South-South Cooperation, Inter-State Relations and Regional Integration

Regionally based South-South Cooperation in the context of changing political dynamics

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ABSTRACT

On the different types of sustainable and resilient South-South Co-operations between developing countries and fragile states or least developed countries (LDCs)

From the Bandung Conference in 1955 to the IGAD initiative that shapes development and cooperation in East-Africa, South-South Cooperation (SSC) has been an increasingly important, but also often challenging, concept that shapes international engagements and regional development in the developing countries of the world. For emerging powers such as China and India, SSC is directly articulated as a value-free and apolitical tool for delivering benefits to another developing country as well as the contributing countries themselves. SSC can however be divided into several different shapes, forms and concepts that rely on diverging assumptions, outlooks and interests, that ultimately shape the resilience and sustainability of the cooperation.

This paper shows that South-South Cooperation (SSC) between Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and fragile states springs out of both immediate self-interests of states with national or regional concerns and the expectation that stability and improved performance of government institutions in the neighbouring fragile states will eventually, further down the road, lead to improved economic performance, enhanced trade with other neighbouring countries and regional prosperity. The analysis shows that this type of international integration does not happen in parallel processes in distinct and separate forums but that a range of complementary interests drives cooperation and that actual partnerships span a range of topics and dynamics.

The paper identifies the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Initiative as an example of a sustainable regional model for SSC.

“Bureaucratic resilience” and a form of “positive self-interest” allowed the IGAD initiative to perform reasonably well under extremely challenging circumstances.

This paper argues that SSC between LDCs and fragile and conflict-affected states should be analysed and understood differently. Regional linkages and interdependencies between the involved countries are often key drivers of regional SSC between an LDC and a fragile state, but there is reason to be cautious of SSC that is driven by the fact that the involved countries have to care about each other because of their intertwined destinies. Destabilising developments on e.g. security issues in a country can heavily influence even cooperation at a “bureaucratic level” amongst countries if the cooperation is shaped out of necessity and a shared destiny.

1. For the purpose of this paper, focus will be on SSC between states.
1. INTRODUCTION

This article addresses a gap in the literature on South-South Cooperation (SSC) between developing countries and fragile states or least developed countries (LDCs). This type of SSC often has strong regional aspects as fragile states and LDCs mainly, but not exclusively, cooperate when it is in their immediate self-interest.

While a growing body of literature is devoted to the study of South-South Cooperation (SSC), that is, cooperation between countries broadly defined as belonging to the Global South, the main focus has been on cooperation between an emerging or recently emerged state and a developing country.

The case explored in this article is the IGAD initiative, under which Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda has deployed around 200 Civil Servant Support Officers (CSSOs) to coach and mentor South Sudanese counterparts. The example of assistance provided by three developing countries, all with some level of internal fragility to a neighboring post-conflict country, such as South Sudan, represents an interesting "laboratory" for understanding how some SSCs varies from the SSCs that involves an emerging and distant state.

The article draws on research undertaken since 2011 and thus presents a medium if not long-term perspective of the initiative and its regional dynamics (see box 1 for additional details on the research).

While the details of the initiative are covered sufficiently elsewhere (see footnoting throughout the article), this article zooms in on the regional dynamics at play in the IGAD initiative. This aspect has been particularly relevant since 2013 when conflict re-emerged in South Sudan with significant ramifications for regional political relationships. The article thus explores the potential politicization of the partnership and the potential of conflict dynamics to affect the relations between the involved countries.

By using the IGAD initiative as a case, the paper investigates the relationship between regional and bilateral political dynamics (for the purpose of this article referred to as "high politics level") and the lower level institutional/technical relationships that are established in SSC (for the purpose of this article referred to as "technical level"). The article initially outlines how SSC has emerged and why SSC between poor developing countries and fragile states remains underexplored.

