First-Hand Experience, Relevance, and Coverage in Development Economics Research. Are We Studying All the Topics that Really Matter?

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Abstract

This analysis highlights a significant disconnect between public priorities and academic research outputs. We look at data on 16 topics covered in Pew Research Center opinion surveys and publication records from 14 journals (2002–2023), and observe that while topics such as inflation, employment, and health (e.g., HIV) rank as major concerns for populations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, there is a notable lack of academic publications addressing these issues. Our research also reveals a stark imbalance in authorship. Researchers from the Global South are more likely than those from the Global North to focus on topics deemed very important by local populations, which highlights that their publications are more strongly aligned with local priorities. These findings emphasize the need for greater inclusion of researchers from the Global South, balanced geographic focus, and context-sensitive approaches to enhance the relevance and impact of development economics research in addressing local challenges. The paper serves as a call to action for policymakers, journal editors, and researchers to prioritize diversity and equity in academic research in order to foster a more inclusive and balanced approach to development economics.

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I. Introduction

There is an old joke about a person who lost their keys in a park but only searched under a lamppost because the light was better there. As development economists, are we searching for keys—the keys to inclusive and sustainable development—only under the lamppost rather than exploring the entire park? We argue that amplifying the voice and influence of researchers located in the developing world in development economics forums would enable us to cover a larger area. We hypothesize that the key mechanism is the firsthand experience that local researchers possess with development challenges, which is crucial for identifying relevant and under-studied topics. This paper provides novel descriptive evidence supporting this claim. We follow a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative data on journal publication patterns from Elsevier's Scopus database and the qualitative interpretation of opinion surveys from the Pew Research Center (PEW).

The landscape of development economics journals heavily favors authors from North America and Europe, which results in a significant disparity in representation. While a considerable portion of research focuses on countries or regions in the Southern Hemisphere, most articles are authored by scholars based in the Northern Hemisphere (Aigner et al. 2025, Aistleitner et al. 2023, Amarante et al. 2022, Angus et al. 2021, Das et al. 2013, Liverpool 2021). This inequality is particularly evident in the striking under-representation of researchers from Africa in development-focused journals and underscores the urgent need for greater diversity in scholarly discourse. Even more concerning is the lack of progress that has been made over time on involving Southern researchers. Despite the passage of decades, their contributions remain discouragingly stagnant, with their share of published papers hovering at a mere 15% over the past 30 years (Amarante and Zurbrigg 2022).

We conjecture that Southern researchers usually possess a deep understanding of the complexities that influence their countries, including challenges related to data and governmental policies. This expertise equips them to contribute meaningfully to the design

and implementation of research projects. However, despite this potential, researchers in developing nations often face marginalization in international forums dedicated to development research and policy agendas. This suggests that the global scientific community may be overlooking a wealth of valuable ideas and policy recommendations that are rooted in a substantial body of local research (Aigner et al. 2025).

To extend the metaphor, our objective is to investigate whether research published in development economics journals, which generally have editorial boards comprised overwhelmingly of researchers located in the Global North (Kassouf and Ronconi 2022), addresses all *relevant* topics or focuses primarily on those "under the lamppost". This is a difficult question to answer because defining "relevance" necessarily requires taking a particular normative position. We develop alternative definitions of "relevance" that rely heavily on the opinions of the population living in each country and compare them with the actual distribution of topics covered in development economics journals.[1] That is to say, this paper explores whether the topics covered in leading journals reflect the priorities and challenges identified by the local populations surveyed. We seek to assess the inclusiveness of current development research by comparing the thematic focus of the journals with the issues considered most relevant by those living in the Global South.

We analyze thematic variation both within and across countries to provide a comprehensive understanding of the gaps between global population priorities and the topics covered in economics and development economics journals. Additionally, we compare research addressing issues deemed very important by populations in developing countries and focus on differences between studies authored by scholars in the Global North and the Global South. More specifically, we examine whether researchers based in the South are likely to focus on different topics than their counterparts based in the North.

[1] Social scientists have long used people's preferences in studies. One example is the "quality of life" literature that attempts to use people's preferences to develop an index that could serve to guide research topics and policymaking. See, for example, Milbrath (1979).

This paper makes an original empirical contribution by systematically comparing public opinion data on development priorities across the Global South with academic publishing patterns in leading economics and development economics journals. Linking societal concerns, captured through nationally representative opinion surveys, with publication data indexed in Scopus enables us to assess the degree to which research agendas reflect local needs. While prior works have examined publication biases or representation issues in academic publishing (Aigner et al. 2025, Corsi et al. 2019, Das et al. 2013), none have explicitly evaluated the topical alignment of academic output and public priorities at this scale or across such a wide range of countries. Our findings help inform ongoing debates around research relevance, equity, and the localization of knowledge in the field of development economics.

Whereas most previous studies have focused on specific countries, regions, or topics, this analysis covers a broad set of developing countries from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. To our knowledge, this is the first attempt to systematically compare topic relevance in public opinion with publication content across so many countries and topics. The cross-regional scope helps to identify both common patterns and context-specific gaps in alignment between research agendas and development priorities. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: a review of the literature, a description of the data and methodology, a presentation of the results, various analyses of the results, and concluding remarks.

II. Bibliography Review

The literature reviewed highlights significant changes in how economics research is conducted and published, particularly in top economics and development economics journals. These changes reflect broader academic trends but raise concerns about the topics prioritized and the lack of representation of researchers and issues from the Global South. While some studies document methodological advancements and shifts in geographic influence, others condemn the systemic barriers that prevent low- and middle-

income countries (LMICs) and peripheral research fields from receiving more attention in influential journals.

More than two decades ago, Hodgson and Rothman (1999) showed that most editorial board members of core economics journals came from a few US universities and suggested that such a high concentration of power is a threat to innovation and change in the field. Following this line of thought, Ductor and Visser (2023) explored more than one hundred economics journals and found a negative consequence of power concentration: a strong negative association between editorial board member terms and journal impact. The problem of power concentration is even more stark in the sub-field of development economics, since the few individuals and institutions that dominate the editorial boards are not located in the developing world (Ronconi and Kassouf 2023).

Hamermesh (2013) documented a transition from theoretical to empirical research in the top three American economics journals (*American Economic Review*, *Journal of Political Economy*, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*) that was facilitated by technological advancements and evolving editorial preferences. While this evolution has enhanced the rigor and applicability of research, it also underscores a narrowing focus on data-rich topics that are often derived from contexts with better data infrastructure, which are typically found in high-income countries. This trend resonates with findings by Das et al. (2013) that emphasize the consistent under-representation of low-income countries in economics research. The strong correlation between a country's income level and research coverage reveals there is a disproportionate focus on issues relevant to wealthier nations, which leaves poorer regions under-studied. Together, these studies suggest there is a growing divide in research relevance that is driven by institutional dominance and publication incentives.

Fontana (2019) added nuance to this discussion by examining citation trends and the "identification revolution" and revealing an increase in emphasis on microeconomics and empirical studies in top journals. While Fontana's findings highlight a reduction in U.S. dominance and growing European contributions, the absence of substantial representation

from LMICs remains a notable gap. This reflects the localization of knowledge flows, with influential ideas being less likely to originate from or significantly impact scholars in the Global South, which aligns with Nunn's (2019) critique of Western-centric research practices. Nunn argued for integrating qualitative methods and local contexts into development research and suggested that current practices fail to capture the complexity of development challenges in marginalized regions.

Similarly, Bardhan (2003) identified systemic barriers that limit the participation of researchers from peripheral fields like development economics in top journals. Institutional biases, publication pressures, and an opaque refereeing process compound the difficulties experienced by scholars from less-prestigious institutions or those focusing on less-mainstream topics. These structural issues are echoed in the work of Polyakov et al. (2017), who demonstrated how research topics and international collaborations influence citation rates in agricultural, resource, environmental, and ecological economics. Topics that attract broad, international attention, such as environmental economics, fare better in terms of impact, while those that do not remain overlooked, which further marginalizes certain research areas.

A common thread emerges across these studies: the dominance of (a few) Northern researchers in shaping the discourse in top journals. While Hamermesh and Fontana focused on methodological evolution and shifting academic dominance, Nunn, Bardhan, and Das and coauthors critiqued the structural and institutional dynamics that marginalize voices from the Global South. Together, their findings underscore the need for systemic changes in editorial practices, publication incentives, and research focus to create a more inclusive and impactful academic environment in economics and development studies. Such changes would help address persistent biases and ensure that pressing issues in under-represented regions receive more scholarly attention. A reason for hope is the increasing amount of research published recently on these issues (Ahir et al. 2021, Aigner et al. 2025, Aistleitner et al. 2023, Amarante et al. 2022, Angus et al. 2021, Hellmanzik and

Kuld 2021, Kvangraven and Kesar 2023, Liverpool 2021, Mabugu et al. 2025, Ronconi and Kassouf 2023).

III. Data and Methodology

3.1 Defining "Relevance"

It is simple to determine which topics and countries are covered in economics forums. For example, bibliometric datasets provide measures of the share of papers published in journals covering any topic and country pair (e.g., unemployment in South Africa). It is much more difficult to assess whether the papers published cover all *relevant* issues and whether the attention topics receive is proportional to their *relevance*.

One measure of relevance lies in demographic representation across countries. For example, given that approximately 5% of the global population resides in the United States and United Kingdom combined, an analysis of the proportion of articles in economics journals that pertain to these countries can shed light on any potential gap in relevance. The fact that the share of papers published on these two countries is substantially larger than 5% suggests that the rest of the world is under-represented in academic articles. This measure of relevance, however, has already been extensively documented in the existing literature (Bardhan 2003, Card and DellaVigna 2013, Das et al. 2013, Fontana et al. 2019).

In this paper we confront this complex and intrinsically normative issue by instead focusing on *topical* relevance. We do this by conducting an analysis of existing opinion surveys in which representative samples of populations were asked to identify the most pressing topics in their respective countries. That is to say, we define relevance following an old tradition in economics: listening to the preferences of the population. We define x_{ij} as the share of the population in country i that considers topic j to be the main problem in their country. Then, we define topic A as more relevant than topic B in country i if $x_{iA} > x_{iB}$.

