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SOUTH-SOUTH COLLABORATIVE PROGRAMME

OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES

**Africa: A Bridge Between Latin America
and Asia**

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The South-South Tri-continental Programme is a scholarly collaboration for Research, Training, Publishing, and Dissemination, between the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (**CODESRIA**); the Asian Political and International Studies Association (**APISA**); and the Latin American Council of Social Science (**CLACSO**). The Programme was established as a reaction to the need, identified by scholars in the South, to reorient theoretical and methodological frameworks of the dominant development discourses; and to improve the organization of Southern research infrastructures. The Programme aims at reviving cooperation and collaboration among scholars of the global South working in the broad field of the social sciences. The collaboration was entered into with the specific aim of sustaining knowledge exchange between scholars on the three continents as a long-term initiative. At the core of this collaboration are the objectives of

deepening intra-South networking

contributing a South perspective towards the transformation of the Social Sciences on a global scale

producing alternative theoretical and methodological approaches of knowledge building

Networking and dialoguing take place in the different International Comparative Seminars that the partners set up annually on a rotational basis. For each International Seminar, **CODESRIA**, **CLACSO** and **APISA** select representatives from their respective continents. Each themed Seminar brings together a total of no more than twelve senior scholars who have been working on the thematic area identified for the Seminar, and are recognized as leaders in such area of scholarship. The small number of participants is meant to enable close, thorough discussion of issues, with a view to producing scholarly publications that not only make audible the voices of the South in the global arena, but effectively advance scientific scholarship.

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Introduction

Referring to a Venezuelan industrialist who admitted that it was much more difficult to deal with countries of the South, and for that reason he has been dealing with the countries of the North, Nyerere wondered why those of the North are always on the lookout for commercial opportunities in the South. "Couldn't they also be of interest for the industrialists of the same South? It is necessary to consider that perhaps the historical time has come to resolutely undertake the fight for the economic independence of the South [...] The South knows of the North, the North knows of the South, but the South does not know of itself [...]" - Pérez Ramírez, (1989: 191)

This paper offers a reflection on the potential and real possibilities of Africa to play a key role within the framework of the international relations associated with Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean islands. The study explores the socio-cultural, philosophical, and political contributions of Africa in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Of particular interest is the International Policy dimension inasmuch as the paper also aims at providing a current systematic review of an evidence-base on traditional links between countries of the three continents and its peoples, in order to justify the necessity to reinforce their international cooperation. Thus, the paper is concerned with what Africa can offer to both continents and how it could possibly proceed in order to participate in strengthening their relations as historical, cultural, political and economic partners.

Historically and politically, the three continents share colonial experiences that could help them to draw common guidelines as a *negotiation strategy with the North*. Their populations underwent the colonial system between the 15th (Latin America) and 20th Centuries (Asia and Africa, since the 19th Century). One of the consequences of this political domination is the constitution of the modern State which does not necessarily match the three continents' traditional principles of government.

Culturally, slavery as a historical process and economic practice which was executed by the Europeans throughout the 14th and 19th centuries, facilitated cultural interactions and relations between Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. These ties have been the foundation of the construction of common cultural identities and similar socio-political forms of organization within the afro-descendant communities. So it is necessary to consolidate favorable initiatives and actions for a greater integration since, on the one

hand, it will definitely help to strengthen identities of Black men and women who live in Latin American and the Caribbean countries; on the other hand it will help to extend collective struggles in favor of changes in their conditions for life which is generally marked by lack of opportunities, low political participation, increasing racial conflicts, ethnic and racial discrimination, among others.

Regarding cultural contributions of Africa to Asia, we refer to the period of the Arabic empire (7th to 14th centuries) when slavery constituted the means by which the Islamic world was supplied of black slaves (natives of the south of the Sahara); however this practice cannot be compared with the slavery system set up by Europeans later on. The slaves contributed to the economic development of countries located in the Middle East - Syria and the Arabic Peninsula (such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen)- and several Asian countries mainly situated in Southwest Asia (for instance, Iraq). Although the cultural contributions of the Black slaves in this area are undeniable, the revolt of the Zandj (between years 866 and 883) had significant consequences (positive and negative) at the political, social and economic levels. The Zandj were enslaved Black people who worked on the sugar cane plantations of Southeastern Iraq and the Persian Gulf (Hbrek, 1992: 28-32 & 41-51).

Economically, the dependent and vertical relations that countries of the South maintain with the North since the colonial era go on deepening and expanding, mainly within the framework of globalization.


