

MONITOR

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THE ROLE OF NON-TRADITIONAL DONORS IN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

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South Africa's Role in International Development Policy

Strong ambitions but limited scope for an African regional power

Henning Suhr

- › Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has been a strong advocate of multilateralism and pan-Africanism in international politics.
- › Under President Mbeki, South Africa was seen as a spokesperson for African interests. This role has declined somewhat, although since 2018 President Ramaphosa has endeavoured to enhance the country's international profile and influence.
- › Given the limited options, South African foreign and development policy is designed to establish institutions and shifting norms and regulations to accommodate South African interests.
- › South Africa is an important partner for donor countries in Africa. Its triangular cooperation with non-African donors and African recipients is part and parcel of the national development approach.
- › The historic economic crisis is taking its toll on South Africa. Financial expenditure on foreign and development policy is expected to decrease due to the crisis and domestic political priorities.
- › However, due to the lack of alternatives South Africa remains the most important partner in the region for non-African donors. If South Africa fails, the region collapses.

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Introduction

South Africa cannot be described as a donor country in the classical sense. The funding it provides is too low to fit into that category and the inflow of funds from other donors is too significant. The country has been the recipient of considerable development funds since the end of apartheid in 1994. The international community was subsequently very keen to contribute to the success of the political transformation of South Africa into a true “rainbow nation” offering a home to all its citizens irrespective of the colour of their skin. Notwithstanding the external support it received for its domestic objectives, South Africa began to make its presence felt in the international arena at a relatively early stage, being intent on pursuing its own cooperation strategies and approaches. Under President Thabo Mbeki (1999-2008), in particular, the country trod new paths in its quest for an “African Renaissance”, the slogan he coined which attracted a great deal of attention around the world. The underlying aim was to advance the development not just of South Africa but of the entire continent. To this end, a South African bilateral aid instrument was introduced for the first time with the launching of the African Renaissance Fund (ARF). With the transformation of the Organisation of African States (OAS) into the African Union (AU), within whose institutional framework the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) or African Union Development Agency (AUDA) and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) were set up, South Africa vigorously pursued the establishment of multilateral development institutions by the Afri-

can states themselves. Not surprisingly, then, the geographical focus of its foreign policy is on co-operation with partner countries in Africa. The South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) emphasises the partnership with the member countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). According to the Strategic Plan 2020-2025, the priorities in multilateral cooperation are conflict prevention, conflict resolution and reconstruction, regional integration, support for sustainable economic development, good governance and humanitarian aid. At the bilateral level, the focus is mainly on technical cooperation. The active role South Africa played meant that the young democracy became Africa's most prominent spokesperson in other multilateral forums, such as the United Nations. The country forfeited this role during the years of Jacob Zuma's presidency (2009-2018), however, since he pursued a largely passive foreign policy. Corruption, mismanagement and other forms of bad governance led to domestic problems, which have absorbed a great deal of attention since then.

Nevertheless, South Africa remains an important mediator with a claim to regional leadership on the African continent. This is evidenced by its military engagement in peacekeeping missions, by means of which Pretoria underlines its close concern with conflict prevention and resolution. Over the past decade, relations have also been extended with the emerging countries of the South, primarily with the People's Republic of China. A logical consequence of this has been the institutionalisation of relations, for example in the BRICS Forum and through participation in the associated New Development Bank. Moreover, the thrust of South African foreign policy has traditionally been on strengthening South-South relations.

The following section provides an analysis of the philosophy, allocation of funds and instruments of South African international cooperation and takes a look forward to South Africa's future role within the region and in multilateral forums.

Philosophy of South African international cooperation: pan-Africanism, multilateralism

Since the end of apartheid, democratic South Africa has proactively sought to shape international development and expand multilateral solutions to complex challenges. This is attributable in part to the experience of apartheid itself, given that the former liberation movement African National Congress (ANC), which has been the country's permanent governing party since 1994, would not have proved successful without assistance from abroad. The ANC received considerable backing from the Eastern bloc and later also from Western countries. Support from within Africa was of especial value, however, because not only was the ANC granted exile and supplied with weapons, but black South Africans were also offered a compass for a self-determined Africa. Presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, in particular, built on these experiences to produce ideas for a South African foreign and development policy for Africa. The latter is the father of the "African Renaissance", which took up this leitmotif.