This paper focuses on gaps in topical relevance within countries. For example, suppose that according to a survey of people in country *i*, topic *A* is twice as important as topic *B*. We then ask: Do journals publish twice as many papers about topic *A* in country *i* than topic *B* in country *i*?

An important aspect to discuss is whether people know what problems are most relevant in their country and whether they report those concerns in surveys. How much information do people have? Do they possess the skills required to understand the relationship between topics and their temporal dynamics? Do they care about the medium and long term, or only the short term (what is urgent)? Do they report their real concerns or what is politically correct? The definition of relevance that is adopted in this paper assumes that opinion surveys provide added value despite their limitations.

3.2 Measuring "Relevance" in the PEW Survey Data

We use data from opinion surveys that are publicly available in the PEW Global Attitudes & Trends Question Database accessible at https://www.pewresearch.org/global/question-search/. This dataset has several advantages. First, the same questionnaire was used in many countries all over the world. Second, an effort was made to interview a representative sample of the population in each country.[2] Third, interviewees assessed the importance of various topics/issues in their countries, categorizing each of them as (i) a very big problem, (ii) a moderately big problem, (iii) a small problem, or (iv) not a problem.

We use the PEW survey data to calculate a measure of relevance for 16 topics across 60 countries. The topics include climate change, commuting, corruption, crime, debt,

[2] Here are some details about the surveys: "Pew Research Center's cross-national studies are designed to be nationally representative using probability-based methods and target the non-institutional adult population (18 and older) in each country. The Center strives for samples that cover as much of the adult population as possible, given logistical, security and other constraints. ... Sample sizes for Pew Research Center's cross-national studies are usually designed to yield at least 1,000 interviews, though larger samples may be required for more robust within-country comparisons." More information is available online at https://www.pewresearch.org/global/question-search/.

drugs, education, employment, healthcare, HIV, immigration, inequality/poverty, inflation, pollution, racism, and terrorism. The countries are listed in Table 1.

We selected these topics and countries based on PEW survey coverage. First, we included every topic that was surveyed in at least 30 countries between 2002 and 2018, for a total of 16 topics. Thus, we excluded topics with data for only a small number of countries.[3] Second, for country–topic pairs with multiple survey observations over the 2002–2018 period, we used the simple average of the available data without taking into account time variation. We ignore time variation because: (i) it is conceptually unclear what should be the temporal link between people's interest and researchers' coverage, and (ii) the number of articles published per topic–country–year in the selected journals is zero in most cases. These two problems are partially overcome by using a two-decade time frame.

Third, the values in the country–topic cells in Table 1 were computed by weighting the percentage of respondents who selected each response based on the perceived importance of the topic as follows: 1 for "a very big problem", 0.3 for "a moderately big problem", 0.1 for "a small problem", and 0 for "not a problem". For example, since 86.5% of Argentines think that inflation is "a very big problem", 11.5% consider it "a moderately big problem", and 2% say it is "not a problem", then the value of the country–topic cell "Argentina–inflation" is 89.95 (86.5 x 1 + 11.5 x 0.3 + 0 x 0.1 + 2.0 x 0).

Fourth, the dataset for the 16 topics spanning 60 countries was imbalanced.[4] Data was available for 812 of the 960 possible country–topic combinations (60 countries x 16 topics).

[3] The topics that were asked about in less than 30 countries, and hence excluded from our analysis, are (the number of countries is in parentheses): old age insurance (1), political instability (1), poverty (3), energy shortcuts (9), public transportation (1), lack of food (3), lack of drinking water (10), social inequality (1), and unemployment (2).

[4] The original list included 63 countries, but three countries available in the PEW survey dataset (Britain, El Salvador, and Lithuania) were dropped due to difficulties processing the Scopus dataset.

For country–topic cells with no survey data available, we imputed values using the regional average for the corresponding topic.[5]

Table 1 presents the weighted PEW survey results. While employment emerges as the primary concern in most countries, there is significant variation across regions. In several Sub-Saharan nations, including Angola, Ethiopia, and South Africa, HIV is considered a critical issue. In contrast, inflation and crime dominate concerns in many South and Central American countries. Notably, education does not rank as the top concern in any of the countries considered. Conversely, in high-income countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States, healthcare takes precedence. This diversity of priorities partially reflects the distinct socioeconomic challenges different regions face.

[5] The precise definition of region is in Tables 6–11.

Table 1 – Weighted† PEW survey results – average percentage of respondents who considered each topic very important, by country

Country	Climate change	Commuting	Corruption	Crime	Debt	Drugs	Education	Employment	Healthcare	HIV	Immigration	Inequality/Poverty	Inflation	Pollution	Racism	Terrorism
Angola	66.24	49.46	77.6	82.31	69.87	63.02	75.41	87.78	73.36	**89.7**	38.33	77.83	88.76	60.34	53.02	52.31
Argentina	73.69	53.02	87.73	89.23	64.01	84.8	68.88	82.95	59.01	77.05	38.58	77.46	**89.95**	75.87	40.02	59.67
Australia	53.21	34.42	49.42	53.62	44.12	63.66	44.87	47.92	**70.76**	47.17	37.85	44.72	50.12	59.16	30.96	44.56
Bangladesh	88.6	48.72	83.27	**89.17**	38.52	77.2	48.35	77.5	52.32	70.61	27.18	45.72	83.3	57.01	57.71	87.66
Bolivia	75.2	60.03	74.26	75.06	65.71	66.81	56.71	**82.81**	77.16	68.91	48.17	65.81	81.41	67.81	55.27	58.12
Brazil	**90.48**	58.41	79.96	87.45	71.31	86.8	71.64	80.45	87.8	72.4	23.14	78.4	86.83	66.62	47.72	57.97
Bulgaria	71.71	35.79	73.87	77.63	70.8	78.65	42.95	**78.88**	64.88	43.89	11.61	70.92	73.77	70.16	16.88	31.16
Burkina Faso	83.51	49.46	74.64	89	69.87	63.02	80.9	91.3	**91.4**	84.18	36.74	77.83	88.76	60.34	51.26	45.26
Canada	61.91	34.42	39.98	46.03	53.21	58.21	35.83	49.02	**70.76**	41.22	27.93	56.11	49.72	62.01	18.14	30.84
Chile	81.7	69.41	71.01	**88.8**	57.06	84.5	73.61	78.81	84.5	72.51	35.53	81.91	84.26	69.81	42.12	51.72
China	46.61	26.31	56.01	40.37	23.49	38.22	37.93	42.37	35.92	43.17	12.39	54.48	**60.51**	50.08	48.77	18.84
Colombia	78.68	74.41	89.7	92.1	74.41	78.4	87.7	**94.1**	93.1	78.38	42.26	79.41	89.3	92.6	50.37	62.46
Czechia	69.71	35.79	78.04	70.07	77.5	65.01	41.19	**79.6**	64.88	46.19	35.83	64.51	68.81	51.51	39.49	31.7
Egypt	51.52	49.52	53.12	52.32	55.01	52.01	45.22	**70.66**	51.42	59.91	40.82	63.51	68.54	52.78	34.22	62.01
Ethiopia	49.31	49.46	59.81	51.97	69.87	29.34	50.52	72.31	60.61	**90.3**	16.64	77.83	88.76	41.33	45.33	29.93
France	71.3	35.79	55.42	69.11	75.36	52.32	60.31	**84.05**	64.88	70.11	42.73	70.91	75.84	68.11	53.17	67.02
Germany	**66.61**	35.79	50.18	55.48	48.72	59.41	54.24	37.58	64.88	40.52	40.29	57.46	41.59	57.16	36.12	50.18
Ghana	74.61	51.22	74.64	83.2	79.11	66.21	69.41	93	81.21	85.1	31.58	83.3	**94.15**	60.38	54.07	29.03
Greece	65.18	35.79	64.1	66.52	92.45	62.75	42.89	**98.95**	64.88	49.75	33	87.4	93.4	60.37	40.02	44.31
Guatemala	78.68	60.03	87.3	**94.5**	68.51	78.4	70.11	83.48	77.16	86.2	56.01	71.53	85.6	76.41	69.91	64.42
Honduras	78.68	60.03	88.2	**94.8**	68.51	78.4	76.71	83.48	77.16	94.5	65.61	71.53	85.6	76.41	58.61	68.01
Hungary	65.18	35.79	**82**	77.1	70.8	62.41	41.32	78.88	64.88	38.43	23.34	70.92	73.77	67.61	58.21	27.74
India	73.1	50.32	82.95	85.52	58.61	73.96	62.08	85.14	60.68	77.47	43.17	75.46	**86.35**	67.37	69.76	83.79
Indonesia	54.81	30.04	**85.73**	70.91	66.56	57.61	55.51	80.15	59.54	65.26	18.2	55.66	85.27	47.48	63.72	57.22
Israel	52.11	49.61	**78.61**	65.81	50.77	59.61	51.02	69.56	59.54	48.02	21.53	64.51	69.83	51.72	49.42	76.31
Italy	66.66	35.79	72.56	81.1	85.55	74.81	57.96	**96.4**	64.88	72.16	68.96	80	85.65	88.5	65.56	78.61
Ivory Coast	66.24	49.46	71.01	84.46	69.87	72.11	67.96	87.78	73.36	87.9	43.53	77.83	**88.76**	74.51	62.47	64.81
Japan	72.03	49.61	77.96	**83.15**	71.46	55.81	56.86	62.46	59.54	58.76	26.63	44.52	47.32	66.61	31.23	70.86
Jordan	53.2	39.83	30.3	36.7	56.22	53.72	38.82	68.06	46.51	41.28	27.64	55.52	**71.91**	46.78	29.32	37.08
Kenya	66.48	35.93	80.57	82.8	60.17	51.22	59.65	87.25	67.98	86.71	29.54	78.41	**92.13**	46.22	59.42	38.68
Kuwait	74.71	49.61	32.51	64.41	62.65	75.71	55.81	74.47	59.54	48.02	16.22	62.1	**76.92**	68.91	33.12	40.61
Lebanon	64.31	66.12	84.53	69.58	92.35	69.01	52.55	**93.55**	91.4	54.87	64.51	89.05	93.27	72.38	77.91	64.32
Malaysia	55.96	40.43	55.72	**80.05**	69.96	48.02	32.03	65.01	43.92	55.11	25.14	53.27	78.7	49.58	11.75	15.43
Mali	66.24	49.46	77.36	70.96	69.87	70.51	81.41	87.78	73.36	80.21	29.59	77.83	**88.76**	66.41	43.88	25.17
Mexico	72.34	49.42	77.38	83.32	71.61	76.6	62.58	82.5	64.81	74.66	43.17	66.51	**84.46**	72.67	52.41	65.66
Morocco	72.91	49.46	65.9	77.41	69.87	75.2	75.11	87.78	73.36	77.3	52.51	77.83	**88.76**	74.9	55.4	84
Nicaragua	78.68	57.92	82.1	**90.3**	77.71	78.4	77.51	87.6	82.91	78.38	42.26	64.31	88.6	90	50.37	62.46
Nigeria	59.46	50.03	88.73	88.16	71.91	65.71	77.33	**90.85**	80.24	82.41	38.83	79.77	88.6	58.42	70.26	58.12

