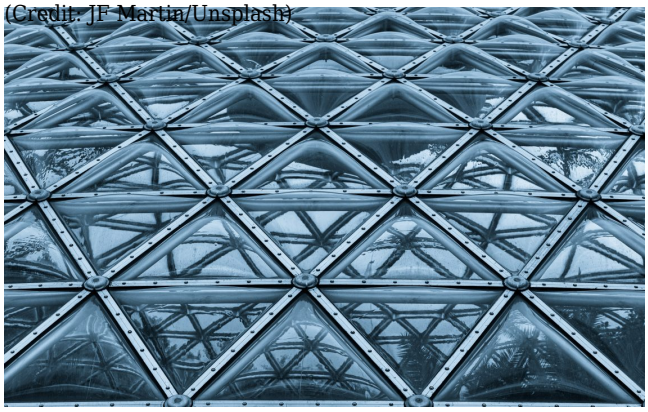
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Trilateral development cooperation: the cases of China and Brazil

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Trilateral (or triangular as some prefer to call it) cooperation has become one of the latest frontiers in the development sector. By involving a traditional donor, an 'emerging donor' (or 'Southern development partner') and a development partner country, trilateral cooperation has the potential to complement North-South and South-South cooperation, and therefore has received growing international recognition. For example, the second High-level United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation in Buenos Aires in March 2019 acknowledged the role trilateral aid cooperation can play in achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and alleviating poverty.

China and Brazil are heavyweight development partners and they have been active in development cooperation. In addition to delivering bilateral cooperation, the two countries have been trialling trilateral cooperation in recent years. Their involvement will have significant implications for the sustainability of this new modality. Drawing on our extensive fieldwork research, we offer a brief comparative analysis of China's and Brazil's trilateral cooperation.

Overview

China's trilateral cooperation dates back to its collaboration with UN agencies in the 1980s, such as the China-UN Capital Development Fund-Gambia brick factory project in 1984. More formal experimentation with trilateral cooperation commenced about ten years ago. China's Ministry of Commerce and the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), as coordinators of the Chinese foreign aid program before and after April 2018 when CIDCA was established, have taken a cautious approach to trilateral cooperation. They have been selective of traditional donors and UN agencies as partners for cooperation. China has so far piloted cooperation with partners such as the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and the United Nations Development Programme

(UNDP), on projects in Asia, Africa and the Pacific. Interestingly, although the Pacific is not a focus of Chinese aid, it has been a testing ground for China's trilateral cooperation. The China-Australia-Papua New Guinea malaria control project and the China-New Zealand-Cook Islands water supply project are China's first two trilateral projects in the region. The majority of China's pilot trilateral projects have been small grant projects. Being selective and starting small are testimony to China's risk aversion in testing trilateral cooperation.

Similarly, Brazil started its trilateral partnerships in the 1980s, with Japan. From the mid-2000s Brazilian trilateral South-South technical cooperation took off, working with traditional donors including Japan, Germany, the United States and Canada, and most notably with UN agencies such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Food Programme (WFP), UNICEF, UNESCO and United Nations Population Fund. Brazil has a few well-consolidated trilateral partnerships that started as pilots and developed into structured capacity development programs with partners in Latin America and Africa (such as the Brazil-FAO cooperation program, started in 2008) and even into jointly managed centres of excellence (the Brazil-WFP Centre of Excellence Against Hunger, created in 2011). The Brazilian Cooperation Agency (ABC) is the formal coordinating agency, but a multitude of national and subnational agencies have acted on exchanges as implementing agencies since they hold the expertise.

Motives

China's motives in testing trilateral cooperation are twofold: responding to traditional donors' calls for more engagement as they phased out bilateral aid to China; and improving China's aid effectiveness by learning (selectively) skills and expertise from traditional donors and UN agencies. The engagement between traditional donors and China in this process has seemingly failed to make China more aligned with the traditional aid regime. Rather, China's self-identification as a South-South cooperation partner has remained firm. China has been sensitive to developing countries' responses to their participation in trilateral cooperation, especially concerns that China's no strings attached practice in bilateral aid might be compromised in trilateral partnership with traditional donors. As a precaution, China insists that approval by recipient countries should be a precondition for China to endorse a trilateral project. China has also deliberately circumvented sensitive areas such as democracy, governance, corruption and human rights in its pilot trilateral projects.

The main motives for Brazilian expansion of its trilateral partnerships in the mid-2000s have been both operational and political. Operationally, Brazil has relied on UN agencies, most notably UNDP and progressively on others such as FAO, ILO and WFP, to deliver its

technical cooperation and expand the reach and impact of its exchanges, especially as Brazil started to receive numerous cooperation demands from other Southern countries. Politically, trilateral partnerships have allowed certain Brazilian institutions and policies to be internationalised. They gain international recognition by both UN agencies and countries in the North and the South, which serves as a legitimacy boost at home. Specific public agencies within the Brazilian government have taken a proactive stance in leading several partnerships in Latin America and Africa. Mostly during the Workers' Party era (2003–2016), Brazil held an official narrative of 'policy learning and sharing' of Brazil-grown social policy solutions, comfortably working with both partner governments and international organisations to transfer knowledge and social technology.

Position

Both CIDCA and line ministries in China such as agriculture, health, science and technology have been involved in China's trilateral cooperation. CIDCA will be involved in a project if it is interested (for example, the project has symbolic significance) or if it needs to contribute funding. Otherwise, traditional donors can directly approach China's line ministries for trilateral cooperation in the latter's respective areas. So far, China has not issued guidelines on its trilateral cooperation. There are a few reasons for this: first, China is still in the process of trialling trilateral cooperation; second, bilateral aid still dominates China's aid program and trilateral initiatives are a drop in the bucket; and, third, CIDCA has shown more interest in working with UN agencies than traditional donor states. It is noteworthy that with CIDCA tasked with using Chinese foreign aid to support the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it has shown a growing interest in promoting third-party market cooperation, which is commercial in nature, between China and traditional donors to support BRI in a third country.

Brazilian trilateral cooperation is guided by a range of both general and specific instruments, including: ABC *Manual of South-South Technical Cooperation Management* (2013); ABC 'General Guideline for the Design, Coordination and Management of Trilateral Technical Cooperation Initiatives' (2017); the *Brazilian-German Trilateral Cooperation Operational Manual* (2015); and the 'Guidelines for Trilateral South-South Cooperation Initiatives' issued by ABC and UNICEF (2015). Compared with China, Brazil values trilateral cooperation more highly, both politically and materially. For example, in 2015, trilateral cooperation with international organisations accounted for more than 70% of the Brazilian technical cooperation budget executed under ABC coordination.

Overall, China and Brazil's approaches to trilateral development cooperation have similarities and differences. Both countries are still testing this modality and, for the near

future, the trilateral cooperation agenda looks like it will be sustained but not significantly expanded, remaining discreet and 'under the radar'. The two countries, however, will have different priorities longer term. China will likely focus on future trilateral partnerships with UN agencies and traditional donors that China trusts. Criticism from traditional donors, such as the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, of China's handling of the COVID-19 crisis and their sponsorship of an independent international inquiry have received strong pushback from China, making trilateral cooperation extremely difficult. As for Brazil, since the electoral campaign in 2018, Jair Bolsonaro's extreme-right government has proposed to alter Brazilian global identity, de-emphasise its 'Southern' identity, and seek new partnerships with developed countries and the OECD. Partnerships with developed countries and the private sector look set to increase, as both are important agendas under the current government, and may replace the previous focus of trilateral partnerships with UN agencies.

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