
South-South Cooperation and Triangular Cooperation to Strengthen Multilateralism



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“The world needs more and better South-South cooperation for the consolidation of a multilateral and more just world that effectively provides opportunities to those who need it the most.”

The ideal of cooperation among developing countries was born in the 1950s as an attempt to establish new patterns of collaboration which addressed the limitations of a world order influenced by imperialism and colonialism, and caught up on the dynamic of the Cold War. However, some developing countries like, India and China had initiated their efforts in development cooperation well before, in the late 1940s, through provision of opportunities in training and knowledge sharing.

The 1955 Afro-Asian Bandung Conference became a landmark event, in which major developing countries committed to the principles of the charter of the United Nations, and called for an international order in which the interests and rights of developing countries were to be fully considered. The declaration, among others, called for the respect for fundamental human rights and for the purposes and principles of the charter of the United Nations; respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations; recognition of the equality of all races and of the equality of all nations; abstention from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country; respect for the right of each nation to defend itself, singly or collectively,

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in conformity with the charter of the United Nations; abstention from the use of arrangements of collective defense to serve any particular interests of the big powers, abstention by any country from exerting pressures on other countries; refraining from acts or threats of aggression or the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any country; settlement of all international disputes by peaceful means, such as negotiation, conciliation, arbitration or judicial settlement as well as other peaceful means of the parties' own choice, in conformity with the charter of the United Nations; promotion of mutual interests and cooperation; and respect for justice and international obligations.

The conclusions of this seminal international conference thus represented a commitment to a multilateral world, and to the engagement of all countries, regardless of their size and power, within the principles and instruments of the Charter of the United Nations. In that context, the urge for increased collaboration among developing countries, based on solidarity, respect and mutual interests, represented the first major milestone for what we now call South-South Cooperation.

These countries, eventually joined by many others, coalesced in the 1964 United Nations Conference for Trade and Development with the creation of the Group of 77 developing countries.¹ This group aimed from the start to collaborate to make the international trade and financial systems more favorable to the interests of the developing world. The efforts to promote the collaboration in these areas among developing countries

was called Economic Cooperation among Developing countries, or ECDC, centered mostly on the Geneva spaces of the UN system.

In parallel, there were increasing calls for the United Nations System to more actively promote other forms of collaboration among developing countries. This request became a difficult proposition for the United Nations to accommodate; after all, the UN cooperation architecture was established mostly on the premise that development was to be the result of the transfer of knowledge and resources from the developed countries, thus operating in a way that the best -if not only - answers were to come from the North to the South. The proposition that collaboration among developing countries was an important component of the mission was not prevalent. The leadership and governance of the system also conspired to the incorporation of the South-South perspective to the mandates and the operational modalities of the United Nations, and even less so in the work of the multilateral financial institutions.

Nevertheless, the increasing activism of the G77, as well as the understanding by some UN leaders that this type of collaboration needed to be mainstreamed, led to the call of a UN Conference on the Technical Collaboration among developing countries. After almost five years of preparatory work at the political and technical level, this conference eventually took place in Buenos Aires, Argentina, between 30 August and 12 September 1978. This conference produced the Buenos Aires Plan of Action, for promoting, and implementing technical cooperation

among developing countries. This very important and comprehensive document provided a broad framework for this collaboration, and opened spaces for the engagement of all actors of the international community to support this cooperation modality.²

The plan called for actions at the national, regional, interregional and global levels. Within the UN system, the United Nations Development Programme was given a leading role, through the strengthening of its Special Unit for Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries, and with the mandate to promote the further engagement of the rest of the system, particularly the UN Regional Commissions. The document also called for the establishment of a permanent intergovernmental structure under the UN General Assembly, which became the High Level Committee on South-South cooperation that were to meet every two years to follow up on the implementation of the Buenos Aires Plan of Action and to promote additional actions to expand this cooperation.

Therefore, as early as 1978 there was a full framework to legitimize and support South-South collaboration within the United Nations. Nevertheless, the system remained mostly committed to the traditional modalities of work, considering that the bulk of the funding continued to be provided by developed countries and the development paradigm of North-South flows remained the controlling ideological framework. This dominance was accentuated by the renewed preeminence in the 1980s of a market-based approach to international development, the paradigm that

came to be simplistically known as “neoliberalism”. This vision stipulated that economic growth was to come from the freeing of market forces and the opening of the economies; as a result, significant resources were devoted to facilitating this processes in most developing countries, with some funding devoted to mitigating the negative effects of the implementation of these policies. The resulting economic growth would then lead to the improvement of the quality of life of the peoples of the South.

