



ENGENDERING BRICS' SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION AGENDA : POTENTIAL & PITFALLS



- SHUBHA CHACKO

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The Covid19 pandemic has hit developing economies the hardest owing, largely, to their role in global trade, the structure of their economies (where the bulk of workers are in the informal sector, particularly women) and to their health system. Governance arrangements have also been under severe pressure; with multilaterals failing to deliver at this moment of crisis. International cooperation remains weak, with instances of bans and political recriminations between countries. For the South, the consequences of weak multilateralism-on climate change, trade, conflict prevention, etc are particularly high.

Covid-19 pandemic has unmasked, once again, all the dysfunctions in the international systems. This includes the inability of all our economies, including in the advanced countries, to protect care-provisioning and financing of public health. The international system restricts our (developing countries') public sectors' capabilities to respond to the pandemic

-Manuel Montes*

At this point in time, South-South cooperation is also being reassessed and turned to as a probable pathway to offer “a blueprint for the kind of international coordination and cooperation needed”¹. The recent economic and diplomatic advances of BRICS in the international arena such as the United Nations, G20 and even, to some extent, at the WTO has led to new calls for a multipolar world order and to relook at South-South cooperation. This paper offers a backward glance to the ideas of South-South Cooperation (SSC) and BRICS' commitment to SSC and centres a gendered perspective to these. It concludes with possible next steps. It also draws from an online webinar organised by BRICS Feminists Watch, *Engendering BRICS' South-South Cooperation Agenda: Potential and Pitfalls, held on August 19th, 2021*.

1. Tracing the path of South-South Cooperation

BRICS is also a strong step towards both the struggle and attempt to show or suggest that a united front collective can curb the power of the enemy; in this case- the industrialised and capitalist economy

-Devaki Jain*

BRICS is an acronym for a political/economic coalition involving Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. It is considered the new kid on the block in the current international system that is characterised by an upsurge in the number of security organisations, trading associations and economic blocs. BRICS moved from a mere grouping to a bloc that has developed considerable clout. Between 2009

and 2021 it has held yearly summits and has established itself as a significant player in the international arena. The jury is still out on the implications of BRICS for a new world order, but what is undeniable is that BRICS is a player worth watching. The BRICS nations describe themselves as advocates for the countries of the South and promoters of South-South Cooperation. South-South cooperation has been defined by the United Nations as “a broad framework of collaboration among countries of the South in the political, economic, social, cultural, environmental and technical domains. Involving two or more developing countries, it can take place on a bilateral, regional, intraregional or interregional basis”³. The objectives are to foster self-reliance, enhance capacities, explore joint solutions and to facilitate greater degree of participation in the international arena.

The idea of South-South Cooperation is intimately tied with the anti-colonial struggles in different parts of the world. Some of the milestones along the way have been

- The historic Bandung Conference of 1955, which laid the foundation for the formalisation of the idea of South-South Cooperation as a global political movement.
- This paved the way for the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961 and the Group of 77 (G-77) in 1964. They were to serve as models of “cooperative political mobilization and collective bargaining, wherein propositions such as a new international economic order were advanced”⁴.
- The United Nations Conference of 1978 led to the acceptance of an “exhaustively, carefully debated document” dubbed the Buenos Aires Plan of Action (BAPA) which had “a dramatically heightened emphasis on national and collective self-reliance among developing countries as foundations for a new international economic order.”
- Three years later, at a High-Level United Nations Conference in Nairobi, the principles and guidelines of SSC were updated.
- In 1990, a group of thinkers from the South put out a report entitled “The Challenges to the South”. The document covered a range of challenges of the South in the 1990s and signalled the unfairness of the international economic and political systems. It also underlined the need for the countries of the South to work collectively for their mutual development. The Commission recommended “the creation of a South organisation charged with undertaking this challenge.” This recommendation led to the creation of an independent intergovernmental think tank called the South Centre⁵.

The idea of South-South Cooperation (SSC) seems to have been in retreat in the post-cold war world of the 1990s. The recent economic and diplomatic advances made by

several countries of the global South, and the proliferating of a range of development actors, has given a fillip to a new phase of SSC. The growing clout of emerging economies in the international arena such as the United Nations, G20 and even, to some extent, the WTO has led to new calls for relooking at South-South cooperation and for a multipolar world order. After another two decades the issue picked up momentum again

