

## *Chapter 2*

### **Beyond aid and trade: theoretical and practical perspectives on SADC external relations**

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#### **1. Introduction**

The states of southern Africa share a history of political cooperation and solidarity dating back to the struggle against colonialism and apartheid – and beyond. The external threat of apartheid South Africa together with the prospect of receiving additional aid pushed and pulled the states of the region into a first institutionalised arrangement some 30 years ago – the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC). External influence also pushed the free trade agenda that has become the dominant theme in SADC integration in recent years. Yet, while dozens of scholars have analysed the pros and cons of the SADC Free Trade Area (FTA) and the SADC-EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), the question of the organisation's external relations outside the field of trade and aid has hitherto by and large been left untouched.

This paper fills this gap by providing an overview on the theme of SADC's external relations. The subject will be explored from three different angles. Firstly, some theoretical observations on the relevance of the topic of external relations of regional organisations are presented. Secondly, the question of the actor quality of SADC (institutional and political framework) is analysed. Finally, the paper gives an overview of the development of SADC's external relations over time. While it is obvious that the region is far from having a common foreign policy, the paper sheds some light on the current status and future prospects of SADC's external relations.

#### **2. Regional external relations in the age of globalisation**

Looking at regional external relations in a comparative global perspective, Hänggi, Roloff, and Rüländ (2006: 6) have found empirical evidence that over the last two decades 'regional organizations have begun to develop their own external relations, in other words gradually became actors in their own right in international relations'. Hänggi has classified the forms that the external relations of regions take according

to the counterpart. Firstly, in the classic case of inter-regionalism, regions establish bilateral relations with other regions, for example, the case of the SADC-EU Berlin Initiative. Secondly, a region may also interact in a quasi-interregional relationship with a single state as partner, such as in the case of the SADC-US Forum. Thirdly, trans-regional arrangements occur that involve more than one region and that have a more diffuse membership. The Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) and the Asian-African Sub-Regional Conference (AASROC) are two such examples. Finally, one could add to Hänggi's classifications the case of regions interacting with international institutions, such as the United Nations system or the World Trade Organisation. While in principle the nature of the partnership may influence the outcome, the practical implications are minor in the case of SADC. Hence, this paper summarises all the above-mentioned forms under the term SADC external relations.

The reasons for the emerging of the New Regionalism in the mid-1980s and also for the above-mentioned rise of regional external relations can be traced back to the structural force that has shaped international relations since the end of the Cold War: globalisation. The Windhoek Declaration, the founding document of the reformed 1992 SADC, reflects on this changing global environment when it states,

integration is fast becoming a global trend. Countries in different regions of the globe are organising themselves into closer economic and political entities. These movements towards stronger regional blocs will transform the world, both economically and politically,

and further on,

the countries of the region must (...) join together to strengthen themselves economically and politically, if the region is to become a serious player in international relations.

The Declaration shares the notion, that the classic Westphalian State, characterised by its sovereign control over a country's political and economic resources, will not have much leverage in the future, especially not if the state is small and underdeveloped. Hettne and others (1999) have in this regard described the New Regionalism as a defensive move by the states, as a 'second great transformation',

an attempt to regain political control over global (economic) forces.<sup>1</sup> As one dimension in a multi-layered system of global governance, regional organisations can not only help countries to adapt to the new circumstances, but also actively shape the wider regional and global environment.

Political scientists have attributed various functions to regional external relations, depending on the school of thought they follow: realists suggest balancing or bandwagoning, liberal-institutionalists stress the function of international institution building and a rationalisation of international relations and agenda setting, while constructivists have added the spreading of ideas and identity building (Rüland 2006). But from the perspective of SADC states, the issues are less on a systemic or global level. Their concern is rather to demarginalise, in other words to gain access to markets, (aid) funds, and recognition of their concerns on the international agenda.<sup>2</sup>

In theory, SADC is well aware of the need to speak with one voice and to develop common policies vis-à-vis the outside world. Tanzanian President Benjamin W. Mkapa expressed this notably at the opening of the 2003 SADC Summit in his position as SADC Chair:

Rapid and far-reaching changes in the world reinforce the need to act together with utmost urgency. Internationally, we face a world where an interplay of global forces demands change and adaptability. Information and technological forces driving the process of globalisation have made the world a more complex place. This calls for concerted international and regional responses to the different challenges we all face. Only in regional unity can we face those challenges with confidence, and with a decent chance for success. ... SADC... enables us to speak to the globalising world with a united, firm negotiating power that dare not be ignored!

