

IMPROVING GLOBAL GOVERNANCE THROUGH ENGAGEMENT WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

The case of BRICS

This paper presents a set of recommendations to increase the effectiveness of global governance forums by incorporating the experience, views and expertise of civil society. These recommendations are based on a research study, commissioned by Oxfam in Russia, which documented and analysed the experience of the Civil BRICS Forum 2015 and the views of organizers and participants. The recommendations are presented together with an overview of the lessons learned.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper offers a set of recommendations to the BRICS countries on the design and incorporation of an effective civil society engagement process relating to the annual BRICS Intergovernmental Summit. As with other global governance forums, the BRICS grouping has faced the challenge of how to improve the legitimacy of its policy making and implementing mechanisms – specifically how to enable the process to become more grounded and linked to the experiences and aspirations of the people represented by member states' governments.

Over recent years, BRICS governments and civil society have sought to ensure more effective participation of civil society sectors in BRICS processes. Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) was engaged in discussions about the representation of civil society at the BRICS summit in 2011, as part of the Civil Society–BRICS engagement initiative of the Forum for Democratic Governance in Montreal, Canada. The South Africa BRICS Think Tank together with the Department of International Relations and Cooperation hosted a series of meetings with civil society groups in 2014 and 2015 to discuss the development of a South African strategy for BRICS engagement. In Brazil in October 2015, REBRIP (the Brazilian Network for the Integration of Peoples) produced recommendations to create a permanent BRICS civil society consultative forum to facilitate civil society engagement in each of the five BRICS countries. All of these initiatives have been conducted in close interaction with, and often with full support of, the Sherpas in the BRICS member states.¹

These initiatives, together with other experiences of civil society participation at global forums, have prompted Oxfam to analyse examples of good practice and the challenges posed by civil engagement processes at global level. The first official Civil Society Forum of the BRICS countries (henceforth Civil BRICS Forum), held in Moscow from 29 June to 1 July 2015, presented a good opportunity for such analysis. This paper draws on a research study, commissioned by Oxfam in Russia, which documented and analysed the experience of this first Civil BRICS Forum, with the aim of assisting BRICS governments to develop an appropriate space for their civil societies to engage meaningfully with the BRICS processes. The research was based on a review of official and related documents and a series of interviews with key stakeholders, including those involved in the organization of the forum in Russia and members of civil society from each of the BRICS countries.²

The paper presents details of the forum and an overview of the lessons learned, which provided the basis for the recommendations below. These recommendations are targeted at the three main groups of actors with an interest in the involvement of BRICS civil society organizations (CSOs) in BRICS processes and policy development: the BRICS governments; the government and civil society of the country hosting the annual BRICS summit and related forums; and the civil societies of the BRICS countries. Oxfam hopes these recommendations will be useful to both policy makers and civil society in developing representative, transparent and inclusive processes.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR ALL BRICS GOVERNMENTS

- An effective Civil BRICS process will depend on an agreement of the definition of civil society and of the benefits of supporting inclusive involvement of civil society groups in such a process. Furthermore, it should recognize the specific value of giving BRICS CSOs an opportunity to share their experiences, expertise and knowledge, and to lobby on behalf the citizens of BRICS countries.
- A BRICS civil society consultative body should be established to coordinate and represent the civil society of each BRICS country. This body should be designed by civil society itself, reflect the diversity of each country's civil society, and be balanced in terms of gender and other social strata to ensure inclusive participation.
- Institute a dialogue, similar to that established by the G20 and G8, whereby a 'Troika' – a three-party group made up of representatives from the previous, current and future host governments and their civil societies – gather to discuss strengths and weaknesses of the recent processes so they can incorporate learning and make adjustments for the current and future processes as necessary. This should involve both government and civil society representatives in the same unified dialogue.
- Support processes at national level to enable civil society to respond to the host-country call for participation in a Civil BRICS Forum.
- It is profoundly important for all BRICS governments to welcome gender organizations as legitimate actors in their country's civil society, and to provide space and assistance to support their participation in the Civil BRICS process.
- The status of any recommendations from Civil BRICS Forums should be agreed on: specifically, how the BRICS Summit will incorporate such recommendations into its final communiqué, and how BRICS governments will be held to account in fulfilling their obligations.
- If the plan is to continue to hold several different forums (or outreach tracks) such as the Academic, Business, and Civil BRICS Forums, the BRICS governments need to define the separate purposes of each. This should be accomplished in discussion with each of the forum constituencies.

