

THE UNCERTAIN SUSTAINABILITY OF BRICS STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT*

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The aim of this paper is to assess domestic and international strategies for sustainable development of the BRICS coalition (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) within the new institutional framework established by Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement (PA) on Climate Change, which, since 2015, have defined the guidelines for individual and collective action.

The BRICS show a strong potential in leading the way to sustainable development. They play a major role in world economy in terms of trade and finance and have been able to involve an increasing number of less developed and emerging countries in a complex web of economic and political relations. Yet, several doubts are raised on the sustainability of BRICS strategies for sustainable development. This paper argues that, as far as sustainable development is concerned, the effectiveness of BRICS action is reduced by the inconsistencies between the engagements envisaged by SDGs and PA and the practices implemented by BRICS members on the basis of economic and political interests. To show this argument, the paper focuses first on BRICS commitments at domestic and international level, and then it explores BRICS present actions and future strategies. The attention is mainly on China and India, taking their relations with Africa as a major case for international cooperation.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 1 introduces the regulatory framework produced by SDGs and PA and describes the commitments for the transition to sustainable development. Section 2 points out BRICS economic and political role in world economy and reviews BRICS strategy and action, addressing first domestic policies and then South-South cooperation and international initiatives with a specific reference to China and India in Africa. Section 3 points out the major inconsistencies and ambiguities between official commitments and actual practices.

1. The BRICS and the new scenario for sustainable development

When the first BRICS Summit was held in China (2011), the international community was already aware that the UN Millennium Campaign (2000-2015) was about to reach limited achievements. While being the most successful anti-poverty effort in the history of humankind, the 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the 21 Targets were not fully reached and the job was left unfinished for millions of people in the most disadvantaged countries. Then, in the UN Summit in New York (2015), it was established that this partial success was to be addressed by means of the 2030 Agenda which included the SDGs: a new set of 17 Goals and 169 Targets to be reached in 15

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years to enhance the transition to sustainable development and to end poverty in all forms, everywhere and forever¹.

Indeed, also the SDGs have been criticized and a major failure of Agenda 2030 has been anticipated for important Goals². While the huge number of Goals and Targets has been pointed out as a key weakness, the influential critique has been raised that a “narrative of change” is missing and no explanation is provided of the “ultimate end” and of the way in which goals and targets contribute to achieving it³. This lack of theoretical foundations adds to internal inconsistencies due to the very focus on sustainable development. Building on the idea that a sustainable development is an oxymoron, it has been argued that there is an inherent (and inescapable) contradiction between socio-economic goals and environmental goals⁴. Finally, the effectiveness of SDGs has been questioned, pointing out that, while the political responsibility of the outcomes is collective, no individual responsibility for actions is identifiable, goals and targets are not binding, and each country is free to follow its own strategy to meet them⁵.

Environmental issues are also at the core of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which, since 1995, has collected together a wide number of country representatives in the Conferences of Parties (CoPs) to define common actions for keeping under control climate change.

With the Kyoto Protocol (CoP 3, 1997) more than 150 nations agreed on the reduction of Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions. The Protocol placed a heavier burden on developed nations, while China (15.5% of emissions in 1997) and other developing and emerging countries were exempted from specific actions. With CoP 21 (Paris, 2015) the situation drastically changes. When signing the agreement, all countries – developed, developing and emerging – explicitly engage in keeping the increase of temperature 2°C above pre-industrial levels, with an effort to limit the increase to 1.5°C⁶. Moreover, signatory countries are required to define their own engagement in terms of specific actions, and are free to choose their own strategies to be communicated to, and approved by, the Secretariat of UNFCCC.

This change impacts on collective and individual action against climate change. The indicator of climate change is the increase in average temperature and each participant is required a specific engagement to keep the indicator at the agreed level. Moreover, the engagement is not enforced, being the result of individual decision. Developing countries exerted a major pressure for this change. In particular, the BRICS took a strong position against EU proposal, which, in continuity

¹ For information, see UN Sustainable Development Goals. Knowledge Platform: sustainabledevelopment.un.org.

² FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018. Building climate resilience for food security and nutrition*, Rome, FAO, 2018, p. xiii.

³ ICSU and ISSC, *Review of the Sustainable Development Goals: The Science Perspective*, Paris, International Council for Science, 2015, p. 10.

⁴ Spaiser V., Ranganathan S., Swain R.B., Sumpter D.J.T., *The sustainable development oxymoron: quantifying and modelling the incompatibility of sustainable development goals*, in «International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology», 2017, 24: 6, pp. 457-470. DOI: 10.1080/13504509.2016.1235624.

⁵ Easterly W., *The SDGs Should Stand for Senseless, Dreamy, Garbled*, in «Foreign Policy», 2015, 28 September, foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/28/the-sdgs-are-utopian-and-worthless-mdgs-development-rise-of-the-rest/; see also Swain R.B., «A Critical Analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals», in Leal Filho W. (ed.) *Handbook of Sustainability Science and Research*. World Sustainability Series, Cham, Springer, 2018, pp. 341-355.

⁶ United Nations, *Paris Agreement*, 2016, www.unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf.

with the Kyoto Protocol, suggested the decrease of emissions to 40%. Against the EU proposal, the USA supported developing countries, rejecting external control on environmental issues⁷.

The SDGs and the agenda on climate change are intertwined. Climate change makes the pursuing of sustainable development more difficult as it generates uncertainties, increasing the cost of mitigation and adaptation. Therefore, the actions to keep under control climate change are a major component of the agenda for sustainable development.

2. BRICS potential contribution to sustainable development

Tables 1 and 2 provide basic information to contextualize BRICS contribution to sustainable development. Both the notable participation to world economy of the BRICS as a whole and the significant differences among members clearly emerge.

With 42% of world population and 22% of GDP, the BRICS contribute 42% of CO2 emissions. Since 2000, their share of population has been slightly decreasing, while the shares of GDP and CO2 emissions have shown a marked increase. The countries markedly differ in terms of size: while both China and India are above 1.3 billion people, South African population is only 56 million, with Brazil and Russia well below 300 million. This difference is mirrored on per capita CO2 emissions, which vary from 1.7 mt in India, to 7.5 mt for China, to 11.9 mt in Russia (Table 1).