Box 1: The research underpinning this articles

This article draws on in-depth field research into the so-called IGAD initiative in South Sudan undertaken by research teams in 2011, 2013 and again in 2015. The researchers came from the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) and Norwegian Institute for International Affairs (NUPI) and worked in collaboration with South Sudanese Ministry of Labour, Public Service and Human Resource Development, the contributing countries, UNDP, and Norway. The researchers have conducted around 200 semi-structured interviews mostly face to face but also over the telephone with key stakeholders in all involved countries as well as the deployed Civil Service Support Officers (CSSOs) and their South Sudanese twins. In 2015, a survey was conducted with CSSOs that had returned from their deployment. The research is captured in a range of peer-reviewed articles, policy papers and reports.
After describing the case of the IGAD initiative, the article explores the significance of regional dynamics in the IGAD initiative. It does so by first outlining key perspectives on regional integration in the greater Horn of Africa and subsequently by analysing how the events in South Sudan since 2013 have or have not affected the IGAD initiative. The article draws on interviews with key stakeholders (see box 1) in South Sudan and among the contributing countries.

1. THE EMERGENCE OF SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

This section provides an overview of key developments in the history of SSC to provide the historical backdrop against which SSC may be understood.

1.2 DEFINING SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

Definitions of current SSC range between largely technical ones: “South-South cooperation is essentially a process whereby two or more developing countries pursue their individual or collective development objectives through a cooperative exchange of knowledge, skills, resources and technical knowhow”2 to more political definitions in which SSC is framed in the context of a partnership between equals: “based on a shared solidarity born out of similar experiences and sympathies, which is guided by the principles of respect for national sovereignty and ownership, free from any conditions”3. SSC can occur between governments, private sector companies, nongovernmental organisations, community-based organisations, and civil society organisations and across states, regions, or countries.

In fact, there has been a tendency for SSC to increasingly be based on commercially focussed cooperation as a departure from the traditional more state-centric focus on broader development objectives.4

1.3 A CHRONOLOGY OF SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

While South-South cooperation may have gained prominence in policy circles and increased attention from academics over the last decade, SSC is not a new phenomenon in the field of development assistance as it dates back to the Bandung Conference in 1955 that brought together 29 Asian and African countries to promote economic and cultural cooperation.5 The south-south conference paved way for the Non-Alignment Movement in 1961 and the Group of 77 in 1964 as well as several other regional and sub-regional economic bodies.6 In 1978 the UN opened a unit for SSC that should support academic research and cooperative efforts between Southern countries to promote South-South trade and investments.7 Since the 1980s there has been a significant upsurge in SSC and a number of emerging powers have increasingly become important providers of development assistance. These are especially Brazil, India, China and South Africa (BRICS), but also countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Israel, the Czech Republic, Thailand and the United Arab Emirates have increased their development cooperation in the past several years.8

Since 2008 UNDP and other organisations, funds and programs have increased SSC as an element in their policies and programmes9, and influential global policy organisations, such as OECD and the World Bank, have changed their “concepts of resilience” to include capacity development. This also meant a focus on SSC as the solution to the changing ideas of how to address fragility through capacity development and resilience.10 DAC donors have also acknowledged the growth in SSC as an important development and have sought ways of engaging with the agenda including through establishing tripartite partnerships (also called triangular cooperation) in which western donors help fund South-South exchanges.11

2. Kagonge, 2014. p. 3
11. OECD. (2013). Triangular Co-operation. What’s the literature telling us? OECD.
The research gap is particularly true with regards to cooperation between LDCs and between fragile states, so-called Fragile-to-Fragile cooperation (F2F) identified above. One explanation for this omission in the literature may be that LDC-to-LDC and F2F (fragile states are often also LDCs) often involve a tripartite arrangement with a donor funding some of the involved costs. As described in the preceding section, the inherent political sensitivities around SSC – also regarding the nomenclature – may have led to an “exclusion” of further academic work on LDC-to-LDC and F2F SSC. Put differently, the involvement of a donor has meant that these types of partnerships have not been regarded as SSC and therefore not been studied. This omission is however unfortunate as SSC between LDCs and fragile and conflict-affected states often entails a particular set of attributes, challenges and opportunities, which should be explored further. One of these differences is about the motives for engaging in SSC.

2.1 Divergent focus of South-South Cooperation

Emerging powers make it clear that they see SSC – and aid in general – not only as a way to help other developing countries, but also as a tool for their own gain. For emerging powers, such as China and India, SSC is directly articulated as a value-free and apolitical tool for delivering benefits to another developing country, as well as the contributing countries themselves. In fact, these two motives are entwined and often hard to separate. This discourse is quite different from the one traditionally used by Western donors where aid has often been provided to the sole benefit of the recipient with conditionalities attached, though also this discourse has changed in recent years to include policy choices also based on selfinterests.

