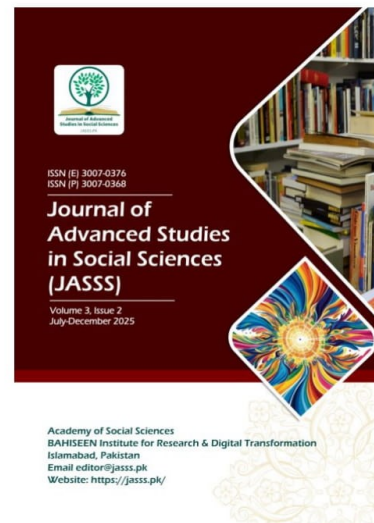


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Empty Promises or Structural Constraints? A Critical Qualitative Inquiry into the Nature of BRICS Social Development Efforts in South Africa

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Abstract

Background

In recent years, the BRICS bloc comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa has emerged as a vital platform for South-South cooperation, shaping global governance and development agendas. This study examines the impact of BRICS collaboration on social development initiatives in South Africa, focusing on the nature, achievements, and challenges of BRICS-supported projects. Grounded in the Developmental State Theory, the research explores how these partnerships align with national development goals and contribute to social transformation. Using a qualitative, exploratory design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including South African scholars specializing in BRICS relations and officials from the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Findings indicate that BRICS collaboration has contributed significantly to infrastructure, education, and healthcare development, particularly through the New Development Bank (NDB) and knowledge-sharing initiatives. Successes include enhanced funding mechanisms and technology transfer, mainly from China and India. However, challenges such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, weak coordination among BRICS partners, and socio-political resistance persist. While BRICS initiatives align with South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, gaps remain in addressing unemployment, poverty, and inequality. The study recommends improving policy coordination, transparency in funding, and stronger public-private partnerships to integrate BRICS initiatives into local social frameworks. Overall, the findings suggest that with targeted reforms and deeper collaboration, BRICS can play a transformative role in advancing South Africa's social development agenda and achieving long-term sustainability. Limitations include a small sample size.

Keywords: BRICS, Social Development, National Development Plan (NDP), New Development Bank (NDB) South-South Cooperation, South Africa

1. Introduction

BRICS is a coalition of five major developing countries Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa widely regarded as some of the world's fastest-growing emerging economies. This recognition is largely attributed to their low labour costs, favourable demographics, and abundant natural resources (Chen et al., 2020). South Africa joined BRICS in 2011, aligning with its foreign policy goals to address poverty, inequality, and job creation, while also seeking support for African development and international reforms (Shubin, 2018). The inclusion of South Africa in BRICS marked a significant milestone, indicating a shift towards a stronger development agenda within the group (Vadra, 2017). As of January 2025, BRICS has expanded to include six additional members Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates forming what is now referred to as BRICS+. However, this article focuses on the original five founding members due to their long-standing collaboration and the historical context of their development within the bloc.

The South African government highlights several economic advantages of joining BRICS, including expanded trade and investment opportunities, increased influence in global institutions, and representation of the sub-Saharan region (South African Government News Agency, 2018). Through BRICS membership, South Africa gains access to employment prospects, infrastructure development, and an international platform to advance its foreign policy and national objectives. Motivated by national interests, the country collaborates with key Southern partners to support reforms in global governance. Furthermore, BRICS facilitates projects across sectors such as science, agriculture, security, and justice, which contribute to economic growth and unemployment reduction. South Africa's participation has benefited both itself and the BRICS coalition, which has driven over one-third of global GDP growth in the past decade (Kapoor, 2020).

Despite the optimistic discourse surrounding BRICS, increasing scholarly critique highlights the bloc's internal dynamics and its limited impact on member states, particularly in the realm of social development. While BRICS advocates for equity and collective progress, it struggles with significant internal disparities; notably, China's economic dominance often eclipses the influence of other members, raising questions about the fairness of cooperation within the group (Thompson, 2017). Moreover, the absence of a robust institutional framework has constrained BRICS's capacity to deliver concrete social development outcomes (Kornegay & Bohler-Muller, 2013). BRICS countries, particularly China and South Africa, have influenced development policies in Southern Africa, potentially creating development space and fostering the emergence of developmental states (Carmody, 2017). However, there is a debate on whether BRICS' influence has reinforced the neoliberal, extractive nature of Southern African economies or genuinely promoted sustainable development (Carmody, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated socio-economic disparities in South Africa, undermining progress towards Sustainable Development Goals and there is a need for BRICS to adopt bottom-up perspectives and qualitative state interventions to effectively address social and economic challenges in Africa (Lumumba-Kasongo, 2015). The BRICS effect, including South-South cooperation, challenges established principles and practices in international development cooperation, indicating new positions, modes of cooperation, and institutional changes (Gomes & Esteves, 2018). BRICS promotes South-South cooperation as an alternative to traditional development models, challenging established international development cooperation structures. This approach aims to

create new positions and modes of development cooperation that can benefit South Africa (Gomes & Esteves, 2018).