Yet, does SADC possess the actor quality to live up to its external relations goals?

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<sup>1</sup> From a liberal economic view, regional integration (often reduced to FTAs) is often interpreted the opposite way, namely a fast track toward global free trade.

<sup>2</sup> Typically for Africa, the personal recognition of the leader (related to internal legitimacy) could be added as a further function.

### **3. The actor quality of SADC**

To determine the ability of a fairly weak organisation to conduct external relations, the concept of actor quality may help to better understand the political and institutional framework of this policy field. Of the various theoretical actorness models, Sjöstedt's approach, developed for the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1977, seems to best fit SADC's reality of today.<sup>3</sup> He suggests looking at actorness from the legal point of view, taking into account the internal structure, and the de facto output an actor produces.

The first threshold condition is fairly easy to verify: SADC is a clearly defined unit, based on a treaty (SADC Treaty 1992), which has been registered with the United Nations (UN) and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU)/the African Union (AU). According to the treaty, SADC is an international organisation with legal personality (Article 3). As such, SADC has reached observer status with several UN organisations and is regarded as one of the regional organisations forming the building blocks of the AU. The organisation has also concluded various Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) with non-SADC states and other actors. Yet, its autonomy as an actor is clearly limited by the sovereignty of the member states, which have so far not made any attempt to replace the intergovernmental character of SADC with some supranational elements.

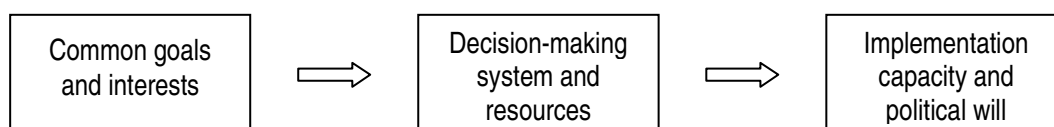
But more important than the legal structure is the question of whether or not SADC fulfils the internal prerequisites to be an actor in international relations. The first such prerequisite is the existence of common goals and interests, which are clearly expressed in the SADC Treaty and, in greater detail, in the Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) and the Strategic Indicative Plan for the Organ (SIPO), as well as in the sector specific protocols. The goal to 'promote the coordination and harmonisation of the international relations of Member States' is notably included in the Treaty (Article 5.2). Yet, it is clear that despite all written and oral commitments the heterogeneity of the membership often foils joint approaches. The long struggle for an FTA and an EPA has markedly exposed the diverging economic interests: the cases of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC),

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<sup>3</sup> More recent actorness models by, for example, Allen/Smith, Brethertan/Vogler, Ginsberg, Hill, Jupille/Caporaso were developed to analyse the more advanced EU foreign policy and do not fit the reality of SADC's external relations.

Swaziland, and most importantly, Zimbabwe, have shed light on the diverging political values and interests of the member states. One of the few policy fields that SADC(C) could easily agree on throughout its history was the joint lobbying for donor funds, hence, this is the most, if not the only, successful field of SADC external relations until today (Adelmann 2007, 2008).