In addition, South Africa, as a regional peacekeeping power and economic heavyweight on the continent, is clearly striving to ensure independent policy-making for Africa. Along with its commitment to pan-Africanism, for which there are historical reasons, it is therefore also pursuing economic and political interests, which are of benefit to itself. The strong focus on multilateralism is due to the fact that the country has limited resources. South African foreign and development policy can use the relevant forums to achieve a leverage effect, especially if the policy approach adopted is a pan-African one. Assuming South Africa remains the region's leading force, the country will continue to be the most important interlocutor in sub-Saharan Africa for all non-African states. Its efforts to exert influence cannot, therefore, be reduced to development policy alone.

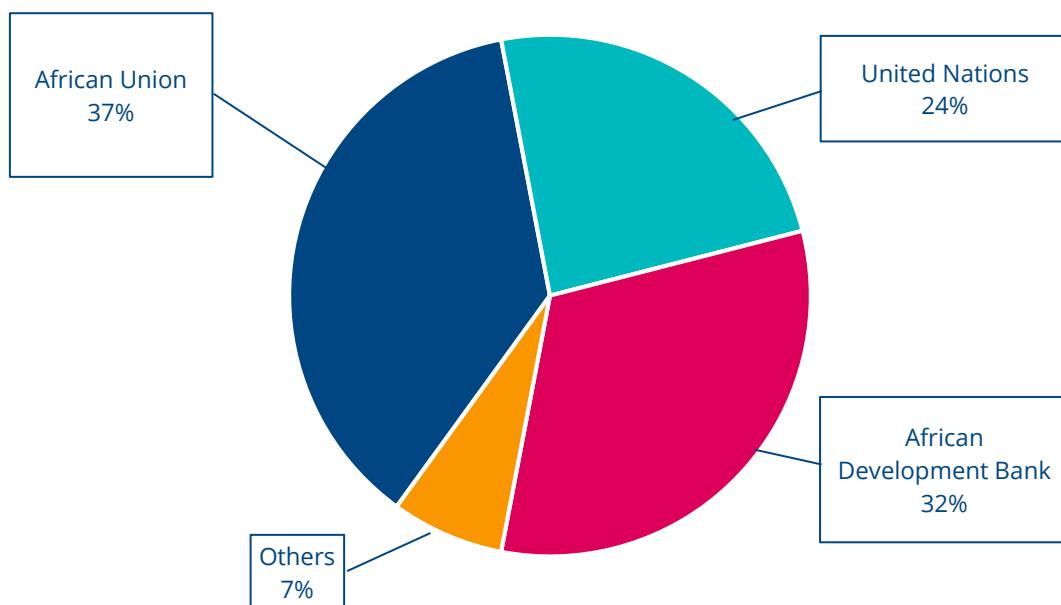
Rather, a holistic view is required to understand South Africa's approach to development and foreign policy. It transpires that South Africa is endeavouring to exert influence and shape policy in its favour on many levels. In conjunction with practical development projects, South Africa's international engagement represents an attempt to introduce or amend standards and regulations. The research director of the South African Institute for International Affairs, Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, calls this approach "regime/institution shifting or creation".¹ Efforts to influence and shape development policy for the whole of Africa have also been manifest in the country's active participation in various formats of the Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD).² Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor has explicitly highlighted South Africa's active role in promoting African agency across the board in the Strategic Plan 2020-2025.³

Resources and instruments of South African international and development cooperation

Multilateral cooperation

South Africa is a strong advocate of the multilateral approach to international policy. According to OECD estimates, the country allocated funds for development cooperation amounting to 106 million US dollars in 2019. Of this, 73.3 million US dollars, or about 70 per cent, went to multilateral organisations. The African Union accounted for the lion's share of multilateral allocations (37 per cent), followed by the African Development Bank (32 per cent) and the United Nations (24 per cent).⁴ This underlines the country's commitment to multilateralism and pan-Africanism. The relatively modest remaining amount was allocated to the Global Fund, which aims to fight HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis – a serious problem in southern Africa, which places a heavy burden on health insurance funds. The distribution of the funds is thus well considered and makes sense for South Africa.