Pakistan	44.79	58.81	75.96	91.74	74.05	78.45	68.57	93.95	70.11	70.31	39.56	84.25	**98.03**	56.55	68.21	89.01
Palestine	60.91	45.92	81.71	78.31	66.22	72.61	57.82	**83.81**	75.21	54.51	57.71	63.77	81.21	68.34	53.91	57.01

Table 1 – continued

Country	Climate change	Commuting	Corruption	Crime	Debt	Drugs	Education	Employment	Health care	HIV	Immigration	Inequality /Poverty	Inflation	Pollution	Racism	Terrorism
Peru	76.5	64.71	82.63	**86.5**	55.11	84.1	69.41	74.1	72.01	84.4	39.77	64.51	73.41	81.44	50.37	76.16
Philippines	78.9	56.32	82.75	88.55	84.8	61.89	54.12	86.3	52.62	77.01	33.42	62.31	**90.1**	69.46	69.11	82.2
Poland	49.33	40.52	67.91	63.98	61.81	60.26	27.19	**78.96**	68.61	48.12	21.94	60.71	70.58	46.42	27.07	43.89
Russia	51.71	49.72	66.86	65.68	38.53	67.86	41.17	60.84	61.81	63.78	31.29	63.84	**72.37**	58.11	40.62	61.38
Senegal	64.61	54.82	65.88	81.36	64.36	69.01	73.28	93.23	83.56	80.61	31.28	75.31	**93.5**	52.59	56.67	30.97
Slovakia	73.41	35.79	73.57	68.94	70.8	59.46	46.72	**78.88**	64.88	34.27	21.17	70.92	73.77	57.06	39.66	29.07
South Africa	53.06	35.52	75.81	89.58	72.66	89	62.75	88.43	64.68	**93.8**	64.31	76.21	89.15	47.59	46.93	37.23
South Korea	**74.58**	49.61	72.16	49.76	68.26	34.03	37.57	70.86	59.54	36.43	16.95	68.46	59.92	66.81	31.54	22.99
Spain	69.5	35.79	58.01	65.71	81.55	69.41	35.12	**95**	64.88	59.41	51.92	80.2	73.48	74.3	47.61	73.81
Sweden	71.51	35.79	16.05	40.62	70.8	46.92	26.83	**78.88**	64.88	10.46	19.44	70.92	73.77	29.44	23.44	6.05
Tanzania	72.31	67.11	79.54	79.2	75.61	70.21	67.16	**91.7**	78.11	90.7	30.68	82.4	88.5	64.45	36.03	27.68
Thailand	65.09	60.31	**86.9**	79.5	65.51	61.89	66.21	70.5	66.21	59.2	31.13	57.11	83.3	65.66	48.77	56.55
Tunisia	66.24	60.31	91.1	**94.2**	80.85	63.02	88.6	93.55	67.41	84.18	36.74	82.95	93.7	87.3	51.26	45.26
Turkey	71.18	52.32	62.59	70.89	71.66	72.51	59.86	70.97	51.22	62.91	52.97	71.68	**73.96**	62.84	53.27	69.91
Uganda	80.81	40.72	83.9	73.84	69.11	45.72	68.79	**93.33**	80.31	89.65	29.98	78.61	90.55	57.55	48.72	48.42
Ukraine	55.57	17.14	74.76	62.86	75.7	56.46	39.7	78.5	64.21	69.64	27.46	73.21	**82.2**	56.11	32.38	31.06
United States	51.81	34.42	58.86	61.21	69.36	69.11	53.91	65.01	**70.76**	53.12	47.77	55.36	63.28	56.31	43.77	58.27
Uzbekistan	65.09	49.61	43.52	58.92	62.65	61.89	55.22	74.47	59.54	65.51	22.63	62.1	**76.92**	61.5	31.63	65.02
Venezuela	80.85	52.93	70.74	82.63	79.64	65.21	63.41	88.03	73.11	74.81	30.39	65.48	**92.17**	70.88	36.88	60.37
Vietnam	75.61	69.51	**80.7**	75.7	43.92	61.89	44.72	71.31	70.2	77.1	23.43	47.81	67.8	77.85	48.77	23.02

† Each country–topic cell reports the average after assigning a value of 100 to the respondents from said country who considered said topic "a very big problem", 30 to those who indicated it was "a moderately big problem", 10 to those who reported it was "a small problem", and 0 to those who considered it "not a problem". Source: Own elaboration based on the PEW surveys. Note: The value corresponding to each country's most important concern is indicated in **bold**.

3.3 Measuring the Supply of Published Research

We drew the journals selected for analysis primarily from David McKenzie's informal ranking of development economics journals (World Bank blog). The journals were chosen based on their established reputation for publishing empirical research focused on LMICs. McKenzie's list incorporates mainstream practitioner insights and focuses on content relevance, geographic focus, and researcher perceptions within the development community—dimensions that conventional impact-based rankings often overlook. We recognize, however, that it has limitations like any ranking of journals, and speculate that it is not universally agreed upon, particularly among policy-oriented and heterodox economists.

We then checked the availability of journals in the Scopus database and selected five key economics journals, five key development economics journals, and key regional economics journals focused on Africa, Latin America, and Asia. There were 864 general "economics and econometrics" journals and 380 "development" journals in Scopus. The journals selected are listed in Table 2.

Table 2 – The journals used to identify the supply of publications

Economics journals	Development economics journals	Regional economics journals
Quarterly Journal of Economics	World Development	Journal of African Economies
American Economic Review	Journal of Development Economics	Latin American Economic Review
Journal of Political Economy	World Bank Research Observer	Asian Economic Policy Review
Review of Economic Studies	World Bank Economic Review	Journal of Asian Economics
Econometrica	Economic Dev. & Cultural Change	

Source: Own elaboration based on McKenzie's informal ranking of development economics journals.

We used these journals as our focal point to examine how frequently each topic was covered in each country between 2002 and 2023. We restricted our analysis to this period because 2002 marks the beginning of the PEW survey series used in this study and 2023 was the most recent year with complete data available in Scopus when we started this research. This period is a few years longer than the time frame used for the public opinion data (i.e., 2002–2018); we expect that the extra years will enable us to consider time lags in journal publication.

To measure the supply of published research, we simply counted the number of articles covering each country and topic pair.[6] This information was obtained by using the advanced search feature in the Scopus database, specifying the years of publication, and searching for "relevant topics" (explained below) in the title, abstract, and keywords of papers. These parameters enabled us to categorize publications by country and topic pair in accordance with methodologies outlined in prior research (e.g., Kelly and Bruestle 2011, Kosnik 2015, Buehling 2021, Rath and Wohlrabe 2016).

We experimented with narrower searches using only the title or the title and keywords in addition to the title, abstract, and keywords, but found these approaches significantly reduced the number of articles retrieved. For example, in the case of "Kenya–education", a search that included the title, abstract, and keywords retrieved 22 articles, only 2 of which were unrelated to schooling. In contrast, searching by title alone yielded only 6 articles, and by title and keywords, 7 articles. This suggests that the most effective strategy to maximize search results while maintaining relevance is to include the title, abstract, and keywords in the search criteria. This iterative and context-sensitive approach ensured a more accurate representation of the relevant literature while minimizing inclusion and exclusion errors.

Identifying the Country variable in the dataset was relatively straightforward except for two minor challenges. First, some published papers covered multiple countries, in which case the same paper was counted separately for each relevant country. Second, we excluded Britain from the analysis due to ambiguity in determining which countries it included. The term "Britain" is sometimes used as a synonym for the United Kingdom, which comprises England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, and sometimes not, which created confusion in assigning papers to specific countries. El Salvador was also excluded from the analysis due to a data retrieval bug in the Scopus database.

[6] We do not take into account potentially important variables such as article length and citation count.

The major practical issue was to match topics in the dataset. The PEW opinion surveys identify each topic using a single term (as is explained above), but we have no way of knowing whether that term precisely captures what was on the minds of the interviewees and interviewers. As is shown in Table 3, we added two synonyms to each PEW survey topic except for "AIDS", since the term itself and the single synonym "HIV" were sufficient to characterize the issue. As a result, our search for "relevant topics" in Scopus included up to three synonymous terms for each topic.

Why three terms? In this study, we address the classic challenge of balancing inclusion and exclusion error when identifying relevant research articles. For instance, we found that the term "education" often appears in articles unrelated to schooling, learning, or educational improvement despite initially being included in our search criteria. To refine our methodology, we analyzed the case of "Kenya–education" as an example. Including the term "education" alongside related keywords such as "school" and "teacher" retrieved 38 articles, 12 (32%) of which were not relevant to schooling. When we excluded the term "education" and instead focused on keywords like "enrollment", "school", and "teacher", we retrieved 22 articles, only 2 (9%) of which were irrelevant. This iterative approach helped us significantly reduce our inclusion and exclusion error rates while ensuring key studies were not overlooked.