Table 1 - BRICS countries: population, GDP and CO2 emissions

	Population			GDP				CO2 emissions			
	2016 Mln	2000 %	2016 %	2016 Bln	2000 US\$	2016 %	2016 %	2014 Mt	2000 %	2014 %	2014 per capita mt
Brazil	207.7	2.9	2.8	1,796	2.0	2.4		530	1.3	1.5	2.59
Russian Federation	144.3	2.4	1.9	1,283	0.8	1.7		1,705	6.3	4.7	11.86
India	1,324.2	17.2	17.8	2,264	1.4	3.0		2,238	4.2	6.2	1.73
China	1,378.7	20.6	18.5	11,199	3.6	14.8		10,292	13.8	28.5	7.54
South Africa	56.0	0.7	0.8	295	0.4	0.4		490	1.5	1.4	8.98
BRICS	3,110.8	43.8	41.8	16,838	8.1	22.2		15,255	27.1	42.2	4.96
<i>European Union</i>	<i>511.4</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>6.9</i>	<i>16,491</i>	<i>26.6</i>	<i>21.7</i>		<i>3,242</i>	<i>15.8</i>	<i>9.0</i>	<i>6.38</i>
<i>United States</i>	<i>323.1</i>	<i>4.6</i>	<i>4.3</i>	<i>18,624</i>	<i>30.6</i>	<i>24.5</i>		<i>5,254</i>	<i>23.1</i>	<i>14.5</i>	<i>16.49</i>
World	7,444.0	100.0	100.0	75,872	100.0	100.0		36,138	100.0	100.0	4.97

Source: data.worldbank.org

The differences of GDP growth are also huge. The coalition includes: two growing economies, China and India, with GDP growth rate of 7.1% and 6.7% in 2016, respectively; two stagnant economies, Russia and South Africa, respectively with 0.2% and 0.6%; and one declining economy, Brazil with -3.5%. This difference is matched by the difference in per capita GNI, which varies from 7,060 \$PPP for India to 24,890 \$PPP for Russia. Also the Gini coefficient shows impressive variation, from 35.1 for India to 63.0 for South Africa. Finally, the BRICS are heterogeneous in relation to living standard, including developing countries like India, in which over 86% of the population live with less than 5.50\$ per capita per day, and South Africa (57.1%); a major

⁷ Viola E. and Basso L., *Wandering Decarbonization: The BRIC Countries as Conservative Climate Powers*, in «Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional», 59 (1), 2016, pp. 1–22.

economic power, such as China (2.7%); and two countries with higher per capita income, such as Russia (27.2%) and Brazil (19.4%) (Table 2).

Table 2 - BRICS countries: selected socio-economic indicators

	GDP rate of growth*		Gini Index *		Headcount ratio (% of population)**			per capita GNI***	
	Annual %				Poverty line at \$ PPP (2011) per person per day			\$ PPP (2011)	
					5.5	3.2	1.9		
Brazil	-3.5	2016	52.9	2015	19.4	8.0	3.4	2015	15,160 2017
Russian Federation	-0.2	2016	37.7	2015	27.2	7.0	0.7	2015	24,890 2017
India	7.1	2016	35.1	2011	86.8	60.4	21.2	2011	7,060 2017
China	6.7	2016	42.2	2012	2.7	0.3	0.0	2015	16,760 2017
South Africa	0.6	2016	63.0	2015	57.1	37.6	18.9	2014	13,090 2017

Sources:

* databank.worldbank.org/data

** databank.worldbank.org/data/source/poverty-and-equity

***data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.PP.CD

The heterogeneity is confirmed also for trade. Russia and South Africa are net exporters of primary energy goods, while China, India and Brazil are net importers. It is the opposite for trade in other goods and services, being China a strong exporter together with Russia, and Brazil, India and South Africa net importers⁸.

As the coalition started in 2009/10, BRICS role was marginal in the first Millennium Campaign, when the Kyoto Protocol was in action, and became a major player only in the negotiations for the 2030 Agenda and PA⁹.

Since 2015, BRICS potential contribution to sustainable development has been expanding relying on two complementary groups of tools¹⁰. First, for their large dimension in terms of population and economy, the BRICS exert a major impact on world production and consumption. Therefore, they might contribute to sustainable development through their national practices. Second, the BRICS have an active and increasing involvement in South-South cooperation and with the BRICS Plus strategy might lead emerging and developing partners to adopt policies and practices for environmental protection. Besides, China has promoted international initiatives involving several developed and developing countries in building physical and financial infrastructures worldwide and mobilizing large amounts of resources.

In the remaining of this section, we review and discuss BRICS potential contribution in the two areas as they emerge from official statements and documents. We focus on the engagements of each BRICS country and on international cooperation.

2.1. National commitments for sustainable development

⁸ National Statistics Bureau of the People's Republic of China, *BRICS Joint Statistical Publication 2017*, Beijing, China Statistics Press, 2017.

⁹ BRICS Information Portal, *Sustainable Development Goals: BRICS and Russia*, in «News», 1 December, 2017, infobrics.org/post/26088/.

¹⁰ Basile E. and Cecchi C., *Will the BRICS succeed in leading the way to sustainable development?*, in «Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali», Anno 85, No 2, 2018, pp. 223-234.

China, India and Brazil provide detailed information on their commitments for SDGs with their “Voluntary National Reports”, while Russia and South Africa only provided information for MDGs.

In China’s Report the importance of SDGs is highlighted and results and commitments are listed for each Goal. In relation to *Goal 7*, the Report emphasizes the commitment to provide energy to the whole population, to diversify energy sources, and to develop international cooperation in the energy sector. For *Goal 8*, the increase in employment is emphasized, together with the enhancement and upgrading of economic transformation, the promotion of new drivers for economic growth, and the support of workers’ rights. For *Goal 9*, the Report summarises the results and introduces future commitments to strengthen infrastructure development; to implement the *Made in China 2025* programme; to foster a more enabling environment for entrepreneurship and innovation; to accelerate the development of demonstration zones for implementation of 2030 Agenda and green technology banks; to continue implementing the Belt and Road Initiative, listing the projects already undertaken. For *Goal 10*, the Report points out the improvement of urban and rural living standards to reduce income gaps and ensure equal access to goods and services, and the commitment to international cooperation for the development of other developing countries. Finally for *Goal 13*, the Report mentions the “Work Plan for Greenhouse Gas Emissions Control during the 13th Five-Year Plan Period and the Action Plan for Adaptation to Climate Change in Cities”, emphasizing the engagement to curb carbon emissions in key industries, such as power, steel, construction materials and chemicals, and to promote low-carbon development in priority areas, including industry, energy, construction and transportation¹¹.

