Guest Article

Civil Society Strategies and Principles for Dialogue with the BRICS

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1. Introduction

This paper will attempt to demonstrate the value of structured dialogues between civil society and the BRICS. Drawing from similar experiences and lessons learned elsewhere by FIM - Forum for Democratic Global Governance (FIM), it offers a practitioner’s analysis of tactical and strategic options and principles to consider for civil society engagement with multilateral bodies, many which may be helpful for civil society dialogues with the BRICS.

The primary mission of FIM is to strengthen dialogue between Southern-based civil society and multilateral organisations; particularly in situations where constructive dialogue is weak or absent. FIM is a convening body. Its objective is to build and support the capacity of civil society to dialogue with multilateral actors. FIM’s approach includes the capture and mobilisation of practitioners’ knowledge and convening civil society and other global governance leadership. Examples to date of initiatives undertaken by FIM include the first-ever formal discussions between the leadership of civil society and both the G8 and the G20.

2. The Context

The BRICS alliance is a grouping of nation states with a combined population of close to 3 billion. BRICS members include some of the fastest growing economies in the world. The increasing formalisation of this alliance clearly indicates a realisation by all members that, through more systematic collaboration, they can have a greater influence on global governance.

The Sanya Declaration of April 2011 is a concise summary of agreed upon issues and action steps that will lead to closer BRICS collaboration with many new constituencies. Yet, while this declaration paints a portrait of inclusivity, collaboration and outreach, there is no explicit reference to civil society. The priority issues identified within the Sanya Declaration include: support of the MDGs, sustainable development, climate change, NEPAD, food security and a more democratic United Nations. Several action steps have been agreed upon and/or will be looked into. These include meetings with business leadership, sports and cultural activities and joint meetings on finance and health matters. Virtually all of these are of prime interest to civil society activists, both within and outside of the BRICS states.

It is unlikely that the omission of any reference to civil society is accidental. Indeed organised civil society is not always welcome in every one of the BRICS member states. However, it is possible that this omission, even if deliberate, reflects misunderstanding of the potential of civil society to play a constructive role in governance, be it at the local, national, regional or global level.

3. Why Dialogue with the BRICS?

Civil society has many tools at its disposal in its collective efforts to achieve the Common Good. Basically they can be divided into two broad groupings; operations and advocacy. Within the framework of advocacy, one sub-category has been growing rapidly in recent years. This refers to what is often labelled as quiet diplomacy or citizens’ diplomacy or Second Track Diplomacy.
The FIM experience with the G8, the G20 and other multilateral bodies is essentially one of convening and supporting civil society leaders to engage in quiet diplomacy. Thus, most of the lessons learned by FIM derive from FIM’s experience as conveners and facilitators of that specific form of civil society advocacy. It is not reasonable however to assume that quiet diplomacy operates in a vacuum; in fact, it can be most effective if other, more confrontational, forms of civil society advocacy are also an option.

The conditions for quiet diplomacy engagement with BRICS officials, although not excellent, are auspicious. There is an active and experienced civil society in most of the BRICS counties, many of whom are well equipped for engaging in quiet diplomacy. The global context is also supportive for diplomatic civil society engagement with BRICS. The Arab Spring, the anti-corruption campaign in India, the mobilisation of civil society in conjunction with the recent elections in Russia and the massive influence of organised civil society in the Senegal elections are unambiguous messages to all governments, including their Heads of State, that civil society can, and is, influencing governance. The growing democratisation of communication is clearly opening the door for direct citizen engagement in its own governance.

Direct citizen engagement can be helpful in all forms of governance, including even those within which transparency and accountability are unwelcome. If quiet diplomacy can diminish the potential for violent social uprisings, then it is a welcome alternative, or at minimum, a helpful complement to other approaches.

4. Conditions of Engagement with BRICS

There are always valid arguments against opening up a dialogue with a powerful body; particularly one like BRICS that is self-selected and that is not democratically accountable to an electorate. For some, this lack of accountability de-legitimises the organisation from the outset. The FIM position is that any legitimate Head of State has the right to collaborate with other Heads of State as long as the decision to do so is transparent and subject to scrutiny, either by elected officials and/or directly by the public.

Although an ad hoc dialogue mechanism such as BRICS may be legitimate in and of itself, it crosses over into illegitimacy when it begins to engage in governance, whether at the national, regional or global level. BRICS is not a governance mechanism, although it is obvious that the BRICS alliance intends to bring collective influence on global governance bodies, such as the UN. Within this context, the concern for civil society is that, by entering into a dialogue with BRICS, they may be conferring to BRICS an unacceptable level of legitimacy. Therefore, one important condition of engagement may very well be that:

In opening up dialogue with BRICS, civil society does not, in any way, intend to confer legitimacy upon BRICS as a governance mechanism.

A second concern is that, very often, the agenda or priorities of a Summit meeting may be strongly influenced by preoccupations within the host country. For example, a host Head of State can use a Summit meeting as a means of strengthening his/her chances of winning an upcoming national election. In FIM’s experience, this happened at the G8 meeting in the UK just before their elections. The UK government at the time of the Summit used the civil society dialogue as a platform for their own election purposes. This caused an uncomfortable split between the local British civil society leadership, who favoured re-election of that particular political party, and the non-host-country civil society participants, who were preoccupied with the global impact of the G8 agenda. Thus a second condition
Civil society engaging diplomatically with BRICS will deal only with the issues affecting civil society within all BRICS countries, and/or civil society globally, and will not deal with issues specific to the host country.

Another very serious concern is that the BRICS alliance will use a dialogue with a select group of civil society participants for public relations value and benefit from such a meeting to proclaim that, because of these meetings, they ‘have consulted with civil society’. Another condition might be:

Civil society engaging diplomatically with BRICS will not present itself as a gate keeper of civil society throughout the BRICS countries.

5. Civil Society Representivity and Credibility

The above conditions are but a few of many that could help to create a framework for effective civil society engagement with BRICS. This last condition however leads to the thorny question of representivity. Very often the first question in the mind of a politician or governmental official when meeting with a small group of civil society participants is: “Who do these people represent?” Often for them, this question is more important than “What is the inherent value of their ideas?”

It is therefore essential that civil society activists do not misrepresent themselves by claiming to speak for those beyond the group or constituency that has formally mandated them to speak on their behalf. Any claim that they “represent the poor” or “represent the people” will immediately be recognised as self-righteous exaggeration, diminishing their credibility as well as that of civil society in general.

The lack of broad representivity does not, in any way, diminish the legitimacy of the participants; nor need it diminish their credibility. Civil society legitimacy is rooted in the right of any citizen to participate directly in his or her own governance. Civil society credibility can come from the soundness of their research, the strength of the values underlying their position, their capacity for creative solutions and their evident lack of self-interest to name but a few sources.

Nevertheless, it would be unwise to underestimate the perceived importance of appearing to be broadly representative. This pressure will come from the inter-governmental side, but it will also come from within the civil society community, both within and outside of BRICS countries.