### **Internal structures: prerequisites for actorness**



A second prerequisite of actorness is a functioning decision-making structure to transform goals into policies. The 2001 structural reform, especially the integration of the Organ for Politics, Defence and Security (OPDS) into the main SADC structure, was a reaction to the up to then inadequate institutional setup. With the Summit, the Council, the OPDS and the respective chairing Troikas, the organisation now has regularly meeting decision-making institutions in the field of external relations. But some problems in terms of decisionmaking structure remain. The first is the problem of decision making and follow-up in between Summit/Council meetings. The 2001 reform provision to double the number of meetings was never adhered to; only in cases of crisis (such as in the DRC or Zimbabwe) has SADC held additional meetings. It is therefore up to the Chair to fill this gap, which not all chairing countries live up to. Another fundamental problem remains the principle of unanimity, which gives a de facto veto right to members. The inactivity and often calm tone of the official documents (again, for example, in the case of Zimbabwe, where the often heated discussions behind closed doors are not reflected in the official communiqués) can be attributed to the unanimity principle. A further problem in past years, that was only recently reverted, was the 2001 replacement of sectoral ministerial committees by the Integrated Committee of Ministers (ICM), which lead to unclear decision-making structures and a lack of decision-making competence in thematic fields. Finally, the regional organisation has always suffered from a lack of human and financial resources. While the 2001 reform aimed to overcome this problem, the long years of internal restructuring have indeed increased the problem for some time. Insufficient preparation and follow-up of decisions on the side of the

secretariat, as well as on the side of the chairing country, have many times delayed important resolutions. Decisions had to be postponed to the next meeting and were sometimes pending for several years. Thus, while in principle SADC has decision-making structures in place, the organisation has in the past often been slow or silent when it came to decide or comment on external affairs.

Finally, as a third internal prerequisite, any organisation needs the means to implement its own policies. The secretariat is the only permanent structure and has, according to the treaty, the mandate to coordinate policies. With regard to external relations the secretariat is mandated to the 'promotion of cooperation with other organisations for the furtherance of the objectives of SADC' and to 'diplomatic and other representation of SADC' (Article 15, c, j). In 1998 the Executive Secretary, as head of the secretariat, after many years of internal negotiations, received the so-called 'full powers' to negotiate and sign treaties on behalf of SADC (SADC 1998a: 269, 1998b: 145). He also regularly receives foreign diplomats and represents the secretariat at international meetings. Especially in the 1990s, the Executive Secretary undertook, some times together with the chair, long diplomatic tours to liaise with major western donors. However, the external representation of SADC through the secretariat faces two constraints: the political dependency on the council, which denies the secretariat a more independent role, and the lack of staff and resources to implement agreed decisions. Especially during the years of reform from 2001 onward, the secretariat did not have the capacity to follow up or initiate external affairs properly.

A second external relations structure is the Committees of Ambassadors, which exist in various strategic cities such as Addis Ababa or Brussels and coordinate the diplomatic positions of SADC states. The problem with the Ambassador Committees is again the weak capacity of the member states' embassies (in the 1990s, for example, not all SADC states even had a representative in Geneva where the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and many UN offices are based, and the existing ones were not well staffed; this has improved since then, see Adelman 2007: 245) and the diverging interests of the member states. Much depends on the ability of the Chair to effectively coordinate the embassies. Aware of the need for a genuine SADC representation abroad, the secretariat lobbied in the 1990s for the establishment of

permanent genuine SADC representations or at least the appointment of honorary representatives in foreign capitals (SADCC 1990: 374; SADC 1999:10). On a comparative note, the establishment of cultural liaison offices was one of the means of the old EEC to conduct international relations at times when it did not yet have the foreign policy mandate and the delegations abroad like today. But this idea could not win the support of the Council.

The Chair, and sometimes the Summit and the Council as a whole, are not only decision-making bodies but they also perform implementation functions in international relations. They issue diplomatic statements on behalf of SADC, negotiate international agreements, or interact with external diplomats. In the case of the Summit and the Council, these activities are restricted to the time of the meeting. Examples can be found where Summit or Council commented on international events that happened close before or during the meetings. In between meetings, it is up to the Chair or to a mandated person (such as Thabo Mbeki as SADC mediator in Zimbabwe) to speak on behalf of the regional organisation. In recent years, the Chair has often called double Troika meetings (SADC-Troika plus SADC-OPDS Troika) to discuss urgent matters and to bridge the time to the next Summit or Council meeting.