Table 3 – List of relevant topics from the PEW surveys and their synonyms

Relevant topics	Synonyms
AIDS	HIV
Climate change	Global warming, Greenhouse effect
Corruption	Bribery, Clientelism
Crime	Prison, Police
Enrollment	School, Teacher
Employment	Unemployment, Informality
Ethnic conflict	Slavery, Racial conflict
Healthcare	Hospital, Health insurance
Illegal Drugs	Addiction, Cocaine
Immigration	Migration, Refugees
Inequality/poverty	Exploitation, Income distribution
Inflation	Monetary policy, Central bank independence
Pollution	Air quality, Water quality
Public/External debt	National debt, Sovereign default
Terrorism	Arm conflict, Extremism
Traffic	Transportation, Commuting

Source: Own elaboration based on the PEW surveys.

IV. Results – Articles Published on PEW Survey Topics

The PEW survey data used to construct Table 1 span from 2002 to 2018, while the academic publication data extend through 2023. We recognize that public opinion may have shifted after 2018 in response to major global developments, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this temporal gap is partly justified by the nature of academic publishing. It often takes considerable time, typically two to three years or more, for a topic to progress from initial scholarly interest to peer-reviewed publication. This lag means that even if new priorities emerge in real time, published academic literature reflecting those shifts tends to appear only after a delay. In that sense, the 2002–2023 publication window is still meaningfully connected to the 2002–2018 public opinion data, since many of the articles published after 2018 are likely based on research agendas formed during or shortly after the survey period. Moreover, core development concerns such as

education, health, inequality, and governance tend to exhibit a degree of stability over time, as the existing literature supports.

Using the advanced search feature in the Scopus database, we determined the number of articles published in 2002–2023 that addressed the PEW survey topics and referenced one of the 60 countries considered. The results of this search are presented in Table 4 for countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Table 5 for countries in Latin America, Table 6 for countries in Asia, and Table 7 for Arab countries.

Of the 14,355 papers published during the period 2002–2023 across the 14 journals selected, 5,133 cover one of the 39 LMICs considered in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Arab world. We now explore topical coverage by region. We found a total of 1,540 articles covering the 12 Sub-Saharan African countries, 1,015 of which incorporated at least one of the 16 topics selected from the PEW surveys. Similarly, a total of 1,198 journal articles covered the 11 Latin American countries, 958 of which pertained to at least one of the 16 topics. The figures for the 10 Asian countries are 2,263 and 1,763, and the 6 Arab countries, 132 and 94. Approximately 36% of the articles published in the journals considered over the period in question covered a combination of the 16 topics and 39 countries.

It is worth noting that many of the terms listed in Table 3, which represent significant concerns and challenges identified by populations, are not given proportional attention in academic articles. For instance, in Angola, HIV was the primary concern, while in Argentina, the top issues were inflation and crime. However, we did not find a single journal article focusing on HIV in Angola, and only two articles addressed crime in Argentina and three, inflation. This pattern is prevalent across other developing countries as well.

One plausible explanation for this finding is that the gap simply reflects that the journals we consider are all economics-related, whereas some of the 16 issues analyzed (e.g., HIV, racism, healthcare, and terrorism) are broader. Following this line of reasoning to the

extreme could induce economists to think that there is no need to worry about health or social issues, since other disciplines will take care of the ignored topics. We think, however, this view is incomplete. First, 12 of the 16 topics we study are primarily economic; the four exceptions are the topics listed above. Second, even the four topics that are not primarily economic have a clear economic dimension. Third, according to the populations surveyed, all the most important concerns are predominantly economic (i.e., employment, inflation, crime, corruption, inequality/poverty). Thus, the gap observed highlights a disconnect between the priorities identified by local populations and the topics covered in the academic economics literature.

It is important to acknowledge that our assessment of the number of articles may be prone to underestimation or overestimation. For instance, a paper may not contain any of the relevant topics and synonyms listed in Table 3 in its title, abstract, or keywords, but indeed address a topic. Additionally, a topic may be mentioned in a paper's title, abstract, or keywords but ultimately used in a context that is not relevant to the intended subject matter—consider, for instance, the distinction between drug use as a medical treatment and drug trafficking as a criminal activity.

Table 4 – Number of articles on the 16 PEW topics and 12 Sub-Saharan African countries considered, by country and topic pair

		year	2002	2023													
	Climate											Inequality					
Sub-Saharan A	Change	Commuting	Corruption	Crime	Debt	Drugs	Education	Employment	Healthcare	HIV	Immigration	Poverty	Inflation	Pollution	Racism	Terrorism	Total
Angola	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	5
Burkina Faso	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	3	2	0	7	17	1	0	3	0	43
Ethiopia	13	5	0	0	0	0	17	33	4	2	20	75	4	1	7	0	181
Ghana	1	3	1	1	0	0	8	24	5	0	5	43	4	2	5	0	102
Ivory Coast	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kenya	6	4	2	1	0	0	22	14	6	13	0	52	5	3	7	0	135
Mali	2	2	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	3	11	0	0	2	0	23
Nigeria	2	0	4	2	0	0	6	9	2	0	6	20	2	0	11	2	66
Senegal	2	2	1	1	0	0	10	5	3	1	7	11	0	0	3	0	46
South Africa	5	4	3	6	0	0	13	41	4	10	9	62	6	1	3	0	167
Tanzania	7	2	1	1	0	0	16	13	3	7	14	46	1	0	2	0	113
Uganda	5	1	8	2	0	0	15	14	4	6	16	51	3	1	7	1	134

Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database.

Table 5 – Number of articles on the 16 PEW topics and 11 Latin American countries considered, by country and topic pair

	Climate											Inequality					
Latin America	Change	Commuting	Corruption	Crime	Debt	Drugs	Education	Employment	Healthcare	HIV	Immigration	Poverty	Inflation	Pollution	Racism	Terrorism	Total
Argentina	1	1	1	2	3	0	7	16	2	0	0	20	3	0	0	0	56
Bolivia	0	0	3	1	0	1	9	8	1	0	1	13	0	2	3	0	42
Brazil	15	4	8	10	0	0	24	48	5	0	7	67	8	9	4	0	209
Chile	0	1	0	1	0	0	18	18	1	0	1	28	4	2	1	0	75
Colombia	2	4	0	7	0	7	20	19	5	0	10	28	5	3	4	0	114
Guatemala	2	1	0	1	0	1	4	1	0	0	3	5	0	0	2	0	20
Honduras	2	1	1	1	0	1	8	1	1	0	1	11	0	0	0	0	28
Mexico	4	7	5	14	1	1	38	52	7	2	28	97	10	7	2	0	275
Nicaragua	4	0	1	1	0	0	8	3	2	0	4	20	0	0	0	0	43
Peru	9	0	2	3	0	2	16	14	1	0	4	24	3	0	3	0	81
Venezuela	0	1	1	2	0	0	1	3	0	0	5	2	0	0	0	0	15

Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database.

Table 6 – Number of articles on the 16 PEW topics and 10 Asian countries considered, by country and topic pair

Asia	Climate	Commuting	Corruption	Crime	Debt	Drugs	Education	Employment	Healthcare	HIV	Immigration	Inequality	Inflation	Pollution	Racism	Terrorism	Total
Bangladesh	8	1	0	1	0	0	17	24	3	0	15	41	4	7	2	0	123
China	14	18	19	2	0	0	43	98	12	2	57	153	28	42	14	0	502
India	18	12	16	11	1	0	62	145	19	6	28	199	34	18	13	1	583
Indonesia	8	4	9	1	1	0	13	20	3	0	9	59	17	2	8	1	155
Malaysia	1	2	0	1	1	0	2	4	1	0	5	12	11	1	8	0	49
Pakistan	2	0	3	0	0	0	9	11	2	0	5	13	5	1	2	4	57
Philippines	4	0	0	3	0	0	8	9	2	1	10	21	12	0	0	0	70
Thailand	4	1	2	0	2	0	3	10	3	0	6	28	17	4	0	0	80
Uzbekistan	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Vietnam	5	2	4	0	0	0	9	27	5	0	10	67	4	5	5	1	144

Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database.

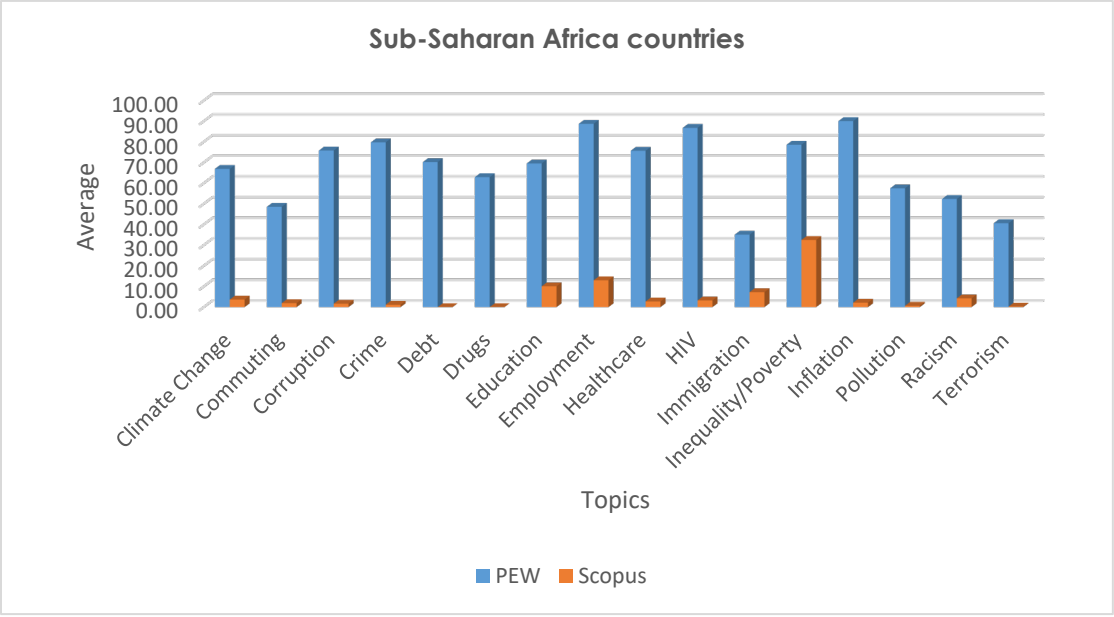
Table 7 – Number of articles on the 16 PEW topics and 6 Arab countries considered, by country and topic pair

Arab countries	Climate Change	Commuting	Corruption	Crime	Debt	Drugs	Education	Employment	Healthcare	HIV	Immigration	Inequality Poverty	Inflation	Pollution	Racism	Terrorism	Total
Egypt	0	1	0	0	0	0	3	8	0	0	6	9	3	1	2	0	33
Jordan	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	0	0	8	3	0	0	0	0	16
Lebanon	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	5	2	0	0	0	0	11
Morocco	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	12
Palestine	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	7
Tunisia	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	7	1	0	0	3	1	0	0	1	15
Total	0	1	4	0	0	0	12	22	1	0	19	25	4	1	4	1	94

Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database.