Chart 1: Distribution of South Africa's multilateral allocations (2019, in per cent)



African Union

It is particularly important for South Africa, as a regional peacekeeping power, to extend its influence on the African continent, which makes its concentration on the African Union (AU) only logical. Thus it is no coincidence that the legislative chamber of the AU, the Pan-African Parliament, should be located in Midrand in South Africa. The country last held the rotating chairmanship of the AU in 2020. Due to the Corona pandemic, it failed to achieve the original goals of peace and security ("silencing the guns") during its AU chairmanship, but Cyril Ramaphosa as chairperson was able to initiate joint action by African states to procure vaccines against COVID-19.⁵

An important tool available to the AU itself since 2001 is NEPAD, a strategic instrument for socio-economic development wielded by the African states themselves. Thabo Mbeki played a major role in the establishment of NEPAD and its embedding in the AU in 2002. NEPAD's work is conducted primarily in regional economic areas. However, NEPAD is also used by international financial institutions, United Nations agencies and Africa's development partners as a mechanism to boost development efforts.⁶ In 2018, NEPAD was renamed the African Union Development Agency-NEPAD (AUDA-NEPAD). The name is intended to emphasise the institution's integration into the AU and to advance the AU's Agenda 2063.⁷

Another instrument South Africa has played a large part in establishing is the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), which enables African states to evaluate their own governance. APRM itself emerged from NEPAD in 2003.⁸

South Africa's efforts to influence the AU have been visible since its inception. This was the case particularly during Mbeki's presidency, but the AU has subsequently been a consistent priority in South Africa's foreign policy. This was confirmed most recently during the pandemic.

United Nations

The same applies to the UN, which is disproportionately present in Africa with its numerous sub-organisations and peace missions. Although not as successful as in days gone by, South Africa is positioning itself as an advocate for the interests of Africa and the Global South. Together with Germany, South Africa was a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2019/2020. Disappointingly, the country found itself voting together with Russia and China rather than the US or Germany. The idiosyncratic course pursued is indicative of the country's desire for an autonomous and independent foreign policy.⁹

African Development Bank

In view of the priorities described above, the annual financial support given to the African Development Bank (AfDB) is just as logical as the country's contributions to the AU and the UN. Positive economic development is indispensable for the achievement of its foreign policy goals in the region.

Bilateral cooperation

The African Renaissance and International Cooperation Fund (ARF) accounts for a large share of the financial resources flowing from South Africa's bilateral aid. In 2019, expenditures amounted to the equivalent of around 30 million US dollars.¹⁰ The ARF was founded in 2000 on the initiative of the then President Thabo Mbeki. Its objectives are development through technical cooperation, support for democracy and good governance, conflict prevention and resolution, socio-economic development and integration, and humanitarian assistance.¹¹ The ARF, a new instrument of devel-

opment work founded by the then still young democracy, was modelled in its approach on the development policy instruments of Western donor nations, but aimed at ensuring the independence, autonomy and capabilities of African states. The intention was that both South Africa and the respective (African) partner country should benefit from ARF projects. In no way did this exclude South Africa's own foreign policy goals in the region, however. On the contrary, the ARF was created for practical political purposes.¹² Leaving aside the fact that the fund is negligible in size compared to those in financially stronger donor countries, it nonetheless appeared erratic in terms of the countries targeted, the projects selected and the funding provided. There are several reasons for this. Given the continent's challenges and problems, the urgency of which is constantly changing, the ARF's objectives are too ambitious in relation to its budget. Moreover, the annual allocation of funds depends on the Ministry of Finance, which has to keep an eye on the overall budget situation.¹³

In view of the limited resources available to it, South Africa uses its strategic position as an influential regional power to engage in triangular cooperation. This involves strategic partnerships between South Africa and traditional donors in African partner countries in order to achieve converging goals in the region. Triangular cooperation as an instrument of development policy was first identified by policymakers and academics in the late 2000s.¹⁴ In the Heiligendamm process involving the (then) G8 members and the G5 countries (China, Mexico, Brazil, India and South Africa) triangular cooperation was explicitly included as a strategic instrument between North-South and South-South cooperation.¹⁵ Germany, in particular, has made systematic use of triangular cooperation as a form of development cooperation. Triangular cooperation accounts for about 0.1 per cent of Germany's total annual official development assistance (ODA) funds.¹⁶ According to the OECD, South Africa is involved in triangular cooperation in Africa with Germany, Ireland, Canada, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United States in the fields of good governance, public security and post-conflict reconstruction.¹⁷

Instruments of international cooperation in the broader sense

In connection with triangular cooperation, mention must also be made of inter-governmental cooperation in forums such as IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the ACP (Africa, Caribbean, Pacific) countries. These are platforms that do not focus on development cooperation, but which attempt to counterbalance Western-dominated forums and multilateral institutions. While BRICS is dominated primarily by China, IBSA is an association of three influential countries of the Global South. The financing of development projects, for example through the New Development Bank or the IBSA Fund for the Alleviation of Poverty and Hunger, underpins the development policy claim.

