

CONFERENCE REVIEW NOTES

PEOPLE-CENTERED APPROACH AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN BRICS: A CASE OF BRICS SCHOOL*

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<https://doi.org/10.21684/2412-2343-2020-7-4-177-186>

Recommended citation: Elena Gladun & Reon C.A. van der Merwe, *People-Centered Approach and Youth Participation in BRICS: A Case of BRICS School*, 7(4) BRICS Law Journal 177–186 (2020).

Introduction

International Research and Educational Program “BRICS School” took place in Moscow on 5–10 October 2020. It was the 4th school organized by the National Committee for BRICS Research jointly with the Russian Foreign Ministry in the frameworks the Russian BRICS Chairmanship. The School participants were young researchers, earlier career leaders, bachelor, master and PhD students, diplomats, public activists, entrepreneurs from Brazil, China, India, Russia, South Africa and other countries. Eighty participants had been chosen by the Contest for BRICS Young Leaders among several hundred applicants. The objective of the annual BRICS School is to identify the most talented and involved representatives of BRICS youth and to build a community of young leaders developing the relevant agenda of the BRICS countries.

* The paper is prepared in cooperation with the National Committee for BRICS Research, Russia (Oct. 1, 2020), available at <http://www.nkibrics.ru/>.

1. Background of BRICS International School

The BRICS International School is an annual event aimed at training young experts specializing in BRICS studies in political, economic, humanitarian fields and other relevant areas of interaction within the five countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. The School is a unique research and educational program giving its participants an exclusive opportunity to broaden their professional horizons, to develop communication skills, and to study specifics of cooperation among the BRICS countries. In 2020, within the framework of the Russian BRICS Chairmanship an exceptional School program has been worked out with the primary goal to expand a pool of young experts – “BRICSologists” for further development of a youth track of cooperation within BRICS as well as to support future-oriented projects and ideas from the young leaders from BRICS countries. The idea of 2020 BRICS School is to accumulate intellectual potential of the young experts and to develop their professional community. It has become a powerful gathering of young people under the leadership of mentors – top Russian and international experts, practitioners, representatives of governmental and non-governmental organizations, ministries and agencies, think tanks with considerable experience in BRICS research. The BRICS School program was divided into subject-specific modules developed by partner organizations such as Russian Council for International Affairs, Agency for Strategic Initiatives, Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Far Eastern Federal University, Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, Moscow School of Management SKOLKOVO (Russia), Institute for Applied Economic Research (Brazil), Observer Research Foundation (India), China Council for the BRICS Think Tank Cooperation (China) and South African Centre for BRICS Research (South Africa).

2. Summary of the BRICS International School

In October 2020, BRICS School participants have had a unique opportunity to attend a comprehensive course of lectures specifically developed by prominent politicians, university professors, research well-known for their activities in the BRICS cooperation and development. Among them, Dr. Vyacheslav Nikonov, the Chairman of the Committee on Education and Science of the State Duma of the Russian Federation and the Chairman of Russian National Committee on BRICS Research, the Dean of the Faculty of Public Administration at Moscow State University provided an appealing lecture on the topic “Hegemony vs. Democracy on International Arena: Who’s Gonna Lead?”. Mr. Sergey Ryabkov, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation; Sherpa in BRICS talked about the challenges for BRICS cooperation in the post-COVID era.

The School program included not only lectures, but also master classes, tutorials, case studies, webinars. Educational webinar facilitated by Ms. Ksenia Kuzmina, the

Program manager of Russian International Affairs Council introduced experts – Prof. Georgy Toloraya, the Founder and Deputy Chairman of the Board of Russian National Committee on BRICS Research, Dr. Dmitry Razumovskiy, the Director of the Institute for Latin American Studies and Prof. Alexey Maslov, the Director of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies at Russian Academy of Sciences, as well as senior researchers of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Best practices of BRICS entrepreneurship were introduced by business experts in cooperation with Agency for Strategic Initiatives and facilitated by Ms. Veronika Peshkova, the Goodwill Ambassador of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO); the President of the Foundation for the Development of Public Diplomacy “Women’s Perspective.”

