development Economics (ABC); the African Development Bank's African Economic Conference (AEC); the Bureau for Research and Economic Analysis of Development Conference (popularly known as BREAD); the Centre for the Study of African Economies' African Development Conference (CSAE); the Poverty Reduction, Equity and Growth Network Conference (PEGNet); the North Eastern Universities Development Consortium Conference (NEUDC); and the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research Development Conference (UNU-WIDER).

We looked at participation trends for these conferences from 1 January 2009 to 31 December 2022, using the conference websites to extract the listed presenters, their affiliations and the focus of

their presentations. We have assumed the accuracy of these websites and other material by the organisers, online or published, but these are well-known and reputable conferences so the assumption is not unreasonable.

The analysis that follows is based on our categorisation of the presenters' affiliations. To retrieve the presenters' countries, we extracted their names and the names of their universities (if available) from the conference programmes. We then did a keyword search for the presenters and their affiliations using Google's search API. We parsed the results using a natural language engine to extract each presenter's country of residence. If the country of residence was not found or more than one country was returned, we flagged the result for manual search. In all cases we performed manual validation on the flagged records and spot-checked records to validate the results.

Our focus is on the main presenter of each paper, assuming that co-authors would often not be attendance and relying on earlier arguments that benefits accrue to those attending conferences. We found usable information for a total of 8073 presenters.

We investigate the burden of travel as a possible impediment to broader conference participation in two ways. We first compared the difference in representation between the conferences hosted in developed countries and those hosted in developing countries. This analysis was suggestive, but we are careful to not over-interpret these findings because only one conference in our sample, the African Economic Conference (AEC), is hosted in a developing country. We then explored changes over time in conference representation during the March 2020 to December 2021 pandemic period when most conferences were held online.

Findings

Table 1 shows that than one in five development conference presenters (20%) were affiliated to developing country universities. The remaining four-fifths were affiliated to developed country universities. This ratio much lower than the approximately four in ten (39%) developing country presenters reported for global health conferences (1).

Table 1. Developing country affiliation by conference. The tables compares the number and percentage of conference speakers with developed and developing country institutional affiliation by conference for these top 7 development conferences. Confidence intervals are shown in square brackets.

Conference	Developed country affiliation	Developing country affiliation	Total
ABC	506	64	570
%	88.8 [85.9-91.1]	11.2 [8.9-14.1]	100
AEC	163	428	591
%	27.6 [24.1-31.3]	72.4 [68.7-75.9]	100
BREAD	711	48	759
%	93.7 [91.7-95.2]	6.3 [4.8-8.3]	100
CSAE	1983	456	2439
%	81.3 [79.7-82.8]	18.7 [17.2-20.3]	100

NEUDC	1790	166	1956
%	91.5 [90.2-92.7]	8.5[7.3-9.8]	100
PEGNET	314	114	428
%	73.4 [69.0-77.3]	26.6 [22.7-31.0]	100
WIDER	1024	306	1330
%	77.0 [74.7-79.2]	23.0 [20.8-25.3]	100
Total	6491	1582	8073
%	80.4 [79.5-81.3]	19.6 [18.7-20.5]	100

Pearson: Uncorrected chi2(6) = 1334.5701
F(6, 48432) = 222.4; Pr = 0.000

5 Why are developing country researchers so poorly represented at these conferences? Our data enables us to identify the inequity, but not to explain the reason for it. However, we have some evidence on the burden of travel, including transport, accommodation, meals, travel insurance, vaccinations, visas and incidental costs. Visa applications and visa costs often include travel to the embassy, which in many countries would require two return flights, one to make the application and another to collect the visa. In many developing countries visa application processes are not only expensive and protracted, but also quite unpredictable.

10 The representation of developing country researchers at the AEC, the only conference held in a developing country, was 75%, which is significantly higher than the 15% average for the conferences hosted in developed countries. This much higher representation of developing country researchers at AEC is clear in Figure 1. The lowest developing country representation is found amongst the conferences hosted in North America: for BREAD, developing country representation stays between 0% and 17% and for NEUDC between 3% and 12%. We observe large fluctuations over time in developing country representation for the PEGNET and WIDER conferences: in 2016 PEGNET and WIDER both reached a high point in their developing country representation: 43% for PEGNET and 61% for WIDER. In 2022 PEGNET improved upon its earlier best performance, with a 50% share of developing country researchers.