It is the clear ambition and expectation of countries such as China and India that the neutral value-free exchange of technologies and know-how will lead to economic returns for both parties in the South-South partnership.

Returns may come up front in the form of revenues for Chinese workers and companies or later on through improved bilateral relationships and trade. A growing body of literature criticizes the BRICS’ SSC for not always respecting the principles of SSC as cooperation among equals.\textsuperscript{16}

The incentives behind SSC between a developing country and its “fragile” neighbour is shaped by a different reality. Neighbours to fragile states are directly affected by the instability of the latter. This instability makes such countries approach SSC in a different way than the BRICS and other Southern aid providers because they have a clear self-interest in immediate political stability, government reform and institutional performance. Developing countries involved in this latter type of SSC therefore engage in the partnership with a different focus.

Despite having clear political and economic incentives, BRICS-sponsored SSC has often focused on technical assistance and steered away from meddling in politics and core government reform in the partner country. At the same time this type of SSC has come with a clear expectation of immediate and/or future economic reward articulated as “mutual benefits”. SSC between a developing country and its fragile neighbour, on the other hand, is also motivated by the ambition of “mutual benefits” in its broad sense, and appears to be more directly targeted at thematic areas, such as migration and security, which are, potentially, politically sensitive in nature.

The implementation of the SSC may still be technically focused but implementation will happen in a thematic area, which can easily become politically charged. Conflict, refugees and porous borders feeding arms and narcotics smuggling are negative impacts closely associated with fragile states and have significant negative impacts on neighbouring states. Stabilisation, reform of core government institutions and basic state building therefore become central themes of SSC in this latter category because neighbours to a fragile state have a clear interest in regional political stability. State building interventions can also cover, for example, service delivery institutions in an attempt to help a fragile country deliver peace dividends following a peace accord. This type of work is very different from SSC involving BRICS or a more geographically distant developing country.

A longer-term goal behind SSC between a developing country and its fragile neighbour is the expectation that stability and improved performance of government institutions in the fragile state will eventually, further down the road, lead to improved economic performance, enhanced trade with neighbouring countries and regional

2.2 SSC under the IGAD initiative

Under the IGAD initiative’s first phase around 200 active CSSOs were deployed for a 2-year period to South Sudan to coach and mentor their South Sudanese counterparts across a range of sectors and functions.

The government of the Republic of South Sudan’s (GRSS) Ministry of Labour, Public Service and Human Resource Development serves as the responsible partner on the side of the government and hosts the initiative’s Program Implementation Unit staffed with ministry staff as well as staff from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). UNDP originally designed the project, which was launched under the auspices of the IGAD. UNDP also provided a range of project management support throughout the project. As the civil servants were retained on the payroll of their home countries, the initiative is one of the largest examples of South-South cooperation to date. Norway covered the 28m USD program costs also making the initiative one of the largest trilateral initiatives to date. The second phase of the project included 160 CSSOs and they were deployed in batches from August 2015.

2.3 Regional integration in the Greater Horn of Africa

While the purpose of this paper is not to revisit the growing body of literature on integration including particularly in Sub-Saharan and Eastern Africa, this section provides a few useful references to this literature that can help understand the dynamics of the IGAD initiative.

Regional integration studies and literature have largely focused on economic integration also when studying the immediate post-conflict South Sudan and its ambitions to accede the East African Community (EAC).

Box 2: The IGAD initiative and its assumptions

Four overall assumptions underpin the IGAD initiative’s approach to capacity development. Firstly, it assumes that the cultural affinity between the South Sudanese and the CSSOs increases the latter’s acceptance by the former. Secondly, it assumes that this affinity increases the CSSOs’ adaptability and thus increases the flexibility of the programme. Thirdly, it assumes that the ownership and effectiveness of the programme are stronger because capacity is not developed through the use of international consultants on short-term missions, but through a regionally organised capacity exchange that provides for a better sociocultural fit and a more suitable professional match. Fourthly, it assumes that embedded, on-the-job learning and coaching leads to more sustainable and lasting capacity development and improvements in the core government functions of South Sudan, including positive behavioural changes among the South Sudanese civil servants involved.

