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Mainstreaming South-South and triangular cooperation: Work in progress at the United Nations

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15/2021

Mainstreaming South-South and Triangular Cooperation

Work in Progress at the United Nations

Sebastian Haug

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Abbreviations

BAPA	Buenos Aires Plan of Action
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
G77	Group of 77
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
ODA	official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SSC	South-South cooperation
SSTC	South-South and triangular cooperation
TCDC	technical cooperation among developing countries
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UN-Habitat	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNOSSC	United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
WEOG	Western European and Others Group
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

South-South cooperation – usually understood as referring to collaboration among developing countries – has become an increasingly visible part of international development processes. Together with the expansion of triangular cooperation – that is, South-South efforts supported by a traditional donor or a multilateral organisation – the growing clout of South-South schemes reflects shifts in the global distribution of power and wealth. Against this backdrop, United Nations (UN) entities have repeatedly been asked to mainstream their support for South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC), but there is hardly any systematic comparative evidence on whether and how they have done so, and what the broader SSTC support landscape looks like across the UN. This paper addresses this gap by making the following contributions:

- Regarding terminology, the paper shows that the trajectory of South-South cooperation at the UN goes back to the 1970s and 1980s, and that the more recent rise of South-South references is the result of an incremental process which includes a wide range of actors and fora, notably the institutionalised representatives of (self-assigned) developing countries themselves. The trope of South-South arguably acknowledges the expanding clout of (formerly) marginalised countries in international affairs and has thus come to be seen as a more appropriate frame than previous terminology on technical collaboration. Adding triangular cooperation to the focus on South-South, the notion of “South-South and triangular cooperation” has come to stand for efforts at the UN to support and engage with cooperation among developing countries (see Section 1).
- On definitions and meanings, the paper traces different understandings of South-South cooperation at the UN and provides an overview of three partly complementary and partly contradictory approaches that understand South-South cooperation to be a set of technical cooperation modalities, a general political narrative or a shorthand for inter-state cooperation beyond North-South assistance. Although the latter is the dominant de facto understanding among UN entities, the variety of meanings points to the considerable definitional blurriness attached to South-South cooperation that may be politically convenient but makes systematic analysis a rather difficult undertaking (see Section 1).
- In terms of SSTC mainstreaming, the analysis focuses on organisational efforts over the last two decades aimed at integrating a focus on supporting both South-South as well as triangular cooperation into the institutional setup of entities across the UN development system. It centres around a scorecard of 15 UN entities that maps their level of institutional focus on SSTC, based on insights from strategies, annual reports, publications, monitoring frameworks, budgets and organisational structures. The scorecard highlights the substantive level of diversity across the UN and is the first external systematic assessment of how UN entities have fared with regard to SSTC mainstreaming (see Section 2).
- Based on the scorecard, the paper groups UN entities in terms of their mainstreaming efforts, using the tentative labels of “champions”, “waverers” and “stragglers” for mapping patterns of explicit SSTC engagement. Whereas champions such as the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have consistently engaged with SSTC and indeed considerably expanded their engagement, waverers such as the UN Environment

Programme have oscillated over time. Stragglers such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees have developed little to no institutional focus on SSTC (see Section 2).

- The paper identifies three key factors that, in addition to beliefs in the functional relevance and potential effectiveness of SSTC, have accompanied and conditioned UN mainstreaming efforts. First, SSTC support has been approached by different parts of the UN development system as a tool to remain relevant and adapt to changing funding patterns. SSTC support has, second, also been part of the internal politico-bureaucratic dynamics within UN entities themselves. Third, it has increasingly been a site of member state geopolitics, connecting SSTC mainstreaming efforts to broader questions about the future of the multilateral development system (see Section 3).
- In terms of member state dynamics, the paper shows that China's expanding clout has had a particularly visible – and expanding – influence on SSTC support at the UN. A cursory view at funding patterns suggests that the level of Chinese funding for a given UN entity tends to correlate with the entity's SSTC mainstreaming score. From the perspective of Northern-Western member states, in particular, South-South cooperation has been perceived as an umbrella for China to increase its leverage at the UN. Against the backdrop of intensifying tensions between China and the United States, contestations centring around SSTC have reached an all-time high (see Section 3).

In light of the highly diverse UN engagement with SSTC to date and the complex political dynamics behind mainstreaming efforts, the paper discusses the way ahead for UN engagement with SSTC, including the potentials and challenges of a continued focus on mainstreaming, and it provides both suggestions for further research as well as recommendations for policymakers (see Section 4). Overall, SSTC has had a long, multi-faceted, expanding and increasingly controversial trajectory at the UN. Beyond institutional idiosyncrasies and geopolitical rifts, the paper suggests that UN entities – in coordination with member states – are well advised to expand their efforts for exploring how to best support cooperation that unfolds outside traditional North-South assistance schemes.

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, an increasing number of voices across academic and policy circles have argued that the rise of countries from the South is set to significantly alter the global distribution of power and wealth (Gray & Gills, 2016; UNDP [United Nations Development Programme], 2013a). As a crucial part of this trend, South-South cooperation – that is, collaboration among countries self-identifying as developing – has been referred to as a key feature of the evolving landscape of international cooperation (Gosovic, 2016; Mawdsley, 2012). The United Nations (UN), in particular, has provided a crucial framework for coordination among – and collective action by – the world’s “poorer nations” (see Fukuda-Parr & Muchhala, 2020; Prashad, 2012). South-South schemes have been hailed at the UN as a “central and essential” (UN [United Nations], 2019a) part of multilateral efforts contributing to “more diverse opportunities for development” (UNGA [United Nations General Assembly], 2019, p. 2), notably as a means for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN-DESA, s.a.-a). The idea of bringing what is now referred to as South-South cooperation to the core of UN development work goes back more than five decades: Since the 1960s, UN entities have been an integral part of South-South support schemes. Major policy documents on the matter have highlighted the need for UN entities to expand their support for South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC) (see HLC-SSC [High-level Committee on South-South Cooperation], 2016; UNGA, 1978, 2020a), with triangular cooperation referring to South-South arrangements assisted by a “Northern” donor or a multilateral body.

The notion of mainstreaming, in particular, has been central to discussions about UN support for SSTC (HLC-SSC, 2016; UNDP, 2003; UNGA, 2009). Referring to efforts of bringing something into the conventional core of a given institutional space, the popularity of mainstreaming terminology at the UN initially increased through efforts to broaden the focus on gender equality in the 1990s (Hafner-Burton & Pollack, 2002). In this context, the UN’s Economic and Social Council defined mainstreaming as a strategy that makes a particular issue or concern “an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the policies and programmes in all [...] spheres” (ECOSOC [Economic and Social Council], 1997, p. 2). Although a number of UN entities had early on begun supporting cooperation among developing countries, for decades this support remained in the shadow of a strong focus on Northern-funded assistance schemes, and thus unfolded on the sidelines of UN engagement. It was only around the turn of the millennium that the expanding clout of Southern member states led to an increased visibility of references to UN engagement with South-South – and later also triangular – cooperation, and this discussion quickly integrated the language of mainstreaming in order to push for broader institutional engagement (UNDP, 2003; UNGA, 2009). The repeated insistence across resolutions and reports for UN entities to mainstream SSTC thus reflects and epitomises the broader intention of making support for South-South schemes a fundamental and cross-cutting feature at the UN, to be considered in the preparation of “any planned action, [...] in all areas and at all levels” (see ECOSOC, 1997, p. 2; Hafner-Burton & Pollack, 2002; UNDP, 2000).¹

1 At the UN, mainstreaming has also been used to promote a cross-cutting perspective on youth-related issues; see UN (2018a).

Although official documents and frameworks have asked UN entities to engage in SSTC mainstreaming efforts, it is unclear to what extent and how mainstreaming has actually taken place. More generally, there has been little systematic analysis on what the broader SSTC landscape looks like across the UN, and how UN engagement with SSTC has evolved over the last decades. Available information on SSTC at the UN has usually taken the form of aspirational policies or the descriptive presentation of exemplary initiatives prepared by UN entities themselves. Within the expanding contours of scholarly discussions about the “rising South” (UNDP, 2013c) at the UN,² the focus of the debate has often been directed at how individual Southern states vote at the UN General Assembly (Dijkhuizen & Onderco, 2019; Ferdinand, 2014; Seabra & Sanches, 2019), or whether and how the UN development system has dealt with the changing landscape of power and wealth (Abdenur, 2014; Baumann, 2018a; Browne, 2014; Esteves & Assunção, 2014; Toye, 2014; Weinlich, 2014; Weiss & Abdenur, 2014; Weiss & Roy, 2016). Although this latter strand of the literature has repeatedly mentioned South-South (and less often triangular) cooperation in passing (see notably Weinlich, 2014, pp. 1834-1836), UN engagement with SSTC, as such – let alone UN mainstreaming efforts – have been all but absent from the debate. The handful of existing contributions (Haug, 2016; Milhorange & Soule-Kohndou, 2017; Zhou, 2013) provide limited selections of case studies covering individual initiatives with little insight into broader dynamics.

This not only highlights a gap in the empirical knowledge about institutional processes at the UN, but also points to larger questions about whether and how the alleged “rise of the South” (UNDP, 2013a) has reshaped multilateral development practices. Given the decades-long insistence on – and the dearth of – systematic information about UN engagement with SSTC, this paper examines to what extent, and how, SSTC support has been mainstreamed at the UN. Instead of delving into the growing number of projects and initiatives that have been listed as examples of UN support for SSTC, I focus on organisational efforts by UN entities to make SSTC an integral component of their institutional setup in order to provide a framework for coordinated operational engagement. The focus on SSTC mainstreaming not only takes up a recurring and emblematic feature of debates about UN engagement, but also enables a systematic analysis of South-South-related dynamics that, as discussed below, are often difficult to grasp conceptually. The combination of a review of secondary literature, a detailed examination of official UN documentation as well as insights from 30 interviews with UN officials and observers allows for a detailed analysis of previously unavailable information.

Section 1 focuses on terminology and definitions. Based on a detailed review of how SSTC-related terminology has evolved, it discusses different understandings of and approaches to SSTC and, as a foundation for discussing mainstreaming efforts, shows what SSTC has come to mean at the UN in practice. Section 2 provides an overview of how the UN has been supposed to engage with SSTC and discusses the extent to which SSTC has actually been mainstreamed across UN entities. This is done based on a scorecard that ranks 15 UN entities with reference to a detailed mapping of their SSTC engagement across strategies, reports, monitoring frameworks, budgets and organisational setup. I provide an overview of both the diversity of institutional realities as well as underlying patterns that are taken as a

2 For general discussions including a focus on the UN, see Alden, Morphet and Vieira (2010), Braveboy-Wagner (2009) and Prashad (2012).

basis for tentatively labelling UN entities as SSTC “stragglers”, “waverers” or “champions”. In Section 3, key dynamics that have accompanied mainstreaming efforts take centre stage, ranging from internal strategies and dynamics at the UN to the rise of geopolitical tensions among member states, with a specific focus on dynamics centring around (mostly Northern/Western wariness about) China’s expanding engagement. In conclusion, Section 4 discusses the way ahead for UN engagement with SSTC, including the potentials and challenges of a continued focus on mainstreaming, and it provides both suggestions for further research as well as recommendations for policy-makers.