20 **Fig. 1. Developing country representation from 2009 tot 2022, by conference.** Representation of conferences fluctuates over time, but these fluctuations are dwarfed by sharp differences in representation across conferences with the African-based conference AEC clearly the most representative and two US based conferences, NEUDC and BREAD being the least representative.

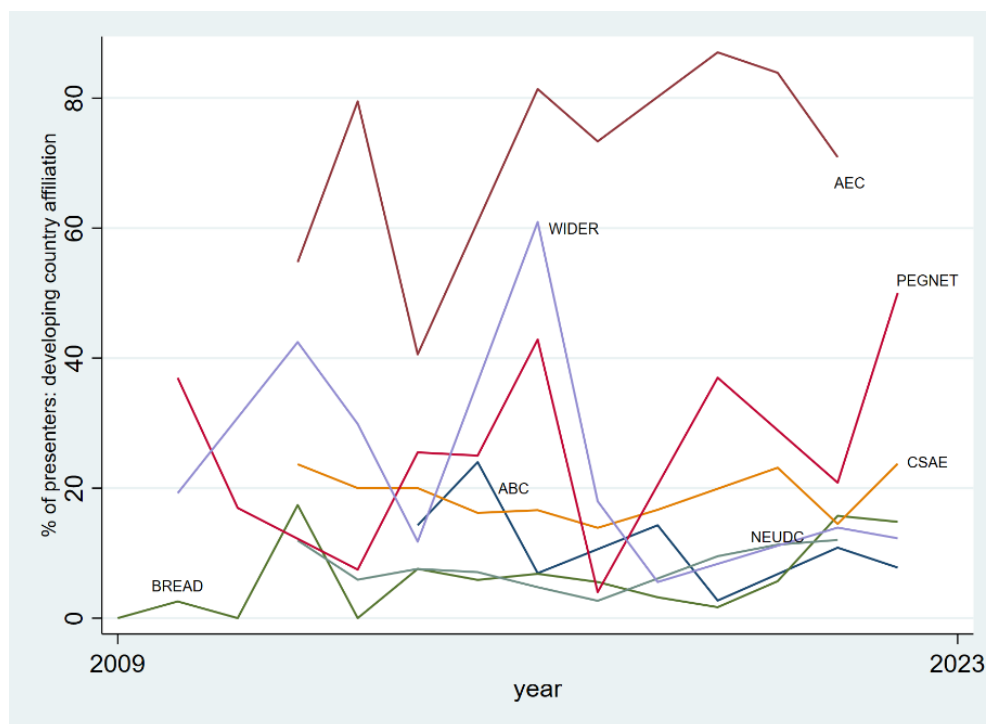


Table 2 confirms the patterns showed in Figure 1. The AEC dummy is large, positive and significantly different from the omitted CSAE reference category for the first two models, but the dummy is insignificant in the third model where conference-specific COVID interaction terms were added. The COVID interaction term for the AEC conference is significant and -0.222, showing a substantial worsening of developing country representation during the COVID years. The North American-based conferences BREAD and NEUDC have large, negative and significant dummies ranging between -0.214 and -0.124 for BREAD and -0.172 and -0.103 for NEUDC.

There is no evidence of an improvement in representation over time. The linear year term's coefficient is negative, small and significant. The coefficient on the COVID time dummy is 5 percentage points before we add the conference-specific COVID interaction terms in the third model. The coefficient is significant and noteworthy, but comparatively small given that an improvement of 22 to 27 percentage points would be needed to achieve equity (since the constant term, representing average conference representation, varies between 0.216 and 0.266). We could find only one other research study investigating the impact of the pandemic era pivot to virtual conferences and it also reported an increase in geographical diversity of conference participants (5).