- In 2004 there was an expansion and reconfiguration of the 'Special Unit for South-South Cooperation of the United Nations Development Programme' (SSC),
- In 2008 the G-77 and China adopted "Yamoussoukro Consensus on South-South Cooperation" which reiterated the principles on SSC
- In 2009 at a High-Level United Nations Conference in Nairobi the principles and guidelines of SSC were updated
- Simultaneously, the idea of "localisation of aid" was encouraged by the United Nations (UN) agencies, International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) and think tanks.
- The UN Development Programme's 2013 Human Development Report entitled The Rise of the South 'called for new institutions which can facilitate regional integration and South-South cooperation'. It acknowledged that emerging powers in the developing world are 'already sources of innovative social and economic policies and are major trade, investment, and, increasingly, development cooperation partners for other developing countries' (UNDP 2013, p. iv), and concluded by saying, 'The South needs the North, and increasingly the North needs the South'.
- At the defining BAPA+40, in 2019, the outcome document again emphasised the interlinkages between SSC and sustainable development and also the values that underpin SSC, including respect for national sovereignty, national ownership, equality, non-conditionality, non-interference and mutual benefit. The outcome document however failed to mention the principle of "common but differentiated responsibility" (CBDR) that has now steadily gained ground – especially in the discourse and agreements around climate change.

These significant trends in international development in the new millennium have underlined the broader notion of SSC to understand it as a means of promoting sustainable forms of human development, as a transfer or exchange of resources, technology and knowledge between "developing" countries, set within claims to shared colonial and post-colonial experiences, and anchored within a wider framework of promoting the collective strength of the "South".

Further, there were a range of multilateral activities pertinent to development cooperation frameworks. This included the 2015 Paris Agreement under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the 2015 Sendai Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Framework, and the 2030

Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted in 2015. All of these refer to the complementarity of SSC to North-South Cooperation in furthering the sustainable development agenda. Even while these underscored the significance of SSC, the definition of SSC remained narrow. For example, Goal 17 of the SDGs conflates SSC with other development flows, ignoring the differences with ODA donors and reducing SSC contribution to merely financial terms.

Besides the limitation in the classification and understanding of the scope of SSC, there are more serious concerns on its effectiveness, given the current geopolitical realities. The role of SSC in development cooperation was also not clearly defined in the document. This, at a time when there is global consensus on the Sustainable Development Goals, and Goal 17.

South-South Cooperation and Gender

Developed countries like to build the reputation and are the champions of gender equality but it is often mere window dressing when it comes to the actual 'rubber meets the road' they do not really apply fiscal policy, external debt, access to medicine and protection of the public sector in the developing countries which are critical to maintaining the first sector (informal home-based work done by women)

-Manuel Montes*

The idea of South-South Cooperation has held much promise for a range of social movements, including feminists. Way back in 1944, a pan-Arab Feminist Conference was hosted in Cairo to promote feminism and pan-Arab unity⁷. At the first pan-Asian women's conference in 1949, women from 37 countries came together to nurture common grounds for a global agenda in advancing gender equality⁸. These calls for solidarity among women of the South preceded the watershed moment of South-South Cooperation (SSC)- the 1955 Bandung Conference.

Bier argues that moments like the Bandung conference "were not merely diplomatic in nature but had social and cultural repercussions that serves to bridge the complex history between imperial discourse of womanhood and the contemporary politics of global feminism⁹" Meetings like the Bandung conference provided colonised and formerly-colonised women "an alternative political and organisational space to the pre-war, Western dominated, imperial international women's movement¹⁰."

Women have forged bonds on not only a shared history of colonisation, but also the continued struggles against unjust international economic and political systems. Chandra Mohanty has called this "an imagined community of third world oppositional struggles" where women "with divergent histories and social locations woven together by political threads of opposition to forms of domination that is not only pervasive but also systematic¹¹."



Capitalism and patriarchy are interlinked and their intersection with other factors has resulted in very extreme and complex forms of exclusion and marginalisation of women and girls.

- Shalmali Guttal*

These coming together of women across national divides based on commonalities of experience across the South continues with “new forms of regional and transnational activism, a trend towards new social movements (including between women, feminists, LGBTQI and youth)”. This has led to denunciations of interventions in the South that are purported to be motivated by the need to “save women” in these countries from their restrictive environments (such as in Afghanistan) and of failing to comprehend the nature of gender and sexual identities, and gender relations in the South. A strong critique of Northern-led development has also emerged. Feminists have argued that “they often misunderstood and misrepresented the diverse positions, positionalities, performances and modes of resistance developed by people across the South, including on the basis of intersecting identities (gender, race, class, age, religion, sexuality...), and in relation to diverse structures of oppression (patriarchy, misogyny, racism, heteronormativity, transphobia, (neo)colonialism, ...)” Southern feminists also simultaneously challenged the idea that feminism was a Western import that disrupts local traditions and culture. They draw from, and contribute to, shaping a range of international spaces, organisations and instruments.

The 2030 agenda emphasised the importance of women's empowerment and gender equality and adopted gender as a cross-cutting theme throughout the SDGs, while also adopting a standalone goal on ensuring gender equality and empowering all women and girls.