While being detailed, India’s Voluntary Report only takes into account few SDGs, on which the commitment of the country has been significant, i.e. *Goals 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 14, 17*. No specific commitments on environmental issues (*Goals 7 and 13*) and working conditions (*Goals 8 and 10*) are found, while strong emphasis is on poverty reduction and on production improvement. *Goal 9* is given a major attention with the aim of enhancing the building of transport and energy infrastructures for peripheral areas and the building of digital infrastructures with the *Digital India Programme*; providing increasing credit to small enterprises; and implementing several initiatives such as the *Start-up India Programme*¹².

In its Report, Brazil underlines the necessity to coordinate the action for SDGs with the Multi-Year Plan 2016-2019. It also informs that the National Commission for SDGs has been established with the participation of representatives of Federal, State, District and Municipal Governments and civil society. Moreover, the Report stresses the importance of *Goals 1, 2, 3, 5, 9 and 17*¹³.

The BRICS are also committed to deal with climate change. According to the PA, the countries have to submit their “Intended National Determined Contribution” (INDC), which should contain a

¹¹ SDG Knowledge Platform, *Voluntary National Review 2016. Executive Summary of China’s Actions on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, in «Voluntary National Review Platform», 2016, sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/china. See also Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Progress Report on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 2017, sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/13028China_review_en_Beijing20.pdf.

¹² SDG Knowledge Platform, *Voluntary National Review 2017. India – Main Messages*, 2017, sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/14922India.pdf.

¹³ Brazilian Government, *Voluntary National Review on the Sustainable Development Goals*, 2017, sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/15806Brazil_English.pdf.

description of aims, tools and resources. The INDC is submitted every 5 years, but may be integrated and amended according to the needs¹⁴.

The engagements described in current INDCs are the following:

- Brazil: to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 43% below 2005 levels in 2030¹⁵.
- Russia: to limit anthropogenic greenhouse gases in the country to 70-75% of 1990 levels by the year 2030¹⁶.
- India: to reduce emission intensity by 33-35% by 2030 from the 2005 level¹⁷.
- China: to lower carbon dioxide emissions per unit of GDP by 60-65% from the 2005 level¹⁸.
- South Africa: to lead emissions by 2025-2030 to a range between 398 and 614 Mt CO₂-eq¹⁹.

As in the case of SDGs, Russia INDC provides little information, while China INDC is very detailed, including descriptions of national and international strategies for “Building Low-Carbon Energy System”, “Controlling Emissions from Building and Transportation Sectors”, “Promoting the Low-Carbon Way of Life”. Moreover, the commitment to “develop nuclear power in a safe and efficient manner” and “newly built coal-fired power plants” is pointed out. India INDC is very detailed too, containing also information on commitments and strategies. The energy section introduces actions to reduce CO₂ emissions by means of wind energy, solar power, biomass energy, hydropower, nuclear power and clean coal power. Also India points out that investments are planned for new nuclear power plants.

2.2. Promoting sustainable development in international cooperation

The PA acknowledges the joint involvement of developed and developing countries in coordinated action under the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities and capabilities”. Moreover, SDGs are extended to, both, developed and developing countries, while SDG 17 points to “partnership for the Goals”. Cooperation of countries at different income levels is then necessary

¹⁴ United Nations, *Report of the Conference of the Parties on its twenty-first session, held in Paris from 30 November to 13 December 2015. Addendum. Part two: Action taken by the Conference of the Parties at its twenty-first session*, 2016,

un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/FCCC_CP_2015_10_Add.1.pdf

¹⁵ UNFCC, *Federative Republic of Brazil. Intended Nationally Determined Contribution Towards Achieving the Objective of the United Nations Framework Convention On Climate Change*, 2015, www4.unfccc.int/Submissions/INDC/Published%20Documents/Brazil/1/BRAZIL%20iNDC%20english%20FINAL.pdf

¹⁶ UNFCC, *INDC of the Russian Federation*, 2015, www4.unfccc.int/Submissions/INDC/Published%20Documents/Russia/1/Russian%20Submission%20INDC_eng_rev1.doc.

¹⁷ UNFCC, *India's Intended Nationally Determined Contribution: Working Towards Climate Justice*, 2015, www4.unfccc.int/ndcregistry/PublishedDocuments/India%20First/INDIA%20INDC%20TO%20UNFCCC.pdf

¹⁸ UNFCC, *Enhanced Actions on Climate Change: China's Intended Nationally Determined Contributions*, 2015, www4.unfccc.int/Submissions/INDC/Published%20Documents/China/1/China's%20INDC%20on%2030%20June%202015.pdf.

¹⁹ UNFCC, *South Africa's Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC)*, 2015 www4.unfccc.int/Submissions/INDC/Published%20Documents/South%20Africa/1/South%20Africa.pdf

to enhance the transition to sustainable development²⁰. North-South cooperation needs to be complemented with South-South cooperation: a form of win-win cooperation in which developing and emerging countries voluntarily assist other developing countries with mutual advantages.

The BRICS have strengthened South-South cooperation stimulating business among Southern countries, keeping under control the impact of Bretton Woods institutions and North-South trade relations. They all are involved in partnerships with developing and emerging countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Yet, China and India are the major players and African countries are their major partners.

China-Africa cooperation started in 2000 with the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) that defined the principles of Sino-African relations: equality of rights, mutual benefits in economic relations, acknowledgment of diversity of cultures, shared engagement for a common prosperity, emphasis on friendly relations in case of conflicting interests²¹. Also India has institutionalized her partnership with Africa with the first India-Africa Forum in 2008.

China and India's model of cooperation includes a mix of investment, trade, and aid (without conditionality) and money transactions are channelled through banking institutions, such as the Exim Bank of China and the Exim Bank of India, implementing a pattern of cooperation outside the rules of the Developed Assistance Committee of the OECD.

Three important financial institutions provide the major tools for BRICS international cooperation. With no less than 55% of the total voting power in the hands of BRICS, the New Development Bank (NDB) has been established in 2015 to support "infrastructure and sustainable development efforts" in members and their partner countries²². Also the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) has been established in 2015 to provide liquidity to member countries in case of balance of payment pressures. The BRICS have full control on CRA with a dominance of China with 40% of voting power. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) addresses Asia's infrastructure funding gap. The AIIB is not a proper BRICS institution but a multilateral development bank promoted by China and involving a large number of Asian and Western countries, including few BRICS (India and Russia). It supports interventions on sustainable and green infrastructure to help Asian countries to meet their environmental and developmental goals. China has a strict control on AIIB with 31% of the total capital²³.