Also, the participants discussed a Case-study “How to Build a Successful Startup,” had tutorials “BRICS Education: Skill Development for the 21st Century” and “BRICS Youth Cooperation,” were involved in round table discussions “Public Diplomacy: Alternative Ways on How to Foster IR” and “Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in BRICS Countries.”

The most memorable events became the foresight webinar “Digital BRICS: Managing Technology for the Post-Digital Era” facilitated by Moscow School of Management SKOLKOVO and the seminar “Global Governance in Post Pandemic World and Implications for BRICS Cooperation” led by the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (Moderator: Dr. Marina Larionova) which includes the experts from all five BRICS countries – Dr. André De Mello E Souza, a senior researcher of the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA) in Brazil, Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi, the General Secretary of Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) in India, Mr. Wang Chenxing, the Deputy Secretary General at Chinese Association for Russian, East European and Central Asian, China Studies in China, Dr. Philani Mthembu, the Executive Director at the Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD) in South Africa.

Participating in discussions and workshops, seminars, gave the young leaders an opportunity to expand their professional knowledge, to develop communication skills, to explore the specifics of cooperation between the BRICS states, their place on the international arena, future goals and objectives of the five. As the result of their activities within the School the young “BRICSologists” have become capable to formulate their positions about the global agenda and foresee the prospects of institutionalization of the BRICS format, goals and priorities of the grouping for the future.

3. Summary of the BRICS International Contest

A specific feature of the International School has become its conjunction with the Contest for BRICS Young Leaders. The objective of the Contest was to identify the most promising projects and papers to enhance practical cooperation among the youth from BRICS countries and beyond. The Contest was targeting at mobilizing

the intellectual potential of promising young leaders to develop strategies and solve the most acute problems of BRICS development; supporting BRICS studies and promote projects and ideas for BRICS development. The contest encourages young scientists and specialists in the field of international relations, economics, finance, trade, humanitarian cooperation to engage in the process of the intellectual search for BRICS new development models.

The contest accepted materials within the following three areas:

- the original research on the problems and prospects of BRICS development until 2050;
- projects aimed at the development of practical cooperation within BRICS;
- academic articles and essays devoted to issues of positioning the BRICS in the international arena.

As the result 124 works have been submitted and evaluated by the Jury of BRICS experts. The topics of the submission were grouped as follows:

(1) "Towards a Brighter Future" – original research/article/project that can make a real contribution to the development of the BRICS.

(2) "BRICS in the Changing World Order" – original research/article/project devoted to the development of a new strategy for BRICS to promote its role in global governance.

(3) "Digital BRICS" – original research/article/project on BRICS cooperation in the digital era.

The best works were presented at the following topic – "Possible Legal Cooperation for a BRICS's Perspective on International and Transnational Economic Law" (Bruce Campos and Emilio Silva, University of Sro Paulo, Brazil), "Prospects for the BRICS-EU Relationship" (Mikhail Porunkov, Udmurt State University, Russia), "A Long-Term Vision for BRICS Youth" (Reon van der Merwe, University of Cape Town, South Africa), "The Role of Social Scoring in the National Banking Systems of the BRICS Countries" (Kirill Cherevko and Mikhail Poliakov, South Ural State University, Russia), "BRICS and the Western-Centric Global Film Industry: Possibilities of the Digital Era" (Georgii Paksiutov, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia), "Participatory Methodologies and Technological Tools for Urbanization of Precarious Settlements: A Bridge Between BRICS Urban Actors" (Marcelo Santos, University of Sro Paulo, Brazil), "Quantitative Dynamics of Intra-BRICS Trade Relations" (Mohd Nayer Rahman, Nida Rahman and Zeenat Fatima, Aligarh Muslim University, India), "BRICS Population Trends: Developments and Projections" (Lucas Gualberto do Nascimento, State University of Sro Paulo, Brazil), "Comparing and Analyzing Public Health Data from BRICS Countries in an Economic Perspective" (Diego Tavares Albuquerque Cunha Federal University of Goi s, Brazil and Diana Tereshchenko, Far Eastern Federal University, Russia), "Not Business as Usual in South Africa's Foreign Policy Under Ramaphosa: An Afrocentric Critique of Russia-South Africa Relations Within the Context of BRICS" (Vongani Muhluri Nkuna, University of Limpopo, South Africa).