1 What is to be mainstreamed? Terminological trajectory and definitions of South-South and triangular cooperation

During the first decades following the setup of the UN in 1945, debates about the standing and voice of newly independent countries increased substantially in multilateral fora. With reference to the principles espoused at the 1955 Africa-Asia conference in the city of Bandung (Appadorai, 1955; Shimazu, 2014) – including not only inter-state equality, non-intervention and mutual cooperation, but also an explicit commitment to the UN and its charter³ – a growing number of states across Asia, Africa and Latin America advocated for the expansion of space for their concerns, notably with regard to economic development. Their expectations and concerns were soon translated into institutional arrangements: The 1961 creation of the Non-Aligned Movement was followed by actions taken within the UN, notably the establishment in 1964 of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) with a permanent secretariat and the Group of 77 (G77) as the UN alliance of developing countries (Munro, s.a.; Toye, 2014; UNCTAD, s.a.-a). All these groupings were strongly committed to what was summarised under the banner of technical cooperation among developing countries (TCDC), defined as “a process whereby two or more developing countries pursue their individual or collective development through cooperative exchanges of knowledge, skills, resources and technical know-how” (UNOSSC [United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation], s.a.-a).

The 1978 Buenos Aires Plan of Action (BAPA), endorsed by the UN General Assembly, provided the first comprehensive policy framework for TCDC. The acronym came to be employed as a shorthand for attempts to expand support for interaction among recently decolonised countries and other more marginalised players in the multilateral sphere, then often collectively referred to in Cold War terms as the “Third World” (see Ayoob, 1989; Escobar, 1995).

How did the notion of South-South cooperation, then, enter the debate? UN documents going back to the 1960s suggest that the “South”, as such, was initially all but absent from UN processes. Early UNCTAD reports show that it was representatives from Latin American countries – notably Brazil and Chile – who occasionally used North-South terminology to refer to global inequities (UNCTAD, 1968, pp. 84 and 95). The reports also show that officials from countries belonging to the Soviet bloc – such as Russia and Hungary – explicitly argued against the notions of “the rich North and the poor South” and instead

3 These principles built on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence agreed upon by India and China in 1954; see “The 10 Principles of Bandung” (2016) and US State Department (s.a.).

highlighted the political-ideological dimensions of global inequality (UNCTAD, 1968, pp. 61, 88, and 117; UNCTAD, 1976, p. 72).⁴ It was in the 1970s and 1980s that the dichotomy of North and South emerged as a more visible reiteration of long-standing binaries – from orient/occident and old/new worlds to First/Third worlds – used for global meaning making (see UNCTAD, 1985; Wagner, 2017).

1.1 The expansion of South-South terminology

The framing of discussions between developed and developing countries along North-South lines expanded with the Conference on International Economic Cooperation (1975-1977) held in Paris. Itself referred to as the “North-South dialogue” (Centre for Economic Policy Research, 2004; Overseas Development Institute, 1976; UNCTAD, 1976; Williams, 1981), the conference covered oil-related questions linked to the growing clout of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries alongside a broader range of mostly economic issues and highlighted fundamental fault lines in the multilateral sphere. Despite empirical complexity, the “so-called North and the so-called South”, as the UNCTAD chairman put it in 1979 (UNCTAD, 1979, p. 118), increased in prominence for the framing of multilateral debates. In 1983 the UNCTAD conference report, while discussing TCDC efforts, explicitly referred – apparently for the first time – to the “need for South-South co-operation” (see UNCTAD, 1983, p. 64; UNCTAD, 1987).

One of the most prominent milestones of North-South-related terminology has been the 1980 report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues. Led by former German Chancellor Willy Brandt, the commission had decided to use the North-South lens in order to discuss what they had identified as key international development challenges. The report explicitly discussed the nature of this framing by stating that “in general terms, and although neither is a uniform or permanent grouping, ‘North’ and ‘South’ are broadly synonymous with ‘rich’ and ‘poor’, ‘developed’ and ‘developing’” (ICIDI [Independent Commission on International Development Issues], 1980, pp. 22 and 23).

In a similar vein, the South Commission – set up in 1987 under the chairmanship of former Tanzanian Prime Minister Julius Nyerere – took the North-South binary as a starting point for its deliberations. The commission saw the South as a space made up of developing countries that had too often directed their focus towards the North, and that should instead engage more with each other in order to transform global power dynamics. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War at the horizon, a key concern of the commission was thus to identify and promote ways “in which South-South co-operation can widen development options for all countries” (see South Commission, 1990, p. v; UNGA, 1989, p. 14).

In 1991, for the first time, the UN General Assembly mentioned South-South cooperation in a resolution (UNGA, 1991). Throughout the 1990s, references to South-South expanded

4 A Japanese delegate had also made a reference to North and South in UNCTAD I; see UNCTAD (1964).

alongside the general focus on TCDC.⁵ In 1994 and 1995, the G77 formally asked the UN to convene a conference on South-South cooperation (UNGA, 1995a); the UN Secretary-General presented his first “Report of the Secretary-General on the State of South-South Cooperation”, which has since been published biannually (UNGA, 1995b); and the General Assembly established “a voluntary trust fund for the promotion of South-South cooperation” (UNGA, 1995c, para. 5). It would take until 2003 for the General Assembly to replace TCDC with South-South cooperation in the official names of the High-Level Committee on the matter and that of the Special Unit on TCDC hosted by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and to establish September 12th as the United Nations Day for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC, s.a.-b). The General Assembly agenda item on “operational activities for development” was expanded in 2005 to include the term “South-South cooperation” (UNGA, 2005, p. 1), and two years later the line “economic and technical cooperation among developing countries” was dropped (UNGA, 2007, p. 1), making South-South cooperation the formal banner for discussion.

This rather detailed tracing of South-South terminology at the UN shows that current references to SSTC build on a trajectory going back to the 1960s, and that the recent rise of the South-South narrative is the result of an incremental process that has included a variety of actors and fora, notably the institutionalised representatives of (self-assigned) developing countries themselves. Since the early 2000s, South-South cooperation has been the main terminology for addressing cooperation among developing countries, and this linguistic modification has also come with a shift in meaning. According to UN documents and interview accounts of long-serving UN officials, the evolution towards “South” terminology reflects attempts to account for major political and economic changes at the global level, with the notion of South-South cooperation going beyond the focus on “technical” issues that TCDC used to stand for (see UNDP, 2013a; UNOSSC, s.a.-a).

Against the backdrop of increasing globalisation dynamics since the 1970s, the economic rise of “developing countries” – notably that of China and other Southern locomotives (see Prasad, 2012; South Commission, 1990) – has benefitted the increase in number and volume as well as the diversification of interactions among them (Chaturvedi, Fues, & Sidiropoulos, 2012; Gosovic, 2016; Mawdsley, 2012). Across issue areas, cooperation between countries outside the Northern-Western core – particularly, but not only, in the economic realm – have led to palpable material changes, affecting everything from crop yields and social policies to transport infrastructure and transnational supply chains (UNCTAD, 2018; UNDP, 2013a). Although experts and UN officials have pointed to a range of reasons for the rhetorical shift towards the South – notably related to the end of the Cold War, the ensuing lack of assistance stemming from great-power rivalry as well as the celebration of newfound (if often aspirational) strength – South-South terminology, more so than TCDC, arguably acknowledges the increasing clout of (formerly) marginalised countries in political and economic terms.⁶ Although references to (the expansion of) South-

5 In the meantime, TCDC itself had “evolved into a wider concept encompassing all forms of cooperation among developing countries, not restricted to technical cooperation” (JIU [Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations System], 2011, p. 6), and it was often used in combination with the ECDC – Economic Cooperation among Developing Countries – acronym. For the related rise of references to the “(Global) South” in academic scholarship, see Haug, Braveboy-Wagner and Maihold (2021).

6 For a more detailed discussion of meanings attached to South-related terminology, see Haug (2020) and Haug et al. (2021).

South cooperation have largely been unable to account for the heterogeneity of collaboration patterns among developing countries, they have offered a discursive umbrella – or a trope – for framing these evolving dynamics across and beyond the UN.

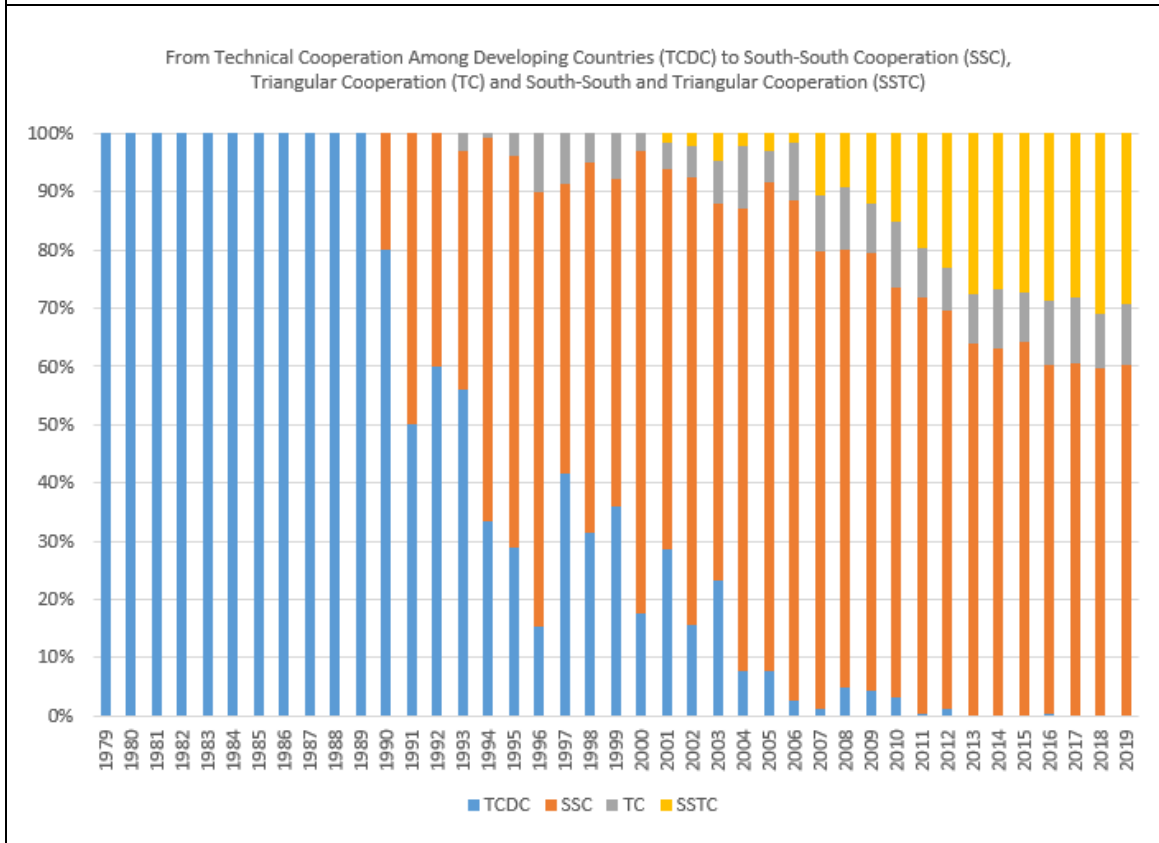
In parallel to the ascendancy of South-South on both terminological and material grounds, but less prominently, the notion of triangular cooperation emerged in UN documents during the 1990s. In line with the 1978 BAPA outcome document, the 1995 High-Level Committee report on TCDC includes a section on the “role of developed countries” in the promotion of cooperation among developing countries that – apparently for the first time – uses the term triangular cooperation to refer to a few concrete examples of how Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries support South-South schemes (High-Level Committee on the Review of Technical Cooperation Among Developing Countries, 1995, para. 12).⁷ In the UN Secretary-General’s 1997 State of South-South Cooperation report, triangular cooperation is mentioned as an “innovative form of cooperation [...] in which developing countries share their own expertise and developed countries provide financial and other assistance for this exchange of experience” (UNGA, 1997, para. 57). The 1999 edition of the report already has a separate section on triangular cooperation, calling it “a useful vehicle for donor countries to support South-South programmes initiated and managed by two or more developing countries for their mutual benefit” (UNGA, 1999, para. 33).