By means of NDB and CRA – and with the support of AIIB – the BRICS are undergoing a process of institutionalization still difficult to assess. While these institutions will provide the BRICS with tools for the collective agency necessary to play an international role²⁴, it is not yet clear whether they are intended as a counterpart to Bretton Woods Institutions or as an alternative to them. Yet, there are major signals that they will enhance the international role of BRICS. The AIIB has already signed co-financing framework agreements and memorandum with the World Bank and other development banks, such as African Development Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and Inter-American Development Bank and others. Moreover, the NDB has signed a

²⁰ UNOSSC, *Climate Partnerships for a Sustainable Future: An initial overview of South-South cooperation on climate change in the context of sustainable development and efforts to eradicate poverty*, New York, United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation, 2017.

²¹ FOCAC includes 53 African states with diplomatic relations with China and the Commission of the African Union. See FOCAC website: www.focac.org; see also Bodomo A., *The Globalization of Foreign Investment in Africa. The Role of Europe, China, and India*, Bingley (UK), Emerald Publishing Limited, Kindle Edition, 2017.

²² See the New Development Bank website: www.ndb.int

²³ See the AIIB website: www.aiib.org.

²⁴ Abdenur A.E. and Folly M., *The New Development Bank and the Institutionalization of the BRICS*, in «Revolutions. Global Trends and Regional Issues», Vol. 3, No 1, 2015, pp. 66-92.

Memorandum of Understanding to establish a framework of collaboration with FAO to support design, monitoring and evaluation of sustainable development and infrastructure projects²⁵.

A major policy with the potential of enhancing international cooperation for sustainable development is the BRICS Plus strategy that was first implemented in 2017, when China invited the leaders of selected developing countries to the Xiamen Summit. There are several reasons for this *openness*. The official account is that the BRICS Plus pattern is: i) “a new platform for cooperation among countries across different continents” with the aim of increasing BRICS influence and to “extend the use of national currencies to overseas investments and bilateral and multilateral trade, thus reducing dependency on the US dollar”²⁶; ii) it is not only about countries but also about “international organisations that can partner with BRICS to create a platform for collaboration and partnerships amongst countries of the Global South, to shape the agenda that will influence changes in the global economy”; and iii) its purpose is “to ensure development and economic growth through trade and investment collaborations, in order to build cooperation in global governance [and in] financial, economic and political institutions”²⁷. In this sense, the BRICS Plus appears to be a strategy that will lead the way to new economic and political alliances worldwide, providing also an aggregating platform for regional trade agreements, allowing the BRICS to support integration against the contemporary declining trend of globalization²⁸.

Under the BRICS Plus strategy, China has invited Egypt, Guinea Conakry, Mexico, Thailand, and Tajikistan for the 9th Summit (Xiamen 2017), while, in the 10th Summit (Johannesburg 2018), South Africa has invited the leaders of the representatives of regional economic communities in the Global South: Argentina for MERCOSUR, Indonesia for the ASEAN, Egypt as Chair of the G77, Jamaica for the Caribbean Community, Turkey for the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation²⁹.

Another important contribution to economic growth that will impact on BRICS international cooperation is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)³⁰. The BRI is a Chinese development strategy, which was launched in 2013 by China’s President Xi Jinping and became operational in 2015³¹. Funded by the Silk Road Fund and the AIIB, the BRI involves a large number of countries in the East and in the West in the construction of transport infrastructure linking Asia, Europe and Africa along five routes.³² It is composed of two major parts: the *Silk Road Economic Belt* links China with Russia and Middle East through Central Asia and connects China with South East Asia and

²⁵ NDB website cit.

²⁶ Wenping H. and Metwally H.A.B., *BRICS Plus model can unite developing economies*, in «People's Daily Online», 28 July 2018, en.people.cn/n3/2018/0728/c90000-9485685.html.

²⁷ N. Kuse, *Introduction to BRICS Plus*, in «BRICS Journal», 13 August 2018, bricsjournal.com/introduction-brics-plus/.

²⁸ Lissovolik Y., *BRICS-Plus: Alternative Globalization in the Making?*, in «Valdai Papers», No. 69, 2017, pp. 1-12.

²⁹ Quotations from the speech by the Deputy Minister L. Landers at the Conference “BRICS in Africa - Working Towards the Realisation of the African Aspirations”, Pretoria, 18 June 2018, published on line by the *International Relation and Cooperation of the Republic of South Africa*, www.dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/2018/land0618.htm.

³⁰ For details, see the BRI portal: eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn.

³¹ National Development and Reform Commission, *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*, NDRS, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, 2015, english.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm.

³² Up to mid-2018, for the BRI China has signed 103 cooperation agreements with 88 countries in Asia, Africa and Europe, and with international organizations. See Xin Z., *Chinese investment in B&R economies exceeds \$70b*, in «China Daily», 17/05/2018. While the aim of BRI is to link China with Asia, Africa and Europe, also 18 Latin American Countries have recently signed BRI agreements with China. These include Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Venezuela, Uruguay and others small Latin American countries. See the Belt and Road Portal, *Ambassador Lu Kun Published a Signed Article on the Belt and Road Initiative*, in «News», 6 May 2019, eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/ghsl/wksl/89066.htm.

South Asia; the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road links China with South Pacific Ocean and Europe through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean.

The BRI has a strong focus on sustainable development emphasized in several official documents. Yet, concern has been raised on the economic, social and environmental impact of BRI projects³³. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) have been working to define state-level and strategic partnership to foster BRI sustainability. The UNDP has achieved China's commitment on the 2030 agenda for BRI projects and was the first international organization to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (2016) and a concrete Action Plan (2017) as a framework for cooperation and the UNDP-China Joint Working Group on the BRI was established in 2018³⁴. The collaboration between UNEP and China has promoted the "International Coalition for Green Development on the Belt and Road" involving more than 80 institutions³⁵. Moreover, UNEP signed an agreement with the Chinese Ministry of Environmental Protection (2016), providing China with a platform to pursue the SDGs, both at national and international level³⁶.