1.1 Problem statement

After more than three decades of democracy, South Africa is still battling with issues of poverty, inequality, unemployment and hunger (Stats SA, 2024). South Africa faces various social development issues that impact the well-being and progress of its population and the country has high levels of poverty and income inequality, with a significant portion of the population living in poverty (Iwara et al., 2020). The unequal distribution of wealth, resources, and opportunities exacerbates social disparities and hinders inclusive development. Moreover, the country struggles with high unemployment rates, particularly among youth. Limited job opportunities contribute to economic exclusion and hinder social mobility, leading to increased poverty and social unrest (Ngubane et al., 2023).

Furthermore, despite efforts to improve access to education, South Africa continues to face challenges in delivering quality education to all citizens. Disparities in educational outcomes persist, affecting employment prospects and perpetuating socio-economic inequalities (Plagerson et al., 2019). Moreover, health and healthcare is another issue South Africa is battling with. South Africa faces significant health challenges, including a high burden of HIV/AIDS, other communicable diseases, and non-communicable diseases. Access to quality healthcare services remains unequal, particularly in rural areas (Ngubane et al., 2023).

Since South Africa joined BRICS in 2010, the group has undertaken various initiatives to promote social development. However, significant challenges persist in addressing social development issues across the BRICS nations despite these efforts (Iwara et al., 2020). One of the key initiatives undertaken by BRICS has been the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) in 2015 (Cooper, 2017). The NDB aims to finance infrastructure and sustainable development projects in BRICS and other emerging economies (Duggan et al., 2022). While the NDB has funded various projects, there are concerns about the equitable distribution of these funds and the overall impact on social development (Duggan et al., 2022).

Furthermore, BRICS has collaborated on other initiatives, such as the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement, a framework for providing protection against global liquidity pressures, and the BRICS Business Council, which promotes economic, trade, and investment cooperation among the member countries (Kirton & Larionova, 2022). However, the tangible impact of these initiatives on social development remains limited.

Given this background, it is crucial to better understand the impact of BRICS on social development, and further research and exploration are needed to determine whether South Africa's involvement in BRICS is helping address these social development challenges. The aim of this article is to explore the impact of BRICS collaboration on social development initiatives in South Africa. The corollary objective been to examine the degree to which the collaboration among BRICS countries has shaped the implementation and efficacy of particular social development initiatives in South Africa.

2. Literature review

As a member of BRICS, South Africa's inclusion in the coalition has been of particular interest, given the country's unique social and economic challenges. One area of focus has been the potential impact of BRICS collaboration on social development

initiatives within South Africa. The BRICS alliance focuses on various areas of collaboration, including agriculture, research, technology and innovation, manufacturing and minerals processing, trade and investment promotion, and sustainable energy (Strategy For BRICS Economic Partnership, 2015).

The primary objective of BRICS is to foster economic growth, security, and peace in a globalized and interconnected environment. Its member states span Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America, providing a transnational dimension and expanded potential consumer markets (BRICS, 2018). According to BRICS (2018), the coalition aims to enhance and support existing bilateral and multilateral relations among its members, improve market access, facilitate market linkages, promote trade and investment, and create a business-friendly atmosphere for investors and entrepreneurs within the member nations.

Additionally, BRICS is dedicated to addressing high unemployment rates, alleviating poverty, and promoting social inclusion on a global scale. It seeks to enhance the coordination of macroeconomic policies (Strategy For BRICS Economic Partnership, 2015). The BRICS mandate aligns with several UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with both emphasizing the importance of addressing the needs and challenges faced by developing countries, particularly in reducing poverty and inequality (Chen et al., 2020).

Social development issues encompass the socio-economic challenges that affect the well-being and quality of life of individuals and communities, including poverty, unemployment, inequality, and inadequate access to education, health care, housing, and social protection (Pasara & Garidzirai, 2020). In South Africa, poverty and inequality remain deeply rooted multidimensional problems, particularly affecting rural and marginalized communities (Francis & Webster, 2019; Pretorius, 2020). Despite post-1994 interventions such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), Millenium Development Goals (MDGS), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the National Development Plan (NDP), limited structural transformation has hindered progress (Mdluli & Dunga, 2022). Scholars argue that persistent poverty and inequality are linked to entrenched economic structures and insufficient political reform, indicating the need for new approaches to improving living conditions and income security (Francis & Webster, 2019; Azzarri & Signorelli, 2020).

Unemployment continues to exacerbate poverty and hinder social development. Stagnant productivity, skills shortages, and declining investment have driven unemployment to some of the highest rates globally, reaching 34.4% among active job seekers and 44.4% when including discouraged workers (Pasara & Garidzirai, 2020; Maisiri et al., 2019). Although BRICS involvement was expected to stimulate economic growth and employment, the developmental gains have remained limited, with political benefits outweighing economic improvements (Diko & Sempijja, 2021). As a result, minimal economic advancement continues to restrict South Africa's broader social development prospects.