The ascendancy of South-South cooperation has thus been accompanied by the emergence of triangular cooperation as a tool to include the “North” in the equation of a cooperation format otherwise explicitly framed as an approach fundamentally different from North-South cooperation (see Abdenur & Fonseca, 2013; McEwan & Mawdsley, 2012). Although often treated as South-South’s distant cousin, triangular cooperation has recently expanded not only in terms of projects and initiatives (GPI-ETC [Global Partnership Initiative on Effective Triangular Co-Operation], 2020; Zoccal, 2020), but also as part of UN engagement with South-South schemes (see below); and the link between South-South and triangular logics has also been reflected in official terminology. The Official Document System at the UN includes a wide range of digitised documents – from resolutions and declarations to project evaluations, technical reports and published notes – and thus offers insights into how discursive patterns have evolved over time. An analysis of available documents covering the last four decades provides a neat summary of the discussion of terminological shifts (Figure 1): In the 1990s, the initial focus on TCDC started to be gradually replaced by references to South-South cooperation, with triangular cooperation playing a minor but expanding role. Ever since, the association of South-South with triangular cooperation has grown substantially, meaning that today a growing number of documents – from strategy papers to reports and General Assembly resolutions – refer to both in unison as South-South and triangular cooperation (UNGA, 2005, 2020a). By and large, the SS(T)C acronym has thus successfully replaced TCDC as a shorthand for the discussion about (support for) cooperation among developing countries at the UN. Keeping the focus on interaction among players outside the traditional core of world affairs, South-

7 According to a long-serving UN official, triangular cooperation initially meant that the UN was asked by a traditional donor to facilitate a North-South assistance scheme, and the current meaning had previously been associated with the – otherwise more generic – term trilateral cooperation. See also McEwan and Mawdsley (2012).

South terminology, as used at the UN, carries an – at least symbolic – commitment to increasing the clout of member states that self-identify as developing countries.

Figure 1: Towards South-South (and triangular) cooperation – terminological shifts at the UN (1979-2019)



Source: Author’s own compilation, based on the analysis of documents available through the UN’s Official Document System (UN, s.a.-b)⁸

1.2 Official definitions and de facto meanings

According to formal UN sources, South-South cooperation is defined as collaboration between “two or more developing countries” or “countries of the South” – these terms are used as synonyms – in all kinds of domains (economic, social, cultural, etc.) and at all levels (bilateral, regional, inter-regional, etc.) towards meeting their development goals (UNGA, 2019, p. 2; UNOSSC, s.a.-b). Triangular cooperation, in turn, is taken to refer to the support provided by “traditional donor countries and multilateral organizations” (UNOSSC, s.a.-b) to facilitate South-South schemes. In addition, official definitions explicitly highlight the “principles of South-South cooperation” (UNGA, 2019, pp. 2 and 3; UNOSSC, s.a.-b) going back inter alia to the 1955 Bandung Conference and related attempts to formulate an alternative vision of world order. Based on “solidarity among peoples and countries of the

⁸ The graph shows the relative distribution of references to “Technical Cooperation Among Developing Countries”, “South-South cooperation”, “triangular cooperation” and “South-South and triangular cooperation” in documents published between 1979 and 2019.

South” and their “proximity of experience”, South-South cooperation is supposed to be “voluntary, participative, and demand driven”, guided by “respect for national sovereignty, national ownership and independence, equality, non-conditionality, non-interference in domestic affairs and mutual benefit” (UNGA, 2019, pp. 2 and 3).

A potentially contentious element of official definitions centres around the “who” of South-South cooperation. Who – in multilateral settings meaning which countries – are part of the South? Is “developing” status defined based on income measures, a historical question linked to the experience of colonisation or a matter of self-assignment? Another set of highly debated issues concerns the “how” of South-South cooperation. Do all forms of cooperation between developing countries count as South-South? Do the principles of South-South cooperation reflect a claim about the inherent nature of cooperation among developing countries, or are they seen as aspirational, an empirical possibility rather than a normative necessity? And how is South-South cooperation, then, to be operationalised and reported on?

All development cooperation measures and modalities arguably face some conceptual blurriness, with the foremost assistance reporting tool of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) – official development assistance (ODA) – as a prominent example: While trade, investment at market rates or military support are explicitly excluded from ODA calculations (OECD, s.a.-a), controversies have centred around levels of tied aid or the extent to which expenditure on hosting refugees in donor countries are to be included (Chadwick, 2017; OECD, 2017). In the case of South-South cooperation, the level of conceptual ambiguity has been considerably higher. The rather broad contours of official UN definitions and the lack of a generally agreed upon operationalisation of South-South principles have contributed to high levels of diversity in how South-South cooperation has been understood and approached (Bracho, 2015; Chaturvedi et al., 2012; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Daley, 2019; Mawdsley, 2012).

This has included questions about the link between South-South cooperation and the notion of “development”. In debates about international development cooperation, including at the UN, the distinction between South-South as a broad space covering all forms of linkages among developing countries, including trade and investment, has been differentiated from a more specific kind of South-South cooperation dedicated to development-related purposes. The latter – also referred to as South-South development cooperation (see Mawdsley, Fourie, & Nauta, 2019) – tries to connect the South-South notion with the trajectory of international development assistance or foreign aid, traditionally dominated by DAC donors and their formal definition and de facto understandings of ODA (see Besharati, Rawhani, & Garelli Rios, 2015; Lancaster, 2007). Although used in both academic and policy circles, including in UN fora (ECOSOC, 2008; UNOSSC, s.a.-b), the notion of South-South development cooperation has not been at the core of UN mainstreaming efforts. This is arguably also because, for influential voices among the Southern constituency, the notion of development stands at the core of all kinds of South-South cooperation, not only those – such as technical cooperation, grants, humanitarian assistance or debt relief – covered by ODA.⁹

9 Interviews with UN and member state officials since 2016; see also definitions in UNOSSC (s.a.-b).

Beyond terminological specificities, the question about the link between South-South cooperation and traditional development assistance has repeatedly been at the centre of heated debates about multilateral burden-sharing. During negotiations leading to the 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development, in particular, some of the most controversial issues centred around questions about how, and to what extent, Southern providers were to be seen as carrying a responsibility to expand their financial support for development processes abroad (see Bracho, 2017; Muchhala, 2014, 2015). By and large, representatives from the G77 have insisted in highlighting throughout resolutions and conference outcome documents that South-South is a “complement, rather than a substitute” for ODA, and that the main responsibility for financing international development partnerships lies with Northern donors (Espandola, 2017; Malki, 2019). For the latter, South-South cooperation has thus often been a reference for the lack of concrete commitments by large players outside the DAC to step up and report on their contributions, and a symbol of a broader conflict about which states need to provide the bulk of resources for international development efforts (see Besharati, 2013; Bracho, 2017; Chaturvedi et al., 2021).

Among Southern players themselves, and in addition to major North-South rows, what one could cautiously refer to as regional patterns have contributed to the diversity of how South-South cooperation is employed and applied. In line with conceptualisations of the (global) South as a tricontinental space covering Africa, Asia and Latin America (see Mahler, 2018; Prashad, 2012; Tricontinental, 2020), illustrative evidence from documents and interviews suggests that representatives of, and institutions from, different world regions have had differing trajectories when it comes to the use of South-South frames.

In Latin America, South-South has been traditionally understood as an approach with technical cooperation and experience-sharing at its core. In terms of historical trajectories, cultural and linguistic references as well as income-per-capita levels, Latin American countries make up a somewhat less heterogeneous space when compared with other continents, and they have, for decades, engaged in bilateral or regional initiatives of sharing experts and expertise (Gómez Ramírez, 2019; Ojeda Medina & Echart Muñoz, 2019). Proactively promoted by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Ibero-American General Secretariat (SEGIB), South-South and triangular formats in the region have had a relatively high level of institutionalisation, including coordination and reporting structures, and Latin American countries are usually among the leading countries in global SSTC mapping exercises (see ECLAC, 2019; GPI-ETC, 2020; Secretaría General Iberoamericana, 2020).

Across Asia, in turn, understandings of South-South have been far more diverse, arguably due to rather low levels of region-wide collaboration and high levels of diversity in terms of development-related realities across countries. Here, many see investment, trade and other forms of interaction as part and parcel of South-South cooperation.¹⁰ Although the UN has initiated basic regional exchange mechanisms on SSTC (UNESCAP, s.a.), there have been no major regional South-South coordination processes comparable to those in Latin America, and the appetite among key countries to identify a common ground for defining, measuring and reporting South-South flows and practices has been notoriously low (Besharati, 2013; Bracho, 2017; see below).

10 Interviews with experts and UN officials, September and October 2020; see also Mulakala (2016).

On the African continent, in turn, the notion of South-South cooperation itself has, by and large, played a rather limited role. Although sub-regional, intra-African and cross-regional cooperation formats have been expanding (see Fayomi, Ehiagwina, & Felix, 2019; Gieg, 2016; Gnanguênon, 2020; Iboye, 2020; Taylor, 2011), illustrative evidence suggests that, in African contexts, the trope of South-South – and the conceptual-historical connotations attached to it – has not made it to the core of how people and institutions think about and frame their engagement (Kamwengo, 2019, 2020; Ming'ate, 2015). This is also because other notions, such as Pan-Africanism (Martin, 2012), have provided more popular framings for intra-regional cooperation processes.¹¹

Overall, and influenced by – but often cutting across – regional tendencies, there have been several broad strands of how South-South cooperation has come to be understood at the UN. The three strands I have identified (Table 1) are to be taken as ideal types rather than empirically pure forms, and they provide a general idea of overlapping, complementary and sometimes contradictory approaches that have made conversations about, and the analysis of, South-South cooperation a rather complex undertaking. For all three, the differences of South-South vis-à-vis North-South cooperation – epitomised by the OECD's ODA framework – are key, but they differ in their leaning and focus.