In addition to this shift in the ideological framework of development, South-South cooperation did not increase significantly in the last decades of the last century. There were remarkable examples of developing countries committed to supporting other nations, among them India, the People’s Republic of China, Cuba, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Libya; however, the predominant dynamics of international cooperation continued to be based on the parameters set by the countries of the North, embodied by the work of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD.

The new century introduced some changes to this reality. Most of the nations that followed faithfully the neoliberal paradigm failed to achieve the expected results, as most countries did not achieve the promised economic growth and the social consequences of the reforms were more dire than expected.

At the same time, in spite of the relative lack of success at the global level, several developing countries achieved remarkable development results. The

well-known example of the extraordinary achievements of the People's Republic of China since the Opening up and Reform process launched in 1978, was joined by many other successes such as the rural employment programs in India, the fight against hunger in Brazil, the health systems in Cuba, the model transition from the apartheid regime in South Africa, among many others. These initiatives generated a renewed interest from other developing countries to learn from these examples, thus generating a renewed demand for cooperation flows. At the same time, several of these and other developing countries committed increased resources to facilitate and fund these exchanges, so South-South cooperation became increasingly important.

However, at the political level this collaboration was not adequately reflected in the international legislation. A major step was taken at the first South Summit held in Havana, Cuba in April of 2000, the meeting declaration (article 40) highlighted the importance of what it was then called South-South Cooperation (including technical and economic), as an "effective instrument", and a "vital element in promoting South-South relations and in achieving self-reliance".³ From there on, the position of developing countries was better coordinated from a common position and understanding.

This language implied an expanded vision to South-South cooperation. Not just to promote the improvement of the living conditions of the peoples of the Global South, but also as means to support increased political cooperation and to establish stronger links to allow

more freedom of action of developing countries in the international system through their joint efforts.

As a result, a clear tension emerged between traditional donors, who wanted the cooperation from Southern countries to follow the parameters of established OECD practices and the Paris Declaration process, and to obtain increased resources from these countries to fund the multilateral system without major structural changes.⁴ At the same time, developing countries articulated by the G77 + China fought to keep Southern cooperation as qualitatively different, and not as a replacement but as a complement to North South cooperation, so as not to provide space for developed countries to renege on their commitments in terms of international assistance. The result was a series of annual General Assembly resolutions that maintained the "status quo" and failed to advance the debate beyond those entrenched positions. Significant efforts were waged in changing the institutional positioning of the UN Office for South-South Cooperation within the system, without major changes. In this context, the 2009 High Level Conference on South-South Cooperation, convened in Nairobi, Kenya in December 2009, on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Buenos Aires Plan of Action, failed to produce major breakthroughs in terms of conceptualization and on the importance and visibility of South-South cooperation,⁵ and no major advances were registered there and over the next few years.

In view of this blockage, the UNOSSC has promoted the convening of another conference on the occasion

of the 40th anniversary of the Buenos Aires Plan of Action since 2016. This initiative was initially met with great skepticism by both the UN leadership and most member states, but the strong advocacy of the Office, and leadership of Argentina together with the offer to host the event in Buenos Aires led to the eventual approval of the conference.⁶

The UNOSSC then embarked on an effort to mobilize member states and other actors towards a forward-looking conference, breaking the political impasse and to fit South-South cooperation in the framework established by the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. New allies were found, including within the OECD which had been working very actively on the promotion, reporting and systematization of triangular cooperation.⁷ In addition, the expanded institutional framework of the 2030 agenda opened the way to incorporate other actors beyond central governments to the South-South architecture such as sub-national governments, academia, NGOs, CSOs, the private sector, foundations and others. Many modalities of South-South Cooperation were identified, beyond the traditional technical cooperation, including infrastructure development, academic exchanges, technology transfers, trade, finance, investment and others.

The negotiations on the outcome document of the conference started earnestly in early 2019, with the able facilitation of the Permanent Representatives of Uganda and Lithuania, and the secretariat support of UNOSSC. Despite strong skepticism,

agreements started to build up in a context of addition, accommodating proposals from all sides. As a result, the outcome document became a breakthrough outcome for South-South cooperation. Among other stipulations, it confirmed the principles of South-South cooperation, including the fact that it is complementary and does not replace North South Cooperation, it expands the scope of potential actors of South-South cooperation, it increases the range of activities included, provides a stronger framework for triangular cooperation, and confirms strong calls for all countries to engage in these efforts. It also mandates the UN system to better coordinate its contributions and to develop a joint strategy to support South-South cooperation.