Two other core social development challenges are the poor state of education and health care. The legacy of apartheid-era exclusion continues to affect education quality, particularly for Black learners, despite government commitments to reform (Fourie, 2018; Akoojee, 2016). While BRICS cooperation through initiatives like the BRICS Network University has potential to improve education and research outcomes, the benefits have yet to be fully realized (Khomyakov, 2018; Rensburg et al., 2015; Chisholm & Chissale, 2025). Similarly, although major post-1994 reforms expanded access to primary health care, significant inequalities in health outcomes persist due to resource disparities,

management inefficiencies, and uneven infrastructure distribution (Maphumulo & Bhengu, 2019). Even within the BRICS framework, progress in South Africa's health system remains mixed, requiring intensified efforts to reduce inequality (Watt et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2023).

2.2 Theoretical framework

This study applied Developmental State Theory to analyze whether South Africa's BRICS collaboration has strengthened its efforts to address social development challenges through state-driven transformation (de Wee, 2016; Gumede, 2019). Developmental State Theory emphasizes the state's active role in economic and social restructuring, including investments in human capital, infrastructure, and welfare systems (Chen et al., 2020). While BRICS has created opportunities for cooperation in infrastructure, technology transfer, and economic growth (Vadra, 2017; Shubin, 2018), policy misalignment, institutional weaknesses, and the risk of reinforcing neoliberal pressures constrain South Africa's developmental ambitions (Carmody, 2017; Lumuba-Kasongo, 2015). The framework thus provides a critical lens for understanding how BRICS engagement influences South Africa's capacity to advance inclusive social development as a developmental state (Diko & Sempijja, 2021).

3. Methodological approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the impact of BRICS collaboration on social development initiatives in South Africa. We used a qualitative research approach to investigate the impact of BRICS collaboration on social development initiatives in South Africa as we considered it most appropriate for the exploratory nature of the study, allowing the researcher to delve into complex social phenomena that cannot be fully captured through quantitative data (Cresswell, 2014).

3.1 Research design

In this study we employed a qualitative exploratory research design. Cresswell (2014) supports the use of an exploratory design when there is limited understanding of the topic under investigation. Neuman (2014) describes the exploratory design as a study undertaken to get new insights, find new ideas, and gain a better understanding of a topic. Specifically for this study, there is limited information and knowledge on the impact of BRICS collaboration on social development initiatives in South Africa. Therefore, the exploratory design was the ideal research design to help generate new ideas, views, and opinions about the research object (Bless et al., 2013).

3.2 Participants of the study

For this study, the target population consisted of scholars from South African universities with expertise on BRICS relations and officials from the Department of International Relations (DIRCO). By targeting this specific group, we gathered insights and perspectives from individuals and organizations directly involved in or knowledgeable about the impact of BRICS collaboration on social development initiatives in South Africa. The study employed both purposive and snowball sampling strategies to select 8 participants comprising of 6 university academics with expertise in BRICS relations to South Africa and 1 official from the Department of International Relations (DIRCO) and 1 official from BRICS Research think tank to gain insights on the social development initiatives (See Table 4.1). Neuman (2014) notes that qualitative research often utilises purposive sampling to select individuals or groups with specialised knowledge. Given that BRICS is a relatively new area of study, experts were scarce, which made the snowball

sampling technique appropriate for recruiting further participants. In this approach, the researchers asked participants to refer others in similar positions (Neuman 2014). Those referred will then be asked to identify additional potential participants. The sample size was justified as the study focused on key informants and reached data saturation after 8 participants.

3.3 Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process

This research used semi-structured interview guide to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' beliefs, perceptions, and accounts regarding the impact of BRICS collaboration on social development initiatives in South Africa. The semi-structured interview method provides greater flexibility compared to a structured approach (Igwenugu, 2016). Ultimately, the study recruited 2 officials from DIRCO and BRICS Think Tank and 6 lecturers aged 18-65 with knowledge of BRICS from the universities in South Africa. For participant recruitment, we emailed a participant information sheet, and upon agreement, provided an informed consent form. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and MS Teams and were recorded after gaining consent from the participants. In this study, data collection was completed after interviewing the eighth participant, as data saturation had been achieved. Data saturation refers to the point at which no new themes, insights, or variations arise from further data collection, suggesting that additional interviews would not add significant value to the study's findings (Nayak & Narayan, 2019).