At its core, SSC embraces the principles of solidarity, sovereign equality, and mutual assistance. These values are close to the ethical framework that feminists have been advocating for. Yet there is a visible lack of prioritisation of gender equality in South-South Cooperation which could have implications for the attainment of the international development goals as well as national development priorities in developing countries. It is widely recognised that promoting women's rights is not only a moral and ethical imperative, given the deep gender biases, violence, and exploitation that they are routinely subjected to, it is also necessary for ensuring sustainable development. But none of the principles explicitly speak to upholding human rights and gender equality, and it is difficult to ascertain the gender dimension in practice; for example, the principle of equality in SSC implies horizontal and equal partnerships among national governments, but it does not necessarily bear out in the form of equitable developmental outcomes for men and women under projects implemented under SSC.

Additionally, the Nairobi outcome document of the High-Level UN conference on SSC, held in 2009, noted the need to improve accountability and transparency in SSC, ensure better coordination and results, and adopt a multi-stakeholder approach. It acknowledged non-governmental organisations, private sector, civil society, and academia as important actors in meeting development challenges and objectives, yet it did not mention women's organisations or women from impacted communities and the central role that they play in contributing to the achievement of these objectives.

The document also encouraged developing countries to formulate country-led systems to evaluate and assess the quality and impact of SSC and triangular cooperation, improve data collection and enhance the coordination and dissemination of data by all actors. But it did not touch upon the importance of collecting disaggregated data to accurately evaluate the progress made by SSC in ensuring the rights of marginalised and vulnerable communities and women.

South-South Cooperation has not addressed structures and systems that perpetuate patriarchal oppression. It has, in fact, moved in the same direction as what we have seen in the colonial, neoliberal and capitalist developments.

-Shalmali Guttal*



Why gender is missing from the SSC agenda

SSC does not integrate gender at a normative level; it also falls short at the policy level. The extract below is from **Divita Shandilya's** unpublished paper, with she the question¹².

1. Non-conditional character of SSC

As respect for sovereignty and non-interference are defining tenets of SSC, developing countries do not attach policy or governance conditionalities to their development assistance. Therefore, the macro-economic conditions which became characteristic of Western aid, such as greater privatisation and deregulation, are not implicit in the development cooperation policies of Southern donors, but, more often than not, this also means that there is no insistence on commitments to upholding human rights and ensuring women's empowerment in recipient countries.

2. Lack of prioritisation at a strategic level

SSC is a key tool of foreign policy for many developing country donors, and as such, is subject to their strategic political and economic interests. The driving factors behind development assistance allocations, including geo-political interests, regional interests, and historical ties may sometimes be at odds with a human rights agenda, and at other times, the status of human rights, including women's rights, may be ignored¹³. Moreover, economic growth and technological progress may take precedence or even undermine concern for human rights and gender equality in developing countries, which is translated into their development partnerships. For example, the Chinese conception of human rights privileges the socio-economic rights of large groups to meet their needs over the social, political, economic, and cultural rights of individuals¹⁴.

3. Lack of integration at implementation level

Southern donors believe in a demand driven approach and developmental projects are initiated on requests from the recipient country governments, usually made to the local embassy or during high level official meetings. This leads to an overall ad-hoc approach of project selection and implementation, with variable degrees of gender integration as there is no underlying intent on ensuring gender equality driving the projects. At a functional level, developing country donors seem to prioritise the recipient government's requirements, cost-effectiveness, and project efficiency and sustainability¹⁵, but a similar emphasis on integrating gender equality and women's rights is lacking.

4. Primacy of States as enablers of SSC

Under SSC, the State is viewed as the legitimate representative of people's voices and there is limited process of consultation with local communities in the planning, implementation, or evaluation of development

projects. The idea that the State's authority may be contested from below and there may be multiple interest groups with differing conceptions of development than that deemed to be in "national interest" has not been given enough consideration¹⁶. Consequently, any system or mechanism to include the needs and demands of multiple stakeholders, especially vulnerable communities such as indigenous people and ethno-religious minorities, and the women among them, is absent.

5. Insufficient involvement of civil society

Development cooperation among developing countries is mostly State-led, with substantial involvement of the private sector in delivering infrastructure projects and in stimulating trade and investment flows. Similarly, civil society organisations have occasionally implemented social sector projects, and have provided technical and capacity building support under the rubric of SSC. However, civil society and media in developing countries still do not critically engage with the development cooperation policies of their governments and the governments are, in turn, not forthcoming with information and data regarding their development partnerships. As a result, there exists little objective and systematic research and evaluation, scrutiny, or public pressure related to the intentions and impacts of SSC, especially on structural issues such as gender equality.