The results of the Contest and "BRICS School" reveal that themes related to BRICS agenda are various and diverse. However, they are all crucial for the BRICS countries

and various stakeholders within the BRICS countries. These themes shape the BRICS and global agenda changing in this time of global crisis. The BRICS community having made great progress, but also how it can continue to grow and evolve. The world we live in today is characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. The networks and linkages that make up our societies are being bent, rearranged and broken, by previously unforeseen challenges such as pandemics, the effects of rapid technological change and the need for a reformed international global order. BRICS represents one of the ways that nations are seeking to overcome these challenges and create a framework and network for international cooperation that can undo the hegemonies of the past and usher in a fairer and more just future. The main role in the global future as well as in BRICS cooperation belongs to the youth. The youth is one of key stakeholders within the broader BRICS community that has remained a largely untapped resource to date and which will undoubtedly determine the future of all BRICS countries.

4. The Role of Youth in a More People-Centered BRICS Community

Youth are roughly defined as those between the ages of 15 to 29. They form a unique sub-group that can be classified as “liminal agents” in society. This simply means that they are positioned at the cusp between childhood and adulthood, where their political and social subjectivities i.e. how they position themselves in relation to the world around them, are sufficiently developed to form a coherent identity, yet flexible enough to navigate and adapt to change and uncertainty.¹ This unique transitional state make youth vital to the future of a renewed multilateral order which has entities like BRICS at its center. Youth both shape and are shaped by the world around them, they are adept to learning and innovating. However, because of their open-minded vision of the world, they are also better able to identify shortcomings in the way that things have conventionally been done. While this means that youth tend to be more vulnerable to unhealthy forms of radicalism, this is all the more reason to provide positive channels through which the energies of youth can flow. The liminal features of youth are important qualities that societies and the world now need as they venture into the uncharted waters of a post-pandemic world. A long-term vision for youth in BRICS has the potential of becoming the cornerstone of a sustainable and successful people-to-people approach to the future of the bloc.

In the contemporary world states are no longer the only important stakeholders in international cooperation and development. The inclusion of the private sector, civil society and other sectors of society into the global political landscape has

¹ Bronwyn E. Wood, *Crafted Within Liminal Spaces: Young People's Everyday Politics*, 31(6) *Political Geography* 337 (2012).

presented both opportunities and challenges. Non-state actors have promoted more people-driven international linkages, which in turn has helped to improve global economic activity and cultural exchange. However, these activities are difficult to regulate and can sometimes serve the interest of individuals of select groups rather than the societies in which they operate. The failure of multilateral institutions and groups to adequately and effectively bring these diverse non-state stakeholders to the table as essential partners has further exacerbated the problem. Non-state actors and stakeholders are still viewed with suspicion by states at the expense of meaningful collaboration. Yet the people-to-people ties which are crucial to for achieving a reformed international order cannot be fostered through top down state-level relations alone.

Within BRICS there has been an increasing recognition that people-to-people ties serve a vital role in ensuring the sustained viability and future of the bloc. This is evidenced by Point 60 of the Xiamen Declaration adopted after the 2017 BRICS Summit which highlights “the importance of people-to-people exchanges to promoting development and enhancing mutual understanding, friendship and cooperation among BRICS peoples.”² There is a dire need to promote not only greater cultural understanding, but also grassroots cross-regional cooperation between the citizens of the BRICS nations. Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa each face distinct stigmas and biases in the international community due to the Eurocentric view through which the BRICS nations have been studied in the field of international relations. The current post-Cold War order is based on the idea that there is only one model that nations should strive towards i.e. the Western model. However, the BRICS community is based on a fundamentally different premise. BRICS is built on the idea that each nation has its own unique journey and that while nations can and must seek to cooperate, no one nation can walk the journey that has been laid out for another. This pluralistic thinking is the key philosophy that must underpin a new people-centered multilateralism that respects the different contexts and histories of others. To achieve stronger people-to-people ties, that promote cross-societal learning and cooperation, must go beyond superficial levels and become a tangible reality for people on the ground.

