South Africa’s Development Cooperation: Opportunities in the Global Arena

Amanda Lucey
Senior Researcher, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria

Series Editors: Rahul Chandran and Hannah Cooper, UNU Centre for Policy Research
Introduction

South Africa presents an interesting perspective on South-South Cooperation (SSC). It is an actor with significant influence in both African and multilateral groupings, and is both a recipient of development cooperation support and one that provides development cooperation support. Since 2007, a development agency, the South African Development Partnership Agency (SADPA), has been in the process of being established as a mechanism to better coordinate outgoing development assistance. SADPA has been slow to get off the ground; currently the SADPA Bill is waiting to be considered by Parliament and until approved, the agency remains without a director. However, despite this South Africa has been a significant leader in development cooperation in Africa through a number of bilateral/trilateral measures, as well as through financial arrangements, such as the India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) fund. Its trade, investment and financial cooperation is also set to expand through the BRICS New Development Bank and its Africa Regional Centre in South Africa.

This paper first examines the principles and practices that guide South Africa’s development cooperation. It then casts a critical eye on South Africa’s development assistance, identifying how it is different from traditional, OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC)-dominated approaches to development. It then analyses opportunities to complement and build upon these traditional forms of assistance, particularly from a southern perspective, and suggests ways in which the United Nations could engage with South African development assistance. South Africa sees the UN as an institution that requires reform, but one that is nonetheless central to maintaining peace and security. This provides an opportunity for UN engagement. As global partnerships adapt to the increasing influence of new development actors, the UN can play a role in enhancing SSC, but it must be cautious in the role that it plays in order to give space to emerging narratives.

South Africa’s comparative advantage as a development actor

Countries of the global South have considerable comparative advantages to northern donors in finding solutions to southern development challenges, given their similar cultural, political and strategic interests in the global agenda. In particular, southern countries have three concrete areas of added value in relation to the strategy, financing and capacity gaps identified in much current support to peacebuilding: first, they can assist in facilitating peace agreements, peacebuilding priorities, national development plans and international support due to their own relevant thematic experiences. Second, while there has been greater austerity in global funding, some strong southern economies are growing at a faster rate than developed northern countries and are therefore able to at least partially compensate for reduced aid by northern donors. Finally, southern countries can scale up new development cooperation efforts which contribute to capacity needs in developing countries, due to their greater hands-on experience with such issues and similar institutional capacity.

These advantages can be applied to South Africa given its characteristics as a southern country with a relatively strong economy, and a long-term robust interest in the African continent. Much of South Africa’s specific comparative advantage is argued to lie in its ‘proximity’. South Africa plays an important role in shaping and driving key infrastructure projects on the continent, including the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa. ‘Proximity’ extends beyond mere geography, however, and having gone through its own relatively recent – transition to democracy, South Africa is believed to have several strengths: (1) a better understanding of the African context given its own experience of state building; (2) access to a range of multilateral fora that can be used to promote African perspectives within the development community; and (3) the credibility and legitimacy to act as an intermediary between donors and fragile states on the continent.

At the same time, South Africa also suffers from a number of internal challenges, such as limited military capacity, allegations of corruption relating to its previous development cooperation activities and xenophobic attacks, denting its reputation as a peacebuilder. South Africa’s development cooperation, therefore, requires a balancing of international priorities with domestic ones.

The key characteristics of South Africa’s development cooperation

South Africa’s role as a development partner is strongly linked to its worldview and its ultimate aims. As it emerged from its transition in 1994, it sought to develop strategic ties to strengthen its leadership role on the continent, including through multilateral arrangements such as the Group of 77 (G77); Group of 20 (G20); Brazil, Russia, India, China; ...
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na and South Africa (BRICS); and IBSA groupings. However, despite these relationships, the majority of South Africa’s development cooperation, and its intended future engagements through SADPA, focuses on bilateral and trilateral cooperation to enhance African development. This is often as a result of signed agreements and long-standing ties with countries in the region. South Africa’s multilateral engagements are limited, and for instance country contributions to the IBSA Poverty Alleviation Fund have totaled just $1 million each from South Africa, India and Brazil. Funding levels for the IBSA fund are unlikely to change substantively and, despite South African involvement in the creation of the BRICS New Development Bank, multilateral cooperation is unlikely to become a priority for South African development.

South Africa has consistently prioritized Africa for its development cooperation. Despite the criticism that South Africa often acts unilaterally in its cooperation activities, it draws many of its positions from the African Union (AU) and, to an extent, from the Southern African Development Community. In this regard, South Africa has continued to emphasize the need to use African frameworks to enhance peace and security on the continent. However, at present, there has been limited consideration by South Africa of how their bilateral and trilateral activities fit into regional and/or global frameworks.