V. Descriptive Statistical Analysis

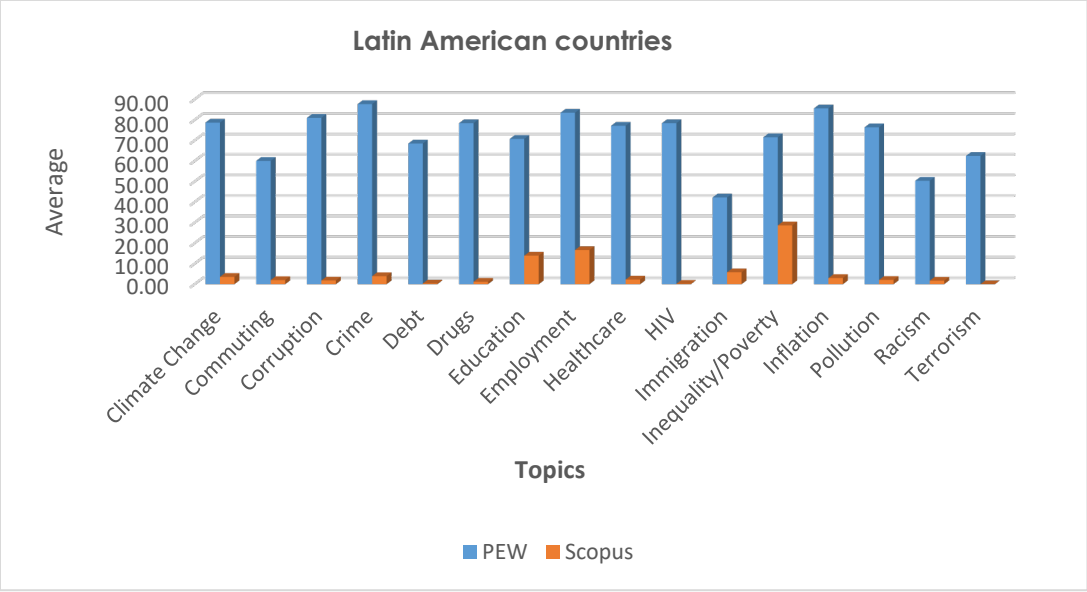
In this section, we analyze basic statistics on the data and summarize them using graphs and averages to better highlight the key patterns in the dataset. We first present several figures and tables that summarize the average number of papers published in Scopus about each topic considered and the average importance of each topic (as a weighted percent) according to the local populations from the PEW opinion surveys. Figure 1 presents the summary for the 12 Sub-Saharan countries considered. It reveals a significant disparity: although many of the topics are highly important to the local populations surveyed based on Table 1, relatively few articles have been published on these countries and issues. For example, 67% of the population on average was concerned about climate change in Sub-Saharan African countries (Table 1), but only 44 papers were written on this topic across 12 countries (an average of 3.7 papers per country) during the period in question. Topics such as inflation, employment, and HIV rank among the most pressing concerns for the populations in Sub-Saharan Africa, but there is a notable lack of research addressing these critical areas. The topics with the highest average number of journal publications specific to this region are inequality/poverty, employment, and education.



Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database and the PEW surveys.

Figure 1 – The average number of papers covering each of the 16 topics (Scopus) and the average importance of each topic (PEW) in the 12 Sub-Saharan African countries considered

Figure 2 presents the same averages for the 11 Latin American countries considered. In this region, inflation and employment are again considered highly important topics by the public, and crime emerges as a significant concern. However, very few papers have been published on these critical topics in these countries. Consistent with the findings for Sub-Saharan Africa, education, employment, and inequality/poverty are the topics with the highest average number of publications specific to Latin America.

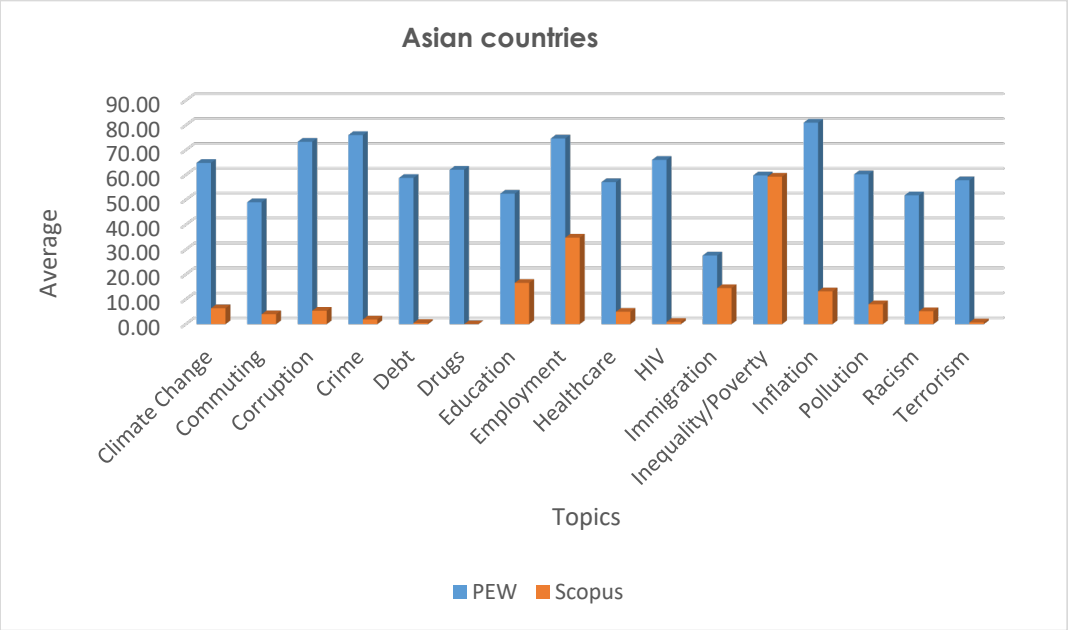


Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database and the PEW surveys.

Figure 2 – The average number of papers covering each of the 16 topics (Scopus) and the average importance of each topic (PEW) in the 11 Latin American countries considered

Figure 3 illustrates the averages for the 10 Asian countries considered. Inflation, crime, and employment emerge as the most pressing concerns for people in these countries. However,

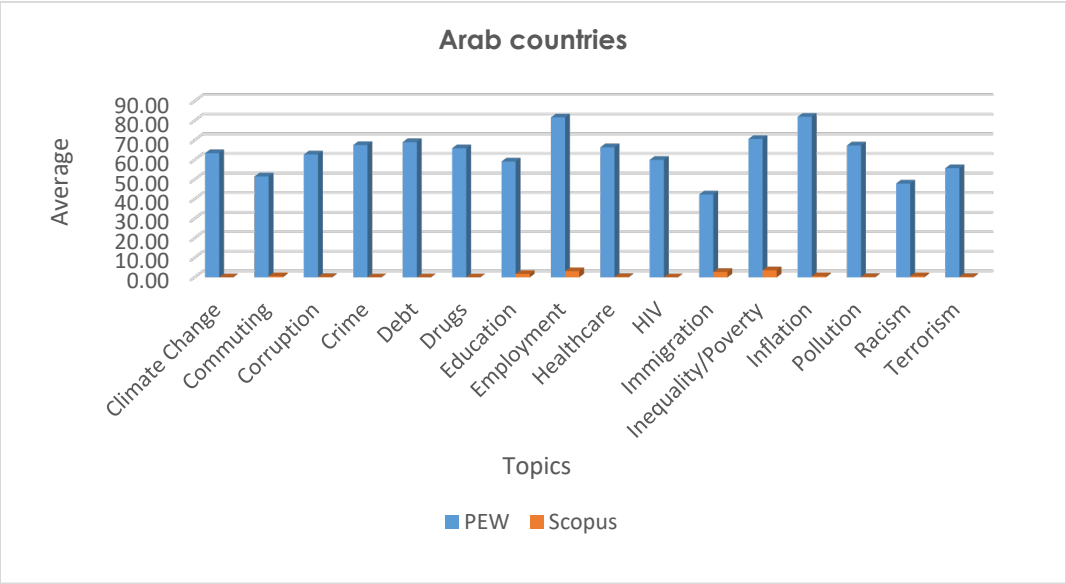
inequality and poverty have the largest average number of publications—notably more than the other topics considered. Employment, education, and immigration also receive significant academic attention in terms of publications specific to this region despite the gap between public priorities and research focus.



Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database and the PEW surveys.

Figure 3 – The average number of papers covering each of the 16 topics (Scopus) and the average importance of each topic (PEW) in the 10 Asian countries considered

Finally, Figure 4 presents the averages for the 6 Arab countries considered and reveals a striking disparity: there are almost no publications investigating any of the topics in these countries despite Arab people expressing high levels of concern for nearly all areas. This significant gap underscores the lack of academic focus on issues considered critical to these countries and highlights the urgent need for increased efforts to better align development economics research topics with the priorities of these countries' populations.



Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database and the PEW surveys.

