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Civil Society from the BRICS: Emerging Roles in the New International Development Landscape

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Abbreviations

ABC	Agência Brasileira de Cooperação [Brazilian Cooperation Agency]
AMEXCID	Mexican Agency for International Development Cooperation
ANC	African National Congress
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
BRICSAM	Brazil, Russia, India, Indonesia, China, South Africa and Mexico
CPDE	Civil Society Partnership for Development Effectiveness
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFPA	China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation
CONSEA	National Food and Nutrition Security Council (Brazil)
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CSO	civil society organisation
CSR	corporate social responsibility
CUT	Central Única dos Trabalhadores [Unified Workers' Central]
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (of the OECD)
DEPs	democratic emerging powers
DFID	Department for International Development
DIRCO	[South African] Department of International Relations and Cooperation
DPA	[Indian] Development Partnerships Administration
ECSN	Empowering Civil Society Networks
EEI	Enabling Environment Index
FIDC	Forum for Indian Development Cooperation
GONGOs	government-organised or government-operated NGOs
GDP	gross domestic product
GPEDC	Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation
GPoPAI	Group on Public Policies for Information Access
GR-RI	Grupo de Reflexão sobre Relações Internacionais [Reflection Group on International Relations]
HLF	High Level Forum
HLM	High Level Meeting
IATI	International Aid Transparency Initiative
IBSA	India, Brazil and South Africa
ICNL	International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INESC	Institute of Socioeconomic Research (Brazil)
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
ITEC	Indian Technical & Economic Cooperation
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOFCOM	Ministry of Commerce
NeST	Network of Southern Think-tanks
NGDOs	non-governmental development organisations
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PT	[Brazilian] Workers' Party
PRIA	Society for Participatory Research in Asia
REBRI	Rede Brasileira pela Integração dos Povos [Brazilian Network for the Integration of the Peoples]
RIS	Research and Information System for Developing Countries
SACSIS	South African Civil Society Information Service
SADPA	South African Development Partnership Agency
SAFIS	South African Forum for International Solidarity

SAIIA	South African Institute of International Affairs
SSC	South–South cooperation
SSDC	South–South Development Cooperation
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VANI	Voluntary Action Network India

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We are grateful for the funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) which made both those meetings and the background research for this study possible, and also for the opportunity to work with Oxfam’s EU-funded ‘Empowering Civil Society Networks in an Unequal Multi-Polar World’ (ECSN-BRICSAM) project, which allowed us to understand better the changing picture of civil society–BRICS engagement in the period between the Brazilian and Russian BRICS presidencies.

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1 Introduction: civil society and South–South Development Cooperation amid global power shifts

There is a burgeoning literature on the (re)emergence of the BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – as significant actors in international development. To date, however, most attention has focused on the government-to-government relations established through state-led South–South Development Cooperation (SSDC) and the BRICS’ engagements in multilateral processes. Much has also been written about the growing presence of businesses from the BRICS (especially China) in poorer countries, particularly in Africa, and the somewhat tendentious and superficial slant that initially characterised much of this work is now starting to give way to a more nuanced analysis of the multiple roles played by such businesses in different places and sectors (Brautigam 2009; Mohan 2013; Navas-Alemán 2015). By comparison with this growing literature on governments and businesses, remarkably little attention has been paid to the roles played by civil society actors from the BRICS countries by researchers from outside those countries themselves.¹ In this report we will argue that this has led to a neglect of both their existing and their potential contributions to the ongoing transformation of the field of international development, amid the broad geopolitical shifts symbolised by the rise of the BRICS.

This report focuses on ‘civil society’ in just one of the many senses in which the term is used: the sense summarised by Edwards (2009) as referring to ‘the world of associational life’ (rather than alternative conceptualisations of civil society as ‘the good society’ or ‘the public sphere’). We are particularly interested in a fairly limited subset of the collective actors who populate this ‘world of associational life’ in the BRICS countries: that is, formally structured civil society organisations (CSOs) with a history of engagement in project implementation, policy dialogue and/or public debate in relation to issues of social and economic development at home and abroad. This category includes non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs) as well as advocacy non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in fields such as human rights and the environment, NGOs with a service provision or social entrepreneurship orientation who are operating in the field of corporate social responsibility, organisations linked to social movements or labour unions who are active in transnational political mobilisation² and research-oriented NGOs that tend to operate more as thinktanks.

These categories are not clear-cut, and often such organisations will – like many of their counterparts from ‘traditional donor’ countries – be hybrids playing multiple roles across the spectrum of service provision, research, networking and advocacy. These roles and the positions *vis-à-vis* governments and businesses that go with them may also differ according to whether development engagements take place at home or abroad – for example, an NGO that operates as an uncritical outsourcing partner for government development cooperation projects overseas may be fiercely outspoken when it comes to domestic development policy, or vice versa. Despite this fluidity, as we will discuss there are often cases where an NGO deliberately positions itself on this spectrum or classifies others according to their position on it in a way that reflects deeply felt differences in identity and ideology, as well as in political

¹ Though within the BRICS countries there is a growing literature on CSO engagements with each individual country’s development cooperation activities – for Brazil, for example, see Santos (2013), Oliveira and Milani (2012) and Milani, Suyama and Lopes (2013).

² Our focus does not specifically include transnational activist networks, although we do discuss the role of networks like La Vía Campesina and the World March of Women that have played a particularly significant role in enabling BRICS-based CSOs to link with others elsewhere in the global South.

and economic interests and in the nature of different organisations' engagements in particular transnational networks across the BRICS and beyond.

Our use of the term 'NGO' is a convenient shorthand that should not of course imply that we assume that all these organisations are fully independent of government; neither do we follow a purist definition of 'civil society' as an associational realm that is somehow completely separable from the state. As we will discuss, the state–civil society boundary in the BRICS tends to be more blurred and fluid than it is in Northern 'traditional donor' countries, and even organisations that cannot be strictly characterised as 'GONGOs' (government-organised NGOs) often have formal or informal links with state agencies and/or governing political parties. This can be the case in the vibrant democratic contexts of the 'IBSA' countries (India, Brazil and South Africa), as much as in the more authoritarian contexts of Russia and China. In recent years civil society organisations in the IBSA countries have enjoyed a great deal more space to challenge government policy, but this does not make CSOs from the other BRICS mere appendages of their governments. In fact, we will argue that, across the BRICS, development cooperation policy includes paradoxical cases of state–CSO dialogue emerging in unpromising authoritarian contexts and stalling in traditionally vibrant democratic ones.

In spite of our focus on formally structured CSOs we do nonetheless recognise the importance of other parts of 'the world of associational life' in shaping relations between the BRICS countries and other low- and middle-income countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. A number of authors have highlighted the role of different networks operating in many kinds of space – from old diaspora connections and new migration routes to proselytising evangelical churches and transnational feminist exchanges – in shaping the BRICS' involvement in other countries' development trajectories (Mawdsley and McCann 2011; Mohan *et al.* 2014; Van de Kamp 2013; Taela 2011). However, we believe that a focus on formally structured CSOs in general and on NGOs in particular is justified because they provide some of the most emblematic examples of the transformations that are arising from the BRICS' rapid shift in identity within the field of international development.

This shift, marked by a significant growth in the size, visibility, impact and influence of the development cooperation activities of countries that for many years were classified by the Northern donor nations primarily as targets for external aid, has been summarised as a change in identity 'from recipients to donors' – despite the fact that Northern aid continues to flow to these countries (albeit in smaller volumes), and that countries identifying with the tradition of South–South Cooperation have long been reluctant to classify themselves as 'donors' (Mawdsley 2012; Abdenur and da Fonseca 2013; Inoue and Costa Vaz 2012). In this report we argue that a key aspect of the BRICS' shift in identity relates not so much to the volumes of aid-equivalent funding that they now provide to other countries but rather to the extent to which they are now seen as a source of development innovations and successful models, which has transformed their position within the 'new knowledge politics of development cooperation' (Shankland and Constantine 2014a).

This report looks at these transformations across the multiple dimensions of international development in which civil society organisations from the BRICS play a role. It begins with an analysis of the domestic context within which they operate, looking at the 'enabling environment' for CSO activity within the five BRICS countries in comparative perspective. It then examines in greater detail their roles in relation to government policy on development cooperation, including the extent to which they have gained access to officially sanctioned spaces for policy debate as well as efforts to stimulate debate within national and subnational civil society networks themselves. The following section examines CSOs as 'development cooperation providers', both in leading their own South–South cooperation initiatives (often invoking solidarity principles) and in delivering government SSDC or triangular cooperation projects. The report then moves on to examine transnational

development policy spaces, including both the global processes where (traditionally Northern-dominated) debates on aid effectiveness and aid transparency have been developing and the specific fora associated with the BRICS Summit process and now with the creation of the ‘New Development Bank’ initiated by the BRICS countries.

The research on which this report draws was carried out in active dialogue – and often in partnership – with a number of key BRICS-based and international CSOs, as well as with the research organisations who led the State of the Debate studies conducted by the IDS Rising Powers in International Development programme with partners across the BRICS countries (Costa Leite *et al.* 2014; Larionova, Rakhmangulow and Berenson 2014; Chaturvedi *et al.* 2014; Gu, Chen and Zhang 2014; Grobbelaar 2014). It consisted not only of an extensive review of academic and grey literature and interviews with key informants in academic, civil society and government institutions across the BRICS as well as in ‘traditional donor’ countries, but also of participant observation in a number of events where CSOs from the BRICS were debating how to engage with their countries’ growing individual and collective roles in international development.

The first of these was the project synthesis meeting for the ‘Civil Society–BRICS Engagement Initiative’, which was led by the FIM-Forum for Democratic Global Governance with PRIA (Society for Participatory Research in Asia – India), Instituto Pólis (Brazil), Isandla Institute (South Africa), the Participation Centre (China) and the Commission on Social Policies, Labour and Living Standards (Russian Federation). At the end of this meeting, which took place in Johannesburg in March 2013, IDS, PRIA and FIM co-convened a debate on ‘Future Strategies for Civil Society–BRICS Engagement’ which brought project participants together with other South African and Brazilian NGOs involved in mobilisation around the BRICS Summit that was due to be held in Durban shortly afterwards. The IDS team co-convened a similar meeting with Articulação SUL during the BRICS Academic Forum in Rio de Janeiro in March 2014, bringing together researchers and activists from India, South Africa, Mexico and Mozambique with Brazilian CSOs and academics.

In addition to these co-convened meetings, IDS researchers participated in many national-level meetings across the BRICS countries in 2013 and 2014 (as part of the State of the Debate study process), and in formal and informal civil society debates organised around the High-Level Meeting of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation in Mexico City in April 2014, as part of the Civil Society-Led South–South Cooperation (CSO-SSC) project jointly managed by IDS, PRIA and Articulação SUL. One IDS team member also carried out ethnographic studies based on participant observation in the BRICS ‘counter-summits’ organised by civil society groups in Durban (March 2013) and Fortaleza (July 2014). Over the course of 2015 we also engaged in extensive discussions with CSOs from across the BRICS countries who were working with Oxfam on the EU-funded ‘Empowering Civil Society Networks in an Unequal Multi-Polar World’ (ECSN-BRICSAM) project, including a network planning workshop in Istanbul in February 2015 and subsequent virtual meetings as part of the IDS-led mapping study of BRICS and G20 engagement (Poskitt *et al.* 2015).

In the next section we begin by examining the ‘enabling environment’ for civil society engagement across the BRICS countries, before going on to look at CSOs’ roles in development cooperation policy and practice at the national and international levels, including the changing nature of civil society engagement with the BRICS Summit process.

2 The state of the enabling environment for civil society in the BRICS

Civil society cannot flourish in a vacuum; in development cooperation as in other fields, it requires an enabling environment to achieve its full potential. As defined by the CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the enabling environment for civil society consists of the conditions that affect the capacity of citizens and organisations to engage in development processes in an effective and sustained manner, including the legal and regulatory framework and political, sociocultural and economic factors (CIVICUS 2013). This environment for civil society is markedly different in each of the BRICS countries, despite their shared common factor of operating within countries that are shifting from being primarily identified as aid recipients to being rising powers in development cooperation.