Against this background, the paper analyses the feasibility of combining these common traits of the three continents in order to share experiences and establish direct dialogues which aim at building up South-South integration without heed - nor awaiting the approval - of vertical dialogue with the North.

I. The search for alternatives to the cooperation in the South leads us to combine the potentiality of Africa, Latin America, and Asia in order to establish comparative insights on the diverse problems and challenges facing the countries of the three continents; mainly those problems that are a consequence of the influences exerted on the three continents by the European Union, the United States, and Canada. We consider that while Asia and Latin America are under the economic, political, and cultural dominion of the United States,

Africa is a continent under the direct control of the European continent. In the same way, there exist historical relations of interchange between the South and the North, which are difficult to dissolve: for instance, Latin America and the United States; or the fact that Asia separately negotiates any type of interchange either with the United States or European Union. On the matter, Jorge Rafael Di Masi (2002: 12) made the following statement:

[...] on the advantages of a greater approach between both regions [Latin America and Asia] in term of greater autonomy [...], a strong political actors' decision will be required. On the Latin American side there may exist, either a lack of interest in exploring this complex way or resistance in those sectors of its elite leadership, which are aligned to the World superpowers. As far as the Asian countries are concerned, there may be a fear to provoke a negative reaction in the United States with whom the main Asian powers have strategic relations, which are nowadays of considerable importance in their national policies [...]

Since Africa, Latin America, and Asia were dominated by colonial systems (colonialism) and they share experiences of political instabilities, they can work together for the establishment of a political agenda with the purpose of identifying the processes and alternatives in the countries of the three continents, while managing to insert the particular conditions of the conflicts within a framework of an independent decision-making policy. Moreover, they have been sharing the same political convictions in order to attempt to overcome the underdevelopment situation in which they are embedded. After the end of the Second World War, as during the Cold War, the African countries have been fighting for their political independence. As opposed to the traditional colonialism of the world-wide superpowers, the African continent made an alliance with Asian countries: in April 1955, the conference of Bandung (Indonesia), denominated 'the Afro-Asian Conference', gathered 29 States (23 Asian and 6 African) and 30 movements of national liberation in order to insist on the necessity to build a tight economic, cultural, and political cooperation within the framework of international relations. This summit gave birth to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and changed the course of intercontinental relations. In September 1961, the first NAM summit was held in Belgrade (Yugoslavia) with the participation of 25 countries, mainly new independent States, and the predominance of Asia and Africa



(Cuba was the only country of Latin America that attended the conference as a full member of the Movement).

In this context, international relations in the South (South/South relations) are to be considered as an adequate option to tackle the polarization of international politics. Obviously, this option compels performance within the framework of constructive multilateralism: Latin America and Africa should take advantage of their **cultural** similarities and resemblances to be more and more emphatic on the need to join together in order to counter global hegemony. Moreover, the search for alternatives aims at increasing economic autonomy and integration of Africa and Latin America since both have oil-high potency; by all means, it is within the context of a higher economic interdependence between states, where these continents need to build up and consolidate closer partnerships and dialogue between cultures and civilizations.

II. Within the framework of a weekly seminar held at the Department of Political Science of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, the participants (third and fourth year students) have been investigating issues related to the tri-continental partnership. The seminar debates the mechanisms that establish and maintain the operation of the international relations, including the cooperation and the stability between/of States of the South. In this sense, it analyses critically the South-South relations that emanate from present and/or future cooperation policies between Africa - Latin America; Africa - Asia; Latin America - Asia. The understanding of these mechanisms, along with the possibilities for cultural, economic and political interchanges and contributions, is relevant to any research implementation plan on these South-South relations.

Some of the topics that are discussed in this seminar are included in the agenda of my research group in order to enrich and deepen the core debates. As a result, the need to contribute to the epistemological and academic debates on South-South cooperation and integration leads its members to investigate the implications and possibilities of implementing a tri-continental strategic coordination along the lines of IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa). In this context, the following question arises as a demonstrable comparative potential that we have been evolving in this research group regarding this mode of South-South cooperation:

To what extent, without falling into Afro-centrism, can Africa serve as a bridge between Asia and Latin America (Latin America - Africa - Asia)?