FOR THE GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SECRETARIAT IN A HOST COUNTRY

- Ensure transparent processes of participation by CSOs, with an open application process that allows sufficient time for preparatory work before the forum; and ensure that visa requirements are not used as a way to limit participation.
- Enable free and bottom-up definitions of the topics for discussion. These should relate to CSOs' interests in the effects and consequences of BRICS-country investments, trading and collaborations on poor populations within these countries and others, including their specific impact on women.
- Ensure transparent processes for the development of the agenda and working-group topics. These should involve all BRICS civil society groupings and be independent from government structures.
- Any development of position papers prior to the forum should be transparent and based on broad civil society involvement.
- Establish a realistic timeframe for each stage of the process and ensure that the format of the forum is designed to enable collaborative work on considered civil society positions relating to the effects of the various BRICS programmes.
- Ensure sufficient time between the Civil BRICS Forum and the Intergovernmental Summit, to enable Sherpas to take account of civil society recommendations.
- Provide funding mechanisms to enable such processes to be developed.

FOR BRICS CIVIL SOCIETY

- Institutionalize processes at national level within each country to enable relevant and representative CSOs to participate in discussions feeding into the annual Civil BRICS Forum.
- Use the Civil BRICS process as an opportunity to organize around BRICS issues, planning joint activities and common agenda-setting with other civil society groups, especially relating to BRICS programmes and policies.
- Conduct in-depth analysis of each year's Civil BRICS Forum to identify lessons learned and best practices, in order to improve future processes and develop positions for the suggested Troika process.
- Institutionalize processes for ongoing discussion between civil society groups throughout the year, thus ensuring fuller discussions on common issues which will feed into the preparation for the annual forum.
- Work collaboratively to develop the Civil BRICS agenda based on civil society objectives which take into account – but are not limited by – the host-country priorities.

- Advocate for the right of civil society to elect its own Civil BRICS management and implementation structures (such as a BRICS civil society consultative body).
- Develop mechanisms for monitoring how governments take up the recommendations from the Civil BRICS Forum.
- Recognize that each civil engagement process represents a valuable influencing opportunity, and an opportunity to test the organizational capacity of civil society itself to work together across the BRICS countries on common areas of concern and interest.
- Look for alternative funding sources for the civil process to ensure independence from government.

3 LESSONS LEARNED FROM CIVIL BRICS PROCESS IN RUSSIA 2015

The recommendations above are drawn from the findings of a series of interviews with key stakeholders of the Civil BRICS Forum in Russia in 2015, including those involved in its organization and civil society participants from each of the BRICS countries. The evidence showed that, while the initial plans for the forum were very detailed and comprehensive, for various reasons they were not completely fulfilled. The overall learning is that all BRICS governments and civil society actors need to engage in a deliberative process to design a mechanism that will enable BRICS civil societies to contribute their valuable experience and insights to BRICS debates and policy making. Some key findings of the research are presented below to support the recommendations.

CHALLENGES IN DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING THE 2015 CIVIL BRICS FORUM

The decision was taken by the 2015 Russian presidency of BRICS to hold an official Civil BRICS Forum, whereby civil society groups from each of the BRICS countries would be involved and contribute to the BRICS process. According to interviewees, from the initial teleconference it looked as though working groups would be set up in all five BRICS countries, with civil society groups coordinating and leading the discussion. One interviewee stated that the process seemed logical, as if an ‘engineer had designed it’; another said he had expected that there would be visits from Russian organizers to each country, and that the BRICS Sherpas in each country would put CSOs in touch with other relevant civil society groups. However, despite the fact that the decision to hold a Civil BRICS Forum in Moscow was taken almost one year in

advance, the final planning was very rushed and did not allow for adequate preparation on the part of civil society participants, nor was there adequate consultation with civil society on the topics/content of the forum.