Another bulk of literature has focussed on the strictly military integration efforts under the (Eastern) African Standby Force or on IGAD as a platform for political cooperation.

Regionalism is widespread across the African continent and besides cooperation and integration within trade, economic and monetary policies, which were the drivers of many of the original regional cooperation “blocs”, integration increasingly happens in “peace and security as well as in political, social and cultural aspects of governance.”

The novelty is that integration does not happen in parallel processes in distinct and separate forums but that a range of complementary interests drives cooperation and that actual partnerships span a range of topics and dynamics.

17. Of 199 CSSOs approximately 20% were from Ethiopia, 30% from Uganda and 40% from Kenya.
Bailes and Cottey (2006) have identified how new models of regional cooperation integrate a wider range of instruments and focus areas appropriate for the context covering everything from military cooperation over dialogue to democracy and human rights. While the role of a shared culture and identity is also increasingly highlighted as a driver of regional integration, most literature has focussed on the history of European integration. However, a recent book edited by Mengisteab and Bereketeab demonstrates the importance of identity, culture and history particularly in the greater horn of Africa region.

The argument that cooperation often involves numerous interests and aspects and can be understood differently depending on the “lens” of the observer seems to resonate well with what is happening in the IGAD initiative. The initiative was conceived under the political auspices of IGAD but materialized as bilateral cooperation agreements between the involved countries. The initiative has sought to help develop the capacity of South Sudan to take on the role as a state in Eastern Africa by producing policy and improving service delivery (and not relapse into conflict).

Broadly, the initiative can be said to have focussed on strengthening the social contract between the state and the South Sudanese people as well as core governance functions. While these efforts evidently failed with the re-emergence of conflict in December 2013, they did seem to reflect many of the “drivers of cooperation” proposed above. South Sudan’s neighbouring countries have a very direct interest in the stability of the country, as these countries are the likely recipients of negative spill-over effects. The surrounding countries are, however, also the main beneficiaries of a stable and prosperous South Sudan with significant economic and commercial interest in the country.

2.4 High politics and regional South-South Cooperation in a fragile setting

This section looks at how bilateral and regional political relationships between countries engaged in SSC between fragile and LDCs can affect the relationships and activities developed under a particular SSC initiative.

The bilateral relationship between two neighbouring countries is complex, multifaceted and it exists simultaneously and sometimes independently, at multiple levels. Security and regional stability, peacebuilding, trade arrangements and high-level political negotiations are situated at the high politics level. The relations at this level may vary between warm and cold depending on national and international political events, stability and conflict in the region, public sentiment, economic prosperity (or crisis) and personal relationships between the heads of state.

* Expressed by an Ethiopian diplomat during an interview in the context of the IGAD Initiative.

At the same time, the two states may be interacting at various other lower levels. If the two countries are engaged in SSC there will be a lower, technical, level of interaction and cooperation specifically focused on the thematic areas of the SSC. This level may involve some of the same actors that operate and interact at the high politics level, but the nature of the interaction at the lower SSC level is intended to be technical in nature. In a regional SSC between a developing country and its fragile neighbour these two levels may easily affect each other.

Relations between neighbouring countries at a time of crisis can quickly change and this may in turn affect the relationships between actors from these countries working together at the technical level of an SSC.
The outbreak of violent conflict in South Sudan in December 2013 has presented significant challenges to the IGAD Initiative not least because it involves neighbouring countries with a profoundly intertwined history and shared borders where problems in one country is likely to spill-over into the other. This poses the very real risk of developments in the regional high politics of peace and security affects the relationships between actors involved in the IGAD Initiative. Potential negative impacts include, for instance, that the involved countries redraw their support for the initiative or change their involvement to reflect their own strategic interests rather than the needs of the Initiative. Another risk is that the people deployed from neighbouring countries under the initiative suffer as an effect of changing perceptions around the legitimacy of the initiative and the neighbours’ shifting roles in domestic issues in South Sudan.