Since it is necessary for Africa, Latin America and Asia to share experiences and establish a dialogue with real practices of integration, new questions (which are explored in this research proposal) arise to clearly define a problematic that can be followed through further research:

- *what are the mechanisms for the establishment of this dialogue?*
- *how is a consensus to be reached on the treatment and management of this dialogue?, and*
- *what will be its implications?*

One way to think about alternatives in a manner that is inclusive of debates on this matter would be to take into consideration the way initiatives in international relations between Africa, Latin America, and Asia have been developed in the last decade. Of course, the possibility of sharing strategies of approach, expectations and difficulties, opens up spaces that allow us to construct new and authentic experiences, which are independent of the European and North American considerations. This means that all attempts to change the current international (cooperation) order have to be informed by new forms of perceiving the three continents and the diversity of its populations. It is necessary to counter attitudes based on 'Afropesimism', 'Third Worldism', 'Periphery' and 'Late modernity', in order to transform imaginaries that maintain stereotypes and to re-evaluate the African, Latin American and Asian cultures for the recognition of their contributions to the rest of the world.

This would require that transformation should start taking place in the academy, which is one of the best spheres where debates regarding political concerns can be addressed on how to change the way to perceive the 'Other'. In this regard, the interrogation of the Postcolonial perspective would be necessary. This would entail a critique of Anglo-American and Eurocentrist tradition, which identifies Africa and the Africans, Latin America and the Latin Americans, Asia and the Asians, as the negative 'other', opposed to 'the order of things'; an 'other' who needs Western development; an 'other' who doesn't follow the epistemological paradigms of Science. Amidst the components of this research perspective we identify *a clear rupture* with the centered view of a vertical speech to maintain that 'other' in the realm of the


Eurocentrist and Anglo-Saxon project of Western modernization; while playing its interventionist role through international organs, defining policies of structural adjustment and fiscal reforms without taking into account the specificities of countries of the South. But in the meantime, its populations are demanding processes of regional and continental integration to confront the influences of the globalized world.

In this sense, it is necessary to continue drawing up these approaches from a critical perspective and outside the sphere of the North-South hegemonic dialogues. The horizontal dialogue invites the African continent to consider possibilities of establishing interlocutions with countries that face similar problems and realities in the South, with the purpose of building up a South-South alliance that would become an excellent actor of the international system, without generating an autistic individualism with regard to the North, but on the contrary by fostering - on conditions of equality - a dialogue that can construct projects of development and progress in agreement with the particular necessities of the three continents.

This dialogue must show a more risky and offensive behavior of the political leaders who are interested in treating differently the postcolonial power relations; this change of attitude can begin with a reflection on the inefficiency of regional and continental integration institutions'. For example, within an institutional framework led by African Union (UA), the Andean Community of Nations (ACN) and The Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) along with Japan, China, India and Korea, the South-South relations can be strengthened, analyzing the causes of the failure and the difficulties in the integration process, which is carried out at the moment by Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, Mexico (in Latin America); Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, Nigeria, South Africa and Senegal (in Africa); Japan, China, India, South Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam (in Asia).

In this context, the intra/intercontinental scientist-academic collaboration thus becomes an essential tool to organize and establish *networks* of intellectuals with large-scale action-oriented commitments for social change; networks of medical instructors or traditional medicine professionals; networks of the defenders of that alternative medicine (ethno-medicine, natural products, pharmacological, etc.); and networks of those who carry out social actions for political transformations.

III. Africa has been active in the search for a political 'Third Way'



alternative in order to face the dominant order. For that reason we believe in the possibility of vindicating Africa as a geographic, strategic, cultural, political, and economic bridge for the interchanges between Latin America and Asia with the purpose of contributing to diversify spaces of multilateral cooperation and, even, to reinforce the South-South ties.

However, beyond the dominant-dominated relations and the power strategies, along with the construction and consolidation of dialogue plans depicted in this reflection paper, there are real limitations to take into consideration when projecting the African continent as the nexus between Latin America and Asia:


a) Being a continent with conditions of internal conflicts and political instabilities, the African continent may favor illegal trafficking and interchanges between countries of the three continents, whilst making difficult the possibility of economic and cultural interchanges.

b) Since Africa has not been able to consolidate as a political region with realistic interest of autonomy opposed to the North and by means of continental, regional, and sub-regional integration policies, it is more difficult for it to play a key role in the union of the three continents.

c) The rising states with advanced development levels within the South may jeopardize this tri-continental integration as they end up dominating the less advanced countries in the same South and they devote more effort and attention to economic issues than the social and political ones (for instance, the respect for Human Rights; the Sale of arms to countries in conflict, etc.); with regard to these aspects, the presence of China in African countries such as Sudan is questionable.

d) In the long run, Africa can also become a simple lawsuit of interchanges and a mere center of consumption of the Asian and Latin American productions favouring its dependency instead of the desirable sustainable development.