This common factor means that across the BRICS countries, civil society is facing the challenge of balancing competing demands and maintaining relevance, while struggling to adapt to these countries' changing global roles in a context that has long been shaped by North–South tensions. CSOs are adjusting to changing domestic demands, as social, economic and political change in the BRICS countries shifts the agenda away from classic development challenges of absolute poverty and access to services towards inequality, environmental issues and governance challenges. At the same time, they are having to balance their work on domestic challenges with both engaging with the emerging opportunities afforded by South–South Development Cooperation and maintaining their often longstanding relationships with multilateral and bilateral donor agencies in a time when these agencies' agendas are changing rapidly.

2.1 Overview of the enabling environment

The Enabling Environment Index (EEI) is a CIVICUS initiative, launched in 2013, that ranks 109 countries using a set of indicators that assess the governance, socioeconomic and sociocultural environment that enables civil society to function effectively. It is calculated using secondary data on a wide range of sub-dimensions: under the 'Governance' heading these sub-dimensions are civil society infrastructure, policy dialogue, corruption, political rights and freedoms, associational rights, rule of law, personal rights, NGO legal context and media freedoms; under the 'Socioeconomic' heading they are education, communications, equality and gender equality; and under the 'Sociocultural' heading they are propensity to participate, tolerance, trust, and giving and volunteering.³ The EEI is necessarily limited by the availability of secondary data on some of these sub-dimensions, and has been questioned by some Southern academics for its reliance on indicators such as formal schooling and broadband coverage that correlate poorly with the actual determinants of civil society activism in countries with a strong history of social movement mobilisation.⁴ Nevertheless, it has the broadest coverage of any comparable index and serves as a relatively robust guide to how the enabling environment in the BRICS compares to other countries. This comparison shows that among the BRICS, only South Africa and Brazil scored higher than the global average, with India, Russia and China being assessed as having a relatively poor environment for citizen and civil society participation.

³ See

www.civicus.org/downloads/Dimensions%20and%20Indicators%20for%20the%20CIVICUS%20Civil%20Society%20Enabling%20Environment%20Index.pdf (accessed 9 May 2015).

⁴ Carlos Milani, pers. comm. 14 May 2015.

Table 2.1 Enabling Environment Index ranking of BRICS

Country	Rank (out of 109)
South Africa	40 th
Brazil	42 nd
India	67 th
Russia	75 th
China	89 th

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on data from CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation (2013).

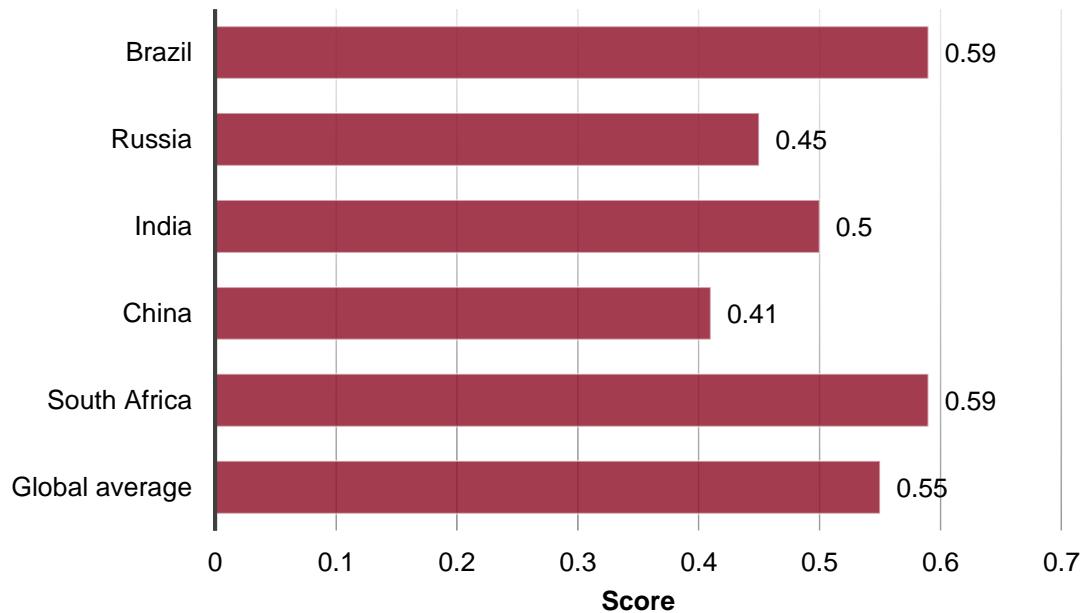
As Table 2.1 shows, South Africa ranks the highest out of the BRICS countries, with high scores for government cooperation and an environment conducive to policy dialogue. This result also reinforces our research finding that the South African government has remained willing to engage with CSOs, despite the increasing tensions that have marked the relationship between civil society and the ruling African National Congress (ANC) following a rising tide of corruption allegations and increasingly open conflict with parts of the labour movement.

Brazil ranked 2nd of the BRICS, but with low scores in the governance dimension, an assessment that was reflected in our interviewees' comments about the frustration of the hopes for a stronger civil society voice in government decision-making that had been raised by the arrival in power of the social movement-supported Workers' Party (PT) in 2003. Since the EEI was released, a highly polarised election, the onset of recession and a series of corruption scandals have further reinforced this deterioration from the high point in government-civil society relations that Brazil reached a decade ago.

India's surprisingly low ranking derives mainly from its unfavourable socioeconomic context (above all its high levels of gender and economic inequality and widespread lack of access to communications infrastructure), which had the effect of dragging down the country's overall score despite positive assessments for the governance and sociocultural dimensions of its enabling environment. Since the EEI data were collected before the arrival in power of the Modi government, it does not reflect the perceived recent deterioration of the legal environment for civil society, which is discussed below.

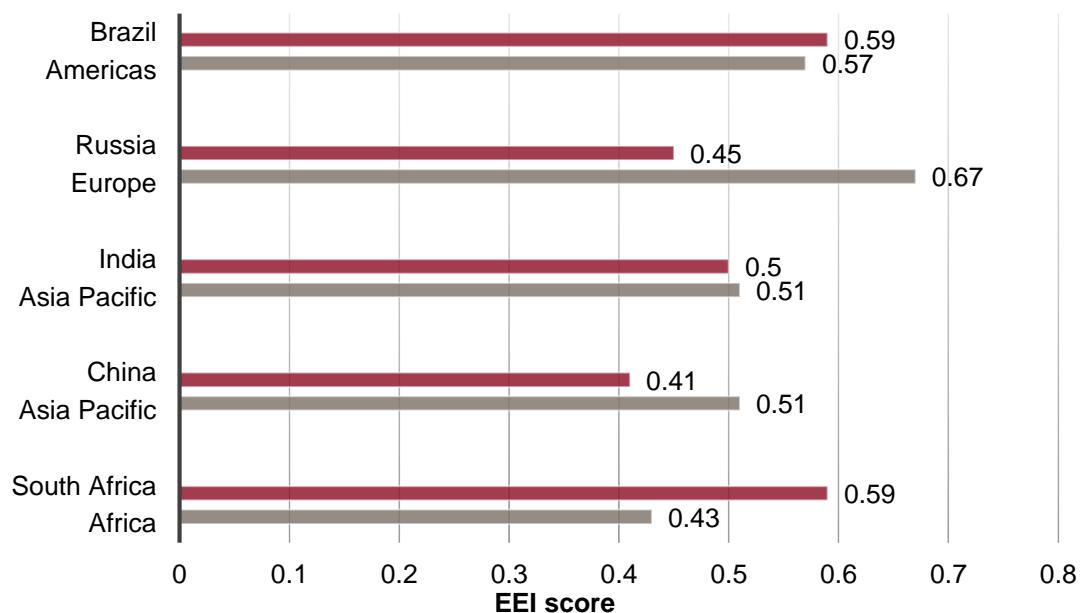
Russia and China both scored fairly well for their socioeconomic environment for civil society, but very poorly for their governance contexts. Furthermore, China also scored highly in the sociocultural dimension, which suggests there is significant potential for civic action and organised civil society in China, although it is currently limited by legal restrictions. This is borne out in the international development arena by an increase in fundraising by Chinese NGOs from the general public, most recently to support humanitarian response to the Ebola crisis, but also notably to support emergency responses after the Nepal earthquake (Bannister 2015).

Figure 2.1 Enabling Environment Index scores for the BRICS countries and global average



Source: Authors' elaboration, based on data from CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation (2013).

Figure 2.2 Enabling Environment Index scores for the BRICS countries and regional average



Source: Authors' elaboration, based on data from CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation (2013).

Taking the Governance dimension of the EEI in isolation, the differences in scores between the IBSA countries on the one hand and China and Russia on the other would seem to justify distinguishing the former countries from their fellow BRICS and labelling them as ‘Democratic Emerging Powers’ or DEPs (Jenkins and Mawdsley 2013). This distinction is often made by civil society and government actors alike from the IBSA countries. Despite these proclaimed and perceived differences, however, the BRICS share common characteristics that make their domestic policy contexts challenging environments for CSOs seeking to engage in debates around international development cooperation, and this is the case even in the IBSA countries.

The first of these characteristics is a belief in a strong (developmental) state that is endowed not only with superior financial and technical resources for promoting national development but also with a certain moral superiority. This moral superiority derives from a mix of the political legitimacy of state elites as representatives of the interests of the people (whether or not they are formally elected to represent these interests) with a more generalised sense of entitlement to rule, sometimes combined with a specific claim to have restored the country’s greatness or with a revolutionary or otherwise transformative narrative attached to the ruling party. This makes it hard for CSOs’ own legitimacy claims to gain purchase, and inclines elites towards the view that while civil society organisations may have a place in delivering state-conceived policy initiatives, they should not go beyond this in seeking to shape such initiatives or propose their own. As we discuss below, this conflicts with CSOs’ own view that they are in effect the co-authors if not the originators of many successful policies recently adopted in the BRICS. It also predisposes the BRICS to privilege government interlocutors for their international cooperation activities, both insisting on the principle of sovereignty vested in governments as a key pillar of cooperation and showing much less willingness than their Northern donor counterparts to direct their resources to CSOs within partner countries.⁵

The second characteristic is a strong nationalistic tendency in which growing assertiveness is mixed with historically rooted anti-colonialism, making life particularly difficult for CSOs who are aligned with and/or funded by transnational actors based in the Northern ‘traditional donor’ countries. As Tandon and Bandyopadhyay note, ‘for some BRICS States there may be a lurking doubt that civil societies, and particularly the CSOs, are a western invention and not to be trusted/relied upon’ (2013: 14). This has contributed to the development of an increasingly restrictive legal framework, a tendency which is most marked in the more authoritarian contexts but is also increasingly evident in the so-called ‘Democratic Emerging Powers’.

2.2 The legal environment

There is growing concern over the increasing restrictions that civil society now faces in many countries, after a period when the trend seemed to be running towards greater political liberalisation (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014; *The Economist* 2014a; CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness 2013; United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association 2013). Anecdotal civil society reports raising this concern are increasingly supported by comprehensive research studies and echoed in statements by high-profile political figures. The Task Team on Civil Society Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment (2014) found a mounting body of evidence of increasing restrictions on CSOs’ access to foreign and domestic sources of finance and on the right to peaceful assembly. In 2013 the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) recorded that more than 50 restrictive laws had been passed or proposed worldwide that would restrict the formation, operation and funding of CSOs, as well as the right to peaceful assembly (ICNL 2013). In 2015, China began consultations on a new ‘Overseas NGO Management Law’, which raised concern that it would have a restrictive effect on national as

⁵ We are indebted to Emma Mawdsley for this observation.

well as international NGOs operating in China (Bannister 2015). Such restrictions have drawn expressions of concern both from global campaigners for human rights and from representatives of established powers with a vested interest in challenging the legitimacy of the BRICS countries. At the UN Special Meeting on the Post-2015 Agenda, for example, President Obama stated that the world was witnessing

a growing number of countries that are passing laws designed specifically to stifle civil society. They're forcing groups to register with governments, eroding human rights protections, restricting NGOs from accessing foreign funding, cracking down on communications technologies that connect civil society groups around the globe. In more extreme cases, activists and journalists have been arrested on false charges, and some have been killed. We're also seeing new and fragile democracies cracking down on civil society, which...sets them back and sends a dangerous signal to other countries.