South Africa's influential position on the African continent has not only made it an interesting partner for alliances such as IBSA and BRICS, but also enabled it to conclude separate strategic partnerships, e.g. with the EU and the OECD. As a G20 member, South Africa advocates a more substantive role for the G20 in achieving the 2030 Agenda, first and foremost through the G20 Development Working Group and its focus on financing sustainable development and assisting developing countries in their economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸

South Africa is also an active member of the Southern African Regional Development Community (SADC). Regional integration and a good neighbourhood policy are among the declared goals of South African foreign policy.¹⁹ As the most advanced and diversified economy in Africa, South Africa has a strong interest in economic integration in the neighbouring region, as the countries concerned import South African consumer and capital goods in large quantities. For countries without access to the sea, such as Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe,

the supply of goods from South Africa or (in the case of overseas imports) through the country is vital. Even Mozambique and Namibia, which have their own deep-sea ports, depend on trade with South Africa. After lengthy procedures, SADC was finally able to launch the Regional Development Fund (RDF), a development instrument for infrastructure projects, in 2017. The Project Preparation and Development Fund (PPDF) of the Southern African Development Bank (SADB) is to be merged into the RDF in the hope of enabling projects to be implemented in a less bureaucratic fashion. At present, the implementation of projects via the SDAB is difficult due to the involvement of third parties and the associated financing rules. Given the fact that the region's economies are closely connected with South Africa, it is surprising that it has taken so long to set up the RDF. Nevertheless, providing the fund with adequate financial resources remains the biggest challenge. The debt of the countries in the region has increased since the global financial crisis of 2009. There is a lack of financing options even for national infrastructure projects, although they are badly needed. To date, instruments like the RDF have remained ineffective.²⁰

Another instrument with which South Africa, in particular, promotes regional integration is the Southern African Customs Union (SACU). One of the oldest unions of its kind in the world, its member countries are Botswana, Lesotho, Eswatini, Namibia and South Africa. The latter is in every respect the unrivalled heavyweight, without which SACU would not exist. SACU's customs revenues are distributed according to a key. While South Africa accounts for 95 per cent of imports into the economic area, it receives only about 17 per cent of customs revenue. Ultimately, the dominance of South African companies in the economies of the neighbouring countries also pays off for South Africa, but the redistribution of customs revenues must also be regarded as constituting substantial support. This is particularly the case with the dwarf states of Lesotho and Eswatini, the lion's share of whose state budgets is financed from SACU customs revenues. Customs revenues are enormously important for Namibia, too. The high volatility of customs revenues recently led to a debate on the revision of the distribution key. However, a reform depends on the political will of the member states.²¹

As described above, one of the focal points of South Africa's foreign and development policy is the prevention and resolution of conflicts. In addition to the instruments listed, the country participates in UN peacekeeping missions in Africa. South Africa currently has 1,041 soldiers and technical personnel deployed almost exclusively in the UN Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO). The country ranks 19th in the world in terms of the number of troops deployed by the UN.²² Military involvement has been declining in recent years, although its strategic importance continues to accord with South Africa's development policy goals on the continent.²³ Efforts to resolve the conflict in northern Mozambique put an end to this downward trend. After considerable hesitation and difficult negotiations with the Mozambican government, the states in the region, led by South Africa, Botswana, Angola, Rwanda and Zimbabwe, agreed to send a military contingent to Mozambique. South Africa is making the largest contribution with 1,495 soldiers and is also in charge of the mission.²⁴

Current developments in South African foreign and development policy

One idea that has been debated for a long time is the establishment of a South African development agency, the South African Development Partnership Agency (SADPA). The aim here is to coordinate various development policy and international cooperation projects with a view to their coherent and more efficient implementation. The existing projects are not executed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but by ministries with the respective competence. This leads to complicated coordination processes, particularly when it comes to the ARF. The most important development policy instruments are to be pooled in SADPA.²⁵ A small foundation sum equivalent to around