3.4 Data Analysis

This study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2012) six-phase thematic analysis to interpret qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. Analysis began with familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts, followed by systematic generation of initial codes capturing salient features of the data. These codes were then organised into potential themes, which were subsequently reviewed for coherence and alignment with the dataset. The themes were defined and refined to clarify their analytic boundaries before the final narrative was produced. Qualitative rigour, understood as the coherence, transparency, and systematic nature of the research process, was ensured through methodological discipline, adherence to established criteria for validity, reliability, confirmability, and transferability (Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016), and the use of a reflective journal to document and mitigate researcher bias.

3.5 Ethical considerations

This study involved human participants and was therefore guided by ethical principles relevant to social science research. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's ethics committee. Before data collection commenced, each participant was provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, their rights (including the right to withdraw), and any potential risks or benefits (Creswell, 2014). Participants were given adequate time to consider participation and ask questions. Written informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews. The researchers ensured that participants' privacy was respected throughout the research process. No identifiable information was collected beyond what was necessary for the study.

4. Presentation and discussion of findings

The demographic characteristics of the participants is shown in table 4.1.

The codes used in the study, such as Participant 1 and Participant 2, were implemented to protect the identities of the participants, ensuring confidentiality while

still enabling the inclusion of relevant data in the analysis. These codes are particularly vital in qualitative research, where individual responses and personal experiences are examined.

Table 4. 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Codes	Age	Gender	Education Level	Job Category	Work Experience
Participant 1	28	Male	PhD	Lecturer	7 years
Participant 2	29	Male	PhD	Lecturer	7 years
Participant 3	53	Male	PhD	Professor / Lecturer	25 years
Participant 4	54	Female	PhD	Professor / Lecturer	20 years
Participant 5	54	Female	PhD	Professor / Lecturer	20 years
Participant 6	38	Male	PhD	Lecturer	13 years
Participant 7	32	Female	Masters	BRICS Think Tank official	5 years
Participant 8	59	Male	Masters	DIRCO official	37 years

Age emerged as an important demographic characteristic, offering insights into the participants' generational perspectives, professional maturity, and their duration of engagement with BRICS-related issues. For instance, younger participants (ages 28, 29, 32 and 38) provided a fresh viewpoint, emphasizing a global perspective on emerging trends in BRICS relations. In contrast, older participants (ages 53, 54, and 59) contributed their experience and historical context, enriching the understanding of BRICS's long-term evolution and its impact on social development.

The gender diversity among participants ensured a range of perspectives was represented in the study and highlighted how gender dynamics influence professional experiences and opinions within the BRICS context. The study included both male and female participants comprising 5 males and 3 females.

Additionally, the educational level of participants was significant, as it indicated the depth of their expertise and qualifications. PhD holders (Participants 1–6) were highly educated and provided critical, well-informed insights, especially on complex topics related to BRICS cooperation, international relations, and economic strategies. Conversely, Master's level participants (Participants 7 and 8) contributed valuable, though slightly less advanced, knowledge and expertise, reflecting more practical and policy-oriented perspectives on BRICS operations.

Finally, work experience indicated the participants' tenure in their respective fields, highlighting their depth of knowledge. Participants with less experience (5 to 13 years) offered contemporary views on BRICS, focusing on recent developments and shifts in the bloc's approach. In contrast, those with more extensive work experience (20–37 years) provided a long-term perspective, aiding in the understanding of the connection between BRICS and social development in South Africa

Nature of BRICS supported Social Development projects in South Africa

South Africa's involvement in BRICS is framed as both an opportunity for domestic advancement and a means of influencing global economic and social governance. The participants in the current study emphasised that:

BRICS is a voice for the global south and a platform for SA to project its foreign policy priorities (Participant 5).

This statement highlights the geopolitical importance of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) as a coalition representing the interests of developing nations. The phrase "voice for the Global South" emphasises BRICS' role in challenging Western-dominated global economic and political systems, offering an alternative platform where emerging economies can shape global governance structures.

For South Africa, BRICS functions as a strategic diplomatic platform to advance its foreign policy priorities, which often focus on economic development, multilateralism, and addressing historical inequalities rooted in colonialism and apartheid (Nach & Ncwadi, 2024). This aligns with South Africa's broader foreign policy goals, which prioritize African development, regional integration, and the reform of global institutions like the United Nations Security Council and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

This view is consistent with Hopewell (2017), who describes BRICS as a significant force in promoting South-South cooperation and challenging the traditional global economic order led by the Global North. South Africa's involvement enables it to utilize collective bargaining power, ensuring that the concerns of Africa and the broader Global South, such as equitable trade policies and sustainable development, are highlighted in international discussions.