3. Ambiguities and contradictions in sustainable development practices

In this section we assess whether BRICS commitments and official declarations for sustainable development are consistent with actual practices. We explore first the consistency of domestic practices and then we turn to the consistency of the practices adopted in international cooperation.

3.1. Domestic practices

All BRICS have adopted strategies against climate change. However, the heterogeneity is huge. Brazil, India and China have adopted effective actions on environmental issues for the management of natural resources and mitigation of climate change. Moreover, they have addressed sustainability issues in the use of renewable energy sources and pollution, developing innovative legislation for alternative energy sources. By contrast, Russia has been slowly moving towards a change, confirming the use of traditional energy sources³⁷, while, due to its priorities to address poverty and

³³ Ascensão F., Fahrig L., Clevenger A.P., Corlett R.T., Jaeger J.A.G., Laurance W.F., Pereira H.M., *Environmental challenges for the Belt and Road Initiative*, in «Nature Sustainability», V. 1, 2018, pp. 206–209. See also Horvath B., *Identifying Development Dividends along the Belt and Road Initiative: Complementarities and Synergies between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Sustainable Development Goals*, UNDP and China Center for Economic Exchanges (CCIEE), 2017, www.undp.org/content/dam/china/docs/Publications/UNDP-CH-BRI%202017%20Scoping%20Paper1%20%EF%BC%88Final%EF%BC%89.pdf.

³⁴ UNDP-China, *Belt and Road Initiative*, 2018, www.cn.undp.org/content/china/en/home/belt-and-road.html.

³⁵ UNEP, *A Green Belt and Road*, 2017, www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/press-release/green-belt-and-road.

³⁶ UNEP – UN Environment, *Green Belt and Road Strategy*, 2017, wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/25178/UN%20Environment%20Belt%20and%20Road%20Strategy%20final.pdf?sequence=38&isAllowed=y

³⁷ Gladun E. and Ahsan E., *BRICS Countries' Political and Legal Participation in the Global Climate Change Agenda*, «Brics Law Journal», 2016, Vol. III, No 3, pp. 7-42; see also Dudin M.N., Frolova E.E., Artemieva J.A., Bezbah V.V. and Kirsanov A.N., *Problems and Perspectives of BRICS Countries Transfer to "Green Economy" and Law-carbon Energy Industry*, in «International Journal of Energy Economics and Policy», 2016, 6(4), pp. 714-720.

inequality, South Africa faces significant rigidities for the transition to a low-carbon and climate resilient society³⁸.

The difficulty of turning SDG commitments into action is shown in Table 3. The best outcomes are for SDG 9, with all BRICS moving to SDG achievement or above, suggesting substantial investments on information technologies, infrastructures and education. SDGs 7 and 13, which refer to the impact of energy production and GHG emissions on climate change, require careful attention in relation to the energy sector, which is the link between SDGs and PA.

Table 3 - BRICS countries: performance by selected SDGs

	Target (threshold)	Brazil		Russia		India		China		South Africa	
		Score	Trend	Score	Trend	Score	Trend	Score	Trend	Score	Trend
Index Score		69.7		68.9		59.1		70.1		60.8	
SDG Global Rank		56		63		112		54		107	

SDG7 – Affordable and Clean Energy

Access to electricity (% population)	≥ 98	99.7	2	100.0	3	79.2	3	100.0	0	86.0	1
Access to clean fuels & technology for cooking (% population)	≥ 85	93.1	2	100.0	3	34.2	0	57.2	1	81.8	3
CO2 emissions from fuel combustion / electricity output (MtCO2/TWh)	≤ 1	0.8	2	1.5	1	1.6	0	1.6	3	1.9	-1

SDG9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure

Proportion of the population using the internet (%)	≥ 80	60.9	2	73.1	2	29.5	1	53.2	3	54.0	3
Mobile broadband subscriptions (per 100 inhabitants)	≥ 75	88.5	2	73.7	2	16.4	0	69.4	3	56.3	3
Quality of overall infrastructure (1= extremely underdeveloped; 7= extensive and efficient by international standards)	≥ 4.5	3.1	-1	4.0	2	4.6	3	4.5	3	4.1	-1
Logistics performance index: Quality of trade and transport-related infrastructure (1=low to 5=high)	≥ 3	3.1	...	2.4	...	3.3	...	3.8	...	3.8	...
The Times Higher Education Universities Ranking, Average score of top 3 universities (0-100)	≥ 20	39.0	...	47.6	...	40.2	...	72.4	...	47.4	...
Number of scientific and technical journal articles (per 1,000 population)	≥ 0.5	0.3	...	0.4	...	0.1	...	0.3	...	0.2	...
Research and development expenditure (% GDP)	≥ 1.5	1.2	...	1.1	...	0.6	...	2.1	...	7.0	...

SDG13 – Climate Action

Energy-related CO2 emissions per capita (tCO2/capita)	≤ 2	2.6	-1	11.9	0	1.7	0	7.5	-1	9.0	0
Imported CO2 emissions, technology-adjusted (tCO2/capita)	≤ 0.5	0.4	...	-0.7	...	0.1	...	-0.8	...	-0.1	...
Climate Change Vulnerability Index (best 0 - 1 worst)	≤ 0.1	0.1	...	0.0	...	0.3	...	0.3	...	0.1	...
CO2 emissions embodied in fossil fuel exports (kg/capita)	≤ 100	530.8	...	9157.6	...	2.1	...	20.6	...	3404.7	...

Legenda:

- 1 = Decreasing score: country is moving in the wrong direction
- 0 = Stagnating: Score remains stagnant or is increasing at a rate below 50% of the growth rate needed to achieve the SDG by 2030
- 1 = Moderately Increasing: Score is increasing at a rate above 50% of the required growthrate but below the rate needed to achieve the SDG by 2030
- 2 = On track: Score is increasing at the rate needed to achieve the SDG by 2030
- 3 = Maintaining SDG achievement: Score is level and trend remains at or above SDG achievement

Source: Sachs et al. (2018)

China – the third country responsible for GHG emissions after USA and EU – is strongly engaged in mitigation of production and consumption impact and, recently, has strengthened domestic actions, taking a leading international role³⁹. While been involved in energy production with coal-

³⁸ UNFCC, *South Africa's Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC)*, cit.