Youth make up an important group within BRICS nations. To date, the BRICS nations have instated several projects to reach and include young people into the community. This includes initiatives like the BRICS Young Scientists Forum, increased cross-national education exchange, BRICS Civil Forum, BRICS Youth Parliamentarian’s Forum, BRICS Youth Forum and the BRICS Games. These initiatives have been pioneering in promoting people-to-people ties in the BRICS community. However, it is vital for BRICS to also move towards forging a new political identity and vision by

² BRICS Leaders Xiamen Declaration (2017) (Oct. 1, 2020), available at http://www.bricschn.org/English/2017-09/05/c_136583711.htm.

allowing youth in the bloc to contribute in setting the course of the BRICS community. In recent years there has been a growing focus on youth inclusion into national and international politics via platforms that facilitate sustained engagement over time.³ This shift is seen as part of a broader trend where globalization and the internet-age have transformed the way that everyday citizens engage with their societies and the international community. Political and social identities are being shaped transnationally and youth have been impacted the most by this shift.

COVID-19 has revealed that the world is only as resilient as the most vulnerable country and person. This moment of global reflection offers an opportunity to reconsider how the international community can implement the people-centric, inclusive, participatory development envisioned in guiding frameworks like the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals. The crisis has exposed the inequalities and vulnerabilities in both developed and developing countries. It has highlighted the exclusion of many stakeholders in society such as the poor, women and the youth.⁴ As a result of the pandemic the multilateral system, which was already on a back-foot due to a global rise in nationalism and protectionism, has been further disrupted. Nations are pulling away from collective decision-making processes at a domestic level as well as in the global political system. In many societies around the world the state has stepped into its rightful role as lead actor in the fight against the pandemic and its socio-economic consequences. However, there has also been a tendency for decision-making in this time of crisis to become too state-centric and unilateral. What this crisis has thus shown is that to truly address the needs of our time, domestically and internationally, states must seek to work cooperatively, among each other and with the various relevant stakeholders in their respective societies. This calls for states to pursue a new form of people-centered politics, that seeks to bring all people within society together and include the voices of the most marginalized, vulnerable and impoverished into the discourse. Employing a people-centered politic at both a national and international level remains key to reviving the multilateral system.

The youth are a major part of the population which are both affected by the aftermath of the pandemic but also play a key role in combatting it. This pandemic has limited the exposure of young people to certain essential resources and assets, such as healthcare, livelihoods, employment, and more, leading to the breakdown of the social networks and linkages that youth rely on.⁵ Young people are most likely

³ Soo Ah Kwon, *The Politics of Global Youth Participation*, 22(7) *Journal of Youth Studies* 926 (2019).

⁴ U.N. Committee for Development Policy, *Development Policy and Multilateralism after COVID-19*, Policy Note (July 2020) (Oct. 1, 2020), available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/CDP-Covid-19-and-Multilateralism.pdf>.

⁵ International Labour Organisation, *Youth & COVID-19: Impacts on Jobs, Education, Rights and Mental Well-Being*, Global Report (2020) (Oct. 1, 2020), available at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_753026.pdf.

to be affected by the high unemployment caused by the pandemic, which makes the group more vulnerable to social ills such as crime or substance abuse. This has also been shown in U.N. reports on COVID19, which highlights that young people are some of the most affected by the pandemic's socioeconomic impacts as well as being the most active group among those fighting on the frontline, yet are being overlooked due to the limited health effect that the virus itself is having on this demographic group.⁶ For these reasons, it's important to highlight that youth remain excluded from the conversation on the social, economic and political decisions being taken regarding the pandemic. However, beyond mitigating the effects of the pandemic youth play a central part in establishing a new multilateral world order. As agents of change youth inclusion can strengthen the BRICS bloc at a grassroots level. It's therefore vital that BRICS be promoted among young people of the bloc, not merely as a multi-national alliance but as a group embodying a new way of doing international politics. As actors positioned in diverse communities, youth and youth organizations form part of the frontline of communicating and leading the struggles in their communities, thus making this group a vital partner.