Figure 4 – The average number of papers covering each of the 16 topics (Scopus) and the average importance of each topic (PEW) in the 6 Arab countries considered

In Table 8, we compare the total number of papers addressing the 16 topics and the average importance of the topics by country. The importance values are calculated as the mean across the 16 topics, as explained in Table 1.

Table 8 – The total number of papers covering the 16 topics (Scopus) and the average importance of the topics (PEW) by country, in order of descending importance

Country	Scopus	PEW	Country	Scopus	PEW
Colombia	114	79	South Africa	167	68
Honduras	28	77	Uganda	134	68
Guatemala	20	76	Bolivia	42	67
Lebanon	11	75	Senegal	46	67
Nicaragua	43	74	Palestine	7	66
Tunisia	15	74	Mali	23	66
Pakistan	57	73	Bangladesh	123	65
Morocco	12	72	Thailand	80	64
Nigeria	66	72	Kenya	135	64
Brazil	209	72	Vietnam	144	60
Ivory Coast	0	71	Indonesia	155	60
Burkina Faso	43	71	Hungary	3	59
India	583	71	Uzbekistan	1	57
Peru	81	71	Bulgaria	3	57
Philippines	70	71	United States	536	57
Chile	75	70	Ukraine	2	56
Argentina	56	70	Russia	22	56
Ghana	102	69	Ethiopia	181	55
Angola	5	69	Egypt	33	54
Tanzania	113	69	Malaysia	49	49
Mexico	275	69	Jordan	16	46
Venezuela	15	68	China	502	40

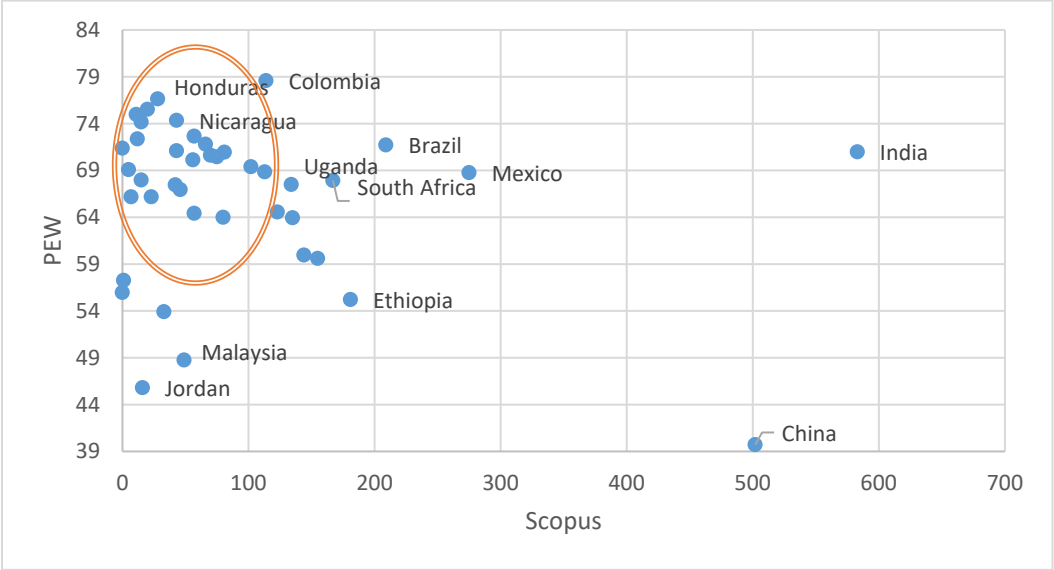
Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database and the PEW surveys.

The dispersion graph shown in Figure 5 provides an overview of the relationship between publication count and average level of public concern by country. The horizontal axis of the graph represents the total number of Scopus-indexed papers pertaining to the country in question and one of the 16 topics from the PEW surveys, while the vertical axis displays the average level of importance the 16 topics were assigned by each country's survey respondents. Larger countries, such as China and India, generally exhibit higher publication volumes regardless of how important their populations consider the topics.

The ellipse in Figure 5 highlights a particularly alarming area, a cluster of countries whose populations are highly concerned about the topics (average importance values greater than 60% on the PEW axis) but for which very few papers have been published in economic journals (and the population in these countries is very high). These countries are presented

in Table 9 along with their average topic importance values and publication counts. Observe that Ivory Coast has no publications, while Angola has only 5, Palestine has 7, Lebanon has 11, and Morocco has 12. Despite the low publication numbers, the populations of these countries consider the issues raised in the PEW surveys highly important.

It is worth noting that a total of 14,355 papers were published between 2002 and 2023 in the 14 journals considered. Even countries with relatively higher publication counts—over 100 papers—such as Mexico, Brazil, South Africa, and Uganda, cannot be considered as having a significant share of publications when compared with the overall total during this period.



Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database and the PEW surveys.

Figure 5 – Scatter plot showing the relationship between the average importance of the 16 topics (PEW) and the total number of articles published on the topics (Scopus) by country

Table 9 – The countries with higher average importance values (> 64%) for the PEW survey topics and fewer articles (< 100) related to the topics in Scopus, in order of descending publication count

Country	Scopus	PEW
Peru	81	71
Thailand	80	64
Chile	75	70
Philippines	70	71
Nigeria	66	72
Pakistan	57	73
Argentina	56	70
Senegal	46	67
Nicaragua	43	74
Burkina Faso	43	71
Bolivia	42	67
Honduras	28	77
Mali	23	66
Guatemala	20	76
Tunisia	15	74
Venezuela	15	68
Morocco	12	72
Lebanon	11	75
Palestine	7	66
Angola	5	69
Ivory Coast	0	71

Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database and the PEW surveys.

VI. Gaps in Relevance

We now focus our analysis on relative terms. We explore how the relative importance of a topic compares with the relative attention it receives in the published academic literature. The relevance of topic *j* in country *i* is defined as:

$$Relevance_{ij} = \frac{PEW_{ij}}{\sum_j PEW_{ij}}$$

where PEW_{ij} is the importance of topic *j* in country *i* according to the PEW surveys (i.e., the values in Table 1).

We then consider journal publications and define:

$$Published_{ij} = \frac{Articles_{ij}}{\sum_j Articles_{ij}}$$

where $Articles_{ij}$ is the number of articles published on topic j and country i in the 14 journals considered over the period in question. Finally, the within-country gap for country i is defined as half of the sum of the absolute values of the country's topical gaps:

$$Gap_i = \frac{1}{2}\sum_j \left| Relevance_{ij} - Published_{ij} \right|$$

The within-country gap can vary from a minimum of zero to a maximum of 1. Figure 6 presents the results for the 39 LMICs in the sample. Since this figure is atypical, we use Kenya as an example to explain how it is constructed. We first sum all the topic values in the Kenya row in Table 1 and obtain a total of 1023.16. The *Relevance* measure for "Kenya–climate change" is then calculated as 66.48/1023.16=0.065 or 6.5%. This value can be interpreted as the relative importance of climate change compared to the other 15 topics according to Kenya's survey respondents. We then follow the same approach to calculate the *Relevance* of each of the other 15 topics in Kenya. Similarly, we use Table 4 to compute the *Published* variable, which represents the number of papers published on a given topic in a country relative to the total number of papers addressing any of the 16 topics in said country. Six of the 135 papers pertaining to Kenya specifically address "Kenya–climate change", for a *Published* measure of 6/135=0.044 or 4.4%. This value can be interpreted as the relative importance of climate change compared to the other 15 topics in Kenya according to the published academic literature. We then use the same method to calculate the *Published* variable for each of the other 15 topics for Kenya. A country's gap is then defined as the sum of the absolute differences between the country's *Relevance* and *Published* values for each topic, divided by 2. Kenya's within-country gap is 0.4432. Its results for all 16 topics are summarized in Table 10.

Table 10 – Kenya's gap calculation results

Kenya	PEW	Relevance	Scopus	Published	Gap
climate change	66.48	0.0650	6	0.0444	0.0205
corruption	80.57	0.0787	2	0.0148	0.0639
commuting	35.93	0.0351	4	0.0296	0.0055
crime	82.80	0.0809	1	0.0074	0.0735
debt	60.17	0.0588	0	0.0000	0.0588
drugs	51.22	0.0501	0	0.0000	0.0501
education	59.65	0.0583	22	0.1630	0.1047
employment	87.25	0.0853	14	0.1037	0.0184
healthcare	67.98	0.0664	6	0.0444	0.0220
HIV	86.71	0.0847	13	0.0963	0.0115
immigration	29.54	0.0289	0	0.0000	0.0289
inequality/poverty	78.41	0.0766	52	0.3852	0.3086
inflation	92.13	0.0900	5	0.0370	0.0530
pollution	46.22	0.0452	3	0.0222	0.0230
racism	59.42	0.0581	7	0.0519	0.0062
terrorism	38.68	0.0378	0	0.0000	0.0378
Total	1023.16		135		0.4432

Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database and the PEW surveys.

In Figure 6, the key finding is that the average within-country gap across 38 LMICs (the 39 previously mentioned minus Ivory Coast) is 0.59. This is quite a large number. To gauge its magnitude, let's explore the gap produced when applying a simple publication count assumption such as the same number of articles are published per topic for each country. If people care twice as much for one half of the topics as the other half, then the gap produced when applying the publication assumption would be 0.166, which is much lower than 0.59. Moreover, when the publication assumption is combined with the average importance values from the PEW surveys, the gap is only 0.152. Some countries, particularly Uzbekistan, Palestine, and Morocco, have within-country gaps greater than 0.8. This is because either very few articles are published on the country or most articles published on the country cover the same topic, such as inequality/poverty in Morocco and education in Palestine.