³⁹ Pan J., *The evolution and transformation of China's climate change response strategy: From preventing 'black swan' events to reducing 'grey rhino' risks*, in Garnaut R., Song L. and Fang C. (eds.) *China's 40 Years of Reform and Development 1978–2018*, Acton, The Australian National University, 2018, pp. 525-542.

fired power plants, the country is strongly engaged in efficiency increase and has already set emission and efficiency standards for coal-fired power plants higher than USA and EU⁴⁰. Moreover, also ultra-supercritical coal power plant technology is expected to help plants to meet stricter standards. Yet, owing to the large number of coal power plants, China will certainly have major difficulties in meeting the commitments for the PA.

Owing to air pollution from coal-fired plants, China has started investing deeply in nuclear power reactors. According to World Nuclear Association, 45 nuclear power reactors are in operation, 15 under construction, and more to be built. Thanks to investments in research and the construction of nuclear plants, the country has become a major exporter of nuclear technology⁴¹, being also a leader in renewable energy. According to the International Energy Agency⁴², being “responsible for a large share of global investment in ... clean energy technologies and applications, including electric vehicles, batteries, carbon capture and storage, nuclear power, and solar and wind power”, the Asian giant will continue to lead the world. Even if renewable energy has not increased much so far, the International Energy Agency estimates that in 2040 China’s share of renewable energy will be higher than the energy from fossil and nuclear sources (57% against 43%).

While being the country that in the next years will show the highest demand for primary energy, India presents a stagnant performance for all Targets of SDGs 7 and 13⁴³. The situation of energy production in 2017 shows the following distribution of power sources: 79.3% fossil fuel, 2.9% nuclear, 10.0% hydro, and 7.8% renewable⁴⁴. To meet increasing (domestic) demand, India should install 320 GW of non-fossil fuel capacity and 63 GW for nuclear energy by 2032. It would be almost a three-fold jump from the current levels⁴⁵.

3.2. *International practices*

In addition to the basic ingredients of South-South cooperation, the BRICS are involved in several forms of development finance through their banks. Aid, investment and development finance are intertwined as capital flows create business opportunities for donor and recipient countries. China and India’s cooperation with Africa provides a major example of this intertwining.

China’s engagement with Africa is a complex issue. While being present in Africa throughout XX century and even before, China has undergone a paradigm shift since 2000 that has changed its pattern of cooperation. With the establishment of the FOCAC and the launch of the BRI, the country has become a major player, acquiring the role of important investor and aid provider, together with USA⁴⁶. Moreover, since 2009, China has become the major trading partner for the African continent, overcoming USA⁴⁷.

⁴⁰ Wenyuan W., *China’s ‘clean coal’ power: a viable model or cautionary tale*, 2017, www.chinadialogue.net/blog/9876-China-s-clean-coal-power-A-viable-model-or-cautionary-tale-/en.

⁴¹ See the website www.world-nuclear.org

⁴² International Energy Agency, *World Energy Outlook 2017*, Paris, International Energy Agency, 2018, <https://www.iea.org/weo/china/>

⁴³ International Energy Agency cit.

⁴⁴ Central Electricity Authority, *Annual Report 2017-18*, New Delhi, Government of India. Ministry of Power. Central Electricity Authority, 2018, p. 29 and p.123

⁴⁵ Singh Y., *India’s Policies on Climate Change*, 2017, www.jagranjosh.com/current-affairs/indias-policies-on-climate-change-1500289752-1.

⁴⁶ Bodomo cit.

⁴⁷ Dollar D., *China’s Engagement with Africa. From Natural Resources to Human Resources*, Washington D.C., The John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings, 2016.

To Africa, China provides several types of aid – goods and materials, technical cooperation, human resource development cooperation, medical assistance, and humanitarian aid – covering a wide range of sectors, from agriculture, to education, transportation, energy, communications, and health⁴⁸. A major component is Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and Nigeria, South Africa and Algeria are top destinations, while mining, construction and manufacturing are the top sectors⁴⁹. Also the loans from Government and banks (in particular from China Exim Bank) to African Governments and state-owned enterprises are a major component. Ethiopia, Angola, Sudan and Kenya are the top destinations, while transportation, energy and mining are the top financed sectors. Moreover, Chinese loans provide funding to the BRI, to build infrastructure – for instance the ports and railways in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya – and to create free trade zone complexes, such as the ones in Djibouti, Egypt and Morocco⁵⁰.

With a steady increase over the past two decades, trade is a major component of China-Africa cooperation. From Africa, China imports commodities – mineral fuels, lubricants, iron ore, metals, and also food and agricultural products – and exports to Africa machinery, transportation and communication equipment, together with a vast range of manufactured goods. Angola, South Africa and Congo are the largest exporters to China, while South Africa, Egypt and Nigeria are the largest importers⁵¹.

India's cooperation with Africa is still little researched. Yet, the available evidence suggests that, while the ingredients are the same, India-Africa cooperation works differently and has a different scope than China's. While having an African Policy since the 1960s, India has established the Development Partnership Administration in the Ministry of Economic Affairs only in 2012 and, for lack of adequate resources, cannot compete with China for investments and loans⁵². As a consequence, India's cooperation with Africa takes mainly the form of non-monetary aid, such as technical assistance and scholarships, while the country relies on *soft power*, i.e. the political power to persuade, convince, attract and co-opt partners by means of intangible resources, such as culture and values. India presents herself as a country that, while not yet been able to overcome poverty, nevertheless is experiencing a pattern of development based on democracy and participation that can be exported to African countries. A major support to India's bottom-up strategy of socio-economic-cultural penetration comes from the Indian Diaspora⁵³.

China and India's cooperation with Africa is presented as a form of win-win-cooperation that ensures advantages to both parties. Jointly, cooperation and investment should produce employment in recipient countries, while creating business opportunities for enterprises in donor countries. This would occur without conditionality and ensuring mutual benefits and equality of rights.

Evidence and argument suggest that China and India get several advantages from their cooperation with Africa. They concentrate trade, aid, and investment in partners, such as Nigeria and Algeria, that are rich of commodities, in particular oil and other mineral fuels, and metals, while energy and

⁴⁸ CARI, *Data: Chinese Foreign Aid to Africa*, China-Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, 2018, Sais-Cari.org.

⁴⁹ CARI, *The United States and China in Africa: What does the data say?*, China-Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, in «Policy Brief», No 18, 2017, Sais-Cari.org., pp. 3-5.

⁵⁰ CARI, *Silk Road to the Sahel: African ambitions in China's Belt and Road Initiative*, China-Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, in «Policy Brief», No. 23, 2018, Sais-Cari.org.