Another participant also mentions that:

There are basically 3 pillars of cooperation in BRICS, and the 3rd pillar speaks towards social development (Participant 2)

The participant above emphasizes that BRICS cooperation is built on three key pillars, with the third pillar specifically addressing social development. This aligns with the research conducted by Kornegay and Bohler-Müller (2013), who identify three main areas of cooperation within BRICS: political/security, economic/financial, and social/cultural cooperation. The third pillar, which focuses on social development, includes initiatives related to education, health, and poverty reduction (Tandon & Slobodchikoff, 2024). This aspect is particularly significant for countries like South Africa, where economic disparities and social challenges are urgent issues. Tandon and Slobodchikoff (2024) point out that BRICS has made education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation priorities, acknowledging that sustainable economic growth should be supported by robust social policies. Through its involvement in BRICS, South Africa can share best practices, attract investment in social sectors, and collaborate on research initiatives aimed at enhancing living standards.

Additional key point is raised by another participant's assertion that:

BRICS focuses on issues of fighting hunger, fighting unemployment, fighting inequality, improving the lives of people in their relationship with their environment (Participant 6)

The participant's assertion that BRICS focuses on combating hunger, unemployment, and inequality, as well as improving the lives of people in relation to their environment, aligns closely with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This specifically resonates with Goal 1 (No Poverty) and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequality), which BRICS has integrated into its framework (BRICS 2018). According to the BRICS (2018), the member nations have incorporated the SDGs into their cooperation agenda through initiatives like the BRICS Agriculture Research Platform (BARP), designed to enhance food security; the BRICS Labor and Employment Ministers' Meetings, which focus on job creation and equitable working conditions; and investments by the New

Development Bank (NDB) in renewable energy to promote environmental sustainability. Consequently, South Africa, as a member of BRICS, benefits from these initiatives, utilizing them to advance its national development goals while also contributing to global efforts for poverty reduction, inclusive economic growth, and climate resilience.

Success stories and key achievements

The participants highlighted several key achievements of BRICS, emphasizing its role in development finance, infrastructure, and health cooperation. These achievements illustrate BRICS' commitment to reducing dependency on Western institutions and fostering self-reliance among member states. Some of the participants highlighted that:

The origins of ideas like a development bank for BRICS is mainly one of the most significant achievements and that the idea was formalized in 2014 in Brazil (Participant 1).

The creation of the New Development Bank (NDB) was a strategic response to the limitations of existing multilateral financial institutions, which often fail to adequately cater to the developmental needs of BRICS nations. The NDB's establishment marked a significant shift in global financial governance, allowing BRICS countries to take greater control of their economic futures and provide funding for infrastructure projects that align with their national and regional priorities (Participant 5)

These statements underscore the importance of the New Development Bank (NDB), which was officially established in 2014 at the BRICS Summit in Fortaleza, Brazil. The creation of the NDB was a strategic initiative aimed at reducing dependence on Western-dominated financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Bond, 2018). The bank offers loans and financial support for infrastructure and sustainable development projects across BRICS member states and beyond (Biziwick et al., 2015; Tsaurai, 2025).

The establishment of the NDB is often seen as a pivotal moment in global financial governance. Before its creation, developing countries had limited influence over decision-making in international financial institutions. The NDB signifies a shift towards multilateralism and financial autonomy, particularly for the Global South (Bond; 2018). Its emphasis on sustainable infrastructure projects aligns with global development priorities, including investments in renewable energy to support climate action, transportation and connectivity projects to enhance trade and economic integration, and urban development initiatives aimed at improving housing and infrastructure in rapidly growing cities (Thompson & De Wet, 2020). By financing projects tailored to developing economies, the NDB reinforces BRICS' position as a leader in South-South cooperation and helps mitigate the structural inequalities associated with traditional financial systems.

One practical application of developmental state theory within BRICS is the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) to finance infrastructure and social projects. This aligns with the concept of "New Developmentalism," whereby developing nations prioritize state-driven investments, industrial policy, and financial autonomy (Bresser-Pereira, 2010). Unlike traditional financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, which impose conditions on loans, the NDB enables developing countries to finance their priorities independently (Hopewell, 2017).

China's economic transformation was partly fueled by state-controlled banks financing strategic industries and social development (Gu et al., 2018). South Africa's involvement in the NDB presents an opportunity to adopt similar models, emphasizing long-term investment in social development, education, and healthcare infrastructure.

Another significant achievement mentioned is the:

Lesotho Highlands Project Phase 2 that contributes to water in South Africa (Participant 3).

This project is part of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP), a collaborative initiative between Lesotho and South Africa aimed at ensuring long-term water security for the Gauteng region, South Africa's economic center. The second phase of the project includes the construction of the Polihali Dam, water transfer infrastructure, and hydroelectric power development (Braun, 2020).

The strategic importance of this project is twofold. South Africa is experiencing increasing water scarcity, worsened by climate change, urbanization, and population growth. The LHWP guarantees a reliable water supply to Gauteng, which is essential for economic sustainability and public health. Additionally, the project offers economic advantages to both South Africa and Lesotho, including job creation, infrastructure investment, and energy generation, highlighting BRICS' commitment to mutual development rather than exploitative partnerships (Alden, 2017). This approach aligns with BRICS' broader strategy of fostering infrastructure development across Africa. By facilitating projects like the LHWP, BRICS promotes regional cooperation and reinforces South Africa's leadership role on the continent.