Under the OPDS, which is the political wing of SADC, the region has a specific sub-structure, the Inter-State Politics and Diplomacy Committee (ISPDC) that is tasked to deal with, among others, international questions.. Yet, this foreign ministers committee, which had a slow start and is only meeting more frequently in recent years, is more concerned with regional diplomatic topics than with the global agenda. An initially more specialised Sub-Committee on Diplomacy never materialised and the foreseen position of diplomacy officer at the secretariat was left vacant for financial reasons.

So, are the SADC institutions equipped to fulfil an international role? A look at the factual outcome can further clarify the actor quality of the organisation. The various SADC organs have so far mainly used four instruments to conduct external relations. The issuing of unilateral political statements on regional as well as international political questions is the most frequently used activity. Yet, while it seems at first glance easy to trace and analyse speeches and documents with regional origin, there is, in political reality, a thin line between regional and national action, which may at

times not be easy to distinguish. When Thabo Mbeki, for example, spoke (or was silent on) the matter of Zimbabwe, did he do this in his position as appointed SADC Zimbabwe mediator, in his position as SADC Chair, or in his position as President of South Africa? Many times, the leading member, South Africa, has claimed in international affairs to speak on behalf of South Africa and the region (or Africa) as a whole. Although most of times the country had no official mandate to speak for the region, the South African position indeed often reflected regional concerns. Should one judge this as a regional instrumentalisation of a member state's resources in absence of own instruments, or is the leading country simply overstepping its competences here?

In addition to statements, diplomatic meetings with states and international organisations take place frequently, most notably at the biannual Consultative Conference, bilateral (interregional) fora or visits of diplomats to SADC institutions. This includes guest speakers at the Summit and observers from other institutions such as AU, East African Community (EAC) or Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). Those diplomatic meetings have in the past often resulted in the conclusion of a formal MoU. Dozens of those have been signed by SADC since the mid-1990s with states, international organisations, and also non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In some cases, the relationship was even upgraded to the more formalised level of a Forum (SADC-Nordics, SADC-EU, SADC-US, SADC-India).

Finally, an outcome of SADC external relations can be seen in the coordination of positions in international organisations. While political coordination has happened at various issues and organisations (UN, WTO, AU), it is still more the exception than the rule. More successful has been the coordination of positions for the submission of jointly agreed candidates for international positions or for the hosting of international institutions. The latest move in this regard is the regional backing of Malawi's ambition to chair the AU. While not always successful in process and result, such coordinated activity can be seen as the beginning of a SADC voting block in international affairs.

Recently, two new regional instruments have emerged that could in future increase the role of SADC at least in its own region and potentially also in adjacent African

countries. The first is the SADC peace-keeping brigade. While the member states still have the decision power whether to deploy their troops in a common effort or not, the existence of a joint planning element and the possibility of joint deployment will force the member states to closely align their national peace-keeping strategies to a regional one. The second new instrument is the SADC election observation mission. While the member states via the council, and especially the chair of the mission, have considerable political power on how to interpret the result (e.g. the SADC Election Observation Mission to Zimbabwe), this mission is a genuinely regional instrument. A critical judgement of the SADC mission could bring a deviant country onto the SADC political agenda or even serve as justification to sanction a member on the ground of violating the common SADC principles. While this refers primarily to intra-SADC affairs, it should be kept in mind that the inclusion or exclusion of a country into a regional organisation is one of the most important foreign policy decisions a region can make (Schmitter 1969).

So, how has SADC used its instruments to conduct external relations over time?