Lack of transparency in selection of organizing bodies

The organizing bodies within Russia were appointed as follows. The Secretariat was established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) which, in consultation with the Russian BRICS Think Tank, appointed the three members of the Steering Committee and the 25 NGOs which constituted the Board. Board members were also selected on the advice of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation and the Presidential Council of Civil Society and Human Rights – which, like the Russian BRICS Think Tank, have close links to the Russian government. Many of the participating NGOs had been involved in previous global forums, such as the C20 process held in Russia in 2013. It was announced at one of the early Board meetings that no international organization could be involved in the Board.

Selection of topics for discussion was not led by civil society

Topics for discussion at the Civil BRICS Forum were identified by the Steering Committee in consultation with the MoFA, based on the topics to be included in the official BRICS Intergovernmental Summit. Working groups were to be established to develop position papers on these topics, and these would form the basis for discussions at the Civil BRICS Forum. Although the initial plan had been to involve participants from the other BRICS countries in the working groups, the cautious approach of the organizing bodies – which needed to act in accordance with the MoFA – meant it was not possible to identify participants from the other countries in time for this to happen.

The Board discussed topics for the working groups at a meeting in early 2015. At this meeting, Russian civil society participants successfully lobbied for the inclusion of the additional subtopic 'poverty and inequality'. The following seven topics were finally selected for development by the working groups: culture and inter-civilizational dialogue; harmonization of interethnic affairs; economics and trade; peace and security; inclusive sustainable development; healthcare; education and science. Gender and women's rights were not considered to be possible topics for discussion.

Working-group Chairs were appointed; most of them academics, with only two from the NGO sector. The Chairs were responsible for deciding on the membership of the working groups and organizing the meetings, and each group operated differently. Membership of the groups had to be approved by the Secretariat. An interviewee stated that the working group meetings were 'pretty closed' and 'hard to get into' if a place had not been allocated by the Secretariat. The working groups had around four months to produce a set of recommendations for discussion at the Civil BRICS Forum. Two working groups took the opportunity to broaden their discussions and hear the views of wider civil society groups, through open meetings held at the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation. As such, at a roundtable

meeting of the healthcare working group, a local CSO was able to present its concerns about inequality in access to healthcare. Each working group produced recommendations which were then put together, with some modifications, to create a Green Paper. The Green Paper was presented at the Civil BRICS Forum, and formed the basis for discussions leading to the final communiqué.

Restricted involvement of CSOs

One interviewee from the Steering Committee stated that it had been difficult to agree on how to approach the other BRICS countries' civil society sectors and how to select participating organizations. Nominations for country-delegation members were sought rather late, largely through the BRICS-country think tanks. As a result, and despite the best efforts of some think tanks, the final delegations from each country included very few representatives from civil society. Delegation members interviewed typically did not know how delegation members had been selected, had not had time to meet with other delegates prior to the forum, and generally felt very underprepared. Members of the think tanks in both Brazil and South Africa were uncomfortable with being asked to identify participants from civil society and to represent civil society at the Civil BRICS Forum.

In May, the Board in Russia was presented with a list of around 80 people from the other BRICS countries who were being invited to attend. One interviewee thought that the names had been identified largely through the network of BRICS think tanks, and that the MoFA had endorsed these names. The speakers at the forum were selected from this list of 80 names. It is unclear how the heads of delegation were selected.

Open registration was possible from 10 June for one week, just prior to the forum. Given that CSOs wishing to register would have to be sponsored for travel and accommodation, this short timeframe prevented many CSOs from attending. While informants state that, in addition to the 25 Russian CSOs involved in the Board, another 50–80 Russian organizations participated, it is not clear who these organizations were or how they were selected. There was also limited participation of civil society groups from the other BRICS countries. Overall, there was no clarity on who had been invited to the forum and no practicable way for CSOs to enrol themselves in the process or apply to attend. Following the event, the website stated that 500 participants were involved in the forum; however, there was no final list of participants.