Another participant also cites the:

BRICS Vaccine Research and Development Facility and BRICS health ministers' dedicated work streams (Participant 4)

This highlights BRICS' growing emphasis on global health governance, particularly in response to health crises like COVID-19. The BRICS Vaccine Research and Development Center, established in 2021, aims to facilitate collaborative research on vaccines and treatments, enhance manufacturing capabilities in member states, and promote equitable access to vaccines, especially in the Global South. This initiative aligns with findings by Nach and Ncwadi (2024), which indicate that BRICS played a vital role in global health responses during the COVID-19 pandemic, collaborating on vaccine distribution, medical supplies, and knowledge-sharing to strengthen public health systems.

Additionally, the BRICS Health Ministers' Work Streams address long-term health challenges, including non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases, universal health coverage (UHC) to improve access to essential health services, and pandemic preparedness to bolster global resilience against future health crises (Liu et al., 2023; Mujumdar & Shadrin, 2021).

The establishment of the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB), formalised at the Brazil summit in 2014, stands out as one of the bloc's most notable accomplishments. The NDB was strategically designed to fill infrastructure financing gaps in emerging economies, providing an alternative to conventional financial institutions. This initiative is in line with the social development objectives of South Africa, especially in promoting sustainable growth and addressing developmental needs that contribute to long-term socio-economic advancement.

However, this positive narrative is met with skepticism from several scholars and policy analysts. Critics argue that while the NDB positions itself as a progressive alternative, it is still rooted in a model of large-scale, capital-intensive development that may not always prioritize the social and environmental needs of local communities (Bond, 2020). Some have pointed out that its lending patterns have not significantly diverged from those of existing multilateral development banks, and that its governance structure

tends to favor the larger BRICS members, particularly China and India, raising concerns about equity and influence within the institution.

Moreover, the NDB has faced criticism regarding transparency and accountability, particularly concerning the social and environmental impact assessments of its funded projects. Civil society organizations in BRICS countries have voiced concerns that the NDB may replicate development models that often exclude marginalized groups, exacerbate inequality, and contribute to environmental degradation. For instance, while the NDB has approved several renewable energy and transport projects in South Africa, critics contend that the actual developmental impact especially in terms of job creation, local capacity building, and community participation remains unclear (Bond, 2020).

Funding and resource allocation from BRICS countries

Funding and resource allocation are critical aspects of BRICS cooperation, particularly through the New Development Bank (NDB). The participants' statements highlight both the successes and challenges associated with BRICS funding, including issues of investment priorities, transparency, and voluntary cooperation.

One of the participants stated that:

The New Development Bank channeled \$1 billion USD for transport infrastructure”
(Participant 8).

This statement emphasizes the significant financial contributions of the NDB toward infrastructure development, particularly in transport. The NDB Annual Report (2022) confirms that the bank has invested heavily in transport, energy, and sustainable development projects, reflecting BRICS' commitment to economic growth and modernisation.

However, while these investments are substantial, concerns arise about how these funds are allocated across different sectors, particularly regarding social development. This is supported by one participant who highlighted that:

I haven't seen money spent on South Africa's social development (Participant 6)

This statement highlights a critical issue regarding funding priorities within BRICS and the NDB. While significant investments are directed toward large-scale infrastructure projects, there is a perceived shortfall in direct funding for social development initiatives in South Africa (Isheloke, 2020). This concern aligns with broader criticisms of development banks, which often prioritize economic infrastructure over social welfare programs, such as education and skills development, healthcare infrastructure, and poverty alleviation efforts (Bond, 2020).

Although the NDB has financed some social projects, including investments in renewable energy and sanitation initiatives, the direct impact on poverty reduction, education, and public healthcare in South Africa remains unclear (Diko & Sempijja, 2021). The perception that BRICS funding primarily supports economic projects rather than social welfare highlights ongoing debates about developmental priorities and the accessibility of funds for marginalized communities.

Another participant raised an important point by stating that:

There is no obligation on BRICS to assist any country (Participant 3)

This statement emphasizes a key aspect of BRICS cooperation, particularly its voluntary nature. Unlike traditional development aid models used by institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), BRICS does not impose policy conditions on its financial assistance. This perspective aligns with the views of Abdenur & Folly (2015), who contend that BRICS adopts a cooperative development model that

prioritizes mutual benefit over conditional aid, although it may offer fewer guarantees for social investment.

However, this perspective is not without its critics. Some scholars argue that while BRICS may present itself as an alternative to Western institutions, it often replicates similar hierarchies and market-driven approaches in practice. For example, Bond (2020) critiques BRICS financing as being commercially oriented and primarily focused on large infrastructure projects that do not always lead to improved social outcomes for vulnerable populations. In this context, the lack of formal conditions does not necessarily ensure progressive or inclusive development impacts.