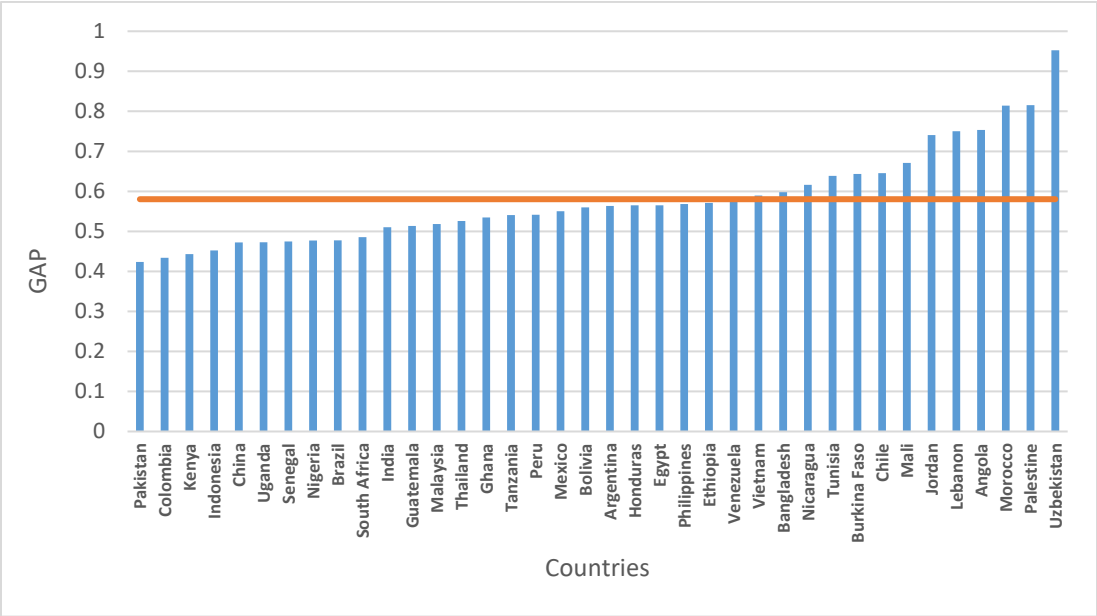


Figure 6 – The within-country gaps of the 39 LMICs studied except Ivory Coast

Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database and the PEW surveys. Note: The orange line indicates the average within-country gap across all 39 LMICs except Ivory Coast. Ivory Coast was excluded due to its absence of publications.

VII. Institutional Affiliation of Development Economics Researchers

We now examine whether authors' institutional affiliation influences the Relevance of their research. More specifically, we assess whether researchers affiliated with institutions based in the Global South (Southern researchers/authors) are more likely than their counterparts affiliated with institutions based in the Global North (Northern researchers/authors) to focus on development economics topics that are considered highly relevant by local populations.

To investigate this, we analyze the number of papers published by Northern and/or Southern authors on the topics identified as very important by at least 50% of the local populations according to the PEW surveys for different regions.

Tables 11–14 present our findings for the Global South, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Asia, respectively.[7] Each table reports: (i) the total number of articles covering topics considered very important by at least 50% of the local populations; (ii) the total number of papers addressing each country, regardless of topical importance; and (iii) the share of papers focusing on very important topics relative to the total number of papers on the country. The analysis is further disaggregated by authorship type: papers authored exclusively by Northern researchers, those co-authored by Northern and Southern researchers, and those authored solely by Southern researchers.

Table 11 shows that the majority of the journal articles published on the Global South in the 14 journals analyzed are authored by Northern researchers alone (3178 out of 5001, or 63%); 27% are authored by Northern and Southern researchers (1340 out of 5001), and less than 10% are published by Southern authors alone (483 out of 5001). However, the share of papers authored by Southern researchers that address topics considered very important by at least 50% of the local populations (58%) is markedly higher than the share authored by Northern researchers (46%) or co-authored by Northern and Southern researchers (48%). This suggests that Southern researchers may select research topics that are more strongly aligned with local priorities and that their research is more relevant.

Table 11 – Number of papers authored by Northern and/or Southern researchers on all 16 PEW survey topics and the topics that at least 50% of the local populations in the Global South considered very important in the PEW surveys, for the period 2002–2023

Global South	Very important topics	All topics	Share
All authors	2438	5001	49%
Northern authors	1465	3178	46%
N-S authors	643	1340	48%
Southern authors	278	483	58%

Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database and the PEW surveys. Note: N-S = Northern and Southern.

[7] Arab countries were not included in this analysis because the number of papers on Arab countries and the 16 topics is very small, and when it is broken down by authorship type (Northern, Southern, and Northern and Southern authors), most values are zero. "Global South" includes Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America combined.

We find similar results regardless of the region of analysis. Table 12 shows that of the 1540 papers focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa, nearly two-thirds are published by Northern authors alone and less than 7% are published by Southern authors alone. Yet only 47% of the papers authored by Northern researchers address topics considered very important by at least 50% of the local populations, similar to the rate observed for works by Northern and Southern authors (46%). In contrast, of the 102 papers authored exclusively by Southern researchers, 58 (57%) address very important topics.

Similarly, in Latin American countries (Table 13), 76% of the papers authored by Southern researchers focus on topics considered very important by local populations, compared to 66% of those authored by Northern researchers. In Asia (Table 14), the pattern persists, with 45% of papers published by Southern authors addressing highly relevant topics, compared to only 36% of those authored by Northern researchers.

It is also noteworthy that research on Latin American countries is significantly more relevant to the priorities of local populations (71% of all papers are on very important topics), compared to less than half (47%) of research on Sub-Saharan African countries and less than two-fifths (38%) of research on Asian countries.

Additionally, Tables 12–14 provide a country-specific breakdown of these shares for a more detailed comparison across regions. There is considerable variation in the relevance of research topics across countries. For instance, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion of all papers addressing topics deemed very important by at least 50% of the local populations ranges from just 7% in Mali to 81% in South Africa. In Latin America, the proportion varies from 19% in Guatemala to 85% in Nicaragua, while in Asia, it ranges from 27% in Indonesia to 65% in India. Notably, in China, PEW survey respondents did not identify any of the 16 topics as very important. This anomaly may be attributed to social control mechanisms that undermine the reliability of such surveys, as citizens may fear that their responses could be used against them.

Although Tables 12–14 do not provide details on the topics considered very important by at least 50% of the local populations, Figures 1–3 above do. The majority of papers published on Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America focus on inequality and poverty, with Southern researchers contributing the largest share of works on topics considered very important in Sub-Saharan Africa, at 57%. Employment is also a prominent topic in these regions. In Asia, inflation is the most studied topic among Southern researchers, while employment is also a significant focus, particularly among Northern researchers.

We now turn to the geographic distribution of papers, taking into account each country's share of its region's population. Geographic relevance is measured by comparing each country's share of its region's total publication count with its proportion of the region's total population. Tables 15–18 show the results for the Global South, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Asia, respectively.

In Table 15, we note that while 75% of the Global South population covered in our analysis lives in the Asian countries considered, only 45% of the papers analyzed from the 14 journals pertain to these countries. In contrast, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America are strongly over-represented in the articles relative to their respective populations. This geographic distribution pattern is relatively stable regardless of the type of authorship. The only nuance is that Latin America is more over-represented, and Sub-Saharan Africa, less over-represented, among papers authored by Southern researchers. This may reflect higher publication rates among Latin American researchers.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, Ghana and Kenya are over-represented, while Angola, Ivory Coast, and Nigeria are under-represented. Notably, these patterns remain relatively consistent across the different authorship types considered. In Latin America, Chile and Peru are over-represented, whereas Venezuela and Brazil are under-represented. Similarly, in Asia, Thailand and Vietnam are over-represented, while Pakistan is under-represented.

Table 12 – Number of papers authored by Northern and/or Southern researchers on all topics and the topics that at least 50% of the local populations in Sub-Saharan Africa considered very important in the PEW surveys, for the period 2002–2023 and Sub-Saharan Africa countries

	All authors			Northern authors			N-S authors			Southern authors		
Sub-Saharan Africa	Very important topics	All topics	Share	Very important topics	All topics	Share	Very important topics	All topics	Share	Very important topics	All topics	Share
Angola	1	8	13%	1	7	14%	0	1	0%	0	0	0%
Burkina Faso	15	65	23%	11	47	23%	3	15	20%	1	3	33%
Ethiopia	39	270	14%	27	161	17%	11	90	12%	1	19	5%
Ghana	87	165	53%	61	110	55%	24	48	50%	2	7	29%
Ivory Coast	0	3	0%	0	2	0%	0	1	0%	0	0	0%
Kenya	128	232	55%	82	158	52%	34	58	59%	12	16	75%
Mali	3	43	7%	2	33	6%	0	8	0%	1	2	50%
Nigeria	60	91	66%	39	63	62%	13	16	81%	8	12	67%
Senegal	37	74	50%	30	60	50%	6	13	46%	1	1	100%
South Africa	154	190	81%	70	96	73%	58	66	88%	26	28	93%
Tanzania	97	184	53%	75	124	60%	20	54	37%	2	6	33%
Uganda	108	215	50%	80	157	51%	24	50	48%	4	8	50%
Total	729	1540	47%	478	1018	47%	193	420	46%	58	102	57%

Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database and the PEW surveys. Note: N-S = Northern and Southern.

Table 13 – Number of papers authored by Northern and/or Southern researchers on all topics and the topics that at least 50% of the local populations in Latin America considered very important in the PEW surveys, for the period 2002–2023 and Latin American countries

	All authors			Northern authors			N-S authors			Southern authors		
Latin America	Very important topics	All topics	Share	Very important topics	All topics	Share	Very important topics	All topics	Share	Very important topics	All topics	Share
Argentina	55	78	71%	32	54	59%	18	18	100%	5	6	83%
Bolivia	28	59	47%	16	37	43%	12	20	60%	0	2	0%
Brazil	194	271	72%	103	143	72%	65	88	74%	26	40	65%
Chile	71	101	70%	34	49	69%	19	25	76%	18	27	67%
Colombia	91	132	69%	40	55	73%	28	48	58%	23	29	79%
Guatemala	7	37	19%	4	23	17%	3	14	21%	0	0	0%
Honduras	11	32	34%	8	22	36%	3	8	38%	0	2	0%
Mexico	238	318	75%	159	218	73%	42	65	65%	37	35	106%
Nicaragua	35	41	85%	25	28	89%	10	12	83%	0	1	0%
Peru	74	116	64%	39	72	54%	26	32	81%	9	12	75%
Venezuela	9	15	60%	8	12	67%	0	1	0%	1	2	50%
Total	855	1198	71%	468	713	66%	226	329	69%	119	156	76%

Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database and the PEW surveys. Note: N-S = Northern and Southern.