The South African approach to development has grown out of South Africa’s own experiences; due to its own relatively recent transition to democracy, and its political engagements on the continent, South Africa’s development cooperation activities have often focused on conflict mediation, peacekeeping and peacebuilding. For example, South Africa played an active role in mediation and peace operations in Burundi and Lesotho, and has provided election support to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan. It has also supported capacity development through, for example, the training of government officials in South Sudan and the DRC and through various information sharing exchanges. Other activities have included infrastructure development, assistance with governance-related mechanisms, and economic trade.

In terms of future activities, proposed cooperation drivers for SADPA have included humanitarian support, humanitarian regional capacity development, post-conflict reconstruction and development, micro-grants programmes, good governance and capacity for elections, regional integration, and a regional volunteer programme. South Africa has emphasized the importance of a demand-driven approach which means that it does not specify which countries or regions it aims to engage with. This differs from traditional models of development assistance which have been criticized as being driven by donor priorities.

South Africa also aims to better engage the private sector in its development and peacebuilding activities. This remains an area traditionally under-utilized by development partners, although South Africa has increasingly taken a more aggressive stance on economic diplomacy, described in the South African context as “policies that promote trade, FDI [foreign direct investment], tourism, and technology transfers to South Africa, and positively position the country in the world through imaging, branding, marketing and public diplomacy (domestic and international).” A number of policy documents, including South Africa’s National Development Plan 2030, refer to South Africa’s economic diplomacy as a means to support its own domestic policy objectives and African development in general.

In the past, the government has been wary of being perceived as a domineering actor that acts in economic self-interest, or favors certain businesses due to elite political connections. In addition, the government has been hesitant to engage the private sector due to historical relations of mistrust as a result of perceived ideological differences and an absence of mechanisms to monitor this engagement. At the heart of this is the concern that its engagement in post-conflict societies will be seen as a commercial opportunity. Such thinking is in line with South Africa’s objective of setting itself aside from colonial powers and also an awareness of not duplicating colonial practices in economic, social and political actions. However, South Africa’s rhetoric is not always in line with its practice. Moving forward, any increased work with the private sector will need to be based on a more robust and transparent strategy for this engagement.

Is South Africa’s development model different?

It is worth noting that South Africa is a signatory to the outcome documents of all OECD-convened High Level Meetings in Rome, Paris, Accra and Busan that have aimed to define aid effectiveness principles, first as a receiver of aid and now as a development partner. However, at the same time it has taken the position of using the principles and lessons that are appropriate for the South and rejecting those that are not contextually relevant,
thus setting itself apart from northern donors. South Africa has promoted itself as a southern and alternative voice to traditional donors on development issues, often couching its foreign policy engagements in SSC terms. South Africa has been eager to be seen as a ‘development partner’, rather than a donor, thus distancing itself from the colonial connotations suggested by North-South relationships. South Africa has often engaged with countries with which it has historical ties, such as South Sudan, where there has been a long-standing connection between South Africa’s African National Congress and South Sudan’s Liberation Movement/Army. Further afield, it has emphasized its shared history of solidarity with countries such as India. South Africa’s concept of solidarity is often understood through similar struggles for democracy and freedom from oppression.

In many ways, South Africa’s development cooperation differs from the traditional approach of the OECD-DAC. Several priority areas for South African development fall outside the OECD-DAC definition of development aid. For example, South African institutions, such as the Development Bank of Southern Africa, provide loans for financing infrastructure development in Africa, outside of the ODA’s concessionality terms. The South African government, however, continues to advocate for using the OECD-DAC definition in this regard, particularly noting that some of the concessionality loans offered to South Africa as part of ODA funding fell outside of concessionality terms and in some cases were worse than finance from commercial banks.

ODA excludes military aid and the enforcement aspects of peacekeeping, areas in which South Africa is often involved, including in the de-mining sector. South Africa does engage in peacekeeping through traditional means, such as sending troops to the United Nations for a number of missions including the UN Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and the AU/UN Hybrid operation in Darfur (UNAMID). Yet South Africa has also contributed military protection to African countries, prior to international intervention. In Burundi, the South African National Defence Force deployed troops to Burundi as a means of providing VIP protection and ensuring the safety of political leaders returning to Burundi from exile. In South Sudan, the military secured airspace during Independence Day celebrations. Most recently, South African troops were sent to the Central African Republic. South Africa claimed this was a result of its 2007 memorandum of understanding to build the capacity of the defense and security sector in the country. This included military, infantry, artillery and Special Forces training, as well as logistics, driving courses and the refurbishment of military infrastructure in the two main cities. However, the engagement was highly criticized. South Africa was alleged to be providing protection to François Bozizé, who had himself come to power through a coup, rather than simply defending their base from rebels entering the city.