Additionally, the voluntary and non-binding nature of BRICS cooperation can be a double-edged sword. While it respects national sovereignty, it may also lead to weak accountability mechanisms, limited transparency, and minimal enforcement of social or environmental safeguards. This has raised concerns among civil society actors and development scholars, who warn that BRICS-backed projects may neglect local communities or reinforce extractive development patterns, particularly in contexts with weak governance structures.

Knowledge and technology transfer within BRICS initiatives

Knowledge and technology transfer play a critical role in South-South cooperation within BRICS, fostering skills development, industrialization, and economic self-reliance among member states. The participants' verbatim quotes emphasize BRICS as a platform for learning, collaboration, and resource optimization, aligning with key economic and development theories.

One of the participants' emphasised that:

BRICS brings these countries together as they share skills, ideas and they observe from each other and learn from each other (Participant 1)

This quote underscores the cooperative nature of knowledge exchange within BRICS, reflecting the concept of knowledge diplomacy (Shubin, 2018; Knight, 2021). Unlike traditional knowledge transfer models, where Western countries set the terms, BRICS promotes mutual learning without imposing external conditions. By enabling cross-country learning, BRICS enhances capacity-building and self-reliance, thereby decreasing dependency on Western technological frameworks. This approach is in line with the principles of South-South cooperation, where development is defined by and for the Global South rather than dictated by external powers (Menter, 2024).

A key area of technological transfer is resource utilization, as noted in the underneath quote:

South Africa should fully utilize the natural resources it has in abundance... There is platinum, there is uranium, there is a whole lot of others that are highly priced natural resources (Participant 3)

This statement highlights the significance of resource beneficiation; a strategy focused on processing raw materials domestically instead of exporting them in their unrefined state. Despite its wealth in natural resources, South Africa has historically exported raw minerals with minimal processing, thereby missing out on higher-value economic opportunities. This situation illustrates the resource curse paradox, in which resource-rich countries struggle to diversify their economies (Kgoale & Odeku, 2019). By fully harnessing its resources, South Africa could strengthen its industrial capacity, decrease reliance on imported goods, and promote job creation in high-value industries.

This perspective aligns with Soko (2023), who argues that South Africa's BRICS strategy should prioritize industrialization and mineral beneficiation to maximize economic returns. Additionally, another participant highlighted that:

BRICS wants to promote industrialization and promote the processing of mineral resources at home, to build home skills and home economy so as to be self-reliant (Participant 5).

This supports findings from economic development research suggesting that resource-exporting countries can benefit from transitioning to value-added production (Soko, 2023). This statement reinforces BRICS' commitment to domestic value addition, a fundamental principle in economic development theory (Soko, 2023). Rather than exporting raw materials, BRICS countries aim to cultivate domestic industries that refine and process resources, enhance skills development in manufacturing, engineering, and high-tech sectors, and reduce reliance on Western-controlled supply chains.

The emphasis on industrialization within BRICS aligns with global trends, where resource-rich countries strive to capture greater economic benefits through local processing and high-value exports. By prioritizing homegrown industrial capabilities, BRICS nations mitigate their vulnerability to commodity price fluctuations and global economic shocks.

Technology transfer within BRICS is a widely discussed topic in the literature. Some scholars argue that while technology-sharing agreements are in place, their effects are inconsistent (Mukherjee, 2022). For instance, China and India have made significant strides in technology diffusion, particularly in renewable energy and digital transformation (Mukherjee, 2022). However, concerns persist regarding whether South Africa is fully capitalizing on these opportunities (Andreoni & Tregenna, 2020).

However, while the value addition narrative is promising in theory, it has faced criticism in practice. Some scholars contend that the industrial policies pursued under the BRICS framework often lack the necessary institutional coordination and investment in research and development to genuinely transform these economies. In South Africa's case, despite verbal commitments to beneficiation and industrialization, implementation has been inconsistent, and the country continues to rely heavily on exporting unprocessed raw materials like platinum, coal, and iron ore.

Moreover, critics argue that the geopolitical and economic asymmetries within BRICS can lead to uneven gains, with more industrialized members like China and India capturing a greater share of value from downstream processing, while less industrialized members struggle to keep up. In this context, South Africa risks remaining in a subordinate position within both global and intra-BRICS value chains (Bond, 2020). This raises critical questions about whether BRICS can genuinely act as a platform for equitable industrial transformation or if it may inadvertently reinforce patterns of dependent development under a different guise.