In addition, the Conference itself that took place in Buenos Aires, Argentina, between 20 and 22 March 2019 had the participation of representatives from 160 countries, including five heads of state and government, and with over 70 countries represented at ministerial level. In addition, many other organizations and actors actively participated, with over 140 side events and many individual presentations. The Conference, that came to be known as BAPA+40 thus became a milestone in the global cooperation architecture. In addition, by reaffirming that South-South cooperation is qualitatively different from North-South collaboration, mandating the UN System to support these partnerships, and confirming a central role for developing countries to set their own development priorities, the document constitutes a strong endorsement of multilateralism.⁸

South-South cooperation has now become a feature of the work of the United Nations. As mandated by the BAPA + 40 Outcome document, a UN System Wide Strategy for South-South Cooperation for Sustainable Development has been produced, with the participation and engagement of over 30 UN entities.⁹ An implementation plan is under preparation to report and measure the impact of the activities of the system in this area.

In parallel to this work within the UN system, other efforts were made to expand and strengthen the institutional framework of South-South cooperation. Two development banks were established namely the New Development Bank, in 2014 and the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank in 2016, to provide much required additional funding to developing countries. In addition, existing Banks such as the Islamic Development Bank and the International Fund for Agricultural Development significantly increased their engagement in South-South cooperation.

Regional initiatives were also scaled up to promote increased cooperation within the regions, including in Africa (through the Africa 2063 initiative and the establishment of the continental free trade area), in ASEAN (through the economic community), and in Latin America through CELAC.

The COVID pandemic has shown that international solidarity and multilateralism are more necessary than ever. South-South cooperation provided many good examples of this collaboration, and the upcoming debates

on the post pandemic world provide a great opportunity to highlight the importance and centrality of South-South cooperation in a more equal world.

To engage in these debates, action and agreements are needed in some areas, namely:

Advocacy: by definition, most developing countries still have serious domestic challenges, and they tend to possess limited resources to support other countries. In this context, it is difficult for the leaders of those countries to justify providing for others, either financially or technically. Consequently, much of the expansion of South-South cooperation in the last few years has come from a limited number of countries. In addition, some of this collaboration is also one way only, through which those countries want to share their successes with others. Building on this valuable collaboration, further efforts are necessary to expand the scope of actors that engage in South-South cooperation, including countries that are less developed, and also to expand the two-way flow of this collaboration, so all actors benefit from this interaction.

Stronger Institutional Arrangements: at the national level, most of the institutions that manage cooperation in developing countries are designed to receive flows from traditional donors. As a result, they tend to lack the capacity to organize demand and supply for cooperation with other developing countries, including legal mechanisms and funding structures. Several cooperation agencies are already evolving to establish that

capacity, and it should be an important component of assistance from other developing countries, and from other partners including traditional donors and particularly UN organizations. Initiatives such as the UNOSSC-Japan-Brazil Programme for the strengthening of cooperation agencies, and the Reverse Linkages supported by the Islamic Development Bank represent good examples of efforts that should be further scaled up. The joint contribution of the South Center, the Islamic Development Bank and UNOSSC on the national ecosystems is also a valuable tool to build in this area.

The Southern led development Banks mentioned above, viz. the Islamic Development Bank, New Development Bank and Asian Infrastructure Development Bank, represent spaces to channel financial and technical resources from within the Global South.

At the regional level, there should be a stronger commitment of regional and sub-regional organizations to promote and facilitate cooperation among their members, which is after all their mission. There are very good examples, such as the work of the Ibero-American Secretariat, the ASEAN work, the initiatives of the African Union and others. More mechanisms are necessary to promote interregional cooperation to strengthen the collective positioning of the Global South.

At the Global level, there is a need of a better coordinated engagement of the developing countries in the governing structures of the United Nations, in order to achieve even deeper engagement of the UN system in support of South-

South Cooperation. In this regard, it is critical to revitalize the role of the G77 plus China, in specifically providing thought leadership and proposals to advance the agenda beyond already agreed principles and practices. The establishment of effective links between the growing contributions of think tanks from the South with the political spaces in New York and Geneva should be further enhanced, building on examples such as the collaboration of the South Center on issues of trade and intellectual property. A better informed positioning from the South would allow developing countries to take the lead in shaping the global agenda, instead of being mostly responsive to initiatives that come from the North or from UN institutions.