South Africa has also provided in-country support to African countries that is not included under the OECD-DAC definition of development aid, such as student scholarships and the training of foreign students at universities around South Africa. Similarly, South Africa also houses and provides support, such as shelter, to large numbers of refugees arriving in South Africa. This kind of humanitarian support to refugees is not included in the OECD-DAC definition of ODA. South Africa’s activities, therefore, encompass a wider range of activities outside traditional definitions and may also take on other forms of assistance or make use of other sectors.

However, it is unclear whether these differences are by design or by default. Research on South Africa’s development cooperation has suggested that South Africa’s engagements on the African continent have lacked vision and strategy. There has been no agreement in the South African government on what its development cooperation entails. More widely, there is still no common definition of SSC, nor a good understanding of how SSC principles are applied in practice on a global level. South Africa subscribes to the Nairobi outcome document of the High-Level United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation that was endorsed by the UN General Assembly. This document states several principles that further define SSC.

South Africa’s development cooperation has at times displayed regard for these principles. However, whilst South Africa ascribes to the normative framework laid out in the Nairobi outcome document, operational elements such as accountability and transparency mechanisms are notably missing. Such a lack of coordination and coherence around SSC has limited Africa’s, and the South’s, negotiating abilities in international debates on development effectiveness. This has led to criticism that southern perspectives, rather than build-
ing on lessons learned by donors, undermine gains made in establishing an effective aid architecture.45

In future, it will be important for South Africa to establish exactly what sets it apart from traditional donors to avoid allegations often generated in the aid effectiveness debate that the concept of ‘differentiated responsibilities’ (i.e. the principle that different countries have different capabilities for the development of global society) is synonymous with ‘no responsibilities’.46 Whilst it can be argued that South Africa does not have the same historical responsibilities as some northern countries, it cannot shy away from engagement as it so wishes. South Africa therefore needs to define the specific areas in which its national circumstances and capacities make it a suitable (or unsuitable) development partner in comparison to others. There are already indications that in some instances South Africa’s engagements on the continent have not been that different from the activities of traditional donors, questioning the impact of these interventions.47 At the same time, there have been other instances, such as Burundian President Nkurunziza’s recent extension to a third term in office, where South Africa, due to its history of assistance in the country, should arguably have been more vocal. Given its perceived advantage as a bridge builder, South Africa should continue to act as a facilitator, by engaging with northern governments and multi-lateral institutions such as the UN to reinforce common interests and the growing role that SSC can play.

Where does the UN fit in?

Within this changing global milieu, what is the role of the UN in engaging with emerging powers such as South Africa? As has been suggested, South Africa and SSC more broadly are thought to have advantages to bring to the global development agenda. South Africa continues to acknowledge the centrality of the UN in global affairs and peace and security, despite being vocal on the need for global governance reform.48 Its partnerships and coalitions, for example through the BRICS, are intended to provide “more impetus to the core activities of the United Nations system in order to ensure a more equitable global system of governance.”49 This would in turn allow it to exert more influence on the African continent. Given South Africa’s affirmation of the centrality of the United Nations, the latter is in a favorable position to assist in bridging current North-South divides. As South Africa moves ahead in setting up SADPA, the UN could engage with the country to determine areas of mutual benefit that will allow it to engage as a neutral broker.

The UN cannot and should not drive any understanding or operationalization of new forms of development cooperation, particularly given the emphasis on national sovereignty and ownership as fundamental normative principles of SSC. As such, southern powers must take ownership of their own dialogue and lead any process that aims to enhance their voices. South Africa has an important role to play in facilitating this, filling as it does the role of a key African representative on the global stage. However, as South Africa and other emerging powers move forward in defining exactly what SSC principles and practice actually mean, the UN could assist in providing a space for emerging actors to find a convergence of principles in the global development architecture, in order to enhance effectiveness. This could include issues of accountability, alignment, and harmonization.

To date, northern perspectives have dominated the development landscape, and attempts to enhance a southern voice through groupings such as the G20 have been limited.50 The UN has, however, started to play a role, albeit a minor one, in SSC. For example, the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs assisted (through some funding - although most came from India) the April 2013 Delhi meeting that provided southern development actors with an opportunity to discuss ways of furthering a southern narrative. The UN could scale up the part it plays in encouraging the development of southern perspectives and facilitating their engagement in northern-dominated conversations, ensuring a more neutral platform for such conversations. This could also include engagement with other multilateral groupings, such as the BRICS or IBSA. The UN could also assist, where possible, in documenting southern capabilities and lessons identified to enhance global knowledge of SSC and to potentially operationalize these capabilities to enhance the global development agenda.