The BRICS commitment to SSC

For BRICS, the idea of South-South Cooperation has been central to their existence. BRICS as a strong coalition of emerging economies has been seen as a forum that is questioning western dominance in international institutions of global governance¹⁷. BRICS has played a "challenge function¹⁸" in the international arena and offers a chance to move to a multipolar universe¹⁹. The very existence of BRICS presents an implicit challenge to the US-led world order but without a direct confrontation. It has moved away from the way in which countries of the North and South have traditionally engaged with each other – and, therefore, there is potential for another paradigm, of "global governance" along with "new regionalisms²⁰".

The main stated objective of BRICS is to deepen, broaden and intensify cooperation within the grouping and among the individual countries for more sustainable, equitable and mutually-beneficial development. The commitment to SSC is therefore embedded in this objective. BRICS has also pledged to strengthen partnerships for advancing international sustainable development in keeping with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) non-interference in the internal matters of a country and non-conditionality to its assistance.

BRICS stated position on SSC is expressed as an attempt to build a link of solidarity and extend a hand to those who are excluded. It enunciated this position on SSC by saying

“The international community needs to step up efforts to provide liquid financial resources for these countries. The international community should also strive to minimise the impact of the crisis on development and ensure the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Developed countries should fulfil their commitment of 0.7% of Gross National Income for the Official Development Assistance and make further efforts in increasing assistance, debt relief, market access and technology transfer for developing countries²¹.”

It has also repeatedly positioned itself as a platform to promote South-South cooperation, a detail that was emphasised by Wang Xiaojun, deputy director for programs and operations of the UN Office for South-South Cooperation²². At the BRICS Summit in 2017, Chinese president Xi Jinping underlined the importance of South-South Cooperation and North-South Dialogue. He also pointed out that the BRICS nations, along with the leaders of the five countries from different regions, will be discussing “global development cooperation and South-South cooperation as well as the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development²³.”

The overall objective of SSC, as expounded by BRICS, includes the sharing of knowledge and experiences that are closer to, and more relevant for, the low-income countries to which they provide assistance for building and strengthening the global partnership²⁴.

The fact that SSC has become an important consideration for BRICS is evident from the fact that China has established a USD 2 bn South-South Fund²⁵, which is aimed at helping developing countries deal with challenges “such as natural disasters, refugees and climate change”. China has also set up an institute for the Study of South-South cooperation alongside a Centre for New Structural Economics at Peking University²⁶.

BRICS nations view SSC as complementing, rather than conflicting with, North-South Cooperation. They enunciated this position at the VII BRICS Summit, held in Ufa, Russia, (July 9, 2015) when they asserted, “We are committed to further strengthening and supporting South-South cooperation, while stressing that South-South cooperation is not a substitute for, but rather a complement to, North-South cooperation which remains the main channel of international development cooperation. We intend to strengthen partnerships for advancing international development and to begin interaction through dialogue, cooperation and exchange of experience in advancing international development of mutual interest to our countries.”

There is a welcoming of Southern partners, including BRICS, critiquing existing frameworks of cooperation and offering alternatives and also “by profoundly unsettling and transgressing some of its orthodox categories and assumptions²⁷”. Some scholars see it as heralding a new era that offers an alternative to western hegemony, recalling the heydays of NAM and its demand for a New International Economic Order in the 1970s²⁸.

To integrate the gender perspective in South-South cooperation would make a contribution for three reasons:

- 1. the gender perspective would help to transform the state-centric to people-centric developmental cooperation.*
- 2. It can enforce, enhance the rights spaced approach by mitigating the false divide between needs versus rights, human rights-based development versus the right to development.*
- 3. The gender perspective in South-South cooperation would enhance accountability. This accountability mechanism would not be possible without the effort and collaboration of the women, and the feminist movement in the countries involved.*

- Yiping, Cai*

However, the pathway chosen by BRICS tells another story. In its key document the Strategy for Economic Cooperation, it underlines that the framework for cooperation is based on market enhancement, mutual trade investment, creation of business-friendly environment, inclusive economic growth, among others (The Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership 2015). Even within the eight priority areas of cooperation that the Strategy document pinpoints – trade and investment, manufacturing and energy processing, energy, agricultural cooperation, science-technology and innovation, financial cooperation, connectivity, and ICT cooperation – the thrust is on growth. Not only are problems such as poverty, inequality, women's empowerment, environmental concerns etc. absent, the priority areas continue to be considered “gender-neutral” and the general presumption is that people universally benefit from economic growth. However, such presumptions are often harmful and can actually lead to negative impacts on women's rights and gender equality. For example, large and medium infrastructure projects have differential impacts on women and men; there have been cases where infrastructure projects have led to large scale influx of men into local communities, thereby increasing the risk of sexual violence against women. These projects also put women at an increased risk of displacement and loss of assets, such as land and livelihoods, without adequate compensation. Conversely, ensuring women's access to productive economic resources and basic services such as education, healthcare, and livelihoods allows them to contribute to the development process.