National CSO platforms are accustomed to being an interface body with governments and to “represent” the common civil society viewpoint. This issue will inevitably be debated within those BRICS countries which have strong CSO coalitions. Clearly these bodies have as much right to dialogue with inter-governmental bodies as anyone. Their strength is to promote a broad consensus view which can and should be debated publicly. This approach is the backbone of collective advocacy.

A quiet diplomatic approach, however, brings different value-added to civil society advocacy. In this approach, a small group of experts can, behind closed doors, follow the Chatham House Rule. This means that all participants must agree that no public exposure of the discussions will be made without the approval of all involved parties. This climate for openness allows all civil society and governmental participants to speak frankly with no eye for the “optics” of the occasion and, importantly, to engage in an in-depth dialogue.
International NGOs (INGOs), or a conglomeration of INGOs are another type of civil society collective that can lay claim to broad representivity. In the case of the G8 and G20 dialogues, it wasn’t long before these INGOs were able to piggy back onto the FIM initiative and negotiate their own direct discussions. In fact, they filled an existing negotiation vacuum and were eventually able to meet directly with each respective host Head of State.

Obviously, INGO participation is also legitimate. Their challenge, which affects all of us, is to properly define the scope of their representivity, and at the same time, to avoid creating an apparent elitist or exclusive dialogue process. Most of the large global INGOs include membership from within the BRICS countries. However, most of them were born, and remain headquartered in the North. Their financial clout and branding success are indisputable and make them attractive to certain political leaders. It is likely that they will also want to influence the BRICS’ policies. Many Northern-based INGOs believe themselves to be sufficiently empathetic and knowledgeable to play an effective intermediary role on behalf of Southern civil society. In some cases this can indeed be invaluable.

The challenge for BRICS-based civil society will be to ensure, from the outset, that any INGO engagement with BRICS is coordinated with them and is complementary to all engagements by BRICs-based civil society.


Once the broad context of dialogue is understood, the conditions agreed upon, and the issues of representivity, legitimacy and credibility understood, it is then important to ensure that the dialogue is structured such that civil society can have the maximum impact on the content.

Over time, FIM developed the following model.

1. **Choice of participants:** The total number of participants is limited in order to ensure that each one can make helpful contributions to the preparations and discussions. All participants are selected on the basis of their knowledge of anticipated agenda issues, their strong credibility within their national civil society, their ease in working within a team approach, and their diplomatic skills.

2. **Briefing of participants:** Typically, civil society participants are invited to spend at least a full working day together before the formal meeting with officials. Often there is not sufficient funding to bring all participants together, other than for the actual meeting. A full day is inevitably sufficient to create a positive team dynamic, to agree on priority issues, and to agree on spokespeople for introductory comments, summaries of civil society positions on a given issue, resumes of dialogues, etc. Often, outside experts are brought in to brief everyone on priority issues.

3. **Selection of agenda:** The agenda is not usually finalised until near the end of the briefing session. In general, the attempt is to identify an agenda that can allow for an in-depth discussion. The rule of thumb is one agenda item for each hour of discussion. For each agenda item, the designated civil society spokesperson introduces the issue within a maximum period of 5 minutes. As well, two other civil society spokespersons are identified by their peers; one to make a 5 minute general introduction and the second to do a 5 minute resume at the end of the meeting.

4. **Chairperson:** For all G8 and G20 meetings FIM argued for a neutral chair; typically it could be a retired statesman, a respected journalist, or an academic. This was accepted in all cases but one and
the nominees from FIM were judged suitable in all cases. Importantly, these dialogues must be expertly chaired.

5. **Chatham House Rule**: All meetings were conducted according to this rule. There was no instance where it was not respected by all or where application of the Rule was problematic. Public documents released following the meeting were vetted by both parties.

7. **Civil Society Principles for Engagement with Multilateral Bodies**

FIM has adopted the following eight general principles developed by and for civil society to aid civil society actors in their engagement with multilaterals. They are the result of extensive consultation with civil society activists. These principles for good practice can be adapted or expanded as a resource for CS engagement with BRICS. [Read the full text](#).

a) **That CSOs build and maintain local to global and global to local links.** This principle asserts that CSOs at local and national levels constitute the broad and essential base for civil society credibility and legitimacy, and for achieving sustainable change and reform at all levels of the multilateral system. Building and maintaining CSO linkages from this local base to the global arena and back to the local is fundamental to democratisation of global governance. Such linkages enable a balanced flow of information and provide the overall coherence and context essential for informed action and shared guidance.

b) **That CSOs document and disseminate their practitioner knowledge.** Documentation and dissemination of CSO experience, knowledge, and lessons learned is foundational to good practice and to the democratisation of global governance. CSOs need to reflect upon and learn from the past, share their lessons and strategies with the wider community, and systematically transfer this knowledge to the next generation.

c) **That CSOs embrace the full diversity of their sector.** Diversity is civil society’s defining quality and strength. Full inclusion of all voices and levels and of the ever-increasing diversity of civil society’s issues, causes, and points of view is a necessary condition for achieving democratic global governance. This principle also recognizes that the complexity of diversity and the demands of inclusiveness can create tensions that slow progress.

d) **That CSOs understand the broad context of global governance.** Democratisation of global governance is a systemic project where all seemingly separate issues are part of a larger, interrelated whole. Critically, in order to influence multilateral policies, programmes, and practices, CSOs must understand multilateralism as a concept and phenomenon as well as the specific multilateral agencies and representatives that they wish to influence.

e) **That CSOs are willing and able to engage, and to disengage, diplomatically with those who do not share their vision of the common good.** In addition to advocacy, CSOs require diplomacy capacities that will enable them to engage directly with those persons or institutions with which they might otherwise avoid dialogue. CSOs must be willing and able to work directly with those who do not share their vision, including governments, multilateral bodies, corporations, institutions and individuals, in order to constructively address global concerns and to prevent the tragedies and global crises that CSOs, working locally, are often the first to experience and to predict.

f) **That CSOs are actively committed to their long-term vision and goals.** Sustained change and measurable progress toward the vision of democratisation of global governance can take years and even generations. This principle values CSO patience and persistence. It also stresses the importance for CSOs to challenge and change their own policies and practices, as well as the policies and practices of donor communities, which focus on short-term results only and ignore or devalue the long-term vision and goals of
democratisation.

g) **That CSOs are open and transparent about whom they represent and to whom they are accountable.** Civil society practitioners and their organisations, alliances, and networks should be rigorous in identifying and communicating whom they represent and to whom they are accountable.

h) **That CSOs align their practice with their values.** It is imperative for CSOs to articulate their ideals and values, to champion the highest standards of conduct, and to strive consciously and systematically to meet these standards. We recognise that the actions of civil society activists and CSOs are not always consistent with their stated goals and values. Practice, unlike theory, is affected by complex contextual factors and does not always fully reflect the principles and ideals of civil society actors or CSOs. Alignment of CSO practices, policies, and values is achieved through on-going self-assessment, evaluation, and improvement.