First, a narrower understanding of South-South cooperation describes a set of (*technical*) *cooperation modalities* that differ from North-South cooperation standards and practices, in that they are structured around – and unfold according to – the notions and principles outlined above, from solidarity to horizontality and mutual benefit. Although there has been no internationally agreed understanding of what these principles mean in practice, some stakeholders – including governments in Latin America – have identified their own operationalisation. The sharing of project costs among all parties involved, for instance, has been one step of formulating a more horizontal alternative to the vertical donor–recipient binary fundamental for traditional North-South schemes (see AMEXCID [Agencia Mexicana de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo], 2014, 2018; APCIC [Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación Internacional de Colombia], s.a.).

Second, a broader understanding of South-South cooperation refers primarily to a *general* (*political*) *narrative*, building on a counter-hegemonic bent that challenges Northern dominance in international cooperation and world affairs more generally. Cooperation principles are invoked but seldom operationalised. Based on this, SSTC has been used as a discursive tool to highlight the normative superiority of South-South vis-à-vis ODA, combined with references to developing-country solidarity and horizontality. During debates and negotiations at the UN and other multilateral fora, Indian representatives have arguably been among the most visible proponents of this approach (see GoI-MoER [Government of India – Ministry of External Relations], 2019; see also Cooper, 2020; Mulakala, 2016; Weinlich, 2014).

11 Inspired by Latin American experiences, the first comprehensive report on South-South cooperation in Africa was published by UNDP and the New Partnership for Africa's Development in 2019; see UNDP and NEPAD (2019).

Table 1: Three strands of how South-South cooperation has been understood in practice

	South-South cooperation (SSC) primarily used as a shorthand for ...		
	... (technical) cooperation modalities	... a general (political) narrative	... inter-state cooperation beyond ODA
Meaning of SSC	Narrow	Broad	Broad
References to SSC principles	Prominent	Prominent	Sporadic
Operationalisation of SSC principles	Prominent	Sporadic	Sporadic
Examples	Colombia's development cooperation framework ¹²	Official statements by Indian officials ¹³	De facto practices of UN entities ¹⁴
Source: Author			

Third – and influenced by this broad approach, but in a less contesting manner – South-South has also been used as a synonym for all forms of international cooperation done outside the spaces of direct Northern influence, with South-South often being used as a de facto shorthand for *inter-state cooperation beyond ODA*. In the debate on flows “beyond aid”, this corresponds to one key aspect of recent shifts, namely the growing clout of governmental players outside the DAC and their cooperation modalities (see Horner, 2019; Janus, Klingebiel, & Paulo, 2015). Normative superiority has not been at the core of this understanding at the UN. Instead, it is closely related to recurring efforts of expanding space for alternative forms of international cooperation by underlining that South-South cooperation is complementing ODA. A review of UN documents and insights from interviews with SSTC experts and UN focal points suggest that the latter understanding has been prevalent for how UN entities have engaged with SSTC. In the day-to-day work at the UN, South-South cooperation is taken as a de facto synonym for “stuff developing countries do among themselves”,¹⁵ with developing countries being variously defined as programme countries (i.e. according to their status at specific UN entities);¹⁶ ODA recipient countries (i.e. based on whether they are included in the DAC list of ODA recipients; see OECD, 2021); low- and middle-income countries (i.e. via income-per-capita measures; see WHO [World Health Organization], 2017); or via self-assignment, such as through the M49 standard in UN statistics (UNCTAD, s.a.-b). South-South principles and the notion of

12 See APCIC (s.a., p. 18). For Mexico, see AMEXCID (2018, p. 35).

13 See, for instance, GoI-MoER (2019); see also Mulakala (2016) and Weinlich (2014).

14 Based on review of UN documents and interviews with UN officials.

15 Interview with UN official, October 2020.

16 Programme countries are usually understood to be member states that host UN entities for development-related support, with the specifics outlined in so-called country programme documents; see United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, s.a.).

solidarity may be repeatedly evoked and seen as the backdrop of engagement, but in concrete terms they play a rather limited role.¹⁷ As one official put it during an interview:

The idea [of South-South cooperation] is great, each country has something to offer, and I really believe in peer learning; but overall relations are not necessarily more equal; if anything, countries like China or India are maybe not trying to hide the fact that there is no free lunch.¹⁸

According to UN officials, South-South interactions tend to be more explicit than traditional North-South schemes about what the providing countries want from the engagement, but the SSTC practices they engage with on a day-to-day basis are not perceived as inherently more horizontal. The common denominator of the SSTC schemes they support is that “it’s not ODA, it’s developing countries cooperation with each other; it’s [...] a mixed bag, not always horizontal, not always demand-driven”.¹⁹ Although understandings of South-South as a rather narrow set of technical cooperation modalities or a general political narrative appear throughout UN spaces, in practical terms, the working definition across UN entities of what is to be mainstreamed thus centres around the notion of cooperation among developing countries, and SSTC is generally used as a shorthand to capture inter-state cooperation unfolding beyond North-South schemes.

2 Mainstreaming South-South and triangular cooperation: A scorecard of 15 UN entities

Although official UN documents do not provide details on how “TCDC” and “SSTC” are understood in practice, they have consistently highlighted the importance of UN support for South-South schemes. As the first major UN guiding document on cooperation among developing countries, the 1978 BAPA outcome document highlighted that “[t]he entire United Nations development system must be permeated by the spirit of TCDC and all its organisations should play a prominent role as promoters and catalysts of TCDC” (UNGA, 1978, p. 19). More specifically, the Plan of Action asked all UN entities to “reorient their internal policies and procedures to respond adequately to the principles and objectives of TCDC” (UNGA, 1978, p. 23). These notions of permeation and reorientation were arguably the 1970s version of system-wide mainstreaming. As alluded to above, bringing something to the mainstream has meant making a particular issue or concern “an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of [...] policies and programmes” and assessing related implications of “any planned action [...] in all areas and at all levels” (ECOSOC, 1997, p. 2). Overall, mainstreaming demands in UN documents – such as the Quadrennial Comprehensive Performance Reviews (UNGA, 2012, para. 74; UNGA, 2016, para. 23) – are part of the requests formulated in member state declarations or UN Secretariat reports that usually have a limited immediate impact on the concrete workings of UN entities, also due to the absence of effective sanctions.²⁰ By and large, entities follow

17 Interviews with UN officials, October and November 2020.

18 Interview with an FAO official, October 2020.

19 Interview with a UN official, September 2020.

20 Interviews with UN officials and experts, 2016-2020.

funding incentives and the directives of their respective oversight bodies, such as executive boards, where the relative strength and positions of representatives often differ from General Assembly settings (see Baumann, 2018b; UN, s.a.-a; Weinlich, 2011, pp. 72 and 73).

This lack of congruence of official rhetoric in resolutions and reports vis-à-vis the de facto practices of UN entities – a phenomenon generally described as decoupling (Gulrajani & Swiss, 2019) – has been a defining feature of UN support for cooperation among developing countries. Until the close of the 20th century – and despite the repeated insistence in resolutions and reports for the UN system to expand its support – TCDC had been anything but mainstreamed across UN bodies and processes. Except for UNCTAD – founded to give a voice to the multilateral South and traditionally a strong advocate of South-South linkages (Toye, 2014) – and maybe UNDP, UN entities and their Northern donors had had limited to no interest in meaningfully expanding institutional engagement with cooperation among developing countries. Most Southern stakeholders, while rhetorically building on developing-country overtures in the 1960s and 1970s, had indeed very much adapted to traditional North-South assistance schemes (Gosovic, 2016). This changed, however, with what has been referred to as “the rise of the South” (UNDP, 2013a) in the early 2000s. With the increasing clout of countries outside the DAC as international development actors (Bracho, 2015; Chaturvedi et al., 2012; Mawdsley, 2012), many UN entities decided to more explicitly and forcefully engage with SSTC, and the notion of mainstreaming began to be used to frame the need for expanded UN support for South-South cooperation (UNDP, 2003; UNGA, 2009).

In line with previous provisions on supporting TCDC, UN resolutions and reports have asked UN entities to support SSTC by acting as conveners and advocates; knowledge brokers; partnership builders; and/or analysts and progress monitors (HLC-SSC, 2016, p. 8). The extent to which UN entities have managed to play these roles, however, is largely unclear. There is a growing body of descriptive evidence of a wide range of engagement practices, mostly focussing on individual UN entities (see UNOSSC, 2020, s.a.-c). Available documentation suggests that UN entities have fared rather poorly when it comes to gathering and analysing meaningful data on SSTC. This is mostly due to the often vague and sometimes contradictory definitions of how member states approach SSTC (see above), something that so far has also contributed to limiting the space for UN entities to design a shared framework for monitoring their own SSTC support (see below).

Although UN-wide coordination on SSTC used to be rather weak, the UN system as a whole can cite a range of visible examples when it comes to convening large meetings on SSTC (such as the 2019 BAPA+40 conference in Buenos Aires or annual South-South Expos; see UNOSSC s.a.-d) or advocating for the explicit inclusion of SSTC in global policy frameworks (such as SDG 17; see UN-DESA, s.a.-a). UN entities have also designed a number of tools for brokering demand and supply among SSTC partners (such as the South-South Galaxy platform administered by UNOSSC; see UNOSSC, s.a.-c) and have come up with compilations of how they have facilitated concrete SSTC projects and initiatives in cooperation with programme countries (see UNOSSC, 2020). To what extent brokering efforts have been successful, however, is often difficult to tell. Upon closer look, not even all projects and initiatives listed by UN entities as examples of SSTC actually centre around cooperation among developing countries, but instead include rather “typical” UN

collaboration with individual programme countries.²¹ The idiosyncratic landscape of reports, brochures and general claims about the UN's unique position for supporting SSTC (HLC-SSC, 2016; UNGA, 1995b) thus only provides a limited set of insights into the concrete contours of UN engagement with SSTC.

2.1 The SSTC scorecard: Towards a systematic overview

Under the headline of mainstreaming efforts, UN entities have been asked to not only support the expansion of SSTC activities per se, but also adapt their internal structures and policies accordingly. The 2016 Operational Guidelines on SSTC provide tools and references for UN entities “towards mainstreaming their support for South-South and triangular cooperation at the global, regional and national levels” (HLC-SSC, 2016, p. 1). They centre around “priority mainstreaming actions” for integrating SSTC into UN work, including at the level of UN entities globally. It is not self-evident, however, what – for the UN itself – would count as successful mainstreaming. With regard to individual UN entities, the 2016 Guidelines only suggest that “the mainstreaming of the internationally mandated South-South policy directives [...] begins with agencies ensuring that South-South cooperation is integrated into their corporate policy and programming frameworks” (HLC-SSC, 2016, p. 10).