⁵¹ Dollar cit., pp. 19 *et seq.*

⁵² Testoni A. *The evolution of Indian development cooperation policies in Africa: pursuing a distinct and proactive role*, in «Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali», 2018, Vol. 85, No 4.

⁵³ Testoni cit., p. 560.

mining are the main sectors of intervention. They also keep close relations with countries that are sensible from a political and economic point of view, such as Ethiopia, which has supported the establishment of the FOCAC, and Djibouti, which will have a strategic role in the African development of the BRI. Finally, they extensively use African land (at a low cost) to grow agricultural goods. By contrast, the impact on Africa is controversial. It is uncertain whether China and India's cooperation is positive for African countries; whether it has a positive impact in terms of technological transfer and economic growth; and whether it can be considered less exploitative than OECD cooperation.

Two opposite views are found in the literature. On one side, it has been suggested⁵⁴ that China and India's cooperation with Africa is a form of neo-colonial relation, within which African partners are exploited to appropriate their commodities and to use their consensus as a support in political arena. So, this form of cooperation would be for African developing countries a sort of "diversification" of their dependency from old colonial powers that does not produce employment and business opportunities for local enterprises. On the other side, it has been argued that, while there are no doubts on China and India's advantages, also African developing countries gain from cooperation. China and India's investment and aid are creating jobs for local workers and building the infrastructure that is necessary for Africa's development⁵⁵.

A similar situation is observed for the impact on Africa's sustainable development. As China and India are in structural deficit of energy, their investments in Africa are mainly finalized to increase access to energy sources, such as oil and coal. The investment in the mining sector has an undeniable impact on environment; similarly, massive land leasing has a major impact on food security and living standards. However, the evidence is often contradictory and recent research has shown that China and, partly, also India are increasingly keeping under control the impact of their investments in Africa, enhancing sustainable development and promoting green growth⁵⁶.

3.2.1. *The case of the Belt and Road Initiative*

Although being a Chinese project, the BRI already involves a large number of Asian, European, and African countries in financial investments in several sectors, and includes different types of contracts for building infrastructure and buying inputs, work, and knowledge. While the official aim is the building of transport infrastructures, the Initiative has the ambitious aim of strengthening economic and political relations among partner countries by means South-South and North-South cooperation for "eradicating poverty, creating jobs, addressing the consequences of international

⁵⁴ Cheru F. and Obi C. (eds.), *The Rise of China and India in Africa: Challenges, Opportunities and Critical Interventions*, London and New York, Zed Books, 2010. See also Taylor I., *Africa rising? BRICS - Diversifying Dependency*, Woodbridge, James Currey, 2014.

⁵⁵ Bräutigam B., *Will Africa Feed India?*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2015; see also Okolo A.L. and Akwu J.O., *China's foreign direct investment in Africa's land: hallmarks of neo-colonialism or South-South cooperation?*, in «Africa Review», 2016, Vol. 8 No 1; and Pham P., Salam Bello A. Boubacar-Sid B., *Chinese Aid and Investment Are Good for Africa*, in «Foreign Policy», 2018, August 31.

⁵⁶ Gu, J. Renwick, N. Xue, L., *The BRICS and Africa's search for green growth, clean energy and sustainable development*, «Energy Policy», 2018, 120, pp. 675–683; see also Shinn D., *The Environmental Impact of China's Investment in Africa*, «Cornell International Law Journal», 2016, No 1, Vol. 49, pp. 25-67; and OECD/IEA, *Boosting the Power Sector in Sub-Saharan Africa: China's Involvement*, Paris, OECD, 2016. www.iea.org/publications/freepublications/publication/Partner_Country_SeriesChinaBoosting_the_Power_Sector_in_Sub-Saharan_Africa_Chinas_Involvement.pdf.

financial crises, promoting sustainable development, and advancing market-based industrial transformation and economic diversification”⁵⁷.

Also the BRI intends to be a form of win-win cooperation. Yet, there are few doubts that the main advantages are for China. According to an estimate of the National Bureau of Statistics of China⁵⁸, China is getting very positive outcomes in terms of imports and exports in BRI area, with an increase in 2017 of 12.1% and 26.8%, respectively. The same source also confirms that the business revenue from countries along the BRI was 85.5 billion US\$ in 2017, with an increase of 12.6%, so accounting for 50.7% of China business revenue through contracted overseas engineering projects. Altogether 520 thousand workers have been sent abroad through overseas labour contracts. Moreover, the BRI has improved China’s position in the Global Value Chain (GVC), facilitating the shift from an exporting structure based on assembly and intensive in foreign inputs to one of the most important GVC hubs, with a large and increasing trade with BRI countries. In the GVC, China has been occupying a central position with Germany and USA, and BRI countries are among its major trade partners⁵⁹.

The BRI requires a huge amount of financial resources both from China and from partners. Investments come from China Development Bank, China Exim Bank and the Silk Road Fund, together with Syndacated Loans by six Chinese banks⁶⁰. Moreover, Chinese state-owned and Chinese privately owned enterprises are involved. In 2014-2017 the flow of funding for the energy sector has been of \$250 billion for projects on oil, gas, and petrochemical transfer, nuclear energy plants, fossil fuel energy generation and also renewable energy generation⁶¹.

China’s financial institutions also provide loans to partners with the consequence that often BRI-funded projects are at risk of debt distress.⁶² Moreover there is strong concern about project delays with deficits and sovereignty losses⁶³.

The UNEP⁶⁴ argues that the BRI might have a positive environmental impact as generates public-private institutional engagement, building climate resilient infrastructure and promoting biodiversity conservation projects. However, this opinion is not widely shared. The World Wide Fund for Nature lists a wide number of environmental issues raised by the projects for the

⁵⁷ Belt and Road Portal, *Joint communiqué of leaders roundtable of Belt and Road forum*, in «News», 16 May 2017. eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/zchj/qwfb/13694.htm

⁵⁸ National Bureau of Statistics of China, *Statistical Communiqué of China on 2017 National Economic and Social Development*, in «News», 28 February 2018. http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/201802/t20180228_1585666.html

⁵⁹ Buffa M., *Trade Linkages Between the Belt and Road Economies*, Policy Research Working Paper No 8423, 2018, World Bank Group - Macroeconomics, Trade and Investment Global Practice.