8. **Conclusion**

Although BRICS is a new multilateral alliance, it is rapidly assuming a position of global importance and there is a strong possibility that its rapid growth, in numbers and in global influence, will continue into the medium term future. For some BRICS states there may be a lurking suspicion that civil society, and particularly CSOs, are a western invention and not to be trusted. Therefore it is imperative that the first civil society contact with BRICS be made by BRICS-based civil society. There is an important body of knowledge within BRICS-based civil society on how to influence interstate governance through quiet diplomacy. All of the lessons alluded to in this article have been experienced by civil society leaders from throughout the BRICS countries. The capacity for civil society leadership in quiet diplomacy exists within the BRICS countries.

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The BRICS as Vectors of Social Transformations: Attraction of Capital, Social Mobility and Right to the City

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**Introduction**

A kind of paradoxical process put the BRICS, analytically speaking, in the centre of the global scene. Born as an acronym, it gave life to a metaphor nourishing new economic and political arrangements, generating chain of interpretative effects and making possible the setting of new power relations and a new status quo in globalisation.

In the aftermath of the relative decline of the Unite States, of the European crisis and of the dissatisfactions of the periphery and benefiting from the spatial fix of global economy towards the East and the South, the BRICS emerged as mediators, particularly for the consolidation of the G20, for trade negotiations and for building new cooperative frameworks with peripheral countries. This context of new perspectives and possibilities is due to the extraordinary active role the BRICS have been playing in

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their regions and continents, emerging as new protagonists in the international scenario and thus creating new bridges of South-South and East-West cooperation and integration.

Throughout the last decades of the 20th century, when social and political transformations enabled by the neoliberal paradigm were automatically replicated in the indebted countries, the BRICS were peripheral players, with few or no power of bargain. In the current context, however, the BRICS are situated as pillars for the maintenance of the production and distribution dynamics sustaining capitalism. In this sense, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa present themselves as attractive sites for less powerful countries no longer mimic the demands of traditionally stronger countries, such as the United States or the United Kingdom, and choose paths more convergent with their own social and political reality of developing countries.

However, even if the emergence of the BRICS indicates a framework of possible changes in power relations and in the status quo in the international scenario, we should not take for granted that the BRICS, in fact, will enable deep and meaningful transformations, promoting a new and unheard global order, more comprehensive and democratic. The existence of a group of countries such as the BRICS allows us only to affirm that a new global order is possible, but its shapes and characteristics are still undefined.

In this text, we will make a short analysis on how the BRICS can enable meaningful and deep transformations, in order to ensure the rise of new actors, to reduce social asymmetries and inequalities thus allowing the valorisation of democracy and social justice as core elements of a new international order.

Attractons of capital, social mobility and right to the city

In the centre of this context of uncertainties and possibilities of real transformations are the main cities and city networks of the BRICS. Megacities with attributes of global-cities, the most important BRICS’ cities and city networks are situated as decisive vectors for the consolidation of new and transformative protagonisms. The BRICS’ cities and city networks are characterised as concrete sites for the sustaining of modes of production and consumption necessary for the survival of global capitalism and for the exercise of public policies enabling wide processes of social mobility. Besides, they constitute arenas for the articulation of groups and non-hegemonic social movements, which press national and sub-national authorities for real transformations that ensure better quality of life, civil rights and decision-making power for peripheral actors.

The central position the BRICS occupy in the international context is due to the way the national, regional and municipal powers articulate and converge their interests and strategies of development and social transformations. On establishing a scenario of articulation of interests and creating of shared strategies and planning between national and subnational administrations, the BRICS countries focus their capacity of production and consumption on their urban territories, converting them on core elements for their aspirations and demands for increase of competition capacity and relevance on the international arena.

This centrality the cities perform on the consolidation of the BRICS as protagonists can be analysed by the existence of three agendas that, together, indicate how the five countries situates themselves on the global scenario. This triple agenda allows us to estimate what kind of transformations, or non-transformations, may arise from the emergence of the BRICS as relevant players. These three
For data, tables, charts and graphics on these process, please visit the BRICS Policy Center website: bricspolicycenter.org

agendas are:

1- The agenda of the attraction of capital, related directly with process of city-marketing and with the promotion of megaevents, transforming its cities and city network on sellable territories;

2- The agenda of the social mobility, which relates to process of gentrification and professional qualification;

3- And, less but not least, the agenda of the right to the city, enabled by the constant pressure put on the governments by the poor and peripheral that migrate to the urban territories in search of better opportunities and quality of life.

The agenda the attraction of capital is based on the new international division of production and on capital flexible accumulation, that deepen the restructuring of the capitalist city. Its translation on the urban life demands a gigantic spatial restructuring aiming at the adequacy of urban space to the neoliberal paradigm of governance. Through this paradigm a scenario on which the public and private walk together in the constitution of transformation that increases the intensity of capital flow crossing the territory is build up.

For this reason, a feature of this agenda is that the operation performed by local forces transferring power to private capital, such as happened in New York through the last decades of the 20th century, for example, are now summarized in a model of public management guided by the need to convert the city into a sellable area.

The fact is that the city-marketing became an objective and a commitment of local administration, converting city governors into agents of a new capitalist strategy, motivating and articulating new business networks. Besides, it created on the sphere of public opinion and of civil society, including universities, a vast chain of support for the production of an urban consensus, which sustain the capitalist convention and guide the dynamics of accumulation based on public resources.

The agenda of mega events is inscribed into this context aiming at the attraction of investments. Mega events, such as the Olympics Games or the Rio+20 Conference, move people from all regions of the globe to one single city, thus demanding an infrastructure preparation which constitutes a concrete investment opportunity for either domestic of international investors.

Through the last decades, the BRICS countries are showing high rates of economical growth and increase of middle class\(^3\), sustaining the phenomenal of gentrification. This scenario indicates an on going process of social mobility, which can be measured by the increase of population’s purchasing power. The fast economical and demographical growth of, for example, Brazil, India and China will give birth to an middle class of gigantic proportions, mainly concentrated on urban territories.

In a gentrified society, the world of automobiles, of spectacles, of industrialized entertainment and of the consumption of durable goodies gets amplified by the expansion of credit and development policies enabling an increasing number of people to take part on a up-to-date version of modern life.

However, social mobility is not limited to the increase of purchasing power. It is also related to the increase of professional qualification offers, that enable functions based on technological

\(^3\) For data, tables, charts and graphics on these process, please visit the BRICS Policy Center website: bricspolicycenter.org
innovations, with more specialized and complex jobs, thus improving the country's position in the international division of production. The Indian investments on the construction of centres of technological production, such as the Hi-Tech City in the region of Hyderabad, the district of Kushan, near Shanghai, in China, or the network of technological research and developments institutions in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, are good examples of the constitution of a new labour force, based on more specialized and complex jobs.

The agenda of the right to the city is built on the assertion of programs that aim to turn all places into centres, equipped with public policies and infrastructure that assure to an increasing population better standards of life. In this sense, precariousness and informalisation becomes targets of a wide set of transformations focused on the peripheral territories, such as favelas or shanty towns, aiming at the construction of affordable houses, at planned and inclusive urbanization and at the increase of credit.