In order to provide more systematic and comparative insights into the current state of a process that has accompanied the UN development system for more than four decades, this section presents and discusses a scorecard on how individual UN entities have engaged with – and to what extent they have effectively mainstreamed their support for – SSTC at the institutional level (Table 2). As the structures and practices of organisation-wide engagement – reflected in reporting formats, budget lines or staff positions – are a prerequisite for the coordinated implementation of SSTC support, the scorecard provides not only insights into macro patterns across UN entities, but also a reference for engagement at the operational level.

In order to allow for comparison and enable a meaningful mapping, the sample of UN entities for the scorecard exercise includes all specialised agencies, funds and programmes that are part of the so-called core group of the UN Sustainable Development Group, charged with leading on UN-wide integration and coordination efforts (UNSDG, 2018, p. 4). This includes the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNDP, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO). In order to also take into account UN entities whose mandate and country-level work touch upon key development issues, but whose total annual expenses are slightly less significant (UNGA, 2020b), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat),

21 The UNESCO South-South webpage, for instance, contains projects that neither mention South-South as a modality nor seem to focus explicitly on cooperation among programme countries; see United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, s.a.).

the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) were added as well. The selected group of entities covers a wide range of mandates and also includes the largest and most visible UN agencies. As the combined expenses of the selected 15 entities made up roughly 80 per cent of all UN expenses for development and humanitarian issues outside the UN Secretariat in 2018 (UNGA, 2020b, pp. 48 and 49),²² the scorecard sample offers a rather comprehensive base for assessing SSTC mainstreaming across the UN development system.

Table 2: A scorecard: South-South (and triangular) cooperation mainstreaming efforts across UN entities

	SS(T)C in strategies	SS(T)C in annual reports	SS(T)C publications	SS(T)C monitoring framework	SS(T)C-specific funding	SS(T)C-specific organisational capacity	Overall SS(T)C score	Tentative labels
FAO	2	2	2	2	2	2	12	champions
IFAD	2	2	2	2	2	2	12	
ILO	2	2	2	2	2	2	12	
UNDP	2	2	2	2	2	2	12	
UNIDO	2	2	2	2	2	2	12	
WFP	2	2	2	2	2	2	12	
UNFPA	2	1	1	2	1	2	9	waverers
UNICEF	1	1	2	2	2	1	9	
UNEP	2	1	1	1	1	1	7	
UN-Habitat	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	
UNESCO	1	1	1	0	0	1	4	
UN Women	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	stragglers
WHO	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	
UNODC	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	
UNHCR	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	

Source: Author; see Annex 3 for the scoring methodology

During the evidence gathering process, publicly available sources covering the last two decades – including two UN inspection reports (JIU, 2011, 2018) providing detailed, if incomplete, information about entities' SSTC support – were triangulated with insights from expert interviews.²³ The 30 officials who agreed to be interviewed included not only the

22 The total expenses listed under “United Nations” and “United Nations Peacekeeping” were excluded from the total in order to allow for a focus on UN entities outside the main organs of the UN.

23 In addition to participant observations from 2012 to 2015 and interviews with UN and member state officials since 2016, semi-structured interviews with SSTC focal points took place from September to November 2020. For a list of entities and the interview template, see Annexes 1 and 2.

SSTC focal points of the UN entities under investigation,²⁴ but also representatives from the UN Secretariat (notably UN-DESA), UNCTAD, the High-Level Committee of South-South Cooperation and the UN Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) who, in line with their expertise and function, have been actively engaged with SSTC support processes.

The scorecard methodology reflects the intention to provide a first comprehensive overview of mainstreaming efforts across UN entities. The scorecard, as such, does not necessarily provide insights into the actual support UN entities provide to cooperation among developing countries, as the relationship between official SSTC rhetoric and actual practices often falls prey to the “gap between policy intent and practical implementation” (Gulrajani & Swiss, 2019, p. 357). It also does not provide an assessment of whether UN entities have actually taken on the roles of conveners, knowledge brokers or progress monitors outlined in official reports (HLC-SSC, 2016, p. 8). What the scorecard provides instead is a systematic, comparative mapping of the extent to which UN entities have integrated SSTC support into their “corporate policy and programming frameworks” (HLC-SSC, 2016, p. 24), as reflected in corporate strategies, annual reports, stand-alone publications, monitoring frameworks, budgets²⁵ as well as their organisational setup in terms of staffing and focal point assignments.²⁶ These six scorecard dimensions are inspired by the framework set out in the 2016 Operational Guidelines as the main steps for mainstreaming SSTC at the level of UN entities (HLC-SSC, 2016, pp. 24 and 25). For each dimension and their proxies, I have designed a three-step (0-1-2) assessment tool to reflect a range of basic engagement levels, from none (0) to some (1) and substantial (2), that allow for a systematic comparison.²⁷ Empirical data used for the calculation of scores covers insights from the last 20 years (2000-2020), collected through publicly available sources and triangulated with interview accounts.²⁸

2.2 Champions, waverers and stragglers: Patterns of SSTC mainstreaming

Beyond anecdotal statements or compilations of illustrative evidence, the scorecard builds on UN reports and evaluations to offer the first independent and systematic comparative assessment of how UN entities have fared with regard to SSTC mainstreaming efforts. At the policy level, most entities have included a reference to SSTC in their *strategic plans*,

24 UN Women was the only entity whose focal point did not respond to interview requests. This is why information regarding mainstreaming efforts at UN Women might be incomplete.

25 The funding dimension focuses on the extent to which funds are explicitly and regularly assigned to SSTC, such as staff salaries (often funded via core contributions) or projects and programmes (usually funded by earmarked contributions). As entities provide different kinds of mostly incomplete information that is difficult to compare, scores do not refer to amounts but capture whether an entity has (0) no; (1) some occasional or one-off; or (2) regular and/or substantial financial resources assigned to SSTC; see Annex 3.

26 Annual reports and stand-alone SSTC publications are assessed separately in order to examine whether SSTC has been seen as important enough to be included in annual reports year by year, and whether there are reports providing detailed insights into concrete projects and initiatives.

27 Even if the weighing of scores is adapted, or if dimensions are slightly rearranged, the overall picture remains the same: Relative to each other, “champion” entities score very high and “straggler” entities very low on (almost) all dimensions, whereas “waverer” entities present a more mixed picture. For scoring details, see Annex 3.

28 The organisational capacity score reflects the state of affairs in November 2020.

but only eight also have separate SSTC strategies.²⁹ Reporting, in turn, points to a similarly heterogeneous picture. A detailed review of *annual reports* over the last 20 years shows that a handful of entities have included SSTC in each and every annual report since the year 2000, whereas others have mentioned it occasionally or not at all (Figure 2; see Annex 4). The same goes for stand-alone *publications* on SSTC initiatives or best practices: Some entities have repeatedly or regularly shared (usually descriptive) details on their SSTC support, whereas others have not produced a single booklet or brochure on the topic. In terms of *monitoring frameworks*, advances have been limited overall.³⁰ Although no entity has so far come up with a detailed and extensive SSTC-specific indicator framework, entities that have established some sort of monitoring practices on SSTC – in terms of country office reporting, project design templates and/or full-scale evaluation processes – have received the highest mark on the scorecard. In terms of *funding*, the entities with the highest scores have publicly provided information on financial resources explicitly dedicated to SSTC, but the absence of common standards of what counts as SSTC expenditure makes a detailed comparison of SSTC-specific funding a rather complex undertaking. The four South-South trust funds currently administered by UNOSSC – set up respectively by the UN General Assembly,³¹ the G77, the India-Brazil-South Africa alliance as well as the government of India (UNOSSC, s.a.-e) – have recently become a more visible source of funding for SSTC across UN entities. Overall, however, financial resources for SSTC support have remained rather modest. Whereas UNDP can point to its regular core funding support for UNOSSC (see JIU, 2011) and FAO reports having spent more than 370 million US dollars on SSTC support over the past two decades (FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations], 2019),³² for many entities the only expenses explicitly and regularly dedicated to SSTC are salaries for those staff members whose job descriptions mention SSTC. For most funds, programmes and specialised agencies, *organisational capacity* on SSTC centres around these designated focal points that often have no or only limited support in terms of promoting and/or following up on SSTC across their respective organisation.

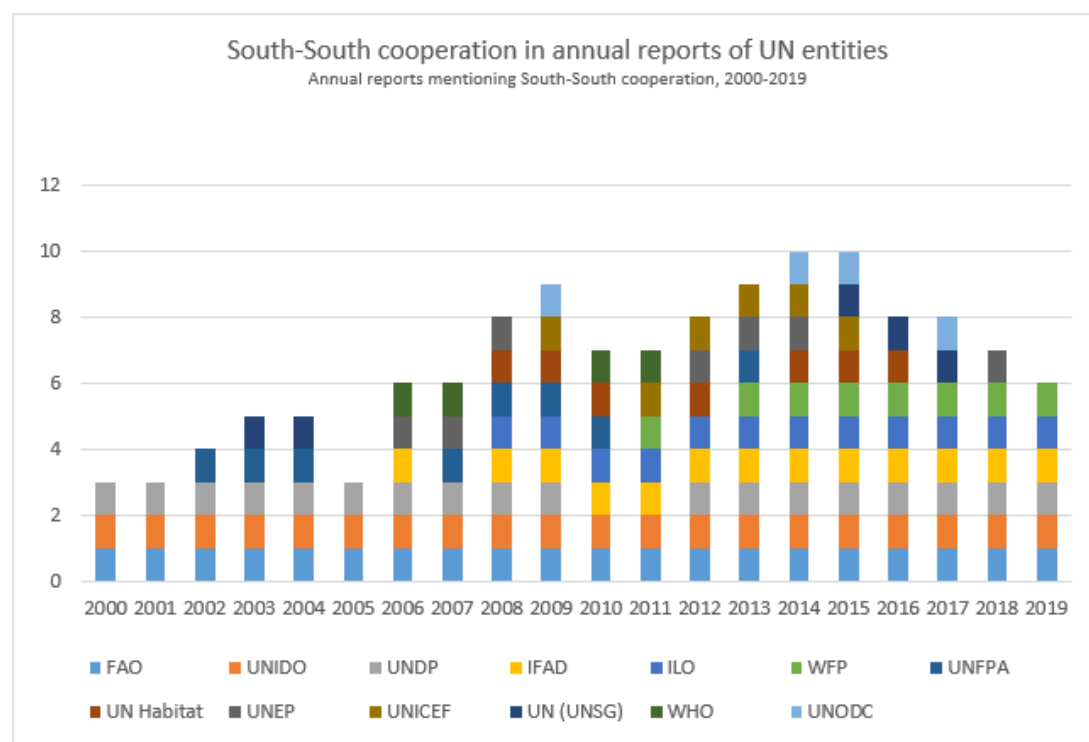
29 FAO, IFAD, ILO, UNDP, UNEP, UNFPA, UNIDO and WFP; UNICEF is currently preparing their SSTC strategy.