(White House 2013: para. 9)

The UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, Maina Kiai, has highlighted the restrictions on an organisation's ability to access financial resources as a violation of the right to freedom of association. In his annual report to the Human Rights Council in April 2013, Maina Kiai specifically noted the restrictions introduced in Russia, which in November 2012 began implementing a law requiring NGOs receiving foreign funding and conducting 'political' activities to register as 'foreign agents'. Government officers began making unannounced inspections of over 2,000 NGOs in search of 'foreign agents'. During these inspections, officials demanded a wide variety of information, from staff lists to tax records. The first conviction under the new law came in April 2013 against Golos, an election-monitoring organisation. Foreign NGOs, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group, were similarly subject to spontaneous inspections despite falling outside the purview of the 2012 law. The arrest of 30 Greenpeace activists in the Arctic in 2013 was widely seen as exemplifying this new and harder line on internationally linked CSO activity. After Russia expelled the US Agency for International Development (USAID) from the country in October 2012, accusing it of meddling in politics, Russian NGOs accused of implementing 'political' or other activities considered to constitute threats to the interests of the Russian Federation were prohibited from receiving any US funding (ICNL 2013).

In India, there have been recent moves by the government to increase the restrictions on CSOs that receive funding from international organisations. A report by the Intelligence Bureau, India's internal intelligence agency, accusing several NGOs of stalling major infrastructure projects, was leaked in May 2014. The report accused 'foreign-funded' NGOs of 'anti-development activities' and 'serving as tools for foreign policy interests of western governments'. Organisations and individuals working on environmental, land rights or anti-nuclear issues were specifically mentioned in the report as using 'people-centric issues to create an environment which lends itself to stalling development projects'. The report claimed that India's annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate fell by 2 to 3 per cent because of civil society campaigns between 2011 and 2013 (Mashru 2014). While this type of accusation and the targeting of environmental CSOs in India are not new,⁶ several civil society figures expressed concerns that the timing of the leaked report, just days after Narendra Modi became prime minister, suggested that new tougher restrictions would be introduced by the government. After a clampdown on funding transfers that specifically targeted Greenpeace, Kumi Naidoo, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Greenpeace, claimed that 'we are part of a broader community of civil society in India and so recognise that the attacks on Greenpeace are not just attacks against Greenpeace' (Chilkoti 2014). Interviewees cited examples since the

⁶ In 2012 NGOs funded by the US and by Scandinavian countries were accused of fuelling protests against the Kudankulam nuclear project in Tamil Nadu (see www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-17150953).

leaked report of several other CSOs, researchers and academics who had had their bank accounts frozen and of international NGO staff being denied visas to enter India, as well as of Indian activists being prevented from travelling to the UK.

2.3 Civil society and domestic development innovations

Although they affect CSOs' freedom of manoeuvre for engaging in debates on international development cooperation, the principal focus of the restrictions discussed above is not international, but rather civil society engagement in the domestic development policy debates within BRICS countries, particularly in relation to governance, human rights and environmental issues. Tensions in these fields are of course by no means new, and in many cases they contain echoes of past struggles, whether against the military dictatorship in Brazil, the Soviet system in Russia, the suppression of dissent in China, the State of Emergency in India or apartheid in South Africa. These echoes mean that state elites are particularly sensitive to challenge in these fields, either because they identify with the regimes that were targeted by these struggles and fear a repeat of the legitimacy challenges that they represented (in the case of China and Russia) or because they consider that they themselves are the legitimate heirs of these struggles and the custodians of the aspirations for justice that they embodied (in the case of Brazil and South Africa), and cannot thus be criticised in the same terms as the regimes that they helped to end.

However, there are many within civil society across the BRICS countries who argue that amid their concern with proclaiming their own development successes, state elites have ignored the role that CSO-led struggles for human rights and social and environmental justice played in shaping these very successes. Widely trumpeted policy innovations that have been spread through South–South Development Cooperation, such as India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and Brazil's Bolsa Família (literally, 'family stipend') social protection programme, had their roots in civil society campaigns for an end to hunger and poverty and against the corruption that marked governments' existing anti-poverty initiatives. As the Brazil State of the Debate report put it, 'many public policies which are shared by the Brazilian government with other developing countries are seen as the result of social dynamics and political struggles that had civil society as a key player' (Costa Leite *et al.* 2014: 63–4).

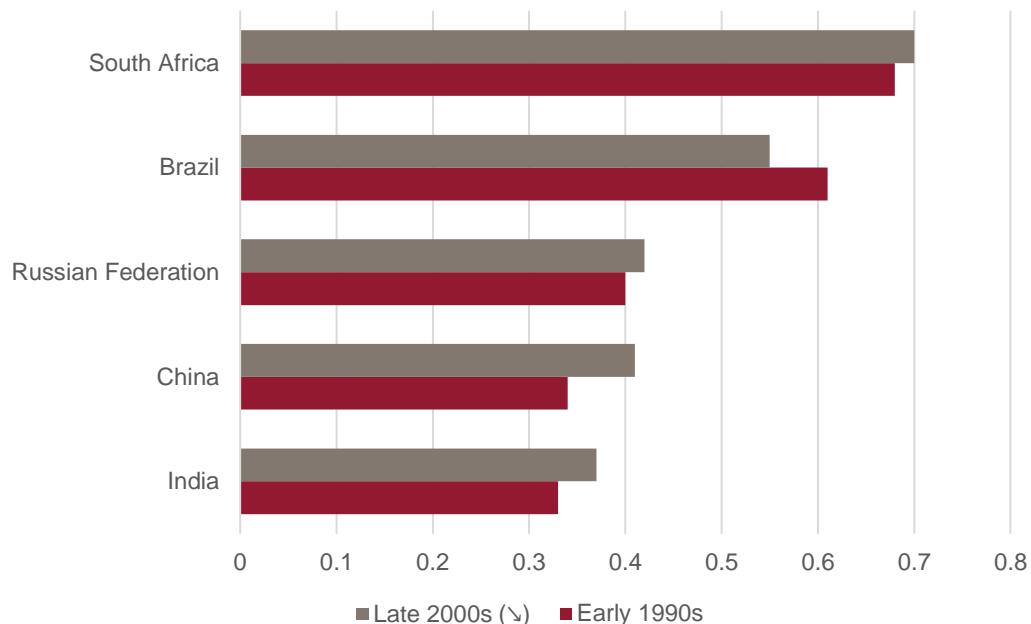
In addition to campaigning, CSOs from the BRICS have also accumulated long experience in implementing development projects in their home countries. This has enabled them to develop innovative 'social technologies' at the local level, as was highlighted by a major Indian civil society workshop on development cooperation which concluded that 'it is important to acknowledge civil society contribution in innovation and applications of development methodologies particularly in the context of local diversities' (PRIA 2013: 6). This experience has also enabled them to aggregate local experiences into broader alternative approaches to development, which many CSOs are arguing should have a more central role in shaping SSDC. Costa Leite *et al.* argue, for example, that 'Brazilian civil society has developed experience and knowledge that supports the pursuit of alternative development paradigms, which is not being adequately incorporated into the portfolio of official cooperation' (2014).

The spur for these innovations has often been social and political contestation of the inequality that is a marked feature of all the BRICS. As Scerri, Soares and Maharajh have argued, 'inequality is a peculiar trait of these countries comprising a key factor for understanding both the configuration and the dynamic of the national innovation systems of BRICS' (2014: 7).

The same authors show that in the years that saw the BRICS' rise (or return) to global prominence and a dramatic reduction in their average poverty levels, inequality intensified

across the five countries – with the single notable exception of Brazil. However, even Brazil's dramatic success in reducing inequality now seems to be faltering in the face of economic and political challenges. Since the decline started from an extremely high base level, inequality in Brazil even now remains higher than any other BRICS country except South Africa, and there is mounting evidence that income inequality in Brazil has stopped falling, while wealth inequality in the country may actually be growing (Krozer 2015).

Figure 2.3 Change in inequality levels, early 1990s versus late 2000s (Gini coefficient of household income)



Source: Adapted from Scerri *et al.* (2014: 8).

CSOs have made a distinctive contribution to the dynamics that have given the BRICS and other middle-income 'rising powers' their unique combination of global influence, high inequality and high innovation capacity (Shankland and Constantine 2014a). This contribution has been made through alternating and sometimes simultaneous processes of contestation and collaboration with governments and with other actors who are helping to shape development policy and practice in the BRICS, including social movements, businesses and thinktanks.

CSOs from the IBSA countries interviewed during our research complained that their capacity to drive innovative responses to development challenges was being systematically undervalued by governments. However, they acknowledged that there was a continued and in some cases increased willingness on the part of governments to fund NGOs to provide outsourced government services and deliver targeted anti-poverty programmes. India's new government is a case in point; regarded with hostility by many CSOs for its commitment to brushing aside social and environmental justice concerns in pursuit of a development model tailored to suit the interests of 'big capital', it was nonetheless described by interviewees as pragmatic and open to dialogue on the potential for civil society involvement in development initiatives – at least within the framework described by Dagnino as that of 'the neoliberal project, which requires the shrinking of the social responsibilities of the state and their transference to civil society' (2008: 57).

At the same time, Chinese interviewees pointed to an increased willingness on the part of the government to allow them (and in some cases to fund them) to take the lead in experimenting with solutions to development and service delivery challenges at local and provincial level, with Yunnan Province and the city of Shenzhen being cited as examples, as well as the remarkable experiment in participatory budgeting in the city of Chengdu (Cabannes and Zhuang 2014). Domestic and international observers alike have described a proliferation of both informal and legally registered NGOs and a rapidly improving regulatory environment for ‘social organisations’ in China in recent years, despite continued nervousness about the prospect of a resumption in the pattern of periodic crackdowns that has marked the government’s relationship with organisations that lie beyond its direct control (Simon 2011; *The Economist* 2014b; Bannister 2015). At the same time as expressing concern over the tightening of state control exemplified by the ‘Overseas NGO Management Law’ proposed in May 2015, Chinese CSOs recognise the potential for partnering with state actors to achieve their objectives, within what has been called a ‘contested symbiosis’ (Zhang 2015). Even in Russia, a study for the international ‘Civil Society at the Crossroads’ project found that many activists outside Moscow were optimistic about the opening up of spaces for constructive engagement and CSO-led development activities at the local level, even while the clampdown on democracy and human rights movements in the capital continued to intensify (Buxton and Konovalova 2012; cf. Cook *et al.* 2015).

There thus appears to be a pattern whereby state elites across the BRICS are open to and even encouraging of civil society engagement in tackling the challenges of poverty and inequality that continue to affect their countries, at least in part because they are aware of the risks of political instability that arise from these challenges. State elites nevertheless remain determined to set the terms of the engagement and are wary of any challenge to their overall political legitimacy and control over policy processes. The confluence of these factors results in a situation where, as Tandon and Brown put it, ‘political space for civil society voice and action seems to be expanding and contracting simultaneously’ (2013: 790).

This means that after many years of struggle to remain active in broader policy debates beyond the outsourcing role to which neoliberalism sought to consign them, CSOs are now finding themselves pushed back into this role by the BRICS’ state-led development model. The result is that while there is still the potential for innovations to be generated within local civil society-led development initiatives, many opportunities for them to be scaled up into national policy – and fed into international development cooperation – are likely to be lost.

2.4 Funding and sustainability

The increased dependence of CSOs on government funding for tightly circumscribed local development activities is just one of the ways in which the funding environment for national and local civil society organisations in BRICS countries is being markedly affected by geopolitical and economic changes. CSOs interviewed during the study argued that there is a pressing need to consider new, alternative sources of funding, as philanthropic and solidarity-based flows alike are being redirected to poorer countries and traditional donors are reducing, and in some cases ending, bilateral funding to middle-income countries.⁷

While Northern donor aid funding comes with its own limitations and impositions (from overly rigid results measurement approaches to predetermined priority focus areas), it has nevertheless been a key resource for some of the most influential and innovative NGDOs from the BRICS. Over the last decade key NGDOs from India and Brazil have lost much of the

⁷ For example, UK bilateral aid to South Africa and India ended completely in 2015 (see DFID 2013, ‘UK to End Direct Financial Support to South Africa’ and DFID 2012, ‘India: Greening Announces New Development Relationship’). However, aid flows from OECD-DAC member countries to Brazil have actually increased in recent years and remain far greater than the country’s own overseas development cooperation budget (Carlos Milani, pers. comm. 14 May 2015).

access to international NGO or foundation funding that they had used to maintain a degree of autonomy from government or business influences while combining local projects with knowledge generation and policy advocacy (Moilwa *et al.* 2015). South African NGDOs have now begun to be subjected to the same pressures, though the phasing out of bilateral aid to South Africa began more recently, and they continue to some extent to be shielded by their strategic location on the African continent, still the epicentre of activity for the global aid industry.