The concern of feminists and other progressive movements are that “Southern partners are (re)inscribing hierarchies of gendered and sexualised others that can sometimes reinforce and sometimes run counter to claims of naturalised conviviality and more equal relations.” This is especially relevant given the assertion of more masculinised and muscular national identities.

We are faced here with two layers of structural inequality and we cannot just address one or the other:

- 1. divisions of unpaid domestic and care work predominately done by women*
- 2. the division of the labour is the geographic division of labour in which the global North is industrialised and adding extra value, and profiting from the extraction of the work in the global South to profit and add extra value to the circulating merchandises in the global North.*

-Emilia Reyes*

There is an urgent need to distinguish between the official policy or normative claims of BRICS' attempt at SSC and their actual development cooperation practice, as evident in the patterns of SSDC flows, in the process of their implementation, outcomes and impacts.

The SSC framework calls upon developing countries to ensure shared prosperity for all their peoples, including women and girls, but currently it would seem that human rights and gender equality have become secondary considerations or afterthoughts in the quest for economic growth and development which, unfortunately, seem to be the foremost priorities for BRICS and the NDB.

The rise of the women of the South provides an opportunity to revitalise the rights to development and rethinking a long-standing debate in the area of international human rights law.

-Yiping Cai*

The BRICS Model of Development Cooperation

Within the realm of development cooperation, though, these emerging donors themselves remain recipients of aid and struggle to effectively address a host of issues such as domestic poverty, sharp and growing inequalities, governance deficits and socio-political injustices. Their aid has grown significant enough for it now to have become imperative to factor in an understanding of the international aid architecture³².

Flows of development financing and other assistance from BRICS to low-income countries (LICs) have surged in recent years. Drawing from their own experience of being "recipients" of aid, these countries support the tenets of national ownership and strengthening of national capacities. Russia, too, draws on its deep suspicion of aid

conditionality that was imposed by the traditional donors through the cold-war years.

Since 1992, for each of the BRICS countries ODA constituted less than 1% of Gross National Income. Flows of development financing from the BRICS to low-income countries (LICs) have surged in recent years; even though it still remains significantly lower than the DAC countries.

It is difficult to compute the extent of aid that flows out of BRICS, but it was at least USD 5 billion a year between 2010-2014³³. Within the strict OECD definition, BRICS aid may appear to be insignificant compared to G7 but such statistics hide the considerable amounts of official non-ODA financing that the emerging powers provide to developing countries³⁴.

Besides the amount, the special significance of the BRICS development cooperation is the nature of assistance. The BRICS countries position themselves as providers of a different kind of development assistance. Their model, they claim, is based on more equal partnerships between the countries and also encompass not only technical and financial assistance, but the strengthening of trade and investment³⁵.

BRICS' stated philosophy for development financing differs from those of "traditional donors" (OECD-DAC members) in three significant ways, according to NkundeMwase and Yongzheng Yang. "BRICS engagement, with the exception of Russia, is founded on a model of mutual benefits. Most of the financing has been concentrated in the infrastructure sector to support productive activities. Russia, similar to traditional donors, has recently focused on social spending, seeing poverty reduction as the main objective of their ODA. China, has tended to provide noncash financing for projects." They also point out that the aid provided by BRICS has fewer conditionalities as it construed this as an intrusion into the sovereignty of the country; whereas traditional donors often include issues of institution building and governance. Another point of departure is the manner in which debt sustainability is defined, with BRICS tending to focus on "micro-sustainability of individual projects" in contrast to traditional donors who are more focussed on long-run debt sustainability³⁷.

Russia's development assistance covers the traditional issues of health, education, and energy security, and now food security has also become a special focus area. China and India are keen on providing technological training and transfers, and also making available concessionary loans, lines of credit, and resource equity swaps. South Africa's assistance is markedly different in that it has played a lead role in security and peacekeeping efforts in Africa³⁸. Brazil focuses on educational and technical partnership, besides humanitarian relief³⁹.

BRICS has subscribed to a broader view of development assistance (other than aid or concessional loans) and states that it encourages the "exploring the possibilities of skills development cooperation through implementation of the

international best practices, including relevant World Skills programmes⁴⁰. The idea of mutuality and job creation are central to this initiative. These are in keeping with the principles of South-South Cooperation and the expanded idea that the partnership can take different forms.