The intensification of migration towards urban territories, due to the concentration of capital in such territories, increases the amount of urban conflicts over land, civil rights and for better standards of life. The wide process of social mobility generates new intensities, which, in its turn, generates new conflicts and mobilizes subjects to get articulated in groups in order to claim for more participation in the decision-making processes of urban social transformation.

This scenario increased conflicts intensifies the pressure over municipal, regional and national governments so the agenda of the attraction of capital is also directed for the overcoming of social asymmetries, inequalities, precarisation and informalisation. By redirecting the capital attracted to the overcoming of such issues, the agendas of social mobility and right to the city converge, thus creating a scenario of reduction of poverty and betterment of life standards not measured only by the increase of purchasing powers, but by the reduction of social inequalities and asymmetries in the urban territories.

In this sense, we understand that, even if the agendas of attraction of capital and social mobility are the most important for the aspirations of the BRICS countries to increase its capacity of competition in economical and political global scenario, the agenda of the right to the city is the one with a bigger transforming potential. If contrasted with the other two agendas, which are related directly with the conversion of the urban territory into concrete sites for investments able to deepen the capacity of production and consumption, the agenda of the right to the city can be understood as a counter-agenda aiming not at the strengthening of capitalism, but aiming at the betterment of life standards and at the increase of the participation of peripheral and precarious actors on the decision-making processes.

It is only with the increase and amplification of the voices of these actors in the BRICS domestic scenario, that the BRICS can become a vector of real transformation in the international scenario. Otherwise, if limited to the agendas of attraction of capital and social mobility, the BRICS will have its relevance in the international arena increased, but this will not mean any deep transformation. If only through these two agendas, the world will remain sunk into a global order in which democracy and social justice will remain having peripheral roles if compared with capital imperatives.

Conclusion
The BRICS are at the centre of a scenario in which real and deep transformations can take place. Their agency can indicate a route through which social justice and democracy can prevail over the capitalist imperative of increasing profit. However, there nothing a priori showing that the BRICS will enable such kind of transformation.

Through the agendas of the attraction of capital and social mobility what can be seen is the continuation of the systemic bases of social and economic relations guided by the neoliberal paradigm, which, historically, has confirmed its inability to overcome social asymmetries and inequalities, core aspect for the valorisation of social justice and democracy. Both agendas seem to indicate that, even if the BRICS consolidates themselves as new global protagonists, there is no space for any meaningful and deep transformation in the global arena.

On the other side, the agenda of the right to the city, based on the pressure of social movements connected to the territory, offers a real possibility of meaningful transformation. Through the right to the city agenda, peripheral populations can emerge as protagonists of their own fate and claim for more participation of the decision-making processes, thus building up the bases for a systemic transformation in the international scenario. The BRICS can only be characterize as vectors for international transformations if their protagonism is enrooted on direct popular participation. Only in this way the BRICS will by a synonym of strengthening of democracy and social justice in the global sphere.

Playing with Giants
Mirjam van Donk, <designation>, Isandla Institute

_We are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, so that we can see more than they, and things at a greater distance, not by virtue of any sharpness of sight on our part, or any physical distinction, but because we are carried high and raised up by their giant size._ (John of Salisbury, in Metalogicon, 1159)

South Africa's inclusion in the elite club of large emerging economies represented by Brazil, Russia, India and China has raised many eyebrows, globally and (to a lesser extent) domestically. Jim O’Neill, global chairperson of Goldman Sachs Asset Management and widely credited with foreseeing the emergence of Brazil, Russia, India and China as an economic bloc, was recently quoted in South African newspapers as being highly critical of South Africa’s inclusion, noting that South Africa does not meet the basic criteria of showing strong productivity and having a large population to be considered a large economy. On the eve of the fourth BRICS Summit in New Delhi in March 2012, his comments caused a bit of a storm in a country that likes to see itself (and wants to be seen by others) as a leading player on the global arena. In particular, his reference to Nigeria as a more likely member, given the performance of its economy and its population size, has touched on deep sensitivities. After all, South Africa cherishes its position as African representative of choice. A week later, O’Neill felt compelled to further explain his position in a local newspaper article. While he held on to his position that South Africa is the odd one out in terms of the club, the tone of his article was a lot more affirming and congratulatory, noting in particular South Africa’s potential role in enhancing the productivity of Africa as a continent.
South Africa has been quite successful in marketing itself as the gateway to Africa for foreign investors. South Africa is, after all, the most vital source of intra-African Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and the second most important developing country investor in Africa after China. The share of African host economies in South Africa’s outward FDI stock reached almost US$ 11 billion in 2008, representing 22 per cent, compared with 5 per cent in 2000. And South Africa’s leadership role in regional (and global) development is widely acknowledged. Former President Thabo Mbeki was a strong proponent of greater regional integration to enable Africa to exert greater influence on the global political and economic stage. He was one of the driving forces behind the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), which was adopted by the Organisation for African Unity (subsequently reconstituted as the African Union), as its economic development programme.

Other members of BRICS clearly recognise Africa’s economic potential or, perhaps more appropriately if not cynically, what the continent can do for their respective economies. China’s growing dominance in Africa is well-known, with its officials reporting that bilateral trade with Africa reached a record US$ 115 billion in 2010. Bilateral trade between India and Africa stood at US$ 62 billion and is envisaged to go up to US$ 90 billion by 2015. Similarly, Brazilian trade with Africa has increased eight-fold in the past decade, while Russian-Africa trade increased by 16 per cent over a similar period. Collectively, it is envisaged that trade between BRICS economies and Africa will increase from US$ 150 billion in 2010 to US$ 350 billion in 2015. It is beyond this commentary to delve into the particular interests of each of these economies, the terms of these economic relations or which particular African countries stand to benefit from the increasing direct investment by and trade with, members of BRICS. After all, for each member of BRICS this tends to be concentrated with particular African countries. Rather, the point is that South Africa’s self-proclaimed role as gateway to Africa clearly resonates with its counterparts in BRICS.

While the debate about the merit of South Africa’s inclusion in BRICS continues to simmer, the more interesting question, now that BRIC has been expanded to BRICS, is: What value can South Africa bring to the collective and, vice versa, what benefit does its membership of BRICS offer for its own development?

In terms of the first part of the question, the political and economic benefit of South Africa as a gateway into the rest of the continent has already been made clear. Of course, this all rests on a big assumption that African countries will be able to overcome barriers towards a continent-wide interdependent and interconnected economy – something that is by no means obvious, given the nature of African economies and entrenched political (nationalist) interests. Clearly, the eight regional economic communities, mandated to achieve greater economic integration in the sub-regions of the continent, have an important role to play in this respect, yet these vary greatly as far as capacity, leadership and strength of membership are concerned.