Table 14 – Number of papers authored by Northern and/or Southern researchers on all survey topics and the topics that at least 50% of the local populations in Asia considered very important in the PEW surveys, for the period 2002–2023 and Asian countries

	All authors			Northern authors			N-S authors			Southern authors		
Asia	Very important topics	All topics	Share	Very important topics	All topics	Share	Very important topics	All topics	Share	Very important topics	All topics	Share
Bangladesh	46	154	30%	27	95	28%	17	47	36%	2	12	17%
China	0	669	0%	0	347	0%	0	214	0%	0	108	0%
India	542	828	65%	331	569	58%	143	186	77%	68	73	93%
Indonesia	56	211	27%	33	147	22%	17	56	30%	6	8	75%
Malaysia	17	32	53%	11	22	50%	2	6	33%	4	4	100%
Pakistan	50	83	60%	35	60	58%	13	18	72%	2	5	40%
Philippines	50	83	60%	31	64	48%	14	14	100%	5	5	100%
Thailand	41	76	54%	20	52	38%	12	15	80%	9	9	100%
Uzbekistan	0	3	0%	0	2	0%	0	1	0%	0	0	0%
Vietnam	52	131	40%	31	89	35%	16	35	46%	5	7	71%
Total	854	2263	38%	519	1447	36%	224	591	38%	101	225	45%

Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database and the PEW surveys. Note: N-S = Northern and Southern.

Table 15 – Geographic relevance measured by comparing each region's share of all papers pertaining to the Global South and proportion of the total population of the Global South

	SSA	LA	Asia	Total – GS
Population (millions)	741.2	570.2	4005.5	5316.9
Share	14%	11%	75%	100%
Papers – all authors	1540	1198	2263	5001
Share	31%	24%	45%	100%
Papers – Northern authors	1018	713	1447	3178
Share	32%	22%	46%	100%
Papers – N-S authors	420	329	591	1340
Share	31%	25%	44%	100%
Papers – Southern authors	102	156	225	483
Share	21%	32%	47%	100%

Note: SSA = Sub-Saharan Africa; LA = Latin America; GS = Global South; N-S = Northern and Southern.
Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database.

Table 16 – Geographic relevance measured by comparing each Sub-Saharan African country's share of all papers pertaining to Sub-Saharan Africa authored by Northern and/or Southern researchers with its proportion of the region's total population

Sub-Saharan Africa	Population (millions)	Share of population	Share of papers – all authors	Share of papers – Northern authors	Share of papers – N-S authors	Share of papers – Southern authors
Angola	36.7	4.9%	0.5%	0.7%	0.2%	0.0%
Burkina Faso	22.8	3.1%	4.2%	4.6%	3.6%	2.9%
Ethiopia	127.0	17.1%	17.5%	15.8%	21.4%	18.6%
Ghana	34.1	4.6%	10.7%	10.8%	11.4%	6.9%
Ivory Coast	31.1	4.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%
Kenya	51.5	6.9%	15.1%	15.5%	13.8%	15.7%
Mali	23.3	3.1%	2.8%	3.2%	1.9%	2.0%
Nigeria	224.0	30.2%	5.9%	6.2%	3.8%	11.8%
Senegal	18.3	2.5%	4.8%	5.9%	3.1%	1.0%
South Africa	62.2	8.4%	12.3%	9.4%	15.7%	27.5%
Tanzania	61.7	8.3%	11.9%	12.2%	12.9%	5.9%
Uganda	48.6	6.6%	14.0%	15.4%	11.9%	7.8%
Total	741.2	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note: N-S = Northern and Southern.
Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database.

Table 17 – Geographic relevance measured by comparing each Latin American country's share of all papers pertaining to Latin America authored by Northern and/or Southern researchers with its proportion of the region's total population

Latin America	Population (millions)	Share of population	Share of papers – all authors	Share of papers – Northern authors	Share of papers – N-S authors	Share of papers – Southern authors
Argentina	46.4	8.1%	6.5%	7.6%	5.5%	3.8%
Bolivia	11.7	2.0%	4.9%	5.2%	6.1%	1.3%
Brazil	216.4	38.0%	22.6%	20.1%	26.7%	25.6%
Chile	19.1	3.4%	8.4%	6.9%	7.6%	17.3%
Colombia	52.9	9.3%	11.0%	7.7%	14.6%	18.6%
Guatemala	16.9	3.0%	3.1%	3.2%	4.3%	0.0%
Honduras	9.9	1.7%	2.7%	3.1%	2.4%	1.3%
Mexico	128.9	22.6%	26.5%	30.6%	19.8%	22.4%
Nicaragua	6.6	1.2%	3.4%	3.9%	3.6%	0.6%
Peru	33.0	5.8%	9.7%	10.1%	9.7%	7.7%
Venezuela	28.4	5.0%	1.3%	1.7%	0.3%	1.3%
Total	570.2	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note: N-S = Northern and Southern.
Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database.

Table 18 – Geographic relevance measured by comparing each Asian country's share of all papers pertaining to Asia authored by Northern and/or Southern researchers with its proportion of the region's total population

Asia	Population (millions)	Share of population	Share of papers – all authors	Share of papers – Northern authors	Share of papers – N-S authors	Share of papers – Southern authors
Bangladesh	170	4.2%	6.8%	6.6%	8.0%	5.3%
China	1500	37.4%	29.6%	24.0%	36.2%	48.0%
India	1500	37.4%	36.6%	39.3%	31.5%	32.4%
Indonesia	278	6.9%	9.3%	10.2%	9.5%	3.6%
Malaysia	30.8	0.8%	1.4%	1.5%	1.0%	1.8%
Pakistan	221	5.5%	3.7%	4.1%	3.0%	2.2%
Philippines	107	2.7%	3.7%	4.4%	2.4%	2.2%
Thailand	71.7	1.8%	3.4%	3.6%	2.5%	4.0%
Uzbekistan	30	0.7%	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%	0.0%
Vietnam	97	2.4%	5.8%	6.2%	5.9%	3.1%
Total	4005.5	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note: N-S = Northern and Southern.
Source: Own elaboration based on the Scopus database.

VIII. Conclusion

This paper assesses the topical alignment between the issues identified as pressing societal concerns by PEW survey respondents and the research published in leading economics and development economics journals from 2002 to 2023 (retrieved using Scopus). More specifically, we analyze the coverage of 16 key topics, examining the topics' importance as perceived by respondents and comparing it with the quantity of research published on them in various geographical contexts.

We employ a mixed-methods approach for our analysis. We quantitatively assess the thematic content of thousands of academic articles published between 2002 and 2023 using Scopus metadata and searches based on keywords linked to PEW survey topics. We qualitatively interpret public opinion data on 16 development-related topics across 60 countries to contextualize the results. This integration enables us to assess not only what research is being conducted and by whom, but also whether the research corresponds to the societal concerns expressed by the populations surveyed.

The analysis reveals a significant disparity between the priorities expressed by local populations in various regions and the focus of academic publications in economics and development economics journals. Across Sub-Saharan African, Latin American, and Asian countries, topics such as inflation, employment, crime, and HIV/AIDS are among the most pressing concerns for the local populations surveyed. However, the number of publications addressing these critical topics in those regions remains disproportionately low, which highlights a gap between societal concerns and academic research outputs.

Our within-country analysis suggests there are large gaps. We estimate the average within-country gap among low- and middle-income countries is 0.59. This large figure indicates there is considerable distance between what people care about and what journals publish. If journals were to follow a very simple strategy, such as publishing the same number of papers per topic for each country, then the gap would decline substantially.

The analysis reveals several key insights regarding the influence of institutional affiliation on the importance of development economics research topics as perceived by local populations in the Global South. Researchers affiliated with institutions based in the Global South are more likely than their counterparts affiliated with institutions based in the Global North to focus on topics deemed very important by local populations. The majority (63%) of the articles on the Global South that we identified in the 14 journals analyzed are written exclusively by Northern researchers, while works co-authored by Northern and Southern researchers account for 27%, and less than 10% are authored solely by Southern researchers. However, studies published by Southern authors are more likely to focus on locally significant topics, with 58% addressing issues considered very important by at least half of the local populations surveyed—compared to 46% for papers authored by Northern researchers and 48% for works co-authored by Northern and Southern researchers. This is evident across all regions studied—Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Asia. For instance, in Sub-Saharan Africa, 57% of papers authored exclusively by Southern researchers addressed highly relevant topics, compared to 47% of those authored exclusively by Northern researchers. Similarly, in Latin America, 76% of papers authored by Southern researchers focused on very important topics, versus 66% of those authored by Northern researchers. This trend suggests that Southern researchers' publications are more strongly aligned with local priorities, potentially due to these researchers' proximity to and deeper understanding of regional challenges.

The geographic distribution of research papers does not always align with population shares. Certain countries, such as Ghana and Kenya in Sub-Saharan Africa, Chile and Peru in Latin America, and Thailand and Vietnam in Asia, are over-represented in research output. Conversely, countries like Angola, Nigeria, Venezuela, Brazil, and Pakistan are under-represented. This misalignment suggests that some regions may be receiving disproportionate attention in academic research and critical issues may potentially be overlooked in under-represented areas.

This imbalance underscores a serious issue: while researchers from institutions located in the Global North dominate the academic discourse on topics related to the Global South, they may lack the nuanced understanding of local contexts and challenges that scholars from institutions

located in the Global South possess. In conclusion, our findings highlight the critical need for a paradigm shift in development economics research. The under-representation of topics pertinent to the Global South, coupled with the dominance of Northern authorship, underscores the need to empower researchers from developing countries. Integrating their insights and perspectives will enable us to ensure the discourse in development economics is more comprehensive and relevant, and ultimately lead to more effective and sustainable policies that address the unique challenges nations in the Global South face. This paper serves as a call to action for policymakers, journal editors, and researchers alike to prioritize diversity and representation in development research in order to pave the way for a more equitable future in the field of development economics.

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