These forms of assistance pose methodological challenges to measuring aid, as usually it is reduced to a single variable, i.e., the economic (usually itself reduced to trade, aid and investment figures), which is inappropriate⁴¹. "There is therefore an underestimation of the value and volume of development aid by non-DAC countries as it is often in kind"⁴². BRICS therefore are well placed to challenge the traditional values and measures of what constitutes development assistance.

Relationship with traditional donors

The world of development cooperation has changed substantially over the last decade. The Fourth High-Level Forum (HLF) on Aid Effectiveness in Busan 2011, where the Global Partnership was created, is thought of as the watershed. It provided a platform for regular engagement of DAC-member donor countries with a broader range of actors, including the governments from rising power countries such as the BRICS⁴³.

The response from the 'traditional' aid and development community to this has been mixed. Some see it as an expansion of aid and enhancing the forms of development cooperation that is in place. However, others view it with suspicion and as a threat to the future of developing countries as its non-conditionality approach to development cooperation could lead to the watering down of standards and a waste of resources on unproductive investments⁴⁴.

BRICS, for its part, has been wary of the traditional donors thwarting its ambitions. They have regarded some of the negotiations at the various development cooperation negotiations as backdoor ways for the traditional donors to dictate terms to them and impose standards that would serve to restrict BRICS, including tensions and contradictions being played out around the issue of transparency. On one hand, BRICS had pushed for greater transparency by DAC but on the other, this issue was perceived as a stick that would be used to beat BRICS with and help maintain the dominant position of DAC⁴⁵. BRICS itself continues to be less forthcoming with information.

The space for useful dialogues between the two groups, OECD and BRICS, has also been limited. One that offers potential to bridge the gap is the 'China-DAC Study Group' that is aimed "at facilitating mutual learning between China and DAC members/observers on how to deliver quality aid to support more effective development and poverty reduction in developing countries"⁴⁶. Another method that developed countries have employed to engage with SSC is through 'triangular' cooperation⁴⁷. Triangular cooperation are tripartite collaboration and partnerships among instead of between South-South-North countries. Traditional donors have used this to offer support through financial, technical

or other means to new donors. However, there are questions whether this in fact can be seen as creating an additional channel for developed countries to shape the development agenda⁴⁸.

Gender Lens to BRICS Development Cooperation

While BRICS held a promise as an alternative force to the western powers, feminists are disappointed that, despite the rich tradition of diverse and vibrant women's movements in the BRICS countries, it binds itself with the neo-liberal capitalist form of economy. This dismay was evident at the aforementioned online seminar as well.

"The insistence on the traditional state-centric security issues on the one hand and economic growth and development on the other make it obvious for BRICS to conform with the contemporary economic system rather than trying to exacerbate a substantial change in the world economic system"⁴⁹. The BRICS Feminist Watch has repeatedly engaged with BRICS to integrate a more feminist vision and practices in its work.

Neoliberal agenda: Feminists and other civil society organisations have had mixed responses to BRICS' SSC programme. For some, emerging donor aid programmes are celebrated for their departure from the neoliberal norms of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee and as providing a mutually-beneficial form of developmental assistance as an alternative to the dominant aid paradigm. Some observers see them as insignificant or that the agenda being pursued is merely "neo-liberalist with southern characteristics"⁵⁰.

Policy of non-interference by BRICS in the internal matters of sovereign states could become a way to circumvent dictatorial or corrupt regimes to continue "business as usual" and thereby dilute democratic principles and weaken the future aid architecture⁵¹. Feminist concerns could be swept under the carpet in the guise of viewing them as internal issues to a country. They, along with others, have argued for clear accountability for the implementation of the entire Busan declaration and, especially emphasised the particular status of countries that are both recipients and providers of aid⁵².

Weak commitment to human rights: The policies of BRICS do not explicitly show a commitment to human rights, though it has in place an Environment and Social Framework and its foundation documents and summit declarations have emphasised poverty eradication. The absence of clear human rights frameworks to guide southern development cooperation, trade and investment is a matter of concern and a demand that feminists and other civil society actors have articulated.

Missing Women: Women, too, are missing from BRICS in its declarations, its forums and its programmes. Feminist have recognised the need to engage with BRICS and the New Development Bank given the growing might of these two

organisations and the fact that their policy decisions affects thousands of women. They have suggested that the contours of a potentially truly-transformative model can emerge if the NDB could move from seeing women as a target group who need special ladders within a framework of economic development, to recognizing, supporting and enabling them to become economic and political agents who become the engine of growth⁵⁵.

*Looking ahead, to the rise of Southern women for a stronger global feminist movement, despite the shrinking space; the women of the South are also mobilising and organising for their rights, justice and equality. - Yiping Cai**

It is still unclear if the principles of SSC that feminists endorse such as equality, mutual benefit etc. are upheld in the projects that BRICS supports or if they are more in line with policies that sustain and reproduce gender inequalities.