Table 2. OLS regressions for developing country affiliation. Data are ordinary least squares results of developing country representation at the top 7 development conferences per conference. We include a linear year effect as well as a COVID-19 dummy for 2020 and 2021. In the second panel we add linear year effects per conference and the third panel we add COVID-19 dummies for each conference. SE are shown in parentheses. *, **, and *** denote impact is significantly different from zero at the 10, 5, and 1% levels, respectively.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
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Year	-0.00478**	-0.00601*	-0.0121***
	(-2.54)	(-1.86)	(-2.79)
Covid period	0.0520***	0.0523***	0.111***
	(3.71)	(3.67)	(3.50)
ABC	-0.0736***	0.0274	0.0337
	(-4.73)	(0.49)	(0.37)
AEC	0.528***	0.294***	0.123
	(25.79)	(4.13)	(1.36)
BREAD	-0.124***	-0.189***	-0.214***
	(-10.49)	(-5.49)	(-5.37)
NEUDC	-0.103***	-0.133***	-0.172***
	(-10.22)	(-4.18)	(-4.22)
PEGNET	0.0768***	-0.0696	-0.105*
	(3.35)	(-1.34)	(-1.70)
WIDER	0.0407***	0.159***	0.0824*
	(2.91)	(4.17)	(1.67)
Year*ABC		-0.0103*	-0.0102
		(-1.85)	(-0.93)
Year*AEC		0.0235***	0.0515***
		(3.45)	(4.65)
Year*BREAD		0.00716*	0.0108**
		(1.84)	(2.18)
Year*NEUDC		0.00358	0.00965*
		(0.97)	(1.81)
Year*PEGNET		0.0196***	0.0250***
		(3.06)	(2.78)
Year*WIDER		-0.0150***	-0.00226
		(-3.61)	(-0.34)
Covid*ABC			-0.0163
			(-0.25)
Covid*AEC			-0.222***
			(-3.34)
Covid*BREAD			-0.0284
			(-0.71)
Covid*NEUDC			-0.0575
			(-1.46)
Covid*PEGNET			-0.0466
			(-0.51)
Covid*WIDER			-0.133**
			(-2.57)
Constant	0.216***	0.227***	0.266***
	(13.40)	(8.38)	(8.01)
Observations	8073	8073	8073

Note: t-statistics in parentheses, *p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01". CSAE is the base category.

The ban on travel during the pandemic gave rise to two years of virtual conferences, allowing researchers to present their work at conferences without incurring the time and financial burden associated with travel. Given that this burden falls disproportionately on developing country researchers, one would expect virtual conferences to improve equity in conference representation. However, it is important to note that there are limitations to interpreting the pandemic time period as a natural experiment that allows us to estimate the representation impact of eliminating the travel burden. One limitation is that virtual conference attendance introduced its own constraints by requiring access to fast, reliable and affordable internet connections. Another is that the interpretation of changes in conference attendance is complicated by other changes that occurred during the pandemic period, such as the heavier academic workload due to remote teaching and increased childcare responsibilities with the closure of schools. More generally too, one would expect the habits and established research networks underpinning conference attendance patterns to be resistant to change over the short to medium term.

Conclusion

Developing country researchers are underrepresented at seven high profile and agenda-setting development economics conferences. The much larger representation from developed countries confers a career advantage on developed country researchers. However, it is not just about careers. The dominance of developed country researchers is difficult to justify in terms of development policy. The involvement of local researchers would strengthen the understanding of their countries' political economy and local social context. Their involvement is crucial for appropriate policy design and for local ownership of the work.

Given the stark patterns we observed, the poor representation of developing country researchers cannot be news to funders and organisers of these conferences. It is unclear why funders have not demanded change, at least in recent years, as conversations have turned towards participation and representation, acknowledging the roots of inequality and the importance of lived experiences, diversity and social context. We find it difficult to reconcile the way conferences are organised with the stated objectives and priorities of the funders in the development realm. It is troubling that these patterns have persisted and the years have brought no sign of improvement.

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Data availability: The data and replication files are available at <https://github.com/rburger/conferencerepresentation>