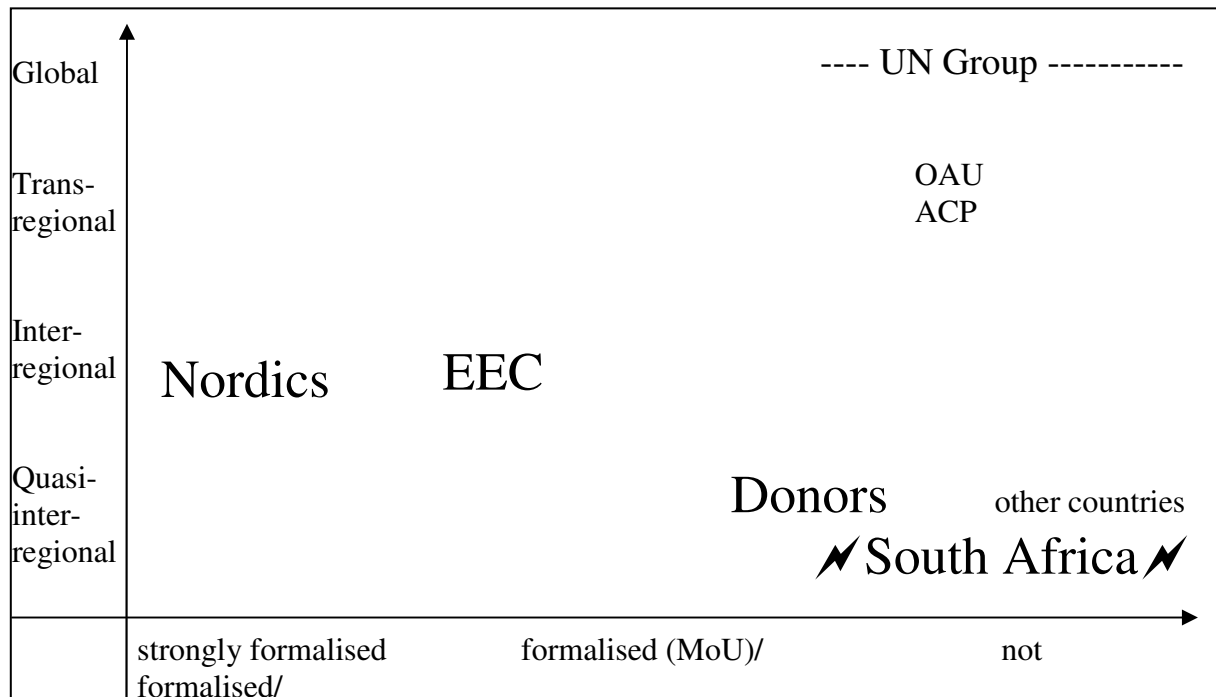
#### **4. The development of SADC external relations: what has been achieved?**

In the 1980s, SADCC external relations had by and large only two dimensions'. The first was the fight (rhetoric) against apartheid South Africa. While the Frontline States (FLS) were the main political platform, SADCC meetings were also used for demonstrating regional solidarity on this issue. The attendance of the South African and Namibian liberation movements at SADCC meetings reinforced the presence of this issue on the SADC agenda. Unilateral SADCC declarations on apartheid were frequent those days. But not only South Africa was addressed, SADCC also issued sharp statements against the political role of the US, for example on the occasions of discriminating funding to SADCC or Savimbi's 1986 visit to Washington. The grievance about apartheid was also taken to the UN where SADC chairs included the issue on behalf of the region in their official speeches.

The second external relations dimension was the relationship with the donor community, which was itself instrumental in the founding of SADC (Adelmann 2008; Mandaza and Tostensen 1994). The relationship with the Nordic countries was most advanced and resulted in the formation of the Nordic-SADC Initiative in 1986. The

European Community (EC) was also a major sponsor of SADC from the beginning and formalised its relationship through the 1986 signing of a Regional Indicative Program (RIP) with SADCC under the Lomé framework. From 1987 onward, other Western countries such as US, UK and West-Germany, but also the Eastern Block significantly increased their collaboration with SADC. While the financial aspect of receiving aid for regional projects was the main issue, the meetings with donors, for example at the Consultative Conference, always had the political function as well of formally and informally exchanging views on regional matters, most notably South Africa.

**Figure 1 SADCC's External Relations in the 1980s**



↘ Conflictive Relationship

By the 1990s the regional and international situation had changed tremendously. The political enemy had faded away and became an important member of SADC. The forces of globalisation posed the challenge of a further marginalisation of the region. But most seriously, there was a real risk that after the end of apartheid and the end of the Cold War the donors could turn their backs on SADC(C) as they now pursued other priorities. The reform from SADCC to SADC was one answer to the problem. Another was the expansion and formalisation of the organisation's external relations.