Reporting: there is a criticism (particularly from traditional donors) that there is no adequate information on the flows of South-South cooperation. In that context, there is pressure from these partners to join the OECD reporting methodologies and mechanisms. On this matter, there is resistance from most Southern countries to utilize this approach, as South-South cooperation adopts many forms that are not well captured by these modalities, which emphasize the financial dimensions. At the same time, it would be particularly useful for the countries of the South to report more systematically on their cooperation, for which more advances are needed in the development of those methodologies. Many developing agencies from the South, among them the Brazilian Cooperation Agency have already established these reporting tools, including through the measurement of non-monetary contributions. More work

is needed in this area, and organizations as the UNOSSC could become a repository and disseminator of these practices.

Related to the above, it is very important to have information on the results achieved by South-South cooperation. On this issue, there is also pressure from the traditional donors that want to promote their evaluation frameworks. There are already many ongoing efforts to establish impact evaluation mechanisms for South-South Cooperation, such as the one being developed by the IBSA think tanks. There is a need to expand these efforts at the academic and political level, as it is critical to show to the leaders and the peoples of the Global South that this collaboration is helping build a better world.

Corollary: The further expansion and success of South-South cooperation will represent a great contribution to multilateralism. On one hand, the development cooperation landscape will benefit from the more proactive engagement of all actors, providing a broader set of options for the challenges of developing countries. At the same time, this expansion should also provide a broader ideological framework for the development debates, with an agenda that is genuinely global and is aimed at supporting the challenges of developing countries factoring in their own perspectives.

The COVID crisis has shown that global crisis necessitates global responses. Within the context of common but differentiated responsibilities, South-South collaboration must become

a key component of the efforts to recover and to regain the march on the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. In sum, the world needs more and better South-South cooperation for the consolidation of a multilateral and more just world that effectively provides opportunities to those who need it the most. As Pope Francis has said “it is our duty to rethink the future of our common home and our common project” by strengthening multilateralism and cooperation between states.

Endnotes

- ¹ The Group currently includes 134 countries
- ² The report of the Conference, including the Plan of Action, was approved by the General Assembly on 12 September 1978, through Resolution 33/134. It should be noted that since the year 2004, 12 September is commemorated as the United Nations Day for South-South Cooperation
- ³ Group of 77 South Summit, Havana, 10/14 April 2000
- ⁴ The Aid Effectiveness process launched by the 2005 Paris Declaration, under the auspices of the OECD, opened a process that led to the 2011 Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation, which operated under a relative tension with South-South cooperation until BAPA + 40 (vid infra)
- ⁵ Approved by the UN General Assembly Resolution 64/222
- ⁶ UN General Assembly Resolution 71/244, paragraphs 30 and 31
- ⁷ Among those are the Global Partnership Initiative on Effective Triangular Cooperation, and the very good work of the OECD Development Cooperation Directorate
- ⁸ The report of the Conferences was approved by UN GA Resolution 73/291
- ⁹ The preparation of the Strategy was mandated by the BAPA+40 outcome document, and the final version is available in the UNOSSC website

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INDIA, US EXTEND TRIANGULAR COOPERATION AGREEMENT TILL 2026

The Statement of Guiding Principles (SGP) on Triangular Cooperation for Global Development Agreement, first signed in November 2014, underscores the importance of India-U.S. partnership to promote global stability and prosperity. It provides a framework for promoting cooperation between the two countries to meet the developmental aspirations of partner countries, particularly in Asia and Africa. It was now being amended to extend the validity of the SGP agreement up to 2026 and the Second Amendment to the SGP was signed between India and the US on July 30, 2021.

With this amendment, the scope of capacity building activities undertaken jointly by India and the United States is expanded. “Under the Agreement, India and U.S. will continue to offer capacity building assistance to partner countries in multiple sectors, focusing primarily on agriculture, regional connectivity, trade and investments, nutrition, health, clean and renewable energy, women empowerment, disaster preparedness, water, sanitation, education and institution building,” said the statement released by Ministry of External Affairs.

The agreement aims to fulfil the joint commitment of the two nations to work together and utilise their combined capacities to provide demand-driven development partnerships. This agreement will support India’s other ongoing and future development partnerships, capacity building and technical assistance as well with countries across the world.

Source: Ministry of External Affairs, GOI. (2021, July 30). Extension of the Agreement on Statement of Guiding Principles on Triangular Cooperation for Global Development between India and the US [Press Release]. Available at <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34088/Extension+of+the+Agreement+on+Statement+of+Guiding+Principles+on+Triangular+Cooperation+for+Global+Development+between+India+and+the+US>