Hence, as opposed to the globalization model as dominated by Western thought, it is important to consider some of the ways through which Africa can assume a South-South dialogue with Latin America and Asia in order to form and consolidate a geopolitical block with the purpose of impelling more equitable conditions for the nations of the South. This would definitely strengthen Africa and position it to play its role in building bridges between Latin America and Asia. Then, beyond the economic axes, these alliances between the three continents emerge as



a better outline to foment common policies (Latin America-Africa-Asia) for the development of each continent.


Politically, this option would allow Africa to be an important actor in the international system inasmuch as it can consolidate a strategic alliance with Asia and Latin America, as opposed to the North, thus setting up a strategic coalition. This is an alternative to confront the manner in which some countries of the South, considered individually, privilege the interests of European and North American institutions at the moment of establishing commercial relations or executing cooperation projects. Therefore, people could take greater protagonism with their systems of beliefs (their cosmos vision) from a perspective of cultural interchanges within an egalitarian framework in order to come out as socio-political and cultural spheres of resistance.

All these characteristics constitute a fundamental condition to go on, considering the construction of new and deep South-South relations in which Africa stands as a bridge or nexus between Latin America and Asia.

Conclusions

There exists a clear transformation of the North-South relations in favor of the first. The countries of the first group enjoy a greater negotiation power compared to the South due to the present improbability to introduce models of development which are different from the Western ones, from the power of the multilateral financial organs, from the monitoring made by these institutions, from the programs of stabilization and its Structural Adjustment Programs that have been imposed to a large extent on the East and the South in order to reconvert these economies and to orient them to the world-wide market and the weakening of the strategic importance of the major part of the exportable supply of good part of the developing countries (Fazio Vengoa, 1999).

This paper has explored the situation of international relations between Africa, Latin America and Asia considering Africa as a bridge between these three continents. This analysis has helped understanding how governments and populations of these continents could play a relevant role in the sphere of international relations. Thus, it has discussed how national policies could take advantage of transnational relations so as to foster social (cultural), political and economic development.




The work has been focused on the importance of similar experiences between the three continents, inasmuch as Africa could help link both Latin America and Asia. But here, we are to respond a question: is South-South cooperation viable, while considering the importance of Africa as a bridge between Latin America and Asia? Without falling into the trap of Afro-centrism, we believe that it is viable inasmuch as a first step should impel or urge Southern countries to extend their diplomatic representations. The horizons must be extended in spite of the difficulties already mentioned, because, throughout the years, Latin American countries have been dependent on the United States; for instance, Colombia is known as a country which maintains privileged relations with this world power. Regarding the African countries, they also continue maintaining privileged alliances with their ex-metropolis (countries of the European Union, such as France, Germany, Great Britain, and Portugal). Asia is not an exception to this structural rule of participating in international relations as defined by both the dominant and the dominated actors since the United States and the European Union are more active in its commercial sphere of influence, than African and Latin American countries.

The interests of the countries of the three continents must begin to take into account the cultural and the mediating issues. The economic relations must be strengthened, and joint efforts are needed to construct common technological and investigative exchanges. The cooperation is viable; but the question is basically related to political will, and social, economic, and cultural approaches or contacts.

The states of the three continents need to strengthen their relations. The Venezuelan leader who attended (as a special guest) the seventh meeting of the African Union in Banjul, Gambia (in 2006, July) along with the president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, declared the following before heads or representatives of the 53 African States:

Africa has everything to become an energy power of the 21st Century. Latin America and the Caribbean are being prepared to become another pole [...] How wonderful would it be to articulate energy, oil, gas and petrochemical strategy! We, Africa, and Latin America are energy powers, let us start up a well coordinated project, such as Petrosur, and we'll see miracles in the short run, we are referring to economic independence and development.

Beyond the state, there is a need to focus on the populations of these continents in order to get to know better one another:



The people of the Third World need to hope and be confident in their future in order to consolidate their political systems. But hope and confidence are not enough; they must be followed by a *mobilization of people* that means their effective and conscious participation like actors of their own process of development (Julius Nyerere, quoted by Pérez Ramírez, 1989, 201).

Beyond the limit of an academic research on these topics, we are facing a situation that compels us to make a political vindication which aims at catching the interest of our leaders of our countries, as well as our people who are more and more facing negative effects of the globalization.



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