With regard to the traditional donors, SADC embarked in the 1990s on four activities to keep the organisation on the donors' agenda: first, it undertook diplomatic lobbying tours through western capitals; second, it formalised the relationship with existing partners through the signing of MoUs; third, it upgraded some existing initiatives from the level of MoU to the level of an interregional forum, most notably the 1994 Berlin Initiative and later on the SADC-US Forum; fourth, from 1998 onward, SADC started to accredit foreign ambassadors to SADC as official representatives of their countries to the organisation.

But SADC activities were not only directed to the global North, but also towards an intensification of South-South relations. On an inter-regional level, other regional organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Mercado Común del Sur (Mercosur), or the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) were actively engaged. The secretariat undertook study tours, joint conferences were held, and the Chair and Executive Secretary addressed meetings of other regional organisations. In addition, the relationship to leading countries of the South, such as China, India or Cuba was intensified. The relationship with the OAU/AU was revived and SADC also showed presence at some trans-regional platforms such as Asian-African Sub-Regional Organisations Conference (AASROC).

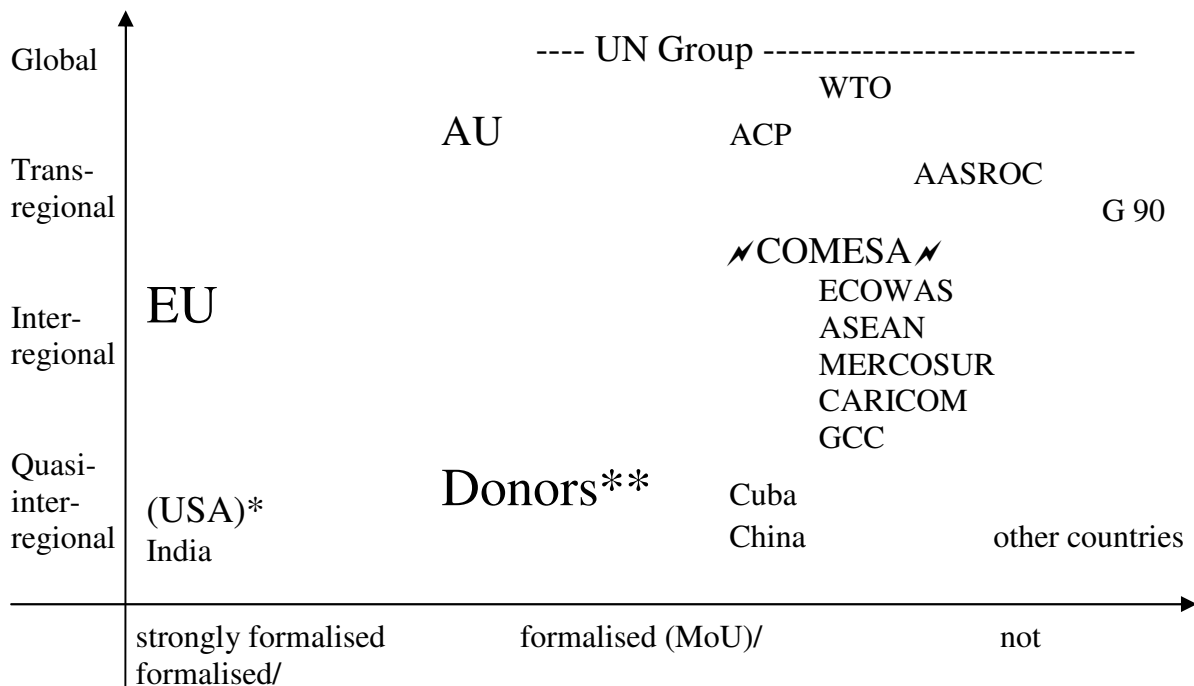
But in retrospect the success of the increased external relations activities of the 1990s was only partial: the major platform of interaction with donors, the Consultative Conference, rapidly declined in profile and the MoUs with external partners remained by and large empty shells with no practical consequences. Also the inter-regional South-South dialogue mostly did not outlive one or two meetings. But most severe, in the beginning of the new millennium, the SADC-US Forum was put on ice and the Berlin Initiative was downgraded from an inter-regional Heads of States and Government meeting to a troika level.

