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# From Beijing to the Rift Valley:

# Why the Global Development Initiative Matters

By Siddharth Chatterjee

*As the Global Development Initiative turns five, a former UN Resident Coordinator in China and Kenya reflects on why it matters, and what will make it last.*

Five years ago this week, at the United Nations General Assembly, China proposed the Global Development Initiative. The world was still reeling from the pandemic. Hunger was rising, debt was mounting, and the 2030 Agenda was slipping out of reach.

The GDI made a simple, unfashionable argument: development must return to the centre of international cooperation. I have watched that argument play out from both ends.

**In Africa, where development is measured in lives**

From 2016 to 2021 I served as UN Resident Coordinator in Kenya. There I learned that development rarely makes headlines. It arrives quietly: a mother who no longer walks hours for water, a clinic whose lights stay on after dark, a young farmer whose harvest finally reaches a market. The true measure of development is not simply what we deliver, but what remains when we leave.

This is also where I see the enduring potential of the GDI. Its close alignment with the 2030 Agenda and its focus on areas such as poverty reduction, food security, health, green development and connectivity respond to priorities that I have encountered throughout my career.

I also learned why good plans stall. Rarely for lack of ideas. Almost always for lack of finance, technology and partners patient enough to stay the course. Across Africa, I saw what happens when infrastructure, skills and investment arrive together, and what happens when they do not.

**In Beijing, where development meets scale**

In 2021 I moved to Beijing as UN Resident Coordinator in China, the year the GDI was launched. China's own journey held lessons the world could not afford to ignore. In four decades, per capita GDP rose from about $180 to $13,953 in 2025, and nearly 800 million people escaped extreme poverty. No country in history has done more to reduce human deprivation.

In April 2023, the UN in China joined China's Permanent Mission to the UN and the China International Development Cooperation Agency to co-host a high-level event on the GDI at UN Headquarters in New York, alongside the ECOSOC Financing for Development Forum. The message was blunt. The world is in desperate need of financing for development, and least developed, landlocked and small island states are hit hardest.

China's upgraded Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund, backed by $4 billion, offered real potential to close part of that gap. It could put Chinese technology at the service of developing countries' own priorities. I told that audience the opportunity was enormous. Three years on, there is growing evidence of delivery.

**From delivery to lasting capacity**

The GDI has helped mobilise more than $23 billion and support over 1,800 projects across the Global South. Africa is among its biggest beneficiaries.

In Rwanda's drought-prone Eastern Province, 200 solar-powered boreholes drilled under a China-funded project now serve about 110,000 people. In Ethiopia, a China-Africa-UN demonstration centre with UNIDO is building the industrial skills that turn raw materials into jobs. Across the continent, solar power is reaching rural communities that the grid never did.

China has renewed its support for the China-UN Peace and Development Fund through 2030, and plans another 2,000 livelihood projects in developing countries over the next five years.

Behind every figure is the Africa I came to know: clean water, light after dark, a harvest that reaches market. That is what development looks like when it works. Development becomes sustainable when cooperation creates the capacity for countries and communities to shape their own futures.

**Development must remain a bridge**

The GDI's best projects share three traits. They are demand-driven, shaped by the countries they serve. They transfer skills, not just structures. And they work with the multilateral system rather than around it.

That last point matters. As I said in New York, the 2030 Agenda is one integrated whole: peace, human rights and development together. Leaving no one behind must be centred on the individual. Transparency, sound standards and debt sustainability are not constraints on the GDI. They are what earn it trust.

The greatest opportunity lies in cooperation. In 2017, John Dramani Mahama and I wrote that Africa's youth population would pass 830 million by 2050, while the continent creates only 3.7 million jobs a year for the 10 to 12 million young people entering its workforce. We called for a plan with the ambition of the Marshall Plan, with youth employment at its heart. That plan need not come from a single capital. The European Union's Global Gateway has committed some €150 billion to Africa; the GDI brings finance, technology and speed.

Now, as the CEO of Global Neighbours, I sincerely believe that if the two worked side by side, co-financing energy, digital links, agribusiness and skills around Africa's own priorities, they could turn the continent into an economic powerhouse and unleash a new engine of global growth.

Cooperation can turn development from an arena of competition into one of shared interest. In a fragmented world, development can remain a bridge when so many others are becoming harder to cross.

Five years on, this may be one of the GDI's most important contributions. Its significance lies not only in the projects it supports, but also in reaffirming that development remains an area in which international cooperation is both possible and necessary.

**A choice for the next four years**

Four years remain until 2030. Traditional aid budgets are tightening and too many governments are turning inward. In that climate, an initiative that keeps development on the global agenda is not a luxury. It is a lifeline.

I have seen what hope looks like in a Kenyan village and in a Beijing policy room. They are more connected than most people imagine. When a partnership works, the distance between them disappears.

The opportunity now is to build on this momentum together, widening the circle of partners so that the GDI's next five years are measured not only in resources mobilised, but in lives transformed. At a time when much of the international conversation is about our differences, development offers a reason to keep working together.



***Siddharth Chatterjee*** *has nearly three decades of international experience in diplomacy, development, humanitarian affairs, and peace operations. He currently serves as Chief Executive Officer of Global Neighbours, a Vienna-based international think tank advancing Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogue between Europe and Asia. Until 1 March 2026, he served as the United Nations Resident Coordinator in China, representing the UN Secretary-General and leading the UN Country Team. His previous senior roles include UN Resident Coordinator, UNDP Resident Representative and UNFPA Representative in Kenya; Regional Director for the Middle East and Europe at UNOPS; Chief of Staff at the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq; and leadership positions with UNICEF in Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Indonesia. In 2001, he played a central role in the demobilization of more than 3,500 child soldiers in South Sudan. He is also a Visiting Professor at Tsinghua University, Diplomat-in-Residence at HKUST, co-founder of One Earth, and a Princeton University graduate.*

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