As outlined above, the policy and political context in the BRICS is problematic for a simple shift from overseas to domestic funding. In a press release after the leak of the Intelligence Bureau memo on restricting access to foreign funding, the CSO platform Voluntary Action Network India (VANI) argued that:

In the last decade the relationship between government and NGOs has changed drastically. NGOs are not seen as the partners in development but rather as subcontractors. They are supposed to bid on fixed projects and deliver the projects without asking questions. The sector which was known for its innovations has become [a] tool for delivering the projects. At the same time, taxation reforms that facilitate domestic generation of funds as CSR [corporate social responsibility] provisions of the Companies Act, have not taken place. Civil society in India is still in the charity mode of philanthropy and has not moved to a mature level of society wherein private donation is motivated by the overall development of [the] country.

(VANI 2014: 2)

While the modes and levels of domestic philanthropy are different within each of the BRICS countries due to a range of historical, cultural, economic and regulatory issues, and there is a lack of research and transparent data on the funds for development assistance and philanthropy within all of these countries, our interviews suggested that they have in common a relative lack of depth and sophistication among domestic philanthropic funders and a marked tendency to prioritise funding for localised social assistance rather than strategic, policy-oriented research and advocacy work. In addition, the slowdown in economic growth affecting most of the BRICS countries is likely to reduce the availability of domestic philanthropic funding. This intensifies the need to generate new, alternative sources of funding, given that despite recent declines a significant proportion of funding for organisations in the BRICS countries working on research and advocacy programmes related to SSDC still comes from foreign donors.

International NGOs with a long-established presence in the BRICS countries, such as Oxfam and ActionAid, are continuing to support strategic research and advocacy work and increasingly seeking to support the strengthening of civil society networks across the BRICS.⁸ However, they have also been establishing ‘nationalised’ branches in these countries that are often seen by national NGDOs as competitors for funding – as well as continuing to suffer accusations of being foreign agents, despite their changed legal status and national staff and leadership.

BRICS-based CSOs interviewed during the research acknowledged that these pressures are contributing to their growing interest in engaging in international development cooperation work as their countries continue to ‘go global’. Some national NGOs are seeking to follow the success of international NGO operations based in the BRICS countries – such as ActionAid and Médecins Sans Frontières in Brazil – in raising funds locally for humanitarian and development work overseas, often using social media and innovative web-based fundraising platforms to connect with the broader public. They are also seeking to strengthen their research profile and access growing national budgets for development-related research.

⁸ See, for example, the Oxfam project on ‘Empowering CSO Networks in the BRICS, Mexico and Indonesia’ (<http://csnbricsam.org>).

Expanding SSDC budgets in particular are seen as a valuable potential source of funds, as well as an opportunity to showcase internationally the development innovations for which CSOs are finding it increasingly hard to advocate domestically. At the same time, there is growing awareness that the transparency, governance, social and environmental justice issues around which CSOs have long mobilised domestically are now appearing in relation to their countries' government and corporate engagements overseas. The ways in which they have started to grapple with these issues are the focus of the next section of this report.

3 Civil society and development cooperation policy in the BRICS countries

Civil society in the BRICS is highly accustomed to the modalities of development assistance, with which it has engaged largely but by no means exclusively from a recipient perspective. As well as receiving assistance from traditional Northern donors for several decades, each of the BRICS countries has a long history of providing development cooperation to regional and political allies, which has sometimes provided CSOs with opportunities for international engagement. As discussed above, CSOs in the BRICS have vast experience of implementing social policies and working closely with development agencies in their domestic contexts, often leading to innovations that have subsequently been spread internationally through South–South Development Cooperation (SSDC) processes. In recent years, concurrent with the growing role of BRICS countries in international cooperation and their increasing flows of overseas investment, the economic and development cooperation policies of these countries have become a more frequent topic of debate within civil society. Capturing the ‘state of the debate’ in civil society in rising power countries on SSDC and engagement with BRICS as a policymaking forum requires capturing a range of different voices; civil society is heterogeneous, representing a wide range of interests, ideologies and sectors in both urban and rural areas, often with little unity or coordination. However, our research suggests that some general trends can be observed.

The first such trend is that despite the increasing interest, debate on SSDC within domestic civil society across most of the BRICS remains embryonic and only a small number of voices are currently steering the debate. Many of the ideas and narratives are still being formed with little documentation or published organisational policy, and lack of access to information on what is often seen as a remote and complex foreign-policy issue remains a significant obstacle to participation by a broader range of CSOs in this debate. India and Brazil in particular have seen policy-oriented NGOs making significant efforts to reach out to social movements and to regional and local CSOs in an attempt to achieve a critical mass of civil society engagement in SSDC policy debates, but thus far with only limited success. A general absence of parliamentary debate and media discussion on SSDC, as well as a shortage of publicly available data, have made it harder to expand their currently limited domestic constituencies for SSDC engagement, although there is some evidence that favourable conditions exist for these constituencies to grow over time as countries like India respond to their new visibility as rising ‘donors’ (Mawdsley 2014).

As a result, both capacity and demand for CSOs in the BRICS to engage outside their countries remain limited. Given that these countries still have high levels of poverty and inequality, the majority of CSOs understandably believe that their primary mission must continue to be engagement on domestic issues. Nevertheless, while in general BRICS NGOs still lack domestic support (and funding) for work on the rights and needs of ‘distant strangers’ in foreign countries when there are still considerable local development challenges, there is also evidence that this is beginning to change. In particular, humanitarian engagements with emergencies beyond their borders can draw wide public support – particularly when these engagements result from natural disasters, as with Russia’s support for earthquake response in Armenia, Brazil’s in Haiti or India’s in Nepal.⁹ Although such interventions tend to be led by government agencies (especially the military), CSOs are often also involved, and in some cases operate autonomously in carrying out humanitarian interventions. The South African NGO Gift of the Givers (discussed below) is a particularly prominent example, but as noted

⁹ We are grateful to Emma Mawdsley for drawing this to our attention.

above Chinese NGOs have also recently started to raise funds directly from the public for humanitarian work overseas, notably in response to the Nepal earthquake and the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

When the focus is on long-term development cooperation rather than emergency response, the most visible organisations engaging with BRICS governments on SSDC and foreign-policy issues are generally not NGOs or social movements but thinktanks.¹⁰ The BRICS summits have often catalysed events that increase civil society dialogue and engagement on SSDC issues, but in the absence of an officially recognised CSO platform, this engagement has tended to function via academic channels, especially as recent years have seen the Academic Forum of the BRICS Summit gradually opening up to allow CSOs to attend. Even after an official ‘Civic BRICS’ platform was established in 2015, as discussed below thinktanks dominated its inaugural meeting ahead of the Russia BRICS Summit. This cemented a process whereby across the BRICS countries – and especially in Russia and China – thinktanks with strong links to government have been emerging as the most important brokers of CSO access to international development policy processes. This, in turn, has made it harder for locally and regionally based CSOs and movements with less experience of operating in elite policy spaces to gain a foothold in debates on international development cooperation – and easier for governments to exclude civil society voices that they find inconvenient.

In addition to the difficulty in bridging gaps between CSOs operating at different levels and with different degrees of familiarity with elite policy processes, civil society engagement on SSDC is ideologically fragmented. Significant divisions are emerging between CSOs and movements whose ideological positions fall into three loose categories: those that regard the BRICS as a ‘sub-imperialist’ group, bent on intensifying the extraction of resources from formerly colonised countries that have not managed to become rising powers as well as from marginalised territories within their own borders; those that regard the BRICS uncritically as a progressive force in geopolitics and a source of opportunities in the global economy; and those that favour pragmatic engagement which maximises their potential to open space internationally for BRICS-based CSOs while minimising the negative social and environmental impacts of their roles overseas. These differing positions have been variously categorised as ‘BRICS from above, BRICS from the middle, and BRICS from below’ (Bond 2015) and as ‘commentators, collaborators and critics’ (Mawdsley and Roychaudhury 2014).

Another common feature across the BRICS countries is that the role played by international NGOs in debates on SSDC is seen as extremely important, while also being highly contested. In our research, national organisations recognised the value of international non-governmental organisation (INGO) expertise, financial support and ability to convene cross-BRICS networking initiatives while simultaneously expressing a certain resentment of their power and influence and wariness of the risks of becoming too dependent on them. As we discuss below, this ambivalence contains echoes of the discord between Northern and Southern organisations that marked previous transnational aid policy processes, such as the ‘Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness’ that preceded the 2011 Busan High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness. It also reflects a sense of frustration among Southern CSOs that the power inequalities between the two groups of actors remain in place despite the broad shift in the historic asymmetries between global North and South symbolised by the rise of the BRICS. National organisations want to take ownership of development policy engagement and establish their role in SSDC, but given the constraints on their domestic enabling environments they remain dependent for funding and even for technical support on international NGOs. The latter in turn are reluctant to leave the scene, both because they

¹⁰ It should be noted, however, that these ‘thinktanks’ tend to be a mix of government agencies and university-linked research institutes; the type of private, policy-oriented research organisation generally described as a ‘thinktank’ in the Northern policy studies literature is the exception rather than the rule in several of the BRICS countries, including Brazil (Carlos Milani, pers. comm. 14 May 2015).

need to assert their continued relevance in the new landscape of international development cooperation and because they believe that they still have valuable expertise to offer their longstanding partners in the BRICS as the latter start to engage with often unfamiliar international policy agendas and processes.

3.1 BRICS public opinion and media debate on development cooperation

As discussed above, one of the key challenges for civil society constituency-building in relation to SSDC is limited media coverage and consequently the low visibility of public debate on development cooperation. The BRICS – like other large and complex countries with their own problems of poverty and inequality – tend to be inward-looking in their debates on development, and this is reflected in a relative scarcity of media debate on their roles in international development cooperation. Even where international engagements have become a focus of political debate, as was the case when sectors of the Brazilian media accused the government of ‘Third Worldism’ after President Lula began to spearhead a major expansion of the country’s presence in Africa, the actual nature and content of development cooperation activities are rarely discussed (Constantine 2012).

Some interviewees suggested that governments have been reluctant to encourage public debate for fear that this could lead to criticism that they were diverting scarce resources away from domestic development challenges. In meetings we observed after Brazil was shaken in 2013 by mass protests that included calls for greater investments in domestic health, education and transport infrastructure, civil society groups accused the government of holding back the publication of the latest official development cooperation report and resisting calls to establish a public forum on development cooperation policy out of fear that the political opposition and right-wing media would exploit them as opportunities to accuse the ruling Workers’ Party of favouring the needs and rights of distant strangers over those of their own protesting citizens. Observers have noted similar concerns in India; as Rani Mullen of the Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research put it, ‘India is unlikely to domestically publicise the fact it feeds nearly 2 million Afghani children on a daily basis when 43 per cent of its own under-five year olds are malnourished.’¹¹

However, such fears are probably overstated, as the existing evidence suggests that public opinion in the BRICS on international development cooperation is underdeveloped rather than hostile, with a low level of awareness of what cooperation currently involves but a generally favourable view of it in principle.¹² The IDS ‘International Public Opinion Monitor’ initiative, which surveyed a large sample of ‘opinion-formers’ across India, Brazil and South Africa in 2013–14, found that support for international development cooperation activities was higher than expected, with a majority or at least a plurality favouring the provision of financial and other forms of support to other developing nations across all three countries. In India, the study found that ‘almost 63 per cent were of the view that India should provide aid to other developing countries, while only 28 per cent considered this not to be appropriate’; the corresponding figures for Brazil were 51 per cent for and 40 per cent against, while in South Africa they were 47 per cent in favour and 45 per cent opposed (Henson 2014a, 2014b, 2014c).