⁶⁰ The six Chinese banks are: China Development Bank, Export-Import Bank of China, Agricultural Bank of China, Bank of China, China Construction Bank and Industrial and Commercial Bank.

⁶¹ Zhou L., Gilbert S., Wang Y., Muñoz Cabré M. And Gallagher K.P., *Moving the Green Belt and Road Initiative: From Words to Actions*, Working Paper, October 2018, Washington, World Resources Institute.

⁶² Harley *et al.* identify 23 countries, of which 10-15 could suffer from debt distress due to future BRI-related financing and eight are considered to be highly vulnerable. See Hurley J., Morris S. and Portelance G., *Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective*, CGD Policy Paper, No 121, Washington Center for Global Development,

⁶³ Yamada G., *Is China's Belt and Road working? A progress report from eight countries*, in «Nikkei Asian Review», 2018, March 28. asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Cover-Story/Is-China-s-Belt-and-Road-working-A-progress-report-from-eight-countries.

⁶⁴ UNEP, *UN Environment’s on-going and potential engagement on Greening the Belt and Road Initiative*, Information note, 2017, Annual Meeting of the GREEN Action Task Force, www.oecd.org/env/outreach/2017_OECD-GATF_UNEP%20Room%20Doc%20BR%20rev.pdf.

overlapping of BRI corridors with bird areas and key biodiversity areas, including the threat to 265 animal species⁶⁵. These environmental issues go together with major social impacts. According to Zhou *et al.*⁶⁶ “most Chinese deals in energy and transportation are still tied to traditional sectors and do not show a strong alignment with the low-carbon priorities”, while according to Yamada⁶⁷ the projects often show a lack of participation by local workers.

The literature also points out that China exports to BRI countries its fossil fuel-based economy⁶⁸ and that high environmental value projects in BRI area may have significant impacts on biodiversity⁶⁹. Finally, relying on an analysis of official data and by means of estimates, Xiaoyang Chen and Lin⁷⁰ argue that the positive impact of investments in BRI area is limited, as the overall investment does not show a significantly different performance than the ones in other areas. The reason is that the leading component of China’s outward direct investment is given by investment towards developed and non-BRI countries, while the majority of China’s construction contracts are in developing and BRI countries. Moreover, again Xiaoyang Chen and Lin⁷¹ argue that China’s infrastructure investments in BRI countries are catalyst for the Chinese investments in manufacturing and services. However, they also argue that, as an initiative to improve physical infrastructure, the BRI stimulates FDI and then GDP and trade growth, but the “effects of FDI on aggregate productivity and innovation are insignificant”.

3.3. An uncertain picture

In this paper we have explored ambiguities and contradictions in BRICS sustainable development practices. We have shown the limited domestic achievements for SDGs due to China, India and Russia’s dependency on fossil energy sources and nuclear energy. Despite the major progress toward sustainability by China, and at a lesser extent also by India, this dependency will last, leading to a slow transition to renewable sources. Among the reasons for this inadequate performance, there are population size and the limited availability of mineral fuel energy that oblige China and India to use imported fossil fuels and to increase nuclear plants, moving on a non-sustainable trajectory.

Exploring development cooperation with Africa, we have shown that China and India act on the basis of different models. Both Asian giants use cooperation as a means to find support for their political role in international fora. However, while China cooperation is based on huge projects for building infrastructure and FDI, India mainly employs her soft power and non-monetary aid to strengthen her political and economic role. Yet, with cooperation with Africa, both countries aim at ensuring the provision of energy sources, so exporting sustainability problems to African partners. China and India’s cooperation with Africa seems to be a form of win-win cooperation. However, the major advantages are with the donors.

⁶⁵ WWF, *The Belt and Road Initiative*, Briefing Paper, 2017, World Wide Fund for Nature. awsassets.panda.org/downloads/the_belt_and_road_initiative___wwf_recommendations_and_spatial_analysis___may_2017.pdf

⁶⁶ Cit. p. 20.

⁶⁷ Cit. p. 6.

⁶⁸ Teese P., *Exploring the Environmental Repercussions of China’s Belt and Road Initiative*, Washington, Environmental and Energy Study Institute (EESI), 2018.

⁶⁹ Ascensão *et al.* cit. p. 206.

⁷⁰ Xiaoyang Chen M. and Lin C., *Foreign Investment across the Belt and Road Patterns, Determinants and Effects*, Policy Research Working Paper, No 8607, 2018, Washington, World Bank Group, p. 15.

⁷¹ Cit. p. 38.

Our analysis points out several inconsistencies in BRICS practices of sustainable development. First, at domestic level, the engagement for SDGs and PA is limited to China and partially to India, while being substantially negligible for the other BRICS. China is the most involved country also in South-South cooperation with Africa, and the international impact of the BRI is large and increasing. Also India is involved in a form of soft cooperation with Africa with strong potentialities.

As far as sustainability is concerned, the BRI shows several contradictory aspects. BRI projects exert a major impact on environment and economy. On the one side, they change territories and landscapes; on the other, they increase the risk in economic transaction and create indebtedness. Moreover, the degree of involvement of local unskilled workforce is rather low. Finally, economic choices are China-led and partner countries operate in subordination. In this sense, the BRI is a major support to China's strategy to ensure the provision of natural resources and to enlarge the market for Chinese goods. So, while the BRI is pursuing sustainable development for partners by means of the Green BRI, several aspects of the project – such as the international transfer of mineral resources and polluting technologies, together with the limited involvement of local human resources in the management of projects – cannot be seen as sustainable from an environmental and socio-economic point of view. By contrast, while her role cannot be compared to China's in terms of size and scope, India seems to be employing a more sustainable approach, involving human local resources (also thanks to her diaspora in Africa) and exporting a democratic and participated pattern of growth.

The picture emerging from our analysis describes the BRICS as a rather unbalanced group of countries. The partners differ for their economic, demographic, and political role. While the coalition revolves around China, which is the major player with large economic and political power, India is progressively increasing her influence on Africa. Also BRICS engagement on SDGs and PA is substantially unbalanced with a modest involvement of Brazil, Russia and South Africa. Internally, China and India show encouraging results, but they are still trapped in past-dependent development trajectories that require fossil fuels and nuclear energy sources. Internationally, they are strong advocates of globalization. Yet, while declaring a strong commitment to sustainable development, they still carry on a pattern of cooperation with Africa focused on the provision of commodities and raw materials, indeed challenging the very idea of sustainability.