However, many youth and youth organizations face significant challenges in engaging meaningfully as actors in society. This is due to limited access to resources for projects and programs, a lack of platforms for coordination and skill-building as well as overall exclusion from the policy-making process.⁷ To address this shortcoming the BRICS community must consider a global partnership to promote and support the activism of young people that strengthens dialogue and cooperation related to the developmental policy challenges in the pandemic/post-pandemic world. Youth make up a quarter of the population of the planet yet their participation in political discourse remains limited. There has also been a steady decline of youth participation in conventional political spaces such as elections, yet in the age of the internet, the youth are more conscious of political issues than ever before.⁸ This disjunct between youth and politics highlights a serious flaw in the pre-pandemic approach to stakeholder participation in societies across the globe and particularly in the BRICS nations.

Nevertheless, youth voices remain marginalized in the political sphere and the impact of their actions often fail to have sustained effect due to the lack of formalized platforms through which they can engage in policy issues. BRICS governments are hesitant to engage young people through institutionalised platforms due to their

⁶ U.N. Department on Economic and Social Affairs, Special Issue on COVID-19 and Youth, 27 March 2020 (Oct. 1, 2020), available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/04/YOUTH-FLASH-Special-issue-on-COVID-19-1.pdf>.

⁷ Rashmi Thapa, *Mapping a Sector: Bridging the Evidence Gap on Youth-Driven Peacebuilding* (New York: UNOY Peacebuilders and Search for Common Ground, 2020).

⁸ Maria Tsekoura, *Debates on Youth Participation: From Citizens in Preparation to Active Social Agents*, 19(1) *Revista Katálysis* 18 (2016).

unconventional ideas, inexperience and even “radical” views. However, these features of the youth population must be harnessed not feared and marginalised. Building a more resilient BRICS community amid a crisis that will shape the coming decade requires that youth voices, views and concerns be address. Lack of understanding of the benefits of youth engagement in policymaking and programs of action limits the extent to which governments are willing to engage young people. Similarly, limited capacity, skills, resources, and tools are hindrances for the youth to articulate and shape their political views effectively.⁹ To establish a new post-pandemic world order where BRICS can become a more closely-knit community, governments must promote youth inclusive participation and improve the capacity of young people to develop trust among BRICS cultures and build networks across BRICS borders.

The impact of existing initiatives remains marginal and sporadic in their impact. Engagements that are open to youth usually privilege those with the means to participate and even then, they are not spaces where mobilization and effective coalition building can take place. Rather they boil down to spaces for discussion or individual upliftment, in particular when measuring their effectiveness with regards to the least privileged youth within BRICS nations, whose voices must be heard the most. Platforms such as these rarely reach the majority of young people and all-together exclude those in rural and peri-urban areas. However, in a time of crisis and change BRICS has an opportunity to give meaningful content to youth engagement and utilise youth views, input and energy to promote and build a new kind of people-centred multilateralism. Youth offer a key part of building the people-to-people ties necessary for a more resilient BRICS in a time of global isolationism and can help BRICS become a better model for a new kind of people-centered politics, where youth engage and build social trust across borders. BRICS governments should involve youth in their policy design, monitoring and implementation processes and provide safe spaces for young people to interact on these measures, express their needs and mobilise to achieve the goals of the government within communities. This approach is in line with the U.N. concept of “Leaving no one behind” and can further enhance the role of BRICS as an advocate for development that hears, sees and includes all people in society.

Conclusion

BRICS School and BRICS International Contest are a vivid example of people-to-people approach and exchanges. It has brought together young people focusing on BRICS issues and aspiring to contribute to BRICS development and cooperation. The idea and the design of BRICS School reflect the main principles of the BRICS block – pluralistic thinking, cross-societal learning and cooperation. This format

⁹ Jennifer S. Earl et al., *Youth, Activism, and Social Movements*, 11(4) *Sociology Compass* e12465 (2017).

of cooperation is particularly important for the BRICS youth who are the driving force of future innovations and the inheritors of BRICS and its legacy. In line with this people-centered approach, the way that BRICS states choose to engage youth and include this sub-group into dialogues on policymaking and pandemic/post-pandemic response strategies will impact the place that the bloc can take on in a reformed global order. The COVID-19 pandemic has given governments the unique opportunity to reshape the terms of the interaction between themselves and the various stakeholders in their societies, using the events and formats like BRICS School to achieve and adopt creative approaches to policy, regulation, and partnerships.

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