The reasons given for supporting international development cooperation in the survey and among interviews and media commentaries analysed by the State of the Debate report teams varied widely, reflecting a mix of national pride, solidarity and self-interest. Such cooperation was seen as potentially playing a role in regional security and stability and promoting commercial interests, but also as a question of religious and/or political solidarity,

¹¹ Quoted in Brant and Romanes (2013).

¹² For a discussion of this phenomenon in relation to Indian public opinion and development cooperation, see Mawdsley (2014).

as a necessary aspect of playing a larger role in the world and as a reflection of the imperative to help others around the world who are still struggling with the poverty against which people in the BRICS themselves feel that their countries are starting to make headway. However, since the follow-up survey round has not yet been carried out, there is a lack of data on whether these levels of support have remained, or whether they have declined as a result of deteriorating economic conditions in most of the BRICS, which may be leading to greater concern with domestic development needs.

3.2 Spaces for civil society–government dialogue on development cooperation policy in the BRICS countries

The interaction between civil society and BRICS governments on South–South Development Cooperation has been uneven, shaped by differences in the enabling environment across the BRICS countries and by the heterogeneous nature of both civil society structures and government policy architectures. In most countries engagement on issues related to SSDC and foreign policy has been *ad hoc*. Partly this reflects a lack of policy coordination within government itself; for example, in South Africa more than half of the government's departments are involved in international cooperation, while the Brazil State of the Debate study showed how different government agencies were acting largely independently of the Brazilian Cooperation Agency (ABC), which is supposed to coordinate the country's development cooperation activities (Costa Leite *et al.* 2014). The disparate nature of SSDC and its distribution across numerous government departments makes it difficult for civil society to coordinate its participation in debates about SSDC initiatives, as different CSOs may engage with different line ministries or parastatal bodies within their areas of specialisation without realising that others may be discussing similar issues in different policy sectors.

It is evident that political dynamics between government departments, as well as debates about the appropriateness of establishing development cooperation as a policy area in its own right remain a delicate issue in several of the BRICS. This includes China, where the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) have frequently tussled over the control of international development cooperation policy, and Russia, where observers have reported on a ‘tug-of-war between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs over who would have the upper hand in providing both the vision and the infrastructure for Russia’s overseas aid programme’ (Gray 2012).

Greater coordination and the establishment of robust development agencies in the BRICS are seen as providing opportunities for civil society to monitor and engage with the government more effectively on issues related to SSDC, as was the case in Mexico after the creation of the country’s new development cooperation agency, AMEXCID (Poskitt and Shankland 2014: 4). The announcements of the creation of India’s Development Partnerships Administration (DPA) and of the South African Development Partnership Agency (SADPA) were welcomed by civil society, although long delays in effectively establishing these agencies subsequently led civil society interviewees to express frustration at the slow pace of institutionalisation of CSO participation in SSDC policymaking debates.

In Brazil, the president’s announcement of reforms to the Brazilian Cooperation Agency in May 2013 was welcomed as an opportunity for engagement, though CSOs also expressed concern at the apparent focus on strengthening links between aid and trade, and the reforms were subsequently shelved (Costa Leite *et al.* 2014). Although individual government departments and policy fora such as the National Food and Nutrition Security Council (CONSEA) have provided opportunities for more strategic dialogue in certain sectors, and the Ministry of External Affairs did run a series of ‘Foreign Policy Dialogues’ in 2014, Brazilian CSOs criticise the lack of a permanent official space in which overarching policies and practices related to SSDC are discussed, linking this to a general reluctance to treat

foreign policy as a ‘normal’ policy area that should be subject to public debate on a regular basis (Milani and Pinheiro 2013).

By contrast, the Forum for Indian Development Cooperation (FIDC) is an example of a more systemic and inclusive process to promote debate on Indian development cooperation policy. FIDC is a multi-stakeholder body that is made up of government departments, research institutions and CSOs. Launched in 2013, it is a forum where some CSOs have been able to participate in debates about the trends, challenges and opportunities of SSDC. It has also commissioned studies of CSO engagement in development cooperation, and its willingness to give visibility to civil society experience was welcomed by interviewees, though some also expressed frustration with the increasing centralisation of FIDC’s agenda in the hands of its host organisation Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), a thinktank affiliated with the Ministry of External Affairs. FIDC has played an increasingly central role in development cooperation debates in India, and in this context it is significant that its special publication marking the 2015 India-Africa Summit highlighted examples of development cooperation involving CSOs (Arora and Chand 2015).

Alongside more regularised fora such as FIDC, there is also evidence of an increased willingness to engage with civil society on an *ad hoc* basis when BRICS countries are hosting major international events or involved in multilateral negotiations for which they need to prepare positions that have broad-based domestic support. In some countries – including South Africa and Brazil – the ‘*sherpas*’ (senior officials responsible for preparing summit meetings) have shown considerable openness to dialogue with CSOs ahead of major policy moments such as the BRICS summits (Poskitt *et al.* 2015). While noting the lack of an institutionalised dialogue forum, one South African civil society interviewee emphasised that the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) ‘has accepted every request to meet with civil society’.

In general, even where specific agencies have been established outside ministries of foreign affairs, the policy elite still tends to regard development cooperation as a domain of foreign policy, which civil society does not have a strong tradition of influencing in any of the BRICS countries. Foreign policy is seen as bound up with strategic issues of national security and geopolitical positioning that have traditionally been closed to civil society engagement, even in countries like Brazil that have a rich history of dialogue in other policy sectors (Milani and Pinheiro 2013). Some interviewees argued that this had worked against Brazilian civil society’s efforts to secure government commitment to establish a permanent forum on development cooperation policy. When the large coalition of NGOs and academic institutions assembled for this purpose opted to campaign for the establishment of a Foreign Policy Council rather than one more narrowly focused on development cooperation, the result was to encourage the conservative establishment of the Itaramaty (Brazil’s foreign office) to dig in its heels, although after intensive lobbying by academics and CSO leaders linked to the Workers’ Party the government did commit itself to establishing the Council.

3.3 Who speaks for civil society in the BRICS countries?

Even when an officially recognised permanent space for policy engagement is established, CSOs must still grapple with issues of power, voice and representation. Several interviewees commented that the space that exists to discuss and contribute to foreign policy and SSDC debates across all the BRICS is dominated by elite groups in civil society. Meetings with government officials and *sherpas*, events organised at the BRICS summits, and attendance at international conferences such as those held around the BRICS Summit or G20, have primarily been restricted to international NGOs, thinktanks, academics and small elite organisations that usually receive foreign funding. National and community-based organisations are often absent from these debates and arenas. In India, for example, the dominant role of a small elite group of organisations in analysing and influencing India’s

foreign policy led leading civil society figure Rajesh Tandon to speak of a ‘vacuum of intellectual engagement in foreign policy within civil society in India’ (PRIA 2013: 3). Similarly, a South African civil society actor has stated that ‘when it comes to foreign policy and international relations, these discussions seem to be the domain of an elite group of thinktanks, experts, international NGOs and representatives from business forums’ (Pressend 2013). While there was much criticism among our interviewees of the self-serving nature of this control of the agenda by a narrow elite, there was also recognition that most CSOs in the BRICS countries lack the basic level of familiarity with the policy debates in this field that would enable them to participate fully.

Some established CSOs have sought to remedy this situation, including Rajesh Tandon’s own organisation, PRIA, which has led a series of outreach workshops with local and regional CSOs around India in an effort to broaden the development cooperation debate beyond the capital. Brazilian CSOs committed to a similar outreach process ahead of the country’s hosting of the BRICS Summit in 2014, and although a lack of both funds and coordination limited the impact of this process it has since given rise to initiatives such as the online Observatory of Brazil in the South, which provides both basic information and sophisticated analysis to a growing base of interested CSOs.¹³ Brazil has also seen increasing civil society interest in the debates promoted since 2012 by the ‘International Relations Reflection Group’ (GR-RI), a discussion forum bringing together influential thinkers from across the internationalist Brazilian Left (including independents and members of the Communist and Socialist parties as well as of the ruling Workers’ Party) which is defined by one of its founders as ‘an informal group that gathers progressive and left-wing intellectuals, political activists, civil society movements and political party representatives, besides some civil servants (as individuals) from the presidency and federal ministries, including Itamaraty’;¹⁴ although the GR-RI remains a fairly exclusive grouping, its membership has grown in recent years. South Africa has seen an attempt to establish a more institutionalised civil society-led platform, in a process that began when, in response to the lack of debate within society about South Africa’s role internationally, a group of CSOs established the South African Forum for International Solidarity (SAFIS) in 2011 (see Box 3.1).

¹³ See <http://obs.org.br>.

¹⁴ Carlos Milani, pers. comm. 14 May 2015.

Box 3.1 The South African Forum for International Solidarity (SAFIS)

SAFIS is a civil society network established in 2011 seeking to influence the debate and policymaking mechanisms in Pretoria. The group of civil society organisations and activists was formed amid much excitement and momentum, with one of the greatest strengths of this group being its diversity as it is made up of international NGOs, local groups, the trade union confederation COSATU and other networks. The group committed to a set of principles and aspirations, stating that:

- ‘We believe in and commit ourselves to the creation of a new, democratic and just world order where equality of nations and people, freedom from poverty and hunger, environmental justice and solidarity are the principal interests driving international relations.
- We respect and support human rights, including the right to self-determination, and commit ourselves to standing in solidarity against all forms of oppression, occupation and injustice, wherever these occur.
- We call for the prioritisation, in the struggle to resolve global affairs, of the crises faced by people of the global South, who are disproportionately victims of environmental devastation and injustice.
- We call for a progressive, democratic and pro-poor foreign policy, informed by a holistic definition of national interest that is not confined to narrow commercial or class interests. Only such a foreign policy allows us to celebrate our inter-connectedness with all of humanity, and to discharge our responsibilities as global citizens in South Africa’ (SAFIS 2013).

An interesting characteristic of SAFIS is that it is largely a locally driven initiative, established by South African organisations that recognised the need for civil society to have a more coordinated and effective impact on the government’s foreign policy. The coalition is a loose grouping of grass-roots organisations, activists and the South African offices of international organisations. Oxfam largely funded a part-time coordinator of the network during 2012 and 2013, although the initiative is not registered and remains informal. Members are keen to keep the group ‘light’ and expressed a strong sentiment that the group must come together in a genuine way. As summarised in the SAFIS ‘Declaration on International Solidarity and People’s Co-operation’, the group’s aims include:

- ‘We will come together as a forum to consider key political, social and economic issues and, wherever practicable, will seek to address these in a collective voice and through concrete proposals to address injustice, oppression and developmental needs of people.
- We will express solidarity – including through mass mobilisation and mass action – with those social classes, communities and people who face oppression or injustice, irrespective of national boundaries, including non-nationals within South Africa who continue to endure daily and often grave violations of their human rights.
- We will critically engage with the South African government’s foreign policy, particularly with regard to its role in the monitoring of, and accountability for, human rights violations through all bilateral and multilateral fora and mechanisms, with the goal of seeking to guide and shape policy processes and outcomes, in line with the principles and values articulated in this declaration.’ (*ibid.*)

Since the network launched in November 2011 it has organised a series of debates on issues such as migration and security, but there has not been as much progress as hoped in systematically engaging with and influencing government policy. The group has struggled with the challenge of implementing its well-crafted principles and workplan in order to keep the initial momentum and meet expectations. At the moment, it appears that members of the network do not prioritise joint initiatives, but rather favour pursuing their own organisational goals. Whether SAFIS can be an effective platform that has a role shaping South Africa’s foreign policy in the way its founders hoped it would remain to be seen.

Source: Authors’ elaboration.

4 Civil society from the BRICS and development cooperation practice

In addition to policy debate, CSOs from the BRICS countries have also been engaging in development cooperation practice, both through their own civil society-led initiatives and as outsourced service providers for government and corporate actors. A 2013 report commissioned by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) China acknowledged the fragmentary nature of most current civil society engagement in SSDC, but concluded by highlighting the opportunities for greater collaboration with CSOs to strengthen rising power governments' own South–South cooperation practice:

Despite its challenges, government collaboration with CSOs in the context of SSC can be highly enriching. CSOs bring a wealth of diverse development experience that can be an invaluable resource for broadening and deepening the reach of SSC in partner countries. CSOs can implement on-the-ground aspects of development cooperation particularly well – for example, in humanitarian assistance, in working directly with poor people in the social sectors, or in strengthening practices and accountability for development cooperation efforts. Including CSOs in development cooperation creates domestic awareness of global issues, and engages important domestic constituencies in concrete expressions of global solidarity.