The Initiative’s regional dimension is not only a source of risk. In fact it also includes a range of opportunities, including a high degrees of ownership of all involved stakeholders as well as the benefits of greater cultural affinity between countries in the region. These opportunities have been explored at length elsewhere.24

24. See for example: Costa et al (2012c), Costa et al. (2012a), Costa et al. (2012b), Costa et al. (2013a), Costa et al. (2013b), and Costa et al. (2013c)
3. THE IMPACT OF REGIONAL “HIGH POLITICS” ON THE IGAD INITIATIVE

This section explores the impact of regional high politics - mainly within the security domain - on the IGAD initiative following the re-emergence of conflict in South Sudan in December 2013.

3.1 High-politics and the technical level of the IGAD Initiative

Emerging powers make it clear that they see SSC – and aid in general – not only as a way to help other developing countries, but also as a tool for their own gain.

Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda are all supporting South Sudan under the IGAD Initiative. From interviews with representatives from these countries’ three embassies it is clear that they all see the SSC under the IGAD initiative as part of their countries’ broader engagement in South Sudan. The IGAD countries support stabilisation, political dialogue, capacity development and government reform processes in South Sudan and the IGAD initiative is seen as one component in this work. The component is part of a political strategy to help South Sudan stabilise and develop in a certain direction to the benefit of the region. The IGAD initiative is in this way part of the neighbouring countries’ strategy, it is on the radar at the high politics level and it is implemented in the politically charged areas of state building and core government reform. In this context there is a risk that the high politics of bilateral and regional relations between the countries in the SSC affects the technical level where the SSC is taking place.

High-level regional politics appears, in some instances, to have affected technical cooperation between South Sudan and the participating countries under the IGAD initiative. One of the neighbouring countries participating in the IGAD initiative expressed on one occasion hesitation towards entering into a new phase of the project before progress had been made in the peace talks taking place at the time. Though this was, at least in part, caused by concern over the security situation and safety of the CSSOs, it may also be seen as an attempt to leverage influence from the technical level of SSC to the high politics level of peace negotiations. Conversely, embassy staff from IGAD countries in Juba also highlighted that the network and personal relations developed through co-managing and discussing the IGAD initiative had brought about constructive and trustful working relations between them at a more general level.

Overall there seems to have been a remarkable degree of separation between the high-level political relations and the bi- and multilateral interaction between the IGAD countries at the technical level in the IGAD initiative. Interaction between the participating countries has in the initiative taken place in the project steering committee and in the technical committee.
The former meets at the level of ambassadors or ministers while the latter handles the day-to-day operations of the initiative and meets at the level of embassy staff (counsellors and first secretaries).

The first phase of the IGAD initiative has been implemented in a tumultuous period of initial independence, oil crisis and subsequent re-emergence of conflict in South Sudan. The relations between South Sudan and its neighbours have changed throughout this period. Tensions and disagreement have at times run high at the capitals in the region. The IGAD initiative initially encountered problems around the need to properly communicate its purpose and scope of work to GRSS counterparts and the general population. However, personal relations, interaction and collaboration at the steering and technical committees as well as in the daily work of CSSOs have been remarkably resilient to the changing political environment at the high politics level throughout the implementation of the first phase of the IGAD initiative. This is most significantly demonstrated by the decision of all the involved stakeholders to proceed with a second phase of the initiative at a time when no peace agreement was in place in South Sudan.

3.2 Depoliticised cooperation between bureaucrats

A number of factors can explain the decision above. The nature of the work carried out in the IGAD initiative, whether at the steering and technical committees or at the level of the individual CSSO, was technically focused in spite of it falling under, at times, politically sensitive thematic areas. Issues like institutional reform, planning and service delivery were approached, based on our findings, from a purely technical perspective. The political undertones of such core government reform were not articulated in the project nor were “politically focussed” results expressed as desired outcomes of the initiative. Despite of the potential for politicisation, the IGAD initiative seems to have steered clear of being perceived as a cog in the broader, highly sensitive and contested, relations between the participating countries.