Rushed nature of final preparations leading to reduced potential for meaningful consultation

At the beginning of May, the dates of the Civil BRICS Forum still had not been finalized, although it was to happen before the official Intergovernmental Summit on 8 July. The start date of 29 June was finally agreed in early June. Several people who had been selected to attend stated that they were trying to get more information about the agenda and topics to be discussed right up until the final days before the forum. Some received the working group recommendations one week before the forum took place, while others did not see these until their arrival in Moscow. There was a general feeling of confusion and being underprepared,

exacerbated by the fact that participants were receiving mixed and conflicting messages about their roles at the forum – for instance, being invited to act as a moderator during a particular session and then having this invitation revoked. The final agenda was not produced until one week before the forum, with last-minute adjustments such as the removal of some topics and speakers that had appeared on previous versions. According to several interviewees, the official Civil BRICS website did not contain useful information about the forum until the week of the meeting itself, when the agenda, recommendations and Green Paper were uploaded.

Inappropriate timeframe led to limited ability to influence the Intergovernmental Summit

The fact that the Civil BRICS Forum was held only days before the official Intergovernmental Summit meant it was unrealistic to expect that its recommendations could have any impact on the summit. In a recent post-BRICS dialogue meeting, a representative from the South African Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the communiqué from the Civil BRICS Forum had very little, if any, impact on the summit, largely due to the late timing of the communiqué.³

Lack of recognition of the value of a civil society perspective

Although members of BRICS think tanks and their colleagues who were selected to be members of delegations did know about BRICS programmes and issues arising from them, they were not fully representative of CSOs, which would have had different and very specific perspectives on BRICS issues. One participant from India stated that it was difficult for him to see this as a civil society process; rather it was a government-organized process. Another participant reflected that while academics and government representatives tended to focus on a 'normative approach' to politics (i.e. what ought to be), civil society is generally more focused on the practical effects of policies on people's lives. An example given of this was the Trade and Economy working group which, according to one interviewee, was more intent on promoting economic operations among BRICS countries than talking about the effects of such agreements and flows of capital on people's lives.

Furthermore, there was a feeling that the inclusion of representatives from the private sector and organizations such as the Russian National Committee of the International Chamber of Commerce had coloured the recommendations of the working groups, meaning that these did not represent a civil society perspective. Given that the 2015 BRICS process included separate forums for academia, business interests and youth, it seems doubly important that the forum for civil society should be confined to *bona fide* civil society organizations which exist to promote the interests of groups of citizens and to consider the impact of BRICS policies and programmes on ordinary people.

For the same reasons, the important role of chairing the working groups should be undertaken by members of civil society. It is imperative that the BRICS countries should jointly define what is meant by civil society and

the purpose of the Civil BRICS Forum. This would prevent future manipulation of the term to suit specific governmental agendas and governmental direction of the recommendations.

CHALLENGES POSED BY FORMAT OF THE FORUM

In addition to the plenary sessions, the main body of the forum consisted of parallel panel sessions based on the topics covered by each of the working groups. The objective was to produce a final set of recommendations from each of the working groups on the final day of the forum. Very little time was scheduled for this work, perhaps illustrating the expectation that the initial recommendations (i.e. those outlined in the Green Paper at the start of the forum) would form the basis of the final communiqué. It seems to have been up to the participants to make time to work on drafts of the final recommendations after the end of the working day or during coffee breaks.

Participants had mixed feelings about the process. Some, such as one participant from China, felt that the sessions were very interesting and raised a lot of pertinent questions. A Russian participant felt that the agenda was 'good, but there was not time to discuss in detail'. Others, including participants from Russia, India and South Africa, felt that the process was rather incoherent and not structured to produce useful consensus around the different issues. There was a general feeling that the format could have been better structured to allow proper deliberations.

The final communiqué could only contain a limited number of recommendations from each working group, so the words had to be carefully chosen. On the last day, the final statements of each working group were put up on a screen, and a selected drafting committee had to vote to accept or reject the wording.⁴ This process was rather messy and at times unclear – with recommendations being re-worded by those who were most familiar with English in order to reduce the text. The final communiqué was substantially different from the text of the Green Paper, the language of which often reflected a Russian (government) view which the delegates from other BRICS countries could not endorse.⁵ The feeling among interviewees was that it was remarkable that a consensus was achieved in the final session, and that credit for this was due to the chairing of that session.