(Tomlinson 2013: 13)

Some BRICS country governments have created funding windows that CSOs can access for international development cooperation work, with the best-known example being India's longstanding ITEC (Indian Technical & Economic Cooperation) programme (Chaturvedi *et al.* 2014). China has also shown increasing interest in channelling international cooperation funds through CSOs, though limited progress has been made and even GONGOs such as the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation tend to rely on international NGO or domestic corporate funding, increasingly complemented by direct public fundraising (see Box 4.1 overleaf¹⁵). South Africa has long made extensive use of CSOs in humanitarian and post-conflict work in other countries in Africa, and Brazil has begun to do the same through its large-scale programme of support to Haiti (Costa Leite *et al.* 2014).

¹⁵ We are indebted to Zhou Taidong for contributing the information for this box.

Box 4.1 The China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA)

CFPA, founded in 1989 and affiliated with the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development, is a non-governmental organisation that for a long time focused its work on poverty alleviation, health, education, microfinance, rural development and emergency relief exclusively within China. CFPA started to engage in international humanitarian assistance in 2005 and in 2009 established an International Development Department with five full-time staff to be responsible solely for international development cooperation.

The roles of CFPA in international development include three dimensions:

- **Providing humanitarian assistance:** Since 2005, CFPA has responded to tsunami-related disasters in Indonesia, Hurricane Katrina in the US, the Pakistan earthquake, typhoon damage in Burma, earthquakes in Chile and Haiti, the combined earthquake and tsunami in Japan and drought in the Horn of Africa. In its response to the April 2015 Nepal earthquake, CFPA sent an emergency humanitarian team of 61 members to conduct rescues and raised more than US\$1.5 million in China within five days after the occurrence of the disaster.
- **Implementing international community development projects:** CFPA has operated international aid projects in 12 countries. Examples include strengthening maternal and child health care in Sudan through constructing and operating the Sudan–China Abuausher Friendship Hospital, improving nutrition and hunger relief through school feeding in less-developed African countries and in Cambodia (the Smiling Children Project), building the poverty alleviation capacity of Sudanese NGOs, and providing scholarships and exchange opportunities for Myanmar university students (the Paukphaw Scholarship Project).
- **Conducting public advocacy:** Starting from 2013, CFPA has also been actively engaging in public advocacy on China's foreign aid and on the corporate social responsibilities of Chinese enterprises, seeking to increase public awareness and influence policy reform. Working with a range of different partners including international and Chinese NGOs, businesses, thinktanks and the media, CFPA has convened seminars and conferences, published books on China's foreign aid and the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs, and organised field visits by a group of journalists to African and Southeast Asian countries to investigate China's investment and aid in these regions and publish reports. In March 2015 CFPA, working together with other NGOs, thinktanks and the media, released the 'China Foreign Aid Reform Initiative', calling for the Chinese government to change the traditional ways of providing aid and enable Chinese NGOs to play a larger role in it, or in its words, to transit from the 'G2G' (government to government) to 'G2G+P2P' (government to government plus people to people) approaches, in order to meet the local needs of the recipient countries better and to improve aid effectiveness and efficiency.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on material prepared by Zhou Taidong.

In addition to operating as outsourced implementing agencies for government-led SSDC programmes, there are a small but increasing number of civil society organisations and social movements in the BRICS that have taken the lead in providing SSDC beyond their borders through CSO-led processes. Although the existing evidence base on the scope and results of these initiatives is very limited, as reporting is patchy and there are few robust evaluations, recent research has highlighted how CSOs have been responsible for some of the most innovative SSDC initiatives in a range of sectors (Poskitt and Shankland 2014; Bandyopadhyay and Tandon 2016).

CSOs from middle-income countries like India, Brazil and South Africa often have experience of collaborating with organisations from other parts of the global South which began long before their countries became 'rising powers'. These collaborations are usually based on values of solidarity among communities facing similar problems in different

countries, and often developed out of initial links facilitated by faith-based organisations or international NGOs (*ibid.*). As the overseas role of the rising powers grows, such collaborations provide an important foundation for joint civil society campaigns linking BRICS-based CSOs with counterparts in Africa, where debate on the opportunities and risks of engagement with the BRICS for their countries' development is increasing among civil society actors (Vaes and Huyse 2013).

Such solidarity-based linkages often form part of what Brigagão and Seabra (2009), discussing the Brazilian case, call 'civic diplomacy'. While such linkages are often rooted in political solidarity, for example among peasant movements affiliated with the transnational Vía Campesina ('the peasants' way') movement (Chichava *et al.* 2013), they may also have a religious dimension. This was evidenced in the role of the Catholic Church in promoting linkages with Haiti among Brazilian as well as Mexican CSOs (Costa Leite *et al.* 2014; Gómez Bruera 2014). It is also the case for the high-profile South African humanitarian organisation Gift of the Givers, which has its roots in Islamic traditions of charitable giving (Box 4.2).

Box 4.2 Humanitarian assistance from a South African NGO

Gift of the Givers Foundation is a South African Muslim organisation established in 1992 that operates in several countries in southern Africa, but also has active projects in Yemen, Syria and Pakistan. Claiming to be the 'largest disaster response NGO of African origin on the African continent' with projects in 41 countries, Gift of the Givers has worked in partnership with the South African government, including working alongside the South African Defence Force to assist flood-affected Mozambique in 2013. The organisation is funded primarily by alms-giving based on the Islamic *zakat* system from South African Muslims and several South African businesses, although there is very little transparent information about its income and project budgets on the organisation's website. Most of the organisation's recent projects involve providing medical equipment and supplies to disaster-affected communities.

In 2014 the organisation gained significant media coverage for coordinating negotiations with the kidnappers of two South African Christian missionaries living in Yemen. Imtiaz Sooliman, director of Gift of the Givers, claimed that he was contacted by the Yemeni group that had captured the South Africans in January 2014 after the South African government had refused to pay the kidnappers a ransom. Throughout 2014, Gift of the Givers attempted to mediate the release of the hostage Pierre Korkie with the kidnappers, widely understood to be a group affiliated with al-Qaeda. Gift of the Givers coordinated an international campaign for the release of the hostage and claimed that they had used a group of Yemeni tribal leaders to secure agreement on the release of Korkie, just two days before a failed US Special Forces rescue mission in which Korkie was killed.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

5 Civil society from the BRICS and global development cooperation policy processes

To date, CSOs from the BRICS countries have largely been included in the aid effectiveness debates that have dominated global development cooperation policy from the perspective of aid recipients. This has generated some tensions within existing transnational CSO networks over participation and representation of national and local organisations. At the same time, BRICS-based CSOs have been faced with the challenge of engaging with the rise of the BRICS Summit process as a key site for development cooperation policy, especially following the announcement that the bloc was planning to create its own development bank.

5.1 Civil society from the BRICS in the era of aid effectiveness

After engaging on aid effectiveness issues for several decades, civil society was officially recognised as an equal partner in development effectiveness debates at the Fourth High Level Forum (HLF) in Busan in 2011. This recognition was formalised in the establishment after Busan of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC), which claims to follow ‘an inclusive multi-stakeholder approach with its broad representation and inclusive participation of varied development actors and countries in a way that surpasses the often-seen approach of mere issue-based consultation and outreach’ (Task Team on Civil Society Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment 2014: 5).

Following the Busan HLF, the two main civil society groups that were engaging with the development effectiveness process, the Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness and the Better Aid coalition, merged to create the Civil Society Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) in 2013. In a statement at the time, Antonio Tujan, the CPDE co-chair, stated that ‘the creation of CPDE is the consolidation of what we have built over more than seven years, from Paris up to now, concerning CSO involvement in development effectiveness... the CPDE platform will coordinate CSOs and ensure they work together in a harmonised way, in the North and South’.

While some interviewees celebrated this consolidation of the position of civil society within the GPEDC, others were sceptical about the ability of CPDE to represent the diverse concerns and differing priorities of civil society. One civil society representative who was involved in CPDE’s work for the GPEDC First High Level Meeting in Mexico City in April 2014 stated that ‘the major advantage for civil society is that CPDE are now inside the negotiations [but] the challenge for CPDE is now speaking with one voice as there is a vast structure underneath one person on the steering committee... the regional grouping and working groups can be useful to draw on information and strengthen the legitimacy of positions that the platform will take on an issue.’ These debates intensified after the Mexico City HLF, with BRICS-based CSOs continuing to question the representativeness and effectiveness of the CPDE (especially as its Working Group on SSC has been slow to gain momentum), against the backdrop of a broader process among rising powers of challenging the GPEDC’s legitimacy as a policy forum (Shankland and Constantine 2014b).

5.2 Civil society from the BRICS and global aid transparency and accountability debates

Since Busan there have been notable efforts from CSOs and some donors to improve aid transparency and monitor accountability to aid commitments. Several of the voluntary commitments in the Annex of Busan’s Communiqué related to transparency and reporting

and are now being implemented, as evidenced by the increasing number of international organisations and institutions publishing data to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) Standard and the 69 governments (including South Africa and Brazil) that are now participating in the Open Government Partnership. Numerous multi-stakeholder initiatives are gaining credibility, using research- and partnership-based models, with the Aid Transparency Tracker and the Aid Transparency Index, developed by Publish What You Fund, gaining increasing attention. These initiatives have also sought to extend their coverage to the development cooperation activities of the Rising Powers; for example, the China section of AidData.org aims to be a comprehensive online platform publishing information about Chinese development finance flows to Africa.¹⁶

The progress in aid and data transparency in recent years is applauded by many international CSOs and institutions, but some initiatives are perceived as being more responsive to the changing dynamics in development cooperation than others. The Open Government Partnership is seeking to move away from traditional donor-recipient aid models, to capture and assess the complexities of emerging powers and SSDC financial flows. Brazil and South Africa were among the eight founding governments of the Open Government Partnership (along with Indonesia, Mexico, UK, Norway, the Philippines and the USA) and have both been members of the Steering Committee, which is responsible for guiding the ongoing development and direction of the Partnership.

However, global transparency initiatives are facing several challenges. Firstly, transparency and accountability mechanisms are often perceived by BRICS governments to be a legacy of the traditional Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)-led, donor-recipient development assistance model from which they want to distance themselves. China and India's refusal to send official delegations to the GPEC High-Level Meeting in Mexico in 2014 is a significant indication that the governments do not want to adhere to processes and initiatives that are still identified as Northern-driven.

Secondly, the major transparency initiatives, such as IATI, Publish What You Fund and Open Government Partnership, do not sufficiently capture and assess the complexities of SSDC financial flows. Blurred lines between different forms of development assistance, private investment and trade negotiations make identifying, monitoring, and holding stakeholders accountable particularly difficult for transparency-oriented CSOs. In addition, there is very little transparency on or accountability for the estimated US\$366 million in philanthropic contributions channelled from emerging economies to international causes in developing countries (Hudson Institute 2013: 5).

A combination of sovereignty concerns, ideological objections to the OECD-DAC (Development Assistance Committee) reporting framework and weak domestic demand for transparency have resulted in a lack of systematically available data on SSDC and other development assistance flows. This combination has led, for example, to all the BRICS governments refusing to sign up to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, despite their being among the nations with the most significant natural resources endowments worldwide (Munje 2014).

However, initiatives are now under way within the BRICS themselves to establish a systematic reporting framework that adequately reflects the principles of South–South cooperation, spearheaded by the Network of Southern Think-tanks (NeST), which brings together leading development cooperation research institutes from several of the BRICS countries (Besharati *et al.* 2015). Despite the BRICS' political objections to the GPEC, this initiative was actually launched at the Mexico City High-Level Meeting, signalling an interest in continuing South–North technical dialogue – as long as this is not confused with the

¹⁶ See China.aiddata.org.

intergovernmental negotiations on development goals and processes which the BRICS believe should be confined to UN fora (Shankland and Constantine 2014b). There is also an increasingly dynamic range of civil society-led transparency initiatives within the BRICS countries (see Box 5.1 below).