5. Conclusions and limitations

The findings of this study reveal that South Africa's participation in BRICS presents both significant opportunities and complex challenges for advancing social development. The demographic composition of the study's participants spanning diverse age groups, genders, educational levels, and professional experiences, provided a multifaceted understanding of BRICS-related initiatives. The combination of experienced scholars, policymakers, and practitioners enriched the analysis, demonstrating that perspectives on BRICS are shaped by both generational outlooks and institutional engagement. The

diversity of respondents also reinforced the credibility of the findings, highlighting both optimism regarding BRICS' transformative potential and critical awareness of its structural limitations.

The evidence suggests that BRICS serves as a strategic diplomatic and developmental platform through which South Africa can articulate its foreign policy priorities, advance South-South cooperation, and pursue national development objectives. Participants consistently emphasized BRICS' role as a "voice for the Global South," highlighting its focus on inclusive growth, poverty eradication, and inequality reduction. This aligns with the bloc's three-pillar cooperation model on political, economic, and social with the third pillar directly addressing social development through health, education, and poverty alleviation initiatives (Kornegay & Bohler-Müller, 2013; Tandon & Slobodchikoff, 2024). Projects such as the BRICS Vaccine Research and Development Centre, the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, and NDB-financed infrastructure investments illustrate tangible outcomes of this cooperation. However, these achievements remain unevenly distributed, with limited evidence of direct, large-scale social impact in South Africa's most vulnerable communities.

The establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) represents one of BRICS' most notable institutional achievements. It provides member states with an alternative to Western-dominated financial institutions, promoting financial autonomy and sustainable infrastructure investment. Nevertheless, concerns persist regarding the NDB's governance, transparency, and developmental orientation. While the Bank's investments in transport and energy infrastructure are substantial, participants highlighted a perceived neglect of direct social development funding, particularly in education, healthcare, and poverty reduction. This imbalance reflects broader tensions within BRICS between macroeconomic growth objectives and inclusive social development outcomes (Bond, 2020; Isheloke, 2020). The voluntary and non-binding nature of BRICS cooperation, while respecting national sovereignty, also limits enforceable accountability mechanisms for ensuring that investments achieve equitable and sustainable results.

Furthermore, knowledge and technology transfer within BRICS emerged as a critical but underexploited opportunity. Participants acknowledged the bloc's potential to facilitate skills development, industrialization, and resource beneficiation. However, despite rhetorical commitments to domestic value addition and industrial growth, implementation remains constrained by weak institutional coordination and asymmetrical power relations within BRICS. More industrialized members such as China and India tend to derive greater benefits from technology diffusion and high-value production, while South Africa risks remaining on the periphery of value chains (Andreoni & Tregenna, 2020; Bond, 2020). This dynamic underscores the need for more strategic policy alignment and capacity-building within South Africa's developmental state apparatus to ensure equitable participation and benefit-sharing within the BRICS framework.

The study's findings are constrained by the narrow and non-representative sample comprising only two officials from DIRCO and the BRICS Think Tank and six university lecturers aged with knowledge of BRICS, which limits the breadth of perspectives, reduces generalisability, and restricts the robustness of empirical inferences; however, this delimitation was intentional, as the study sought to generate in-depth, expert-informed insights from stakeholders directly engaged in or academically knowledgeable about BRICS, rather than to produce population-level generalisations.

Recommendations

South Africa should reorient its BRICS engagement toward more inclusive and socially responsive development outcomes. The New Development Bank (NDB) ought to broaden its portfolio by incorporating direct investments in education, healthcare, and poverty reduction alongside infrastructure financing. Establishing dedicated social development financing windows aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the National Development Plan (NDP) would strengthen this shift. Enhanced coordination among key state institutions including DIRCO, and the National Planning Commission is essential to ensure that BRICS initiatives are effectively integrated into national development priorities. BRICS should further adopt robust accountability and monitoring frameworks that capture social and environmental performance, thereby strengthening transparency and equitable distribution of benefits.

South Africa should intensify efforts to advance technology transfer, industrialization, and human capital development through structured BRICS cooperation. Leveraging mechanisms such as the BRICS Network University can expand research collaboration, technical training, and innovation partnerships that support domestic skills development and productive capacity. Prioritizing resource beneficiation, local manufacturing, and renewable energy development would reduce dependence on primary commodity exports and contribute to sustainable employment creation. Incorporating civil society and community actors in project planning and oversight is critical to ensure participatory, context-sensitive, and inclusive development outcomes. Deepened South-South cooperation grounded in equitable partnerships and shared policy learning will further enhance South Africa's capacity to utilize BRICS as an instrument for transformative development.

In conclusion, although BRICS presents a strategic platform for advancing South Africa's socioeconomic agenda, its developmental potential remains under-realized due to structural imbalances, limited social investment, and weak institutional mechanisms. A more coordinated, proactive, and inclusive approach consistent with Developmental State principles would enable South Africa to leverage BRICS more effectively for equitable and sustainable development.

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Declaration

The authors declare the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the authors used ChatGPT AI for language editing. All work was written by the authors and proofread.

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