VALUE OF THE CIVIL BRICS 2015 PROCESS

Despite its limitations, the Civil BRICS Forum provided space for useful discussion, and most participants interviewed felt that the experience had been worthwhile. A South African participant reported having had good interaction with the Indian and Brazilian delegations and understood that they face similar issues. A Chinese participant had clearly not experienced anything like this forum before, and was grateful for the chance to attend

so many interesting sessions. Most participants interviewed felt that the principle of gathering together civil society groups from the BRICS countries was valuable, and that this had been vindicated by the fact that the groups had managed to work together to produce the final communiqué. Participants recognized that the various civil society groups benefited from joint discussions of common issues and from the experience of working together to formulate common understandings and positions.

Participants were generally pleased with the final communiqué, despite its brevity, and were proud of the fact that they had achieved common understandings of issues. This was largely due to the hard work of participants outside of the scheduled sessions. It was also noted that when some delegations felt unable to subscribe to certain forms of wording, changes were made to accommodate this. The South African delegation was particularly pleased that the opening paragraph of the final communiqué began with a statement outlining the need for an institutionalized space for CSOs to contribute to BRICS discussions. It is to the credit of participants that this communiqué was produced, and this reflects the value of giving space to capture the perspective and expertise of civil society.

4 CONCLUSIONS

There is growing debate about the role of the BRICS grouping in the world and its ability to shape global politics, especially given the current slow-down of the BRICS economies. This is exacerbated by delays in implementing the policies adopted at various BRICS forums. Thus it becomes even more critical to ensure that BRICS policy making and follow-up activities are in tune with the experience, interests and aspirations of wider society in BRICS countries. This reinforces the need for an established and effective dialogue process involving the civil societies of the BRICS countries.

While it is to be commended that the Russian presidency of BRICS included a Civil BRICS Forum as part of the annual discussions, the forum's design and implementation was a top-down, government-driven process. The last-minute organization of the event led to limited involvement from the civil societies of the BRICS countries, illustrating that the value of a civil society perspective was not fully recognized. The format of the forum did not easily allow for constructive participation and formulation of ideas, nor did it provide space to discuss gender issues. Furthermore, the timing of the event – only one week prior to the Intergovernmental Summit – did not allow for any real influence of the Civil BRICS Forum on BRICS policy making. Nevertheless, despite these problems, the Civil BRICS process was a valuable exercise and provided a platform for civil society to discuss common experiences and formulate some initial policy positions.

Increasingly, civil society is regarded as an important constituency in the policy debate at both national and global levels. The degree of its

involvement in policy making is a critical factor in determining the level, pace and quality of a country's economic, social and political development. Civil society engagement can promote development and improve the economic and social conditions of poor and marginalized people. It also increases the accountability of policy makers and the legitimacy of policies developed. Conversely, lack of dialogue with civil society can lead to uninformed and arbitrary decision making, which frequently results in increased poverty and inequality. It is to be hoped that this paper will become a useful tool helping stakeholders to streamline BRICS processes to ensure more effective engagement with civil society.

NOTES

- 1 Sherpa is the name given to the personal representative of a head of state or government who is responsible for the preparatory work for an international summit.
- 2 Research conducted by Janice Giffen of the International Training and Research Centre (INTRAC) in 2015.
- 3 Director of BRICS at the South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) at the HSRC (Human Sciences Research Council) BRICS Civil Society Forum Report Feedback, 14 August 2015.
- 4 This committee consisted of the 25 Russian NGOs constituting the Board, and the national delegations from the BRICS countries. Only the heads of the delegations had the right to speak and vote at this meeting.
- 5 For instance, the Chinese delegation felt unable to sign up to the text on large energy projects; the Brazilian, Indian and South African delegations could not endorse the Russian perspective on NATO, reflected in the initial Peace and Security Group's recommendations. An Indian participant stated that the Trade and Economy recommendations in the Green Paper contained some 'damaging proposals', such as the desire to strengthen legislation on intellectual property; and several countries could not sign up to what they felt was the intolerant language about individual freedoms of expression.

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