But could there be more benefit, beyond the idea that South Africa will unlock and mediate access to the continent as a whole? Perhaps South Africa’s leadership in regional and global arenas (as evidenced in its role in the Non-Aligned Movement, and the G20 Heads of State, amongst others) is also part of the answer. However, while South Africa still makes the most of its reputation as a beacon of hope, following its peaceful transition to democracy in the early 1990s and its ability to maintain economic stability, this standing has been waning (rapidly, as some would argue) in recent years. Systemic corruption, rent-

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In 2011 the South African government failed to issue a visa to Dalai Lama to attend the 80th birthday celebrations of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu. While it never actually declined the application, the visa application was still not processed 5 months after applying. The South African government previously denied him a visa in 2009. It has been widely speculated that this is as a result of pressure from China.

To return then to the second part of the question, namely what benefit membership of BRICS offers to South Africa, there is little question that South Africa benefits from rubbing shoulders with the giants that constitute the other BRICS countries. It will surely add to its global and regional stature as other centres of power find their hegemony contested by the self-assertion of the BRICS club. Economically speaking, South Africa will undoubtedly seek to make the most of its membership. In the past five years, South African trade with BRIC economies rose by 108 per cent. To put this in perspective, EU trade relations rose by 12 per cent during the same period. Importantly, though, whether this positive economic impact will be sustained will depend on whether South Africa is able to act decisively, and with integrity, to root out internal corrupt practices and rein in a political culture that at worst actively breeds such practices, and at best condones them.

Apart from the concerns about good governance, persistent levels of poverty and unemployment and rising levels of inequality continue to characterise South Africa’s development. The notion of jobless growth is a particular worrying reality. There are deep divisions about the causal factors underpinning these conditions, and therefore highly divergent opinions on the preferred development trajectory. The New Economic Growth Path released by the South African government in November 2010 possibly reflects the highest level of consensus between government, business and labour to date, following the sudden abandonment in 1996 of the post-apartheid development project encapsulated in the (highly idealistic) Reconstruction and Development Programme.

Ultimately, then, the question is whether South Africa’s inclusion in BRICS will influence its own development trajectory in a manner that results in inclusive growth, a labour-absorbing economy and sustainable development. This is the litmus test, as far as millions of South Africans who find themselves excluded from economic opportunities and living in sub-standard conditions are concerned. Here, it will be of interest to see whether South Africa takes advantage of its close relationship with Brazil, India, China and Russia to learn from their lessons on what works and doesn’t work – an obvious example is Brazil’s success in reducing inequality compared to the contrasting trend in other BRICS countries.

Interestingly, while the business community has (not surprisingly) wholeheartedly welcomed the opportunity for increased trade and knowledge transfer with the business sector in the BRIC economies and for reinforcing its economic base in Africa, South Africa’s membership of BRICS has barely caused a

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5 In 2011 the South African government failed to issue a visa to Dalai Lama to attend the 80th birthday celebrations of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu. While it never actually declined the application, the visa application was still not processed 5 months after applying. The South African government previously denied him a visa in 2009. It has been widely speculated that this is as a result of pressure from China.
ripple in civil society. The largest, and in many instances most vocal, civil society organisation, organised labour (COSATU), has by and large welcomed South Africa’s inclusion in BRICS, regarding it as an important step towards global economic and political equity and a shift towards a multi-polar world order. It has, however, expressed reservations about the tangibility of gains that could emerge from South Africa’s membership. In particular, it has expressed concerns about the potential impact on the domestic manufacturing and industrial sectors, as South Africa’s economy is easily dwarfed by the capacities of other members of the club. South Africa’s trade union movement has fought a long-standing battle to protect the domestic textile industry against cheap textile imports from China and India, for example. COSATU has further cautioned against BRICS becoming an elitist club, to the exclusion of the world’s majority of developing countries.

However, the March 2012 BRICS Summit has not evoked a single public response from COSATU. It seems the labour movement has been too preoccupied with domestic issues, most notably the impending introduction of the first urban toll road in South Africa, which has caused widespread dissatisfaction and mass-based protest. Nonetheless, its silence remains surprising, especially in light of the high level South African government and business delegation (over 50 representatives from South Africa’s business sector accompanied President Zuma and five Cabinet Ministers). And beyond a handful of research institutions, BRICS thus far seems to have left South African civil society organisations unaffected. Given the potentially far-reaching impact of intra-BRICS relations on South Africa’s development trajectory and the potential significance of BRICS in global and regional development, one can only hope that this disinterest will evaporate soon.

As South Africa is preparing to host the 5th BRICS Summit in 2013, it is hoped that South African civil society organisations will become more involved and demand deliberative engagement with the South African government on critical issues affecting national, regional and global development. It is only when South Africa’s role in BRICS is shaped through robust multi-stakeholder deliberation that South Africa will be able to stand with confidence on the shoulders of the giants representing BRIC and take advantage of this position to exert visionary leadership.

BRICS, Global Governance Opportunity for Civil Society in China
Ming Zhuang, Executive Director, Social Accountability, China

As most global governance agencies in recent decades have been taking active steps to engage with civil society organisations, and have devised mechanisms to some extent to engage initiatives from civil society, however, BRICS, the emerging global governance powers may has not involved decently with voices from civil society organisations. In case of China, civil society may not have sufficient instruments to assume a greater role in global governance right for the moment. Global governance is characterised by partnerships between states and non-state actors, but non-government organisations remain underdeveloped in China, and thus far there is little Chinese presence in the global civil society to represent the interests and voices of Chinese civil society. This forms a sharp contrast with other BRICS countries like Brazil, India and South Africa.

Underdeveloped Civil Society and Global Governance

- Underdevelopment civil society
Non-government organisations in China are still underdeveloped, compared with western countries and some BRICS countries like Brazil, India and South Africa. The term NGO is a recent phenomenon, with a history of around two decades. The definition is to consider all independent, non-profit, autonomous, voluntary, and philanthropy organisations including service providers other than the government system as NGOs. Generally, NGOs in China exist within a social space allowed by the government and the relationship between them is not one of independent cooperation, but one of dependence. At the same time as their activities and approaches are closely tied with space assigned by government, they usually have voices concerned with service delivery, and seeking ways of enhancing ‘society coordination and public participation’ in social and public affairs. Acknowledgement of public participation is defined explicitly in central government policy only since early 2000’s, and still in a way of exploring how it could be achieved effectively, the capacity and arena of civil society participation is almost constrained in local and domestic issues. Given the limited development and immaturity of civil society in China, there is currently limited opportunity and capacity for Chinese civil society to participate actively for a bigger role in global governance.

- Resources and capacities

Civil society in China has limited access to both overseas and domestic resources. In recent years, more and more funding resources for civil society and global governance are transferring to empower civil society in global south, compared to past years, global governance agencies have tended to reach mainly Northern, urban, elite, English-speaking civil society professionals, failing to engage wider and more marginalised people in Southern countries. Even so, few domestic Chinese civil society organisations are able to successfully access the resources, as constrained by limited capacities, access to overseas and domestic founding resources. Moreover, as China has become the second largest economic body of the world, many international development agencies and organisations are now leaving China, which make the situation for Chinese civil society organisation a tougher situation, as domestic funding resources are still unstable and rare.