SSC from below: While examining SSC we should also be careful not to limit our analysis to state-led initiatives alone. There are growing forms of 'resistance from below' that are manifesting themselves increasingly and globally with BRICS too. This challenge 'from below' is equally important in the present era. This track is to represent the voice and concerns of citizens of the BRICS countries and facilitate the 'scaling up' of community concerns onto a variety of government policy platforms through a Statement of Recommendations that is communicated to the official Sherpas for consideration at the intergovernmental BRICS summit. However, this is still a contested space⁵⁶. (For more on this please see **BRICS and Civil Society: Gender Implications of this Chequered Relationship**⁵⁷)

The approach to gender issues that pervades the world order that is wedded to the idea of economic growth is 'gender equality is smart economics'. This is echoed amongst new and old development-cooperation actors and "has made the challenge even bigger for feminists advocating a transformative approach to gender equality, one that tackles structural issues such as care which remain largely invisible in economic policy⁵⁸."

Possible next steps

It is very hard to build South-South solidarity on different issues even while talking about the BRICS. This is why there is an important role of feminist movement to build their network and share their analysis while advocating with their own national polities how the policies should change and making their countries responsible for SSC to the extent they can do that.

-Manuel Montes*

The first step would be to uphold principles of horizontal development cooperation, including acknowledging unequal conditions of partnership that often prevail even within SSC.

Policy: The first urgent task, of course, is for BRICS to develop a policy on development cooperation and establish a common framework for the monitoring and evaluation of SSC. They have the mandate for it following the Ufa declaration of 2012. The first meeting of BRICS senior officials responsible for international development cooperation took place in December 2015. However, it has yet to formulate its own policy on the issue. It has to also move away from viewing development cooperation as merely an extension of its geo-political ambition. A fair forward-thinking policy that centres feminist concerns and that evolves through consultation with experts, activists, and women and LGBTQI+ people would be a first step.

Coordination on the ground for better results: Right now, there are multiple agencies involved in development cooperation in each of the BRICS countries and there is a lack of clarity on the type, extent and features of development cooperation. A clear policy, coupled with an increase in information sharing by BRICS, would result in greater transparency and accountability. "All of the BRICS countries have agendas for making development cooperation more effective but so far there is no attempt to pull together a BRICS development cooperation strategy. Indeed, it has been argued, that the search for a narrative for Southern powers of development cooperation (i.e., emerging powers) is still a work in progress."

Setting Standards: It is essential to ensure that the standards and procedures related to an array of issues, including environmental and social protection, procurement of goods and services etc., that need to be observed are to international standards. BRICS has to simultaneously work to strengthen the national and subnational systems to ensure that they are able to meet these standards. Protection of the rights of women and other marginalised communities have to be part of these standards that govern all decisions on development cooperation. (For more details on NDB and Gender, please refer to Taking it to the Bank)

Civil society activists have also suggested that there is a need to have greater clarity on **BRICS' understanding of sustainability** and take a holistic view of sustainability and "move beyond 'doing no harm' to generating transformative positive impact" BRICS should develop robust sustainability criteria that become part of its benchmarking process and it should build-in incentives that ensure the compliance to these indicators.

Working with the GPEDC and United Nations: Recognising the large amount of negotiating time and political capital that went into striking the agreement that resulted in the Busan Partnership Document, BRICS could play a more proactive role in the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation to help it succeed as a 'post-DAC' forum for global standard setting in the field of international development cooperation. It could also

support the idea of an increased UN role on debates and decisions on global development cooperation principles and standards. Given its universal reach and membership, it enjoys a unique legitimacy that would allow it to adopt an enabling role. This role could be played by the UN Development Cooperation Forum (UNDCF), which is part of the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). BRICS can be a leader in strengthening SSC coordination and develop mechanisms to facilitate that.

Greater Accountability: BRICS and the NDB should establish an effective independent accountability mechanism which can provide redress for individuals or communities who may be harmed or affected by NDB-financed activities. This includes building a transparent and participatory process to deal with the evaluation of projects and the development of remedies for both the short and long term. It appears that the Bank did not have any public consultations with any set of stakeholders, and particularly civil society groups while formulating its policies. It includes developing, promoting and strengthening multiple accountability systems for women's rights, and gender equality. This should include suo moto publishing of all relevant information in a timely manner and holding regular, open consultations with the most affected communities. While the NDB has a social and environmental framework, experts feel that these principles are more aspirational rather than concrete safeguards that could allow the monitoring of environmental and social performance standards of projects. Experts are also of the opinion that there are sufficient clauses within the existing NDB framework that could give room for the host country to waive certain standards for certain projects. Further and importantly, based on a reading of its current policies, it does not appear that the bank has put in place adequate mechanisms that could address any adverse impacts of projects on host or local communities

Gender Perspective: The development cooperation policy along with the guidelines have to be vetted from a gender perspective; including the large infrastructure project that are mistakenly thought to be “gender-neutral”. Gender should be integrated in all aspects of BRICS projects including design, planning and loan agreements. Gender Audits should form part of the project review, besides feedback mechanism at the end of the programme. All BRIC programmes should be subjected to scrutiny by gender expert team. The loan agreement of the NDB does not require any reporting on gender-based indicators.