30 Given the diverging interpretations of SSTC highlighted above and the politics of SSTC discussed below, technical questions of monitoring and evaluation have been rather controversial; see Besharati and MacFeely (2019) and Trajber Waisbich (2021).

31 Recently, the largest funder of the South-South trust fund has been China, followed by South Korea; see UNOSSC (2017).

32 As a point of comparison: In 2018 alone, FAO received overall contributions of more than 1.4 billion US dollars (UN-DESA, 2020a).

Figure 2: References to South-South cooperation over time: Annual reports (2000-2019)



Source: Author³³

Against the backdrop of what are often complex institutional realities, the scorecard includes labels for groups of entities as a shorthand to capture tentative patterns that emerge from the analysis of mainstreaming dimensions. Whereas “champions” perform – relative to other entities – strong across all dimensions, “waverers” show a less visible and overall more variable performance, but all refer to SSTC in both strategic and reporting documents and have at least one member of staff designated to work on SSTC. “Stragglers”, in turn, lack that coverage and have only minimally engaged with SSTC when it comes to strategies, reports and monitoring, and they are overall far from mainstreaming SSTC in their organisation-wide work.³⁴ The labels of champions, waverers and stragglers do not imply a normative mapping of “good” and “bad” entities or a general assessment of their SSTC support performance. They rather refer to performance relative to mainstreaming requests and guidelines formulated by UN bodies and fora: Champions have followed suggested frameworks and action points more closely, whereas waverer entities have been less consistent, with stragglers lagging considerably behind.

While the specificities of individual entities are discussed below, a more detailed look at the three groupings provides a general idea of the overall heterogeneity of SSTC mainstreaming to date. SSTC mainstreaming *champions* have, by and far, managed to not only keep SSTC

33 Annual reports by UN Women and UNHCR have not mentioned SSTC at all, and UNESCO does not publish an annual report covering the work of the entire organisation; see also Annex 4. “UN (UNSG)” refers to annual reports by the UN Secretary-General.

34 For details on scoring and labelling, see Annex 3.

on the organisational radar but, in most cases, significantly expand SSTC visibility over the last years, including the ways in which they monitor and report their SSTC engagement.³⁵ Although the high scores across dimensions do not imply that there is no space for consolidation or improvement, UN entities in this segment have showcased a visible commitment to the notion of SSTC, as put forward in UN reports and guidelines. The Rome-based agencies working on issues related to nutrition and agriculture – FAO, IFAD and WFP – have been particularly prominent supporters of the SSTC agenda. As illustrated by a detailed look at references to SSTC in annual reports (Figure 2), UNIDO and ILO have also been long-time promoters of South-South linkages, and they have steadily solidified their SSTC mainstreaming over the last decade. All champion entities have not only designated SSTC focal points, but also – usually small but dedicated – units in charge of mainstreaming SSTC efforts, often in coordination with additional focal points across divisions at headquarters and at regional and/or country levels.

By contrast to these champions, and on the other side of the spectrum, UN entities labelled as SSTC mainstreaming *stragglers* have by and large failed to mainstream SSTC, albeit in different ways and for different reasons. UNHCR stands out as the UN entity the furthest removed from SSTC debates and processes; SSTC, as such, seems to play not even a minor role in how the organisation structures and reports on its work. UN Women is an atypical case, insofar as it counts, with a rather long-standing SSTC focal point staff that has published statements and short articles on the link between UN Women’s mandate and SSTC (Kabir, 2017; UN Women, 2016). But so far this does not seem to have materialised in terms of how the organisation presents, structures or reports on its work. Together with UNHCR, UN Women is the only entity among the 15 analysed in this study that has not even once mentioned South-South cooperation in one of its annual reports, generally taken as a strong indicator that SSTC is not an organisational priority (see JIU, 2011, 2018). UNODC and WHO, in turn, seem to have a rather pragmatic stance towards SSTC: They report on it occasionally in an ad hoc manner, notably when asked through a UN system-wide coordination process,³⁶ but SSTC as a frame of reference does not play a role for their work at an organisation-wide level, and it is not a relevant category for how they engage with their stakeholders. Whereas at WHO it is the regional branch in the Americas – the Pan American Health Organization – that has explicitly engaged with SSTC (Pan American Health Organization, s.a.), UNODC has focussed more on its support for “emerging and national donors” (UNODC [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime], 2015, p. 124) and for how programme countries cooperate on specific issues and processes, without using the SSTC label and operational toolkit. During interviews with representatives from this cohort of UN entities – in the absence of designated focal points, this meant people who had been identified by colleagues or superiors as the ones with the most South-South-related expertise – some stated that they were not aware of UN system-wide processes on SSTC, or that SSTC had become a major area of work for other UN organisations, and a couple of respondents were surprised to hear that something like a UNOSSC even existed.

Beyond stragglers and champions, the group of SSTC mainstreaming *waverers* is arguably the most diverse and dynamic one when it comes to the complexities behind mainstreaming SSTC. Over the last two decades, waverers have been more than just midfielders that simply

35 As the host of UNOSSC, UNDP is a special case; see below.

36 For an exception, see WHO’s country presence reports (WHO, 2019).

engage less than champions and more than stragglers. The zigzag of (not) mentioning SSTC in their annual reports over the last two decades (Figure 2) is an indicator for rather erratic engagement patterns.³⁷ UNFPA, for instance, was an early mover on the SSTC agenda³⁸ and one of the first UN entities with a separate South-South cooperation strategy, but it was in 2013 that a UNFPA annual report explicitly mentioned SSTC for the last time. UNEP also integrated SSTC in its work earlier than other entities and had a separate team working on SSTC, but over the last six years, only one annual report has mentioned SSTC. UN-Habitat and UNICEF, in a similar vein, did not include explicit references to SSTC in their latest annual reports, even though previous editions used to mention it repeatedly. However, UNICEF still has allocated funding specifically for SSTC and also has a small number of full-time staff working on SSTC at different organisational levels. Some of the reasons behind the back and forth with regard to SSTC mainstreaming are discussed in the next section. Overall, the heterogeneity of mainstreaming efforts and the oscillation over time among waverer entities arguably epitomises the SSTC mainstreaming landscape at the UN. Although the occasional or systematic lack of an explicit focus on SSTC does not necessarily mean that a given entity does not support cooperation among programme countries in its operational work, it suggests that mainstreaming efforts have not been a (consistent) priority at the institutional level.

3 The politics of South-South and triangular cooperation support: Behind the scenes of UN mainstreaming efforts

Integrating support for SSTC into the institutional setup of UN entities has been part of a broader trend to expand and strengthen UN engagement with the means of implementation for the 2030 Agenda currently outlined under SDG 17 (UN-DESA, s.a.-a). Across member states and the UN bureaucracy, many have argued that SSTC is a key vehicle for reaching both national and global development goals (see UN, 2019a; UNCTAD, 2018). However, this general belief in – and commitment to – SSTC has not been the only motivation behind UN engagement patterns. Across “champion”, “waverer” and “straggler” entities, a range of idiosyncratic factors have conditioned (the lack of) attempts to mainstream SSTC support. Given the dearth of external analyses on the topic and the limited information available through UN documents, interviews conducted since 2016, and particularly between September and November 2020, have been crucial for taking a look behind the often opaque scenes of SSTC politics at the UN. The combination of detailed interview accounts with publicly available sources points to three interrelated sets of dynamics that have been particularly influential in shaping the heterogeneous SSTC mainstreaming landscape.

First, SSTC support has been approached by different parts of the UN development system as a tool to remain relevant and adapt to changing patterns of power and wealth. SSTC support has, second, also been part of the internal politico-bureaucratic dynamics within UN entities themselves. Third, it has increasingly been a site of member state geopolitics, and notably the expanding clout of China at the UN, connecting SSTC mainstreaming efforts to

37 This focus on annual reports does not take into account other forms of regular reporting that may include references to SSTC, such as updates on operational activities at UN-Habitat.

38 See UNFPA’s annual reports from 2002 onwards.

broader questions about the future of the multilateral development system. As it would be a wane – and arguably unhelpful – exercise to break down empirical complexity stemming from processes involving 15 UN entities over the course of two decades in order to formulate a neat argument, these sets of dynamics are not supposed to explain scorecard performances in straightforward positivist-causal terms (see Adler-Nissen, 2013; Flyvbjerg, 2001). Instead, they are among the pushing and pulling factors that have conditioned UN support for SSTC and warrant particular attention when making sense of the context in which UN mainstreaming efforts have unfolded.

3.1 A tool for ensuring organisational relevance

With the expanding economic and political clout of large middle-income countries in the first decade of the 2000s, the UN development system found itself in a context increasingly dominated by a discourse centring around the “rise of the South” (UNDP, 2013a). A number of UN entities began to rethink their engagement with those member states they had previously approached as programme countries but that showed increasing signs of active development-related engagement abroad. On top of this, the global financial crisis of 2008 and 2009 suggested that voluntary contributions to UN entities from major DAC donors, such as Spain, would decline significantly (OECD, 2016), and this played its part in plans to prepare a resource mobilisation pivot to the South. UNDP was arguably among the most proactive players in this regard. In 2010, the UNDP senior management launched its New Strategic Partnership agenda to engage “emerging global powers” (UNDP, 2013b), leading to the signature of framework agreements with the five BRICS countries as well as Indonesia, Mexico and Turkey (Haug, 2016, pp. 88-89). A focus on UNDP’s support for South-South cooperation was part and parcel of these framework agreements, and some “emerging partner” (UNDP, 2014a, p. 11) member states indeed expanded their SSTC-related engagement with UNDP, albeit according to their own interests and conditions.³⁹

Brazil has arguably been one of the most prominent examples. As it has, for legal reasons, been difficult for the Brazilian development agency to spend funds abroad, the Brazilian government decided to use UN infrastructure instead (Cabral & Weinstock, 2010, pp. 10 and 11). Reflecting government cost-sharing dynamics in other Latin American countries, large parts of Brazilian assistance to date have effectively been channelled through UN structures, making entities such as UNDP a *de facto* pillar of Brazil’s South-South cooperation model.⁴⁰ *Prima facie* this kind of arrangement has had a beneficial effect for both parties, with governments receiving the kind of support they need and entities such as UNDP charging overhead costs and being able to join the South-South cooperation game. At the same time, however, it has also led to rather controversial discussions within the UN on whether being the infrastructural branch of a government entity is a fruitful way of expanding engagement with South-South cooperation.⁴¹ In many ways, the programmatic and more content-related engagement in UN support for SSTC discussed above – visible

39 An analysis of the evolution of this partnership agenda is still missing.

40 This has, in somewhat similar ways, also been the case in other Latin American countries (see UNDP, s.a.; UNDP, 2016a).