However, some national Government-NGO (GoNGOs) and international civil society network are now making the participation of Chinese civil society in global governance possible.

Government-NGO is one feature of civil society organisations in China. While most other domestic civil society organisations are very weak and struggling for survival, some national GoNGOs enjoy exclusive privileges of direct operation and programme funding from government and their network all across China. Women’s Federation, Youth League, as well as some other GoNGOs attached to various ministries, for the current moment, they are the most possible, capable players participating in global governance, and of course to some extent, they are supposed to participate in global governance discourse at the will and interest of Chinese government. It is similar dilemma that any NGO would have to face, funding at the cost of autonomy or independence.

There is a policy tendency in recent years, from central to local government, to finance NGOs with public budgets, to empower and help development of NGOs. It is a good signal for civil society organisations in China, however, a large part of these public funds are actually transferred again to GoNGOs, or NGOs with strong government background. The recent central fiscal budget to support NGOs is an illustration of how most budgets are transferred to NGOs with strong governmental backgrounds other than independent CSOs. At local levels, it is the same case in most occasions.
Indeed, eagerness to obtain funds has led some civil society associations to compromise their autonomy. These co-opted organizations become voices of — rather than watchdogs over official agencies, political parties and powerful individuals in global governance. However, dubious policies around some resource provision to civil society groups does not alter the fact that adequate resources are a precondition for effective civic accountability initiatives.

- Registration administration and legal environment

The institutional environment is also important for the development of civil society. The current institutional set-up is characterized by a dual administrative system, which in practice hampers the development of CSOs in China. Under current regulations, besides being registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, any NGO, if it is to be officially recognized, must also register with relevant authority as executive supervisor. As no authority is committed or accountable for registration and development of NGOs, this dual administration leads to the fact that most NGOs in China are registered as for-profit business companies, which requires only registration at Industrial and Business Bureau. Behind this registration regulation, is a blank, or lack of institutional support for civil society development and administration in China. More than the registration regulation, taxation, fund raising, transparency, accountability etc. affecting civil society organizations in China, are all parts of the adverse institutional environment.

- Civil society accountability

There is accountability among civil society groups themselves. Just like the global governance agencies that they may critique, civil society groups have an obligation to answer to stakeholders for their actions and missions. The civil society organization accountability has arouse public discontent in recent years in China, mainly because of corruptions and scandals reported in GoNGOs, and there is indeed transparency and accountability issues should be improved among both NGOs with government background or grass-root civil society governance if they were to participate in the global governance and ask international agencies to be more transparent, more inclusive, and accountable for public.

- A global civil society influence to domestic civil society and global governance

International civil society network has also helped Chinese civil society organizations to be connected with global civil society and global governance; meanwhile, as it also helped Chinese NGOs participating in domestic deliberative democracy. Global governance encourages multidimensional cooperation among non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and governments of all countries. As more and more international NGOs are now working in China, they have been helping domestic NGOs networking with global society of civil organization. At present, influenced by the notion of global governance, some Chinese civil society organizations have established a positive network within China, or even overseas. Notably, a large number of national cooperative organizations have emerged and have shown exuberant vitality. These civil society organizations have also boosted the diversification and multidirectional development of resources at home and abroad. Participation of non-state actors in public policy making improves both its quality and the effectiveness of its implementation.

- Uneven global civil society

Development of civil societies across the globe is uneven, multifaceted and diverse. Models and methods of civil society’s development may not be easily replicated across national, regional or cultural
boundaries. In the last few decades, most transnational activism has come from Western organizations, with significant linkage to organizations in Latin America and South-east Asia. China is among the less connected groups, somewhat isolated from the overall trend of growth of global civil society. This uneven participation damages the credibility of civil society in global governance activism as a genuinely global movement that is able to hold international agencies accountable for people from BRICS countries. Meanwhile, the BRICS could have offered a greater opportunity in sense of including civil society from less active countries, on condition that opportunity window for civil society participation in BRICS should be open to include civil society voices from all member countries.

**Government Attitudes and Institution Environment**

- **Government attitudes**

Government attitudes and acknowledgment are very important that state adopt towards civil society contacts with global governance bodies. It seems Chinese government takes no relaxed position towards direct links, bypassing the state, between domestic civil society organizations with global regulatory institutions. Such relations might be viewed as a kind of violation or threaten to state sovereignty, and might not be very well encouraged. Similar in other Southern or Northern countries, these civil society and global governance initiatives would probably be objected when civil society groups advocate for policies that governments underplay or reject.

- **Acceptance of the term civil society and global governance**

Not to mention civil society and global governance, even acceptance for domestic civil society participation is sometimes doubted. Some government officials even resent the term “civil society”, assuming it holds an opposite position against government, so the term “social organization” is much more frequently referred instead in official documents. But this does not suggest a backlash of civil society development. Even as civil society organization/group has boomed only since 1990's in China, according to some researchers, numbers of various civil organizations/groups amounts to more than 8 millions in 2008, the year a big earth quake in Sichuan stroke, many civil organizations/groups participated very actively in the disaster relief and reconstruction.

Meanwhile, most Chinese researchers and analysts recognize the coexistence of state and non-state actors, and China’s approach to international NGOs has changed significantly over time. China’s perception of NGOs in global governance has also undergone some change. In recent years, more and more appreciation of international NGOs’ role in global governance has been shown. The point of view is recognized that globalization has weakened and changed nation-states and national governments, reducing their role in global governance, and global civil society will be playing a bigger role in global governance.

Global civil society has become increasingly important in the governance of global issues, such as poverty, inequality, climate change, transnational crime, and global epidemics. And Chinese researchers have also noted that international organizations, UN, World Bank, OECD, G8, G20 etc., have opened their doors to collaborate with civil society. Some see civil society participation and alternative principles of global governance as necessary as components of global justice. However, some are more cynical, argues that only those social movements that happen to share interests of powerful states can have some effectiveness while most social movements are quite peripheral to global governance. Still researchers argue that domestic NGOs are too divided and diverse to form a united and independent force and that
they might be exploited by governments and powerful interest groups in the North. Despite all that, most believe civil society has become a major factor in global governance.

Many Chinese analysts support that without a vibrant and sophisticated civil society, China cannot effectively play its role in global governance. They urge Chinese government to nurture civil society organizations in China rather than constrain and suppress them; encourage Chinese NGOs to grow to compete with large international NGOs for resources and citizens’ support in China; call for Chinese NGOs to go out and to take part in global governance. However, Chinese government recognizes the utility of NGOs in both domestic and foreign policy, but is very cautious in opening the political space for their development out of fear that they will detract from state power. Their anxiety has been intensified by the Arab Spring in MENA regions, the color revolutions in Easter Europe and Central Asia.\(^6\)

- **Political culture and civil activism tradition**

Another factor shaping effectiveness of Chinese civil society activity in participating global governance is political culture and civic participation tradition. Unlike some countries or regions which have long-standing rituals of citizen mobilization and a deeply embedded democratic political culture, some Chinese researchers question if China can quickly adapt to a non-hierarchical kind of governance structure. Furthermore, global governance inevitably challenges the traditional notion of national sovereignty, contradicting China’s strong attachment to national sovereignty that grew out of the long Chinese history, the notion governance arrangement that might reduce state sovereignty may be hard to be contemplated.