Women as Independent Economic Agents: It is extremely important for developing country donors to recognise women as independent economic agents and not just beneficiaries of development, and commit to development cooperation policies and processes which ensure and promote their rights. In certain cases developing countries do talk about integrating gender equality into their development partnerships, but they are rarely accompanied by operationalisation mechanisms.

Stepping-up Civil Society engagement with BRICS: Civil Society organisations are pressing for a “more inclusive, formal and permanent mechanisms, including support particularly official spaces, financial support and access to information” to allow fruitful civil society interaction with BRICS. The participation of political leaders, civil society organisations—including women's rights groups, social movements, farmers, indigenous women—in these processes should be promoted, supported and adequately financed.

The roles that were suggested for civil society include monitoring the NDB projects to ensure that they uphold the commitments of BRICS to human rights, equality and sustainability. Besides, there are other tasks that civil society forums could take up like creating and disseminating knowledge, as well as building capacities of community organisations and other stakeholders (including, perhaps, even NDB personnel). However, others see civil society's role as one that proposes and pushes alternative transformatory paradigms – rather than merely tweaking or monitoring progress around given indicators.

Most transnational advocacy networks have tended to target global institutions and processes dominated by the West along a North–South axis, but should also consider other MDBs as they are playing an increasingly significant role in the economies of their member and other countries. There have been some advances made in this direction, especially with regard to indigenous and human rights, as well as women's rights as evident by the BRICS Feminist Watch.

It is imperative that as the modalities and institutions of SSC evolve, they imbibe a feminist perspective and broaden the interpretation of the foundational principles of SSC to

South-South Corporation needs to move away from neoliberalism and global value chain change and the competitive environment and needs to operate on principles of international solidarity. These are laid out in the right to development declaration. The SSC should include rebuilding or building the human and societal capacity, and social infrastructure that was destroyed by colonialism

-Shalmali Guttal*

TO CONCLUDE

BRICS should heed the demand of the feminist movements that gender equality be an objective of their official aid programmes and that its success in securing gender equality objectives can be realised by supporting the organising capacity of women's organisations to work at societal change, developing long-term trust relationships with local women's movements and supporting processes of locally-led change rather than imposing their own world view or strategic objectives.

***Please note that the quotes throughout the paper are from the BFW webinar:
Engendering BRICS' South-South Cooperation Agenda: Potential and Pitfalls, 19 August, 2021**

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As a South Feminist Alliance, BRICS Feminist Watch (BFW) relates to the key principles of South-South Cooperation (SSC). However, we continue to observe that discourses around SSC at any level don't really engage with feminist politics or agendas. In our engagements with the New Development Bank's (NDB) management at several CSO meetings, they repeatedly boasted about it being different from 'North' based IFIs as it follows the principles of SSC. This was perceived as a lame attempt by the Bank as BFW monitoring of NDB did not show much commitment to SSC. Hence a strategic decision was taken by the BFW leadership to undertake research on SSC from the gender perspective, and to unpack some of the key challenges and trends in this context. I am, therefore, grateful to the BFW leadership, especially BFW's Core Group members, Patricia Chaves, Govind Kelkar and Sibulele Poswayo, that persuaded us to examine the evolving landscape around SSC.

In August 2021, PWESCR, on behalf of BRICS Feminist Watch and in partnership with The Inequality Movement, Gen Dev Centre for Research and Innovation, EspaçoFeminista, Solidarity Foundation, IWRAP Asia Pacific, Feminist Land Platform and Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) hosted an online Seminar: **Engendering BRICS' South-South Cooperation Agenda: Potential and Pitfalls**. The webinar examined how economic growth alone has not been sufficient in addressing gender inequalities and justice for all. I am grateful to all partnering organisations.

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PWESCR and BFW's ongoing explorations on BRICS and gender equality continue to contribute towards increasing the knowledge base and scholarship to explore new ways of thinking about these areas and to develop strategies that can be used in diverse situations. We decided to publish this report in the hope that it will stimulate further inquiry and work amongst a wide range of audiences.

Priti Darooka

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