41 Participant observations from 2013 to 2015.

throughout policy documents, reports or monitoring frameworks – has also been the result of attempts to be more than just an administrative support system for “emerging powers”.⁴²

Efforts by UN entities to play a more visible role on the South-South cooperation stage, however, have also led to some frowning among programme country representatives. Across resolutions and other UN documents, G77 members have repeatedly insisted in highlighting that, while the UN might have a role to play in supporting South-South, it is member states’ own “primary responsibility” (UNGA, 2019, p. 4) to take care of development-related cooperation processes. Although tensions around UN South-South support have usually remained under the radar of public attention, interviews indicate that the Honduran government reached out to UN entities in 2017 to clarify their engagement with South-South cooperation, and to make sure the UN would not add an unnecessary layer of facilitation or take space away from member states themselves. The Memorandum of Understanding the Honduran government then signed with the UN Resident Coordinator and UNOSSC explicitly highlighted that schemes with UN involvement would always be referred to as *triangular* (and not South-South) cooperation, and that (instead of positioning their own standing) UN entities would focus on strengthening the cooperation and facilitation capacity of their government counterparts (see GRH-UNS-UNOSSC, 2017; UNOSSC, 2017).

More generally, and beyond questions of SSTC coordination, many of the hopes UN entities had attached to an increased engagement with South-South cooperation in the first decade of the 2000s did not materialise. One major aim behind UNDP’s new partnership agenda, for instance, had been to incentivise emerging development partners to significantly increase their core contributions to UNDP’s budget (Haug, 2016). So far, however, contributions from “emerging” member states, when compared with those of traditional donors, have remained rather modest: In 2018, DAC member countries were responsible for 85 per cent of all member state contributions to UN operational activities related to development and humanitarian assistance, or roughly 92 per cent if local resources are excluded.⁴³ Only 15 per cent – or 8 per cent when excluding local resources – thus came from outside the DAC. This includes funding from Brazil, India and China and suggests – particularly from a Northern-Western viewpoint – that Southern heavyweights are largely still “ducking for cover” (Weinlich, 2014) when it comes to providing financial resources to the UN development system.

Although the debate over whether programme countries should indeed step up their contributions has been a controversial one – particularly in light of the still substantial gap in per-capita income between DAC members and Southern locomotives (see Besharati, 2013) – Northern-dominated funding flows have had a direct impact on mainstreaming efforts of UN support for SSTC. Beyond speeches and policy notes, effective mainstreaming depends on the availability of resources, and on whether UN entities have political and/or financial incentives to expand their institutional and operational focus on SSTC. As funding for SSTC

42 Interviews in New York, November and December 2016.

43 These percentages were calculated based on numbers in UN-DESA 2020b; see UNGA (2020b) and also Baumann and Weinlich (2020). Local resources refer to funding provided by programme country governments to the UN for operational activities within their own borders and are often excluded from comparing member state contributions; see UNDP (2014b).

projects and programmes largely depends on contributions from Southern member states themselves,⁴⁴ the limited amount of contributions they currently provide has meant that, in financial terms, SSTC support remains a rather insignificant area of work for most UN entities.

The strong focus on financial resources when comparing development cooperation efforts stems from dominant practices of DAC donors and, as many have argued, may be ill-suited for reporting on South-South flows, which have traditionally centred around the sharing of technical expertise, staff secondments or in-kind contributions (see Besharati & MacFeely, 2019). In the absence of a widely accepted alternative methodology, however, attempts to estimate SSTC flows usually rely on a monetary logic (ECOSOC, 2008; OECD, 2020). More generally, and importantly, for most organisations in the field of international development, it is money that makes the world go round: Funding practices – such as recent trends towards strongly earmarked funding (Weinlich, Baumann, Lundsgaarde, & Wolff, 2020) – condition the ways in which multilateral organisations operate, and what they focus on. SSTC mainstreaming has not escaped this logic. For most UN entities, an increase in efforts to support SSTC has not translated into a significant rise of voluntary contributions from Southern member states. Instead, the South-South hype around the turn of the first decade of the 2000s was followed by the realisation that SSTC support was not going to offer the resources needed to become more resilient finance-wise. The decrease in references to South-South cooperation in annual reports of UN entities outside the group of SSTC mainstreaming champions since 2015 (see Figure 2 above) reflects a perceived decline in relevance and the demystification of SSTC engagement as an innovative way to ensure financial sustainability.

3.2 An element of intra-organisational dynamics

In connection with and beyond strategies to increase the number of funding sources, the trajectories of SSTC mainstreaming efforts have also been connected to politico-bureaucratic dynamics within UN entities themselves. According to interviews, the recent decline in references to SSTC in annual reports indeed reflects a decrease in attention across a growing number of entities, but it has not necessarily been the result of an explicit corporate stance against SSTC. Instead, individuals seem to have played a substantive role in pushing for – or contributing to – a de facto decrease in relevance of the SSTC agenda. Primarily funded by North-South flows, most UN entities still have – in comparative terms – very little expertise on, and experience with, SSTC support. In most entities, there is effectively less than a handful of staff members – if at all – with in-depth knowledge of SSTC structures and processes who are effectively able and willing to promote the corporate SSTC agenda, for example by including SSTC-related passages in monitoring frameworks

44 See, for example, the list of contributors to the UN's South-South cooperation fund (UNOSSC, 2017). The strong trend towards earmarked contributions provided by traditional donors (Baumann & Weinlich, 2020) has meant that core contributions have overall played a limited role for the support of the growing number of SSTC initiatives.

and planning templates. If these individuals leave the organisation or turn to other (more pressing or en vogue) issues, the continuity of SSTC engagement is at stake.⁴⁵

This is exacerbated by a context in which UN entities have repeatedly had to deal with a decrease in core funding (see Better World Campaign, 2017; Global Policy Forum, 2012; Weinlich et al., 2020), and in which SSTC – as a relatively unestablished field of work – is largely seen as expendable. UNDP, for instance, used to have a separate SSTC unit, regional focal points and a number of country offices with staff dedicated to SSTC support (Haug, 2016). In the context of organisational restructuring measures in 2014 and 2015 (see Browne & Weiss, 2014; Clark, 2011; Deen, 2014), however, some SSTC staff left the organisation, whereas others, notably at headquarters, joined the expanding UNOSSC team in 2017 and 2018. These departures have left a sizable hole in UNDP’s engagement with SSTC, with corporate output on, and engagement with, SSTC declining significantly.⁴⁶ Although UNDP still builds on a substantial set of mainstreaming tools and has been working on reinvigorating its SSTC capacity,⁴⁷ the only UNDP staff currently working full-time on SSTC is a Junior Professional Officer.⁴⁸ Although for different reasons (see below), UNEP has experienced a similar drain of SSTC expertise. In many smaller entities – such as UN Women – SSTC-related processes seem to really centre around one individual, underlining the potentially precarious nature of organisational SSTC engagement and the lack of resilience when faced with endogenous or exogenous shocks, such as budget cuts, promotions or organisational restructuring.

What has arguably – and unsurprisingly – been at least as impactful is whether senior management is aware of and/or actively supports the SSTC mainstreaming agenda. In the absence of strong financial incentives through SSTC-related funding, leadership from the South or leadership that is sympathetic to the cause of SSTC can make a real difference. At UN-Habitat, for instance, engagement with SSTC support had taken up speed towards the end of the first decade of the 2000s under the leadership of an executive director from Tanzania, then it lost standing during the tenure of her successor from Spain; it has again received more organisational space since the appointment of a Malaysian official at the helm of the organisation.⁴⁹ As shifts in senior management are often accompanied by a reshuffle due to where specific causes find themselves on an organisation’s priority list, SSTC focal points from both “champion” and “waverer” entities report that whether SSTC gets mentioned in major documents, such as strategies and annual reports, often depends on internal high-level support. Others highlight that, even with that support, they have to “fight an uphill battle”⁵⁰ to make sure references to SSTC are included in corporate processes, as

45 Some “champion” entities have integrated SSTC in their staff training curricula to ensure mainstreaming across the organisation; see International Labour Organisation (ILO, s.a.).

46 UNDP’s latest annual report, for instance, only includes one single reference on SSTC related to the BAPA+40 conference and nothing on UNDP’s operational work on SSTC (UNDP, 2019). Was it not for its hosting function of UNOSSC, UNDP would have received a lower score in the inter-entity comparison discussed above.

47 A full-time SSTC specialist is set to join the organisation in 2021.

48 Junior Professional Officer positions in UN entities are funded directly by a UN member state for a limited period and are usually offered to entry-level candidates from that member state; see UN-DESA (s.a.-b).

49 Interviews in November 2020; see UN (2018b).

50 Interview with a UN official, October 2020.

most colleagues across different levels of seniority do not treat it as a particularly important area of engagement.⁵¹

The work that focal points can do to mainstream SSTC thus only goes so far. As alluded to above, only a limited number of staff have the experience or willingness to engage with the (often less lucrative) modalities and practices of SSTC and the particular requirements stemming from them, such as the need to deal with often less systematised processes or to swiftly react to low-budget ad hoc initiatives. In the absence of strong and coherent political will at the head of the organisation or clear financial incentives, many entities have not systematically encouraged staff to dedicate time and energy to SSTC. What is more, aside from small units that are aware of, and working on, SSTC support, many staff members – both inside and outside headquarters – are simply not aware of what UN support for SSTC looks like, and how it is related to the work they do on a day-to-day basis. Across entities – including some of those labelled as champions – UN officials highlight or deplore a substantive lack of knowledge about SSTC. As one focal point put it in an interview: “Our people on the ground often support South-South without knowing it, and therefore don’t report on it; most of them haven’t read the [SSTC] strategy and have no idea that what they are doing is actually South-South support.”⁵²

Beyond policy frameworks and reports, intra-organisational mainstreaming efforts across global-, regional- and country-level staff networks have often been limited, and of limited success. Across entities, including those identified as “champions”, this widespread pattern of individual and collective staff approaches to SSTC somewhat reflects how “straggler” entities have engaged with the SSTC agenda: They are either unaware of SSTC mainstreaming efforts or do not see SSTC as an issue important enough for them to restructure their workflows. As a WHO official put it, “SSTC is part of the daily work of WHO [...] This is why we do not have a focal point or separate work on SSTC. It is our way of working.” Similarly, UNODC officials are able to present a long list of examples to showcase their engagement with, and support for, cross-border interaction between partner countries. But according to UNODC practices, this kind of work is part of the organisation’s engagement with regional or issue-specific cooperation and not labelled as SSTC support. For “straggler” entities, including WHO, UNODC and UNHCR, there seem to be very limited incentives to integrate SSTC into their policies and working structures, irrespective of the extent to which they, in fact, already support cooperation between programme countries. Some of them perceive SSTC mainstreaming, reporting and coordination efforts by New York-based offices as part of the overflow of policy talk at the UN that has very little to do with their operational work. As a UNHCR official put it, “Some of these request and paper drafts [...] come from the moon, it seems. We don’t engage with this. We save lives.”