The lack of civil society autonomy is one of the major consequences of the fact that the government remains in a dominant position in Chinese society. A majority public in China still believes that the government should bear responsibility for almost everything in their daily lives and they count on government more than the CSOs. Chinese CSOs are perceived as having a role to play corresponding to areas that the government has ignored, or is not able to act efficiently.

**Road Ahead**

BRICS has offered a great opportunity for China and all other BRICS country civil society to engage with global governance. The rising powers of BRICS are now important actor in global governance, which used to be dominated by Northern states, now there seems to be opportunities for some major developing country civil society to have their voices expressed, as most of the current global governance entities are developed country oriented. To achieve a more equal global governance, BRICS civil society now can have more direct linkage to hold global governance accountable for developing countries and disadvantaged people other than global agencies favorable for developed Northern countries.

- **Inevitable trends, but a long way to go**

As our world is more and more globalized, China is among the international society to share problems and benefits in global scale; Furthermore, civil society participation in global governance has been widely accepted and practiced, there is no way that China would stay aside, and civil society in China would be absent for major global governance opportunity. The importance of non-state actors as well as

states, and the underlying norms of good governance would eventually being fully embraced by
government, as many Chinese researchers now have advocated. Chinese government and civil society
organizations would eventually participate in negotiation, coordination in a non-hierarchical nature of
global governance. But China still has a long way to go in building a coordinated relationship between
the state and society.

- Balance between economic, political and social development

As China enters into a new phase of its development, new challenges will occur along with the ongoing
urbanization and industrialization processes which have already created many problems such as
unemployment, environmental degradation, social inequality between rich and poor, imbalanced
development between different regions. It is a daunting task for China to maintain a balance between its
economic, political, social development, and harmony between citizens, between citizens and state,
which is the basis of healthy civil society building and of long-lasting nation-building.

Under such circumstances, it has become a priority for China to manage its social problems as efficiently
as possible and foster a coordinated relationship between the government and civil society for the
purpose of building a harmonious society, for which CSOs are now recognized as key players among
many others. Civic awareness has created diversified interests and demands, CSOs have emerged and
boomed in China at a critical point in time when a broad range of social problems need to be addressed
by multiple channels and solutions instead of being handled only by the government. In order to build a
coordinated relationship between the government and CSOs, substantial efforts need to be made both
in the areas of political and social reform. And, as many people presume, well-conducted relationships
with civil society associations could enhance the democratic legitimacy of global governance
arrangements with increased public participation and public accountability.

For the past 30 years, China has achieved great economic growth, however, social and political
development are lagged behind. And as Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao has stated again this March at the
China National People’s Congress, “Without the success of political reform, economic reform cannot be
fully achieved, the gains we have attained may be lost, new social problems cannot be resolved.” There
seems to be some opportunity for civil society development during the process of gradual political and
social reform in China, which might hold both domestic and global governance more democratic and
accountable for their people, for the countries from which voices expressed by their people.

Engaging BRICS as Emerging Global Governance Institution
Rajesh Tandon, President, PRIA, India and Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay, Director, PRIA, India

1. Emergence of BRICS

Less than ten years ago, a GLODMAN SACHS Report in 2003 coined the phrase BRIC in its report entitled
‘Dreaming with BRICs’. The thrust of the argument of this report was that the four BRICs (Brazil, Russia,
India and China) countries would together account for 27 per cent of world economy and 40 per cent of
its population by 2050. This projection made the policy-makers of the world take notice of a grouping
which hitherto didn’t exist as a collective. It also began to interest bankers, investors and trade
negotiators as they saw BRICs as engines of economic growth regionally and globally. However, the
political dialogue amongst the four BRICs countries began only around September 2006 when the foreign ministers of these four countries met on the sidelines of UN General Assembly. As a follow-up, finance ministers of four BRICs countries met in Sao Paulo (Brazil) on November 7, 2008 and in London on March 13, 2009 (mostly in the context of emerging G20 Heads of States gatherings then convened by US President George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair). At the initiative of Russia, the first informal meeting of the four Heads of States from BRICs countries took place on the side lines of G8 summit in Japan on July 9, 2008. Russia invited to host the first BRICs summit in 2009, and the rest is history.

Since its first formal Summit in Yekaterinburg (Russia) on June 16, 2009, the BRICs have had three Summits – second in Brasilia (Brazil) in April 2010, third in Sanya (China) on 14 April 2011. The fourth Summit was held in New Delhi (India) on March 28-29, 2012. It was in late December 2010 that South Africa was formally invited to join the collective to make it BRICS.

The purpose of this article is to explore the relevance of this semi-formal grouping of the five very powerful economies of the world to the interests and concerns of civil society in these countries nationally, and to civil society globally. What does BRICS represent in the emerging architecture of global governance? Should civil society take notice of its activities? Should civil society engage with BRICS? What should be the modalities and purposes of such engagements? In the next section, the emerging agendas and interests of BRICS are analysed before addressing the above questions.

2. What Does BRICS Do?

The Chinese phrase “jinzuan Guojia” pretty much sums up the underlying rationale of BRICS work – It means ‘financial bricks’; the financial building blocks constitute the basic foundations of BRICs. The then Russian President, while opening the first formal BRIC Summit in 2009 gave the clarion call: “the BRIC should create conditions for a more just world order”. And, the final declaration from the first summit called for ‘a multipolar world order’. In this sense, the primary focus of BRICS coalition has been to find ways to calibrate their collective strategies in matters related to global finance, trade and economy. Yet, the political implications of BRICS as a countervailing force to US ‘unipolarism’ and G7 western capitalism was not lost sight of. When Russian President suggested that the sovereign funds of his country should be invested in other currencies (other than US Dollars), the US Dollars fell by nearly 1 per cent in value in global trading markets. The primary thrust of the first summit was to develop a shared perspective on issues facing global economy and its impacts on the national economies of the four BRICs countries. The declaration from the summit called for a ‘diversified, stable and predictable currency’ system.

By the time the second summit was held in Brasilia in April 2010, the global economy was in such turmoil that the summit was designed to strengthen financial cooperation amongst these four ‘emerging markets’. A major cooperation agreement was signed between the National Development Banks of the four countries. The declarations also included preparations for the forthcoming G20 meeting in South Korea in November 2010. The thrust of the declaration was to take such stands on global political economy issues and matters related to UN reforms that other formations and associations of countries from the developing world could find resonance.