In supporting SSC, the UN must begin to integrate SSC across its mandates and agencies. Whilst UNDP and the UN Office for South-South Cooperation mostly engage in SSC, other agencies could also benefit from the expertise and skills arising from South-South approaches. As noted earlier, SSC can inform peacebuilding strategies, and it may therefore be relevant to consider how the Peacebuilding Architecture can better en-
gage with these initiatives, documenting lessons identified from conflict-affected and fragile states. By being aware of southern countries’ capacities, the UN should encourage national governments to utilize SSC for their own benefit, or at the very least, consider how southern capacities could be drawn upon to implement national development plans in fragile and post-conflict states. In developing a role for SSC in its own mandates, the UN can also engage with regional bodies, such as the AU, to consider how SSC can be mainstreamed into their frameworks and mechanisms.

The way forward and recommendations

South Africa has the potential to strengthen its position as a global actor and important development partner, and can do much more to enhance its clout by developing a better understanding of what its development cooperation entails and intends to do. The UN also has a role to play in SSC; however, the UN should be cautious as to its approach.

**South Africa should:**

1) Define development cooperation in its own terms and establish a vision and strategy for implementing its development cooperation principles.
2) Define what activities should be undertaken under the remit of SSC and how these should be implemented according to the normative and operational principles of SSC; also include monitoring and evaluation as part of planning strategies in order to establish lessons learned and good practice.
3) Examine ways to operationalize and monitor SSC principles and practices and to share best practices and lessons learned with other southern providers.
4) Contribute to a larger southern narrative of aid/development cooperation effectiveness, in line with its ambitions for global governance reform that will lead to greater representation on the world stage.
5) Engage with the UN to share best practices based on its peacekeeping and peace-building experiences.

**The United Nations should:**

1) Engage Member States through its national and regional offices to achieve buy-in for the UN to engage on SSC in order to achieve the Global Goals.
2) With buy-in from national governments, facilitate exchanges and sharing of lessons learned and good practice around SSC and development cooperation in general.
3) Encourage national governments to better understand their own development cooperation in order to enhance their impact on the world stage.
4) Mainstream SSC across its mandates and agencies, and encourage regional bodies to do the same.
5) Exercise caution; SSC must be owned and driven by countries of the South. Only in this way can the political will to ensure that SSC becomes a truly effective and complementary mechanism to traditional aid be realized.
Endnotes

1 South Africa’s Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) has declined since 2010 (see for example Neissan Besharati (2013) ‘South African Development Partnership Agency (SADPA): Strategic Aid or Development Packages for Africa?’, SAIIA Economic Diplomacy Programme Research Report 12). Its rise as a middle income country led to the United Kingdom cutting their aid to South Africa in 2015 in order to pursue a trade and investment relationship. South Africa set up the African Renaissance Fund in 2000 as a means of promoting its own development assistance, with an estimated value of $50 million.


5 Ibid.


7 Ibid.


14 The fund has won awards such as the UN Partnership Award (2006), MDG Award (2010) and Triangular Cooperation Champions Award (2012).


18 Most recently, South Africa supported the Common African Position on the post-2015 debate. South Africa has pointed to the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and the African Union’s Vision 2063 in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals, whilst advocating for inclusivity and adequate representation. It has also stressed the importance of the negotiations being firmly anchored in the United Nations intergovernmental process and the need for collective agreement on what should be done. South Africa has vocalised its viewpoint on the formulation of indicators through the G77, emphasising national circumstances, capabilities and respective development stages, and the importance of such indicators being adopted on a voluntary basis. Such viewpoints reinforce South Africa’s focus on continental Africa, SSC and ensuring that global processes are representative.


20 Ibid.


25 In the DRC for example, South Africa’s economic engagements have been seen with distrust. Hendricks and Lucey (2013) ‘SA’s post-conflict development and peacebuilding experiences in the DRC’, op cit.

26 For a number of possible suggestions refer to Ford (2014) ‘Engaging the private sector in post-conflict recovery’, op cit.

27 The Busan Partnership for Development Effectiveness identified the four following principles: a) Ownership of development priorities by developing counties - Countries should define the development model that they want to implement; b) A focus on results - Having a sustainable impact should be the driving force behind investments and efforts in development policy making; c) Partnerships for development - Development depends on the participation of all actors, and recognises the diversity and complementarity of their functions; and d) Trans-
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31 Communique of the 9th Session of Joint Ministerial Commission between the Republic of South Africa and the Republic of India, op cit.


42 Ibid.


46 Ibid.


48 South Africa has emphasized the need for global governance reform in many of its speeches and engagements with southern partners. For example, South Africa has asserted that BRICS leaders have called for global governance reform since 2009 (see Republic of South Africa Department of International Relations and Cooperation (2013) National Assembly Question no. 231 (No242OE, available at www.dfa.gov.za/docs/2013pq/pq231.html).


50 Ibid.