Box 5.1 Open data initiatives and the data revolution

Beyond the initiatives mentioned above that focus on financial aid data, some actors are looking to create new structures and systems that will better suit the needs and interests of CSOs in rising power countries seeking to monitor development cooperation flows. There have been a burgeoning number of civil society initiatives on broader transparency issues that are seeking to bridge the gap between open data and advocacy, by empowering citizens to understand and use available information to understand how financial flows affect people's lives.

Innovative projects are using open data sources and new technologies to mobilise citizen participation in budget monitoring in many of the BRICS countries. A number of BRICS-based organisations and initiatives are part of the research network Emerging Impacts of Open Data in Developing Countries, including Transparent Chennai in India, the Group on Public Policies for Information Access (GPoPAI) at the University of São Paulo in Brazil, and Open Data in the Governance of South African Higher Education at the University of Cape Town.

While most initiatives are focused on domestic budget monitoring, some network members, including the Brasília-based Institute of Socioeconomic Research (INESC), are also active in international development cooperation debates, so it is likely that the group's work will also end up influencing the approaches taken by BRICS-based CSOs to transparency and accountability issues in SSDC.

The approach of the Open Knowledge network to engaging communities that have access to technology in ways that enable them to hold their governments to account requires little in the way of financial resources and is markedly different from many traditional donor-funded governance projects. 'These initiatives do not want to be considered as development projects', said one civil society interviewee, emphasising that 'they have a business model with a social goal, but do not frame themselves as development projects.'

Source: Authors' elaboration.

5.3 Civil society engagement with the BRICS Summit process

Since its inception with a meeting of the leaders of Brazil, Russia, India and China¹⁷ in Yekaterinburg in 2009, the BRICS Summit process has become an increasingly significant arena for debates on the future of international development policy (Li and Carey 2014). The period during which fieldwork for this study was being carried out coincided with the hosting of summits by the three ‘democratic BRICS’: India in March 2012, South Africa in March 2013 and Brazil in July 2014. This was also a period of some optimism across the BRICS, helped by a generally benign economic context for the countries themselves (if not for the global economy as a whole), though this economic context has since become significantly more adverse. Through their engagements in the IBSA forum, the three countries had indicated a desire to showcase their relatively open and democratic policy processes, and the presence of civil society actors with a strong history of domestic policy engagement, and a growing interest in their countries’ processes of ‘going global’ appeared to provide a promising backdrop for stronger CSO engagement with the BRICS as a multilateral forum. However, these expectations have been frustrated over the three summits, and by the time the summit cycle had moved to Russia in 2015, with the controversial inauguration of an official ‘Civic BRICS’ space within the BRICS Summit programme, CSO interviewees had become much more pessimistic about the prospects for engagement.

When India hosted the BRICS Summit in 2012, Indian CSOs such as PRIA made a concerted effort to stimulate debate on the development implications of greater linkages between the five countries, both for India’s own development trajectory and for other countries. However, this effort was hampered by limited resources and by the low level of information among Indian civil society groups as well as the limited extent of CSO networks operating across all of the BRICS, despite a relatively high degree of Indian government openness to dialogue. When the summit moved to South Africa in 2013, there was optimism that a greater degree of momentum would be achieved, not least because of the rhetoric used by the South African government. For example, the Minister for the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), Maite Nkoana-Mashabane stated that:

BRICS members are still talking about the overall and overarching vision. South Africa believes that we are there at the right time to make a kind of influence and make sure that BRICS doesn’t just focus on big governments, big economies, but also looks at softer issues on how to make sure that ordinary people benefit and can also take ownership of BRICS.

(Quoted in John 2012: 8)

One CSO reported having been told in a closed meeting that DIRCO would support an official BRICS Civil Society Forum, alongside the Academic Forum and Business Forum. However, they were also alerted that this idea would be a problem for other members of BRICS. This was to recur as an argument used by IBSA country governments, resisting pressure from CSOs to establish a more formal BRICS Summit process of dialogue with civil society by stating or implying that China and Russia would oppose any such move – even when it emerged that the IBSA countries themselves were the source of the opposition, which Brazilian interviewees stated was the case with India around the Brazil Summit in 2014.

The Durban BRICS Summit took place against a backdrop of rising alarm among some social movements at the growing economic presence of BRICS countries across Africa, linked to accusations of labour rights violations, environmental damage and ‘land grabs’. This provided an opening for civil society groups who opposed the BRICS as a ‘sub-imperialist’ grouping intent on plundering poorer countries in the South to launch a more critical debate, making visible the divisions within civil society between groups aligned with

¹⁷ South Africa joined the BRIC grouping in 2010, when it was renamed ‘BRICS’.

the different approaches that Bond (2015) has labelled ‘BRICS from above, BRICS from the middle and BRICS from below’.

The Joint Civil Society BRICS Summit (also known as ‘BRICS from below’) took place between 25 and 27 March 2013 at the Diakonia Centre in Durban.¹⁸ This was the first time CSOs from across BRICS countries and beyond had gathered during a BRICS Heads of State Summit and organised a counter-summit. The counter-summit attracted more than 40 organisations including NGOs, grass-roots groups and the media, as well as local and international academic institutions. It reflected the ways in which CSOs had to create informal spaces of engagement with the BRICS while at the same time claiming their right to engage with the BRICS’ governments through formal institutional mechanisms, after finding themselves marginalised from official BRICS meetings and discussions.¹⁹

A booklet published by the event organisers, entitled *A BRICS Reader for the Durban Summit*, introduced the concept of ‘BRICS from below’ in relation to emerging narratives about BRICS. According to Patrick Bond’s introduction to the event, this concept represents a highly critical narrative deriving from ‘a bottom-up civil society network engaged in analysing, watchdogging and representing silenced voices of dissent’. In the discourse of the organisers, the BRICS civil society counter-summit represented the BRICS from below, while the BRICS Heads of State Summit represented the BRICS from above.

This discourse risked projecting an understanding of civil society as a homogenous and democratic space that inevitably represents the interests and voices of those positioned below the more powerful group of heads of state (positioned above), overlooking differences and power relations between CSOs, the convergences and divergences of their interests and agendas as well as their positions and roles in the development industry. However, these differences became quite evident during the counter-summit in the power dynamics between international NGOs (the majority based in Northern donor countries) and CSOs from the BRICS countries themselves as well as from elsewhere in Africa.

While the title of the event – Joint Civil Society Summit – underlined the idea of a combined effort, connection and shared ownership, it also highlights that separation was the starting point, and the need to bring separate groups of actors within civil society together. The separation became evident as the event unfolded, with one group coalescing around the BRICS-from-below event, while the other gathered in a different part of the same building to debate strategies for engaging with the BRICS Bank. While in the BRICS-from-below event there was a clear opposition to BRICS governments and their interventions at home and abroad, in the BRICS development bank event there was a more conciliatory position that, although critical, highlighted the need for dialogue and collaboration among CSOs within BRICS and with BRICS governments. The prominence of Northern NGOs in the event on the Civil Society Democratic Platform for Monitoring the Future BRICS Development Bank reflected the global power relations in North–South divisions and regions, highlighting the uneven geography of global civil society, the complex relationships between ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ activists and organisations, and bringing to the fore issues of legitimacy, representation and voice.

The spatial organisation, the agendas and the types of participants within each event revealed the tensions between local and global struggles, African transnational activism and local and transnational struggles, as well as organisational inequalities and identities.

¹⁸ The Centre is also the headquarters and regional office of well-known South African NGOs such as Black Sash, Family Life Centre and Legal Resources Centre.

¹⁹ This marginalisation was illustrated in the Declaration of the Fifth BRICS Summit (point 42), which while acknowledging the parallel meetings held by the Fifth BRICS Academic Forum, as well as the Third and Fourth BRICS Business Forums, did not mention either the civil society forums or the labour union meetings that occurred in the same period.

These aspects of the Durban process were criticised in subsequent civil society debates, and the criticisms were taken on board by the Brazilian CSOs who inherited the task of hosting civil society mobilisation around the following summit in 2014. In 2013, ahead of the BRICS Summit in Brazil, a group of CSOs and social movements agreed to establish dialogue with government about transparent participation of civil society in the BRICS process. They agreed to write a letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Presidency's General Secretariat demanding the creation of a Civil Society Forum, based on Brazil's social participation rights established by the federal constitution, UN experiences of social participation mechanisms and the government's recent commitment to create a foreign-policy council with civil society participation.

However, before preparations for the Brazil Summit could effectively get under way, the country was hit by a massive wave of protests that convulsed Brazil's largest cities. Among the many issues raised by the protesters, the poor quality of the country's public health and education service provision and the contrast between its creaking urban infrastructure and the gleaming stadia being built at vast expense to host the 2014 FIFA World Cup were especially prominent. The protests led the government to become extremely sensitive about the risk of being perceived as prioritising foreign rather than domestic policy and wasting money on lavish international events.

Brazilian civil society was also paralysed by the protests, as debates raged over the apparent rupture of the connections between elite CSOs such as those who had been leading debates on development cooperation policy and the mainly youth-led grass-roots groups who had come to the fore during the protests. Brazilian CSOs who had been active in the debates around the Durban Summit spent months fruitlessly trying to engage 'the movements' in dialogue around a joint agenda for the summit which Brazil was due to host in the north-eastern city of Fortaleza in July 2014, just after the end of the World Cup. Fortaleza had seen some of the fiercest protests over local infrastructure development, after thousands of residents were evicted or otherwise affected by building works designed to prepare the city for its role as a World Cup venue, and as a result the local movements showed more interest in using the summit to highlight their grievances than in engaging in debates about the future of development cooperation.

Interviewees in Brazil also suggested that the timing of the summit, just three months before a presidential election that many feared would see the ruling Workers' Party (PT) facing a resurgent Right, led many CSOs to back away from engagement with what they thought would inevitably be a confrontational set of mobilisations around the summit. Although vocally critical of many of the PT government's policies, most NGDOs and academics active in Brazil's development cooperation policy debates are party members or sympathisers, and they had no desire to encourage the party's enemies by seeming to side with high-visibility protest movements questioning its record. The powerful Brazilian trade union confederation CUT (a key part of REBRIP, the civil society coalition working on foreign policy and development cooperation) was also reluctant to engage both because of its own links with the PT and because of the prospect that labour unions from across the BRICS would be holding their own meeting in Fortaleza as part of a strategy of securing recognition at the same level already enjoyed by the corporate players of the BRICS Business Council – a strategy for which an alliance with the NGDOs was at best an irrelevance and at worst an inconvenience.

In the event, a common platform was cobbled together with barely a month to go before the summit, when Brazil was already succumbing to World Cup fever. With little time remaining to mobilise resources and communicate with other groups across the BRICS, a network of development-oriented Brazilian CSOs, mostly supported by external donors such as Oxfam, ActionAid, the Ford Foundation and the German political foundations, managed to assemble a reasonably broad-based meeting, which in the words of one participant included 'leaders

from communities affected by mining in South Africa, academics and NGOs from China and India, as well as large international NGOs such as ActionAid' (Garcia 2014: 2).

The meeting did include a more significant engagement of internationally connected social movement organisations – especially those linked to the transnational agrarian movement Vía Campesina and the transnational feminist movement World March of Women – than had been the case in Durban. Some transnational coalitions came together in Fortaleza to engage with a BRICS Summit for the first time, including Sexuality Policy Watch, which launched a project to interrogate the implications for sexuality and human rights of the rise of the BRICS, seeking to establish whether they were more likely to act as a force to 're-articulate the political economy towards justice' or simply to provide a 'South-based road towards new levels of capital accumulation' (Corrêa and khanna 2015: 70). Women's and feminist movement participation in particular was highly visible, benefiting from the incorporation within the civil society event programme of the 'First BRICS Women's Forum'. It was the women's movement that took the lead in organising the only significant street protest seen during the summit, though even that mobilised only around a hundred people: despite all the expectations of mass mobilisation, grass-roots protest around the summit in Fortaleza was virtually non-existent, as it had proved to be during the World Cup once the opening matches had passed.