By the time the third summit was hosted by China in April 2011 in Sanya, South Africa had formally joined the collective; it was BRICS. The focus of deliberations here was far more explicit on such issues as
reforms of Bretton Woods Institutions, Doha Development Round of WTO, international terrorism, climate change and achievements of MDGs. The summit declaration continues to call for support to ‘a multi-polar, equitable and democratic world order’. A major thrust of agreements in China summit was to strengthen cooperation amongst BRICS countries beyond the official government bodies. Specific cooperation focus is mentioned in areas of science, agriculture, health, sports, arts and culture; exchange of scholars, sports persons, youth and various other formations (like trade associations) is explicitly planned as joint programme of BRICS. It is useful to note that there was no reference to exchange or cooperation between NGOs or civil society amongst BRICS countries.

Both the articulation of the purposes and programmes of BRICS and its public communications improved during the third summit held in China. To reiterate its clear purposes:

- To arrive at a consensus on how to cope with global challenges and make contributions to resolving global problems.
- To enhance coordination and collaboration among BRICS countries in international affairs.
- To further deepen and expand BRICS pragmatic cooperation in all fields.
- To further strengthen the bilateral relations among BRICS countries.

The programme of work that evolved during this summit more clearly identified common domestic issues for cooperation – inequality, knowledge-intensive economic development, social security, inflation and flow of ‘hot’ money. Beyond economics, focus on inequality and social security broadens the scope of cooperation amongst BRICS. The summit issued 32 statements, one of which explicitly focuses on creating a network of ‘think tanks’ across BRICS (statement 9, part 1). In preparation for the fourth summit in India on March 28, 2012, there has been a consultation of scholars and researchers earlier this month, hosted and coordinated by Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Delhi. The set of recommendations emerging out of that consultation are an input into the forthcoming summit.

**Why should civil society engage with BRICS?**

Before strategising what should civil society do to engage with BRICS, it is useful to clarify the rationale, if any, for such an engagement. To begin with, it is useful to recognise that BRICS is emerging as a global influencing mechanism beyond the five BRICS countries. As previous analysis is showing, BRICS collective is taking positions on several global issues that affect other multi-lateral institutions (like UN, WTO, World Bank/IMF, etc.). They are also taking common stands with respect to issues such as climate change, MDGs and global terrorism. In essence, therefore, BRICS is emerging as a mechanism whose influence on economic, trade, development and security agenda is having an impact on countries and populations beyond those five of the BRICS.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that BRICS itself is a global governance mechanism of inter-governmental nature. As such a mechanism, it is evolving, maintains its structure in a rotating and multi-modal manner. The current practice in BRICS is that the host of the Summit acts as a coordinator of the activities for the following year till the next summit. So, India will be playing such a coordinating and leadership roles after the New Delhi summit. However, BRICS is a ‘non-legitimate’ global governance mechanism; as FIMFORUM has been arguing, in its character, BRICS is similar to G7 or G8 of the previous era, or G20 of the contemporary context. These are groupings of countries with ‘club-like’ nature, where membership is by invitation only. Unlike UN system or even Bretton Woods institutions, such ‘clubs’ do
not have democratic legitimacy; hence, they also lack democratic accountability. Other than their own internal processes, such global governance mechanisms (like G7/G8, G20, etc.) do not ‘owe’ any external accountability, even though their actions (or inactions) have global impacts on citizens, communities and nations.

Therefore, development organisations in particular, and civil society in general, needs to understand what BRICS is doing, and what impacts its programmes of cooperation are having, or likely to have, on development issues, policies and practices in these five countries, as well as globally. Since the agenda of BRICS cooperation is primarily to advance its own national economic development, first and foremost is the focus of its impacts on the populations of these five countries in general, and its poor and the excluded in particular. Such an understanding may create opportunities and spaces for more direct engagement of national/domestic civil society with the BRICS process in each of the five countries.

Therefore, the starting point for considerations of engagement is the review of programme of cooperation planned by BRICS summits in terms of its social and human development agendas. Environment, sustainability and equity concerns need to be kept in focus by civil society while reviewing such programmes of BRICS. Given the special thrust of civil society, it has to sharply focus on the concerns of the poor and the marginalised at the centre of its analysis of BRICS programme of cooperation. For example, all BRICS countries are facing the phenomenon of rapid urbanisation and growing urban poverty; how do they cooperate in addressing this set of issues within their broad concern for inequality?

In addition, as BRICS is taking collective positions on many global governance institutions and policies, it is also important that national/domestic civil society reviews these positions from those perspectives as well. For example, a part of forthcoming New Delhi summit is the agenda for Rio Sustainability Conference in June 2012; BRICS is likely to develop a common position to influence those negotiations. If civil society from BRICS countries has certain concerns about Rio negotiations, and wants to influence those processes, one channel of that influencing is through BRICS.

**How can civil society engage BRICS?**

This meeting is precisely aimed to explore this question from the vantage point of Indian civil society.

First, it is useful to recognise that networks of civil society in each of these five BRICS countries should come together to explore these questions of why to engage, what to engage and how to engage BRICS form their own national/domestic perspective. Like this exploratory meeting here in New Delhi on March 23, 2012, similar processes are beginning to happen in other four BRICS countries. Once these country level consultations create their own answers to these questions of engagement, then a shared exploration of potential for joint efforts by coalitions of civil society across the five BRICS countries can happen.

In so approaching this effort, two factors have to be kept in mind. First, the nature, scale and strength of civil society across these five BRICS countries vary greatly. While civil society is reasonably strong and visible in Brazil, India and South Africa, its nature and pattern is considerably different in China and Russia. In addition, the democratic space for civil society, though shifting constantly, is relatively open in the first three BRICS countries, as compared to China and Russia. Therefore, civil society’s engagements with national policy-makers, political leaders and senior officials are very different in character across the
BRICS; much more active, constructive and critical engagements are taking place in Brazil and India, as well as South Africa, than in the other two at this stage.

Second, the formal political system of national governance also varies considerably in the BRICS countries. India, Brazil and South Africa follow forms of democratic political systems established in the 1950s, 1980s and 1990s. These can be said to be mature democracies. Russia has acquired democratic political system only in late 1990s, and is still evolving. China’s political system is characterised by a one party rule. As these historical political realities have evolved, each of these BRICS countries has other alliances and coalitions. India, Brazil and South Africa have IBSA axis (a coalition that is working regularly). Russia is part of G8 too. China hosts the Shanghai Cooperation (which brings many Asian countries together with Russia and India). Therefore, the spaces and models of civil society engagements across BRICS have to contend with these complex, evolving and multi-faceted realities.

In short, therefore, it seems that the larger social and human development agenda needs to be the thrust of civil society engagement with BRICS. It must have the vantage point of social inclusion and concerns for growing inequality and marginalisation. Its perspectives on social justice, environmental sustainability and gender equality may further inform its approaches. It is interesting to note that some of these issues have found a clear place in the recommendations made by the meeting of BRICS scholars hosted by ORF in New Delhi earlier this month.

This meeting should be exploring the above and related issues with a view to identify areas of cooperation amongst Indian civil society for engagement with BRICS. In particular, it can be explored if a separate Working Group on Social Inclusion and Development, with active participation of development NGOs, should not be proposed to Indian government for consideration of BRICS? Other ideas can be explored as well.