The latter can be directly related to the Zimbabwe conflict and the personal sanctions the US and the EU had put on Robert Mugabe and his allies. Not only did the western countries want to avoid a direct meeting with Robert Mugabe at such gatherings, a downgrading of SADC and simultaneous pushing of rivaling COMESA by the EU must also be seen as a punishment of SADC for not distancing itself from Zimbabwe. Besides this particular case, the general sharp drop of SADC diplomatic

activities is undoubtedly due to the internal restructuring process from 2001 and onward, which led to an inward-looking perspective and kept the external relations capacity to a minimum. Further on, the creation of the AU and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) initiatives fired back on SADC as an organisation. Much of donors' attention and money flew into the new continental initiatives, thereby putting the regions, which are de facto much ahead of the continental initiatives, on the backburner.

Thus, SADC external relations almost came to a standstill. Yet, in the second half of the decade, the region was again able to revive its international activities. The New SADC-ICP partnership, with its joint task force, thematic groups, and a revival of the Consultative Conference (Windhoek 2006) revitalised traditional donor relations. The South-South contacts were also renewed. At the 2006 Consultative Conference China showed a strong interest in SADC and a SADC-India Forum was inaugurated. The relationship to the AU and other African regional organisations has also improved.

**Figure 2 SADC external relations in the New Millennium**



\* The SADC-US Forum was put on ice because of the Zimbabwe crisis.

\*\* The most important donors are: UK, Sweden, Germany, Norway as well as Japan.

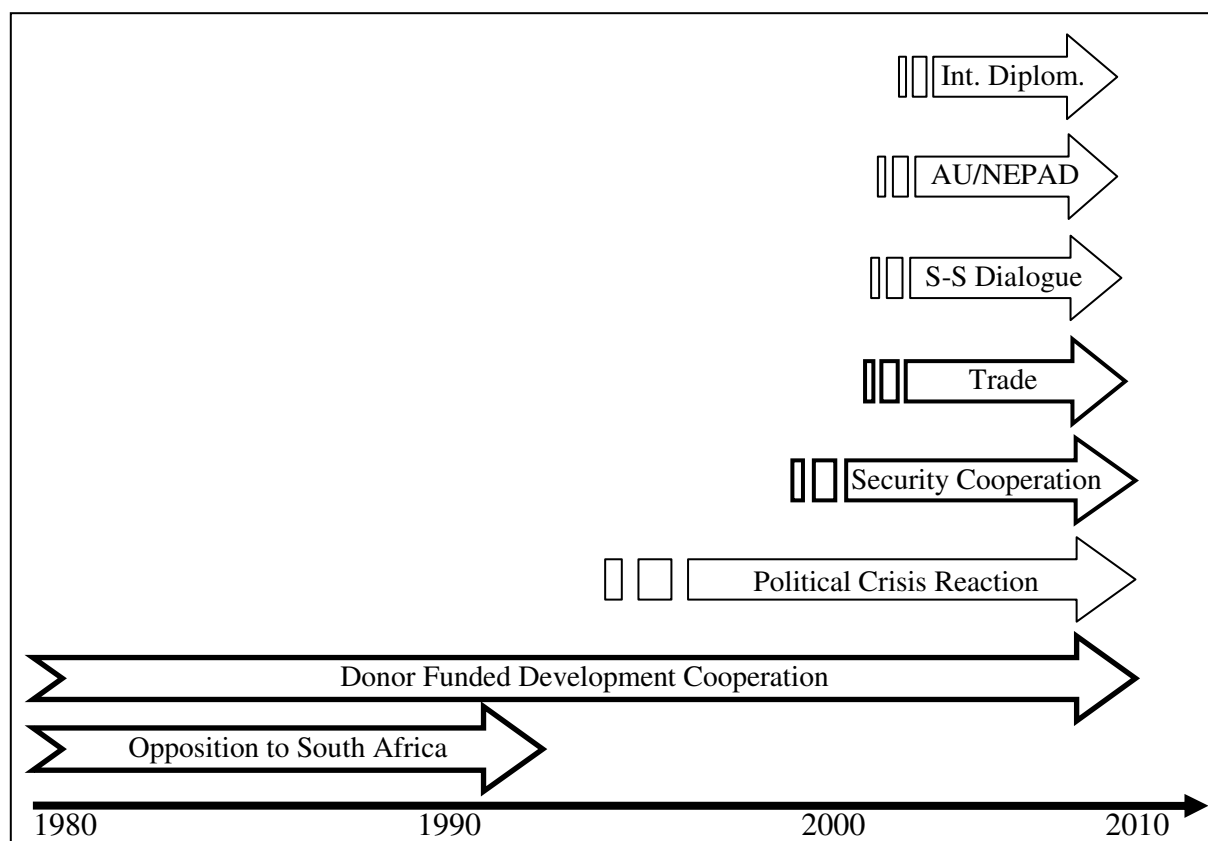
↗ Conflictive relationship.