The Fortaleza meeting repeated some of the tendency of the Durban counter-summit to devolve into a collection of parallel meetings attended by different groups, with little opportunity for cross-group dialogue. Despite a subsequent effort by key CSOs to agree common ground, it did little to move beyond the 'BRICS from above, BRICS from the middle, BRICS from below' differences deliberately highlighted by Patrick Bond and the other organisers of the Durban counter-summit – and also consolidated a perception that the local grass-roots groups identified by Bond as the heart of 'BRICS from below' have failed to engage substantially with the international solidarity agenda. Despite the presence of some international social movement organisations, the Fortaleza counter-summit demonstrated a limited capacity to mobilise grass-roots solidarity, falling far short of successful mass-participation parallel events previously organised by Brazilian CSOs, such as the World Social Forum or the Rio+20 Peoples' Summit.

This failure to secure significant BRICS-from-below momentum was particularly disappointing because the Brazilian NGDOs who favoured constructively critical engagement with the BRICS – 'BRICS from the middle' in Bond's terminology – had opted not to follow a strategy of engagement with the elite policy-influencing strategy of the BRICS-from-above group, exemplified by the thinktanks who had gathered for the BRICS Academic Forum in Rio de Janeiro in March 2014. A civil society meeting initially planned to coincide with the Academic Forum was rescheduled at short notice to the following week – according to one Brazilian civil society informant, at least in part to avoid giving the impression that the NGDOs were too closely aligned with the government-linked research institutes of the BRICS Think Tank Council, which was meeting in parallel with the Academic Forum. As a result, they missed a chance to build the alliances with academia as well as the media that some BRICS civil society thinkers have identified as a strategic opportunity for CSOs, given that 'the civil society-academia-media axis could be a considerable force to generate public debates and discussion on the BRICS policies, programmes and practices' (Tandon and Bandyopadhyay 2013: 18).

Significantly, Russian CSO participation in the Fortaleza civil society events was negligible despite the country's role as host of the next BRICS Summit to take place after Fortaleza. This aggravated the problems of maintaining momentum from one summit to another that were always likely to emerge once the cycle of leaders' meetings moved from the IBSA countries to Russia and China. As preparations for the Russia BRICS Summit got under way, talk of the potential for a BRICS-from-below engagement strategy receded and CSOs'

focus shifted back to options for dealing with a BRICS-from-above approach in which academic institutions were promoted as strategic brokers of civil society engagement. When Russia announced that it would host the first 'Civic BRICS' meeting around its summit in July 2015, it made a mockery of the claims of IBSA policymakers that their failure to establish a formal space for civil society-BRICS engagement had been due to Russian objections. At the same time, it cemented the inclusion of thinktanks in the BRICS definition of 'civil society', operationalising a strategy whereby Russian academic institutions with formal links to government ministries played a similar role in shaping the first Civic BRICS meeting to the one that they had played in shaping the first 'C20' meeting of G20 civil society groups (see Box 5.2).

This has raised fresh challenges for the organisation of a parallel civil society event that can be structured in such a way as to avoid 'surrender to co-optation and political capture by the governments' (Carvalho and Beghin 2015: 2). Other BRICS summits are likely to follow Russia's lead in officially welcoming civil society engagement while seeking to steer it in a way that allows for quite wide-ranging debates on the role of the BRICS as development actors and the implications of their policies for development in their own and other countries that nevertheless remain in the academic arena and do not spill out into the streets. This approach would certainly suit China, the 2017 host, which as noted above is eager to mobilise the capacity of NGOs to provide social energy and innovation for tackling development problems while maintaining control to ensure that such mobilisation does not risk touching on issues of regime legitimacy. It will fall to civil society in the 2016 host country, India, to identify creative strategies for balancing the potential for policy traction afforded by alliances with academia (including via the increasingly influential Forum on Indian Development Cooperation) against the risks of co-optation raised by the Russian experience, and for ensuring that common ground can be found between the contestatory energy of 'BRICS-from-below' mobilisation and the desire for critical engagement of the 'BRICS-from-the-middle' networks within which most of the BRICS-based CSOs active in the development cooperation field are located.

Box 5.2 Civil society participation in Russia's G20 and BRICS summits

The pattern of civil society participation in the Russia 'Civic BRICS' process had to a large extent already been set by the experience of civil society engagement with the Russian G20 presidency in 2013. Civil society has a long history of dialogue and advocacy at the G20, and before that at the G8, but only recently has an official space for dialogue been created. After increasing calls from civil society for officially-recognised participation in the process, the first Civil 20 (C20) took place alongside the G20, B20 (business), L20 (Labour) and Y20 (Youth) during the Russian presidency in 2013. A South African participant described her participation in the Russia event as follows:

I participated in this C20 Summit as a representative of one of four organisations from South Africa... We were all surprised to meet each other in Moscow. This made me think about the lack of coordination at national level and limited spaces to engage on international matters both within civil society and government.

(Quoted in Pressend 2013)

The same observer noted how dominant thinktanks were – the majority of them organically linked to various departments of the Russian government – in steering official civil society engagement with the G20 in Russia. Many of the same thinktanks were subsequently to become dominant players in the Civic BRICS process. One INGO representative interviewed for this study commented that 'the steering committee for the Civic BRICS is made up of organisations and institutions closely linked with the Russian government and we hope this will not deter an active and open debate on the key policy issues we want to influence'. In the event, some of the key Brazilian civil society actors who had been responsible for organising the Fortaleza counter-summit in 2014 decided not to participate in the Civic BRICS in Russia in 2015, on the grounds that it was a 'pseudo space for participation in an authoritarian manner, where the Russian government decided who would participate, what themes would be discussed and the methodology to be adopted' (Carvalho and Beghin 2015).

When Australia came to host the C20 in November 2014, it attempted to secure a more transparent and consistent engagement process than had been apparent at the Russian C20. A steering committee was appointed by the Australian government to organise working groups and coordinate dialogue between policymakers and civil society. This steering committee was made up of 18 individuals who represented large organisations, networks and academic institutions. Ahead of developing policy positions for the G20 Summit, the steering committee hosted a public online consultation to reach CSOs around the world and set up an online crowdsourcing website, C20 Conversations, which enabled some CSOs to contribute to the recommendations. In the more polarised environment of the Turkish presidency in 2015, it proved difficult to maintain the same level of government support and intensity of electronic outreach and inclusive participation seen in Australia; the Turkey C20's international outreach process was slow to get off the ground and highly dependent on Northern-based NGOs such as Oxfam. Nevertheless, according to one BRICS-based observer it eventually succeeded in promoting a 'transparent, inclusive and participatory approach with wide participation of civil society groups from across the G20 nations' (Krishnaswamy 2015: 7). CSOs are now grappling with the challenge of maintaining momentum from the Turkish to the Chinese G20 presidency, just as BRICS civil society groups did when the sequence of BRICS presidencies passed from Brazil to Russia in 2015.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

5.4 Civil society and the BRICS Bank

The one issue that is likely to provide civil society with the purchase it has so far failed to find on the BRICS agenda is the decision by the grouping to establish a major development finance institution, the 'New Development Bank'. The intention to establish the BRICS Bank was mooted at the Delhi Summit in March 2012 and formally announced at the Durban

Summit in March 2013. Initial response to the announcement from civil society was measured and cautious as there was little detail given about the governance and operation of the proposed institution. Public statements were made by some international NGOs, but there was little or no reaction from national CSOs.

More organisations have now engaged, believing that there is an opportunity to influence the process of constructing the New Development Bank.²⁰ There are currently research and advocacy initiatives within a small number of international NGOs and academic institutions that are seeking to establish a global civil society network to monitor the new financial institution, one potential tangible role for CSOs being to strengthen the Bank's accountability and transparency.

So far, a small number of international organisations have produced research or policy positions on what they want the BRICS Bank to look like, and have been seeking strategies to influence the process of establishing it, both at the central level and in its regional offices, the first of which will be located in Johannesburg. Some BRICS-based CSOs are beginning a process of constructively critical engagement, drawing on the experience they have gained in seeking to monitor the activities of their own countries' development banks. Other civil society activists are voicing a strong ideological opposition to the Bank, pointing to the example of existing development banks in the BRICS countries to argue that it will 'exacerbate the human, ecological and economic disasters caused by multilateral financing' (Bond 2013). Once the Bank becomes operational and begins lending to development projects with tangible social, economic and environmental impacts, these debates are likely to gain momentum, and provide a focus around which the fragmented BRICS-from-above, BRICS-from-the-middle and BRICS-from-below networks can converge.

²⁰ This is 'something that did not occur, for example, when the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were created' (Conectas 2013).

6 Conclusions

In this report we have shown how the emerging roles of CSOs from the BRICS in international development cooperation are shaped by history and domestic politics as well as the shifts in the global economic and political landscape. The historical aspects include CSOs' previous experience of engaging with development from the aid recipient standpoint, as well as their roles in transnational solidarity networks and in the often contested processes that gave rise to many of the BRICS' domestic development successes. This continues to colour their perceptions of other key development policy actors, including international NGOs and the aid donor countries of the OECD-DAC.

The domestic politics dimension accounts for many of the aspects of the 'enabling environment' for CSOs in the BRICS countries that create barriers for CSOs to engage effectively in South–South Development Cooperation policy and practice. Despite the apparently stark differences between China and Russia and the three 'IBSA' countries, there is no simple democratic/non-democratic divide in attitudes to civil society among the BRICS, as restrictive legal and regulatory changes inspired by growing suspicion of CSOs as instruments of 'foreign interference' have emerged in India as well as Russia and China, and relations between CSOs and government have become increasingly tense in Brazil and South Africa. Similarly, all the BRICS increasingly share an interest in stimulating CSOs' participation in local service delivery while restricting the scope for them to shape national and international policy. Along with the steep decline in funding from traditional sources, this has compromised CSOs' ability to sustain a strategy of combining grass-roots innovation with broad-based policy engagement.

Another common factor is the increasing pressure that CSOs are experiencing to form alliances with thinktanks and other academic institutions. In some countries (notably India and Brazil), such alliances are helping to open up spaces for CSOs to engage in SSDC policy debates. However, these opportunities have tended to benefit only a small, elite group of organisations, and the agendas of the new spaces tend to be controlled by the thinktanks, who are increasingly being recruited by governments as their preferred brokers for civil society–BRICS engagement. The evidence from existing participation mechanisms, such as the C20, is that states will seek to use strategies of this kind to channel civil society voice into academic spaces that are safely divorced from grass-roots protest, seeking to co-opt rather than to block CSO engagement. This was evident in the 2015 Russia 'Civic BRICS' process that marked the formal acceptance by the BRICS governments that their summits should make provision for a specific civil society space. As a result, divisions have opened up between CSOs who wish to make the most of this opportunity and others who denounce it as crude co-optation.

These divisions, in turn, reflect wider differences of identity, ideology and interest that cut across BRICS civil society. In this report, we have made extensive reference to the 'BRICS from above, BRICS from the middle, BRICS from below' formulation coined by Patrick Bond and colleagues. The majority of the BRICS-based CSOs who are active in development cooperation policy and practice fall firmly into the BRICS-from-the-middle camp, seeking to engage critically but constructively with government and corporate actors from their countries on their roles in international development. They are caught between 'BRICS-from-below' mobilisation that denounces the BRICS as mere sub-imperialists, and 'BRICS-from-above' triumphalism that promotes the grouping as the harbinger of a new, more just and equitable world order.

As the BRICS' economies have stumbled, this triumphalism has begun to fade from their development cooperation efforts, though their determination to lay claim to what they see as their rightful position in the world is clearer than ever, visible in collective efforts such as the New Development Bank as well as in individual initiatives such as Russia's armed interventionism or China's soft-power 'One Belt, One Road' strategy. CSOs are seeing new opportunities to engage with BRICS development cooperation policy and practice open up rapidly, through national SSDC programmes, the BRICS Summit process and now a major development finance institution, the New Development Bank. At the same time, the power asymmetries shaping their scope for influence within these engagements are becoming ever starker.

Strategies will have to be found for navigating these asymmetries if CSOs are to fulfil their potential to infuse BRICS development cooperation with the innovation, energy, solidarity and critical spirit that characterise civil society-led international engagement at its best. For future CSO engagement to be both legitimate and effective, these strategies will need to mobilise new networks that are capable of linking different levels within and across countries and also different ideological positions across civil society. Building these networks will test the adaptive capacity of BRICS CSOs to the full, as they map out a post-2015 development cooperation landscape that is being profoundly reshaped by their countries' new roles in the world.

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