550,000 euros was made available for SADPA for the first time in the financial year 2019.²⁶ However, whether SADPA will become a powerful instrument of South African development policy is more than questionable. The economic problems at home and the related fiscal pressure make it unlikely that South Africa will be able to maintain the level of funding it has provided so far. This will undoubtedly be detrimental to the further development of SADPA.²⁷

Another new development is the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), in which all the states in Africa participate with the exception of Eritrea. AfCFTA is the outcome of an African initiative designed to facilitate the free movement of people, capital, goods and services. This makes the free trade area the flagship project of the AU's Agenda 2063.²⁸ Due to a pandemic-related delay, the AfCFTA secretariat in Ghana only began its work in 2021. South Africa, which unlike most African states is an industrialised economy, should benefit enormously from free trade within the continent.²⁹ It is, therefore, hardly surprising that DIRCO has made AfCFTA a foreign policy priority. Wamkele Mene, a South African, heads the secretariat. South Africa hopes that AfCFTA will trigger a boom in trade and industrial production, increased regional involvement and better integration into global trade and value chains.³⁰ From a South African perspective, promoting trade and economic growth is a part of development. It would, therefore, seem strange if AfCFTA were not simultaneously perceived as a development policy instrument.

Outlook: South Africa remains the most important partner due to the lack of an alternative

All the strategies and instruments notwithstanding, South Africa's claim to be involved in shaping the future must be measured against reality. The term of office of the severely corrupt Jacob Zuma from 2009-2018 is now generally regarded in South Africa as the "nine lost years" characterised by endemic corruption, government failure, incompetence, increasing national debt and a drop in economic performance. This led to a decline in South Africa's importance as Africa's political, economic and moral spokesman in the world. However, the retreat from the arena of international diplomacy was also actively pursued by Zuma, who had no interest in, or any ideas for, a constructive foreign and development policy. With the exception of AfCFTA there have been virtually no changes in South Africa's strategic alignment for a decade. Nevertheless, resources and thus opportunities have shrunk enormously.

Zuma's successor, Cyril Ramaphosa, has since sought to restore South Africa's international influence, but he is grappling with unprecedented domestic challenges. These include trench warfare within his own party, which absorbs a lot of time and attention, and a historic economic crisis, recently exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Efforts to assert the country's foreign and development policy interests have diminished as a result. A drop in financial resources and a lack of attention to the region prevent South Africa from living up to its aspirations. One example is the conflict in northern Mozambique, which Pretoria allowed to smoulder for years until a military operation became necessary. Despite an urgent need for action, there was a long delay in staging a response.

The South African government also behaved in an ambiguous manner during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, it was an early advocate for African countries to cooperate in the procurement of vaccines. On the other hand, President Ramaphosa repeatedly got carried away, indiscriminately accusing Western countries of "vaccine apartheid" and demanding the release of vaccine patents. In view of the technically complicated process involved, it is questionable whether a release would lead to an increase in vaccine production. The president is currently drawing more attention to himself through loud demands rather than specific efforts at reform,

both domestically and in foreign policy. The incompetence of the government apparatus is further highlighted by endemic corruption in connection with the fight against COVID-19.

In the foreseeable future little will change in the lack of capacity of the South African government apparatus to implement measures that have been agreed. Foreign policy options are limited due to the political, economic and social crisis at home and will probably continue to shrink due to financial bottlenecks. However, as long as no other African country can completely take over South Africa's role as an important spokesperson for Africa, the country will remain an important interlocutor for donor countries.

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² OECD: Development Co-operation Profiles: South Africa, in: [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/2dcf1367-en/1/3/2/50/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/2dcf1367-en&csp=177392f5df53d89c9678d0628e39a2c2&itemIGO=oecd&itemContent-Type=book#section-d1e58145](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/2dcf1367-en/1/3/2/50/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/2dcf1367-en&csp=177392f5df53d89c9678d0628e39a2c2&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book#section-d1e58145) [accessed 7 August 2021].

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¹² Mthembo, Philani 2021: South Africa as a Development Partner: An Empirical Analysis of the African Renaissance and International Cooperation Fund, in: Chaturvedi, Sachin/Janus, Heiner/Klingebiel, Stephan/Xiaoyun, Li/de Mello e Souza, André/Sidiropoulos, Elizabeth/Wehrmann, Dorothea (eds.): The Palgrave Handbook of Development Cooperation for Achieving the 2030 Agenda, London, pp. 567-581, here: p. 579.

¹³ Ibid., p. 578.

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