All involved parties appear to have consistently approached the work at hand as technical and outside the realm of the bilateral politics at the higher level. One senior UNDP staff, for instance, noted that the people involved in the committees were perfectly able to wear different hats depending on the forum. An embassy representative from one of the IGAD countries referred to the initiative as being “between bureaucrats who were here before the conflict and will be here after the conflict”. The IGAD Initiative was in this connection clearly seen as a technical forum where political developments between the involved countries were not allowed to interfere.

3.3 The importance of personal relations and the non-diplomatic domain

Another explanation for why SSC in the IGAD initiative remained rather unaffected by high politics is the human relations established in the project through steering and technical committees. One UNDP staff involved in the initiative pointed to these dynamics when stating that: “people to people relations are different from diplomatic relations”. These people to people relations, along with a shared ambition of medium- and long-term stability in South Sudan, made it possible for cooperation under the IGAD initiative to remain rather unaffected by changing relations at the higher level between the involved parties.

The operational level of CSSO interaction was also fairly unaffected by high-level political relationships. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, all CSSOs came from a civil servant background in their home countries. Some CSSOs were motivated by a personal desire to improve regional development and help their brothers and sisters in South Sudan. However, no CSSO had worked as “a diplomat” and did not perceive their role in South Sudan as an extension of the diplomatic relations between their country and South Sudan. The peer-to-peer rather than nationality-to-nationality perception of the involved stakeholders meant that professional relations persisted even as the regional political dynamics shifted significantly.

25. Interview with Project Management Unit representative on 23 June 2015
26. Interview with embassy representative, Juba, June 2015
27. Interview with UNDP in South Sudan in June 2015
A second, and related, explanation is the civil service ethos. The civil service in South Sudan is, as in most other countries, intended to, at least on paper, function as a technocratic machinery separated from politics. Though state institutions in South Sudan are young and the civil service highly politicised, perhaps surprisingly, the IGAD initiative seems to have been perceived a technical project, disconnected from bilateral politics. A senior Government of South Sudan official expressed this sentiment noting that “civil servants stay, politicians come and go”.

Programme adaptability also helps explain how the technical level of the IGAD Initiative has been able to remain rather unaffected by high-politics. Direct support to central government institutions can become controversial and problematic once this government enters into an armed conflict, as was the case after the relapse into conflict in December 2013. To avoid a perceived bias in this complex and dangerous environment, and to increase focus on service delivery, the next phase of the IGAD initiative will shift supporting from central government institutions to the local government level. This could be seen as a case in which high politics affects the technical cooperation in the IGAD initiative. More appropriately, however, it may be interpreted an expression of the latter’s ability to resist the former. The IGAD initiative remains focused on development activities in non-conflict affected areas of South Sudan in a context where most external support has shifted towards emergency relief. Being adaptable in a complex environment has made it possible for the IGAD initiative to maintain a technical focus and resist politicisation.

In this article we have explored the relationship between bilateral politics, regional integration and SSC. SSC covers a range of partnership modalities with great variation in programme focus. Most literature on SSC has focused on collaboration between an emerging/emerged power and a developing country, often an LDC. This article has argued that SSC between LDCs and fragile and conflict-affected states should be analysed and understood differently.

Regional linkages and interdependencies between the involved countries are often key drivers of regional SSC between an LDC and a fragile state. This can be seen in the broader literature on regional integration in Eastern Africa including the greater Horn of Africa region but also very explicitly in the IGAD initiative. The regional aspect is an important driver of collaboration because it incentivises countries in a region to take a genuine interest in the development of neighbouring or proximate countries. Our research has largely found these incentives to be a form of “positive self-interest” that has allowed the IGAD initiative to perform reasonably well under extremely challenging circumstances.

The difference compared to traditional SSC seems to be the very direct impact (negative or positive) of developments within the involved countries.

The high level interdependence in such regional SSC also poses a risk because political and, especially, security developments may negatively affect any type of collaboration between neighbouring states, including a “technocratic” SSC such as the IGAD initiative in South Sudan.

This is a reason to be cautious of SSC that is driven by the fact that the involved countries have to care about each other because of their intertwined destinies.

The field research underpinning this article points to the IGAD initiative as an example of the “bureaucratic resilience” that can develop when civil servants at technical levels cooperate. In these circumstances, technical cooperation may persist despite diplomatic turmoil.