Source: Own compilation.

### Conclusion: What future for SADC external relations?

Looking at SADC’s externally oriented activities in recent years, it is clear that aid and trade are the organisation’s dominant concerns. Political crises also feature prominently on the agenda – however, only in cases where SADC member states are directly concerned (DRC, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Madagascar) – which makes these activities part of the internal rather than the external agenda. The South-South, the Africa, and the international agenda still play a less prominent role in the SADC portfolio, even though some ad hoc activities in these fields are visible. As latest examples, the global financial crisis and, more importantly, the climate change debate have found their way into official statements and SADC documents recently.

**Figure 3 The development of SADC external relations**



Source: Own compilation.

In 1993 the secretariat (SADC 1993b: 465) had perceived that

the Organisation needs to coordinate its positions at international fora with a view to ensuring that collective interests are safeguarded, that member States reflect positions that are consistent with decisions they have taken under SADC....developing common positions to issues should be extended towards the emergence of common approaches and positions on foreign policy. It should be possible to look forward, for example, to the delivery of a single SADC statement at such fora as the OAU, UN, Commonwealth, etc.

But so far, SADC could not live up to this expectation. External relations outside the aid and trade paradigm are conducted on an ad hoc basis and are seen rather as an extra than a core of SADC activities. The prioritisation exercise that SADC has recently undertaken to better structure its activities has put this issue further to the back of the agenda.

In principle, the prerequisites for SADC to be an international actor are in place: SADC enjoys international recognition, it has common interests on many international issues and it has some structures that could be used to put ideas into action. Yet, the implementation structure is still too weak at secretariat or diplomatic level to ensure adequate preparation and follow-up. Thus no systematic approach has emerged so far.

In addition, the double structure of potential external representation of member states by both SADC and the AU poses a structural problem. For SADC and its members it remains unclear what role SADC should play in international arenas in comparison to the AU as both have similar external agendas. The famous rhetoric concept of regions being pillars or stepping stones for continental integration has never been fully transferred into political reality, despite some efforts of the AU to formalise the relationship. While the AU is internationally more visible than SADC, it might be sometimes more effective to travel the sub-regional road in international relations.

By neglecting the issue of closer political cooperation in international relations, both the organisation and its member states miss an opportunity. A continuous debate on international issues could help the organisation not only to improve its external profile, but the process of negotiating joint positions would necessarily also lead to a constant internal reflection on regional political aims and values. Such self-awareness, generated by discussing often less controversial international topics, could lead to positive spillovers to other, more controversial, policy fields. For the member states, on the other hand, especially the weaker ones, a regionally based diplomacy might be the only feasible way to effectively take part in international affairs. Influencing the emerging global governance structures will be vital for the states of southern Africa if they want to demarginalise in the future. Yet, the thought of giving up national power and prestige now, in order to gain some joint international power in the future, seems still far from the reality of SADC regional integration today.

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