3.3 A site of member state geopolitics, notably China’s expanding clout

In the inter-governmental sphere, prima facie beyond the inner workings of funds, programmes and specialised agencies, controversies related to South-South cooperation between the G77, on the one hand, and the EU, the US and their allies, on the other, have

51 Interviews with officials from several UN entities, October and November 2020.

52 Interview with UN official, October 2020.

contributed to keeping the vestiges of North-South dynamics alive (see Baumann, 2018a; Haug, 2020; Weiss, 2009). More recently, UNOSSC has been at centre of some of these (geo)political rows. Initially set up as the Special Unit on TCDC within UNDP, the Office has been funded via UNDP's core budget and used to be a rather low-key body with a limited number of staff (JIU, 2011; UNGA, 1978, p. 24). Over the last decade, however, G77 member states have actively pushed for expanding UNOSSC's visibility and standing within the UN system (Elgarf, 2018; Khor, 2014). China, India and Brazil, in particular, have played key roles in this process, not only through their weight in multilateral negotiations, but also via concrete funding mechanisms administered by UNOSSC, such as the India, Brazil and South Africa Facility for Poverty and Hunger Alleviation, set up in 2006, or the India-UN Development Partnership Fund, established in 2017 (UNOSSC, s.a.-e; see above). At the institutional level, the increase in independence from UNDP, still its official host organisation, and the symbolic move of appointing the UNOSSC director as Envoy of the Secretary-General have arguably made an important contribution toward SSTC receiving more attention within and beyond the UN (UN, 2016; UN-DESA, 2020c). There have also been (so far unsuccessful) attempts to further increase the standing of the Office by transforming it into an organisational body led by an Assistant Secretary-General; and recent member state resolutions have acknowledged and reaffirmed UNOSSC as "a separate entity and coordinator for promoting and facilitating South-South and triangular cooperation on a global and United Nations system-wide basis" (see Lee, 2020a; UNDP Executive Board, 2013; UNGA, 2019; UNOSSC, s.a.-f).

This success story, however, has been tainted by political tensions and allegations of wrongdoing. In 2015, it appeared that UNOSSC was implicated in a scandal around former UN General Assembly President John Ashe (Visser & Frehse, 2016) and faced a UNDP-led audit that found the Office's performance "unsatisfactory", with an explicit emphasis on governance, operations, accountability and reporting lines (UNDP, 2016b). Over the last years, directors of the Office have left their positions in connection to claims about misconduct. Beyond questions about the veracity of specific accusations, which have usually been dealt with behind closed doors, what has been striking is the recent tendency of the Office to be linked to allegations of scandal and a lack of transparency.⁵³ According to a considerable number of interviews with UN officials and external observers, one major reason behind this has been the shifting landscape of global power and the perceived need of the Office to take the interests and preferences of large Southern member states into account. Making sure to strengthen the weight of the Office by working closely with stakeholders associated with key G77 countries, however – while also abiding by official rules on procurement, expenditure and human resources – can turn out to be a challenging balancing act. As a former UNOSSC official put it, "it is basically impossible to lead this office successfully without getting into trouble [...] They are incredibly wary to not step on the toes of the wrong people".⁵⁴

53 See Lee (2020b) and also Gomes (2020). The notorious online news outlet *Inner City Press* arguably does not abide by the highest journalistic standards, but it is one of the very few publicly available sources that provides concrete insights into the inner workings of UN affairs. Interviews with UN officials confirmed that leadership-related controversies have been a major factor for how UNOSSC is currently perceived.

54 Interview with UN official, October 2020.

Overall, SSTC has become a rather contested issue related to questions of international influence and responsibilities, not only with regard to UNOSSC, but also in UN fora more generally. Until the first decade of the 2000s, member states that are part of the Western European and Others Group (WEOG) at the UN – which includes not only Western European countries, but also the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand – had paid little to no attention to South-South cooperation, reflecting the perceived insignificance of “stuff developing countries do among themselves”. With the expanding clout of Southern providers and South-South linkages, however, this began to change. While a range of traditional donors have expanded their engagement with South-South dynamics via a growing focus on triangular cooperation over the last decade (DEVAL [German Institute for Development Evaluation], 2020; GPEDC [Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation], s.a.; GPI-ETC, 2020), the notion of SSTC has also come to stand for rather controversial debates at the UN.⁵⁵ By and large, and as alluded to during the initial discussion about South-South trajectories and meanings, WEOG member states have highlighted that they have no intention to expand their financial contributions (e.g. via core contributions), notably for cooperation they are not part of, and instead expect Southern providers to increase their own funding. G77 member states, in turn, have continued to argue that Northern donors have a historic responsibility to fund international development efforts, and that South-South schemes only offer complementary mechanisms (see Besharati, 2013; Bracho, 2017; Muchhala, 2014, 2015).

This evolving multilateral “North-South theatre” (Weiss, 2009) has arguably been all the more relevant for geopolitical considerations as – at least from the perspective of WEOG member states – SSTC has increasingly been associated with the interests and ambitions of the People’s Republic of China. China and the “South” have had a somewhat complex relationship. Although China is listed as a full member on the G77 website (G77 [Group of 77], s.a.-a), and although the Chinese government continues to highlight China’s developing status (Xinhua, 2021), the dominant formula “the Group of 77 and China” (G77, s.a.-b) suggests that China’s belonging to the developing-country alliance at the UN differs from that of all other 133 G77 members. Early reiterations of North-South issues, such as the 1980 Brandt Report, explicitly underlined that “[w]hen we speak of the ‘South’ we [...] usually exclude China” (ICIDI, 1980, pp. 22 and 23). For official Chinese sources themselves, the South-South trope has been only one framing among others, and one that has been used in rather flexible ways (Kohlenberg & Godehardt, 2020). Together with India, Chinese government representatives have also shown no particular interest in – and, in fact, rather more or less hidden opposition towards – co-designing a globally agreed framework for defining South-South cooperation in more concrete terms and operationalising South-South principles in order to enable shared monitoring and reporting.⁵⁶ Whereas Indian representatives have been at the forefront of presenting South-South as part of a broader political project overtly challenging Northern-Western hegemony (see above), Chinese

55 For an example, see the voting records of the 2014 General Assembly resolution on South-South cooperation (UN, 2014, para. 24b).

56 On India, see GoI-MoER (2019). On patterns of Chinese cooperation in the framework of BRI that apparently go against at least parts of South-South principles, see Rudyak (2020). Although India and China are often referred to as the most influential South-South players at the UN, tensions between them have often made coordination and cooperation among Southern heavyweights a rather difficult undertaking. On a comparison of their variegated engagement with and “differentiated ambivalence” vis-à-vis the South, see Cooper (2020).

engagement might have been somewhat less dogmatic (see Cooper, 2020), but at least as effective. Attempts by the statistics office at UNCTAD, for instance, to come up with proposals for measuring South-South cooperation prompted a formal complaint by the Chinese government to UNCTAD's Secretary-General, which, in turn, led to a complete halt of the process.⁵⁷

Instead of caring about the meaning and operationalisation of South-South principles, WEOG member states, in turn, have often been more concerned about their own standing vis-à-vis China in development-related debates, and about the extent to which Chinese influence at the UN threatens what they perceive as their turf.⁵⁸ Interviews with officials from a wide range of member states over the past five years suggest that representatives of WEOG countries have increasingly perceived South-South cooperation as a shield under which China has been trying to expand its influence across the UN, notably by linking the work of UN bodies to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁵⁹ A range of UN entities – including FAO, WHO and UNEP – have already begun to formally engage with BRI (Mao, 2020). The main issue for many WEOG member states has not been whether UN bodies, including UNOSSC, abide by official regulations, but rather to what extent the Chinese government has managed to expand its control at the UN, notably to promote its foreign policy goals (see Fung & Lam, 2020; Rosenow, 2020).

Against this backdrop, what UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (UN, 2020a) has referred to as the “great fracture” between China and the United States, reflecting “epic geostrategic tensions”, has also had an impact on UN engagement with SSTC support. UN entities have not been oblivious to geopolitical dynamics, and some of them have taken measures accordingly to steer away from potentially controversial waters. Some shifts have been hardly noticeable, such as the UN System Staff College discontinuing its training course on South-South cooperation support.⁶⁰ Others have been somewhat more visible, even though they have mostly taken place in closed-door meetings. At the UNDP executive board, for instance, WEOG member states – notably the United States, still by far the largest provider of the UN development system – were openly critical about the draft version of the Country Programme Document for China that UNDP had prepared together with its Chinese counterparts.⁶¹ As any other programme country, China regularly reviews its policy frameworks with UN entities on their in-country work. In the case of China, this has increasingly included activities abroad under the headline of “China as a partner for global development and South-South cooperation” (UN, 2020b, p. 8), where the UNDP country office supports China's engagement on the African continent and across Asia (see Haug,

57 Interview with an UNCTAD official, November 2020.

58 Interviews with member state officials since October 2016, both in New York City and remotely. Interviews suggest that, in development-related settings such as the Second Committee at the UN General Assembly, concerns about China's stance on human rights have not played a major role for WEOG representatives.

59 On BRI, see Chatzky and McBride (2020).

60 Conversation with a UN official in September 2020. For the 2017, 2018 and 2019 editions of a UNSSC course on SSTC and the 2030 Agenda; see United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC, 2019) and also Milesi (2019).

61 Interview with UN official, November 2020. Similar dynamics have unfolded during discussions about UNICEF and UNFPA engagement with China.

2016; Mao, 2020, pp. 22-23; UNDP China, 2017). In an unusual move, WEOG representatives at the UNDP executive board have challenged the expansion of SSTC support in this context, and particularly the engagement of UN entities with BRI, which the US government has referred to as a core element of the “China challenge” (US State Department, 2020).⁶²

Although tensions at UNDP have so far not led to major implications for how the organisation deals with Chinese partners, UNEP has faced a somewhat more challenging situation. UNEP had been an early mover on expanding engagement with SSTC and had also set up a separate SSTC unit, led by a full-time special advisor (see Nishimoto, 2014; UNEP [United Nations Environment Programme], 2018a). Funding from China had been crucial for this line of work, notably through the UNEP-China Trust Fund and the China South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund (see Ecoticias, 2014; UNEP, 2018b, s.a.). However, WEOG member states – again notably the United States – grew increasingly wary of UNEP’s China-funded SSTC support. This led to a major row among member states, with key donors questioning UNEP’s neutrality.⁶³ In the end, China-led South-South funding schemes that had taken place outside the usual work programme were discontinued,⁶⁴ UNEP’s SSTC unit was dismantled, and the UNEP senior management presented an explicit SSTC strategy that was rubber-stamped by member states in order to preclude future tensions. Instead of highlighting SSTC as a separate line of engagement, UNEP now holds that it integrates SSTC as “an integral cross-cutting delivery mechanism” (UNEP, 2020, p. 7) into its programme of work, with only one headquarter staff following up part-time on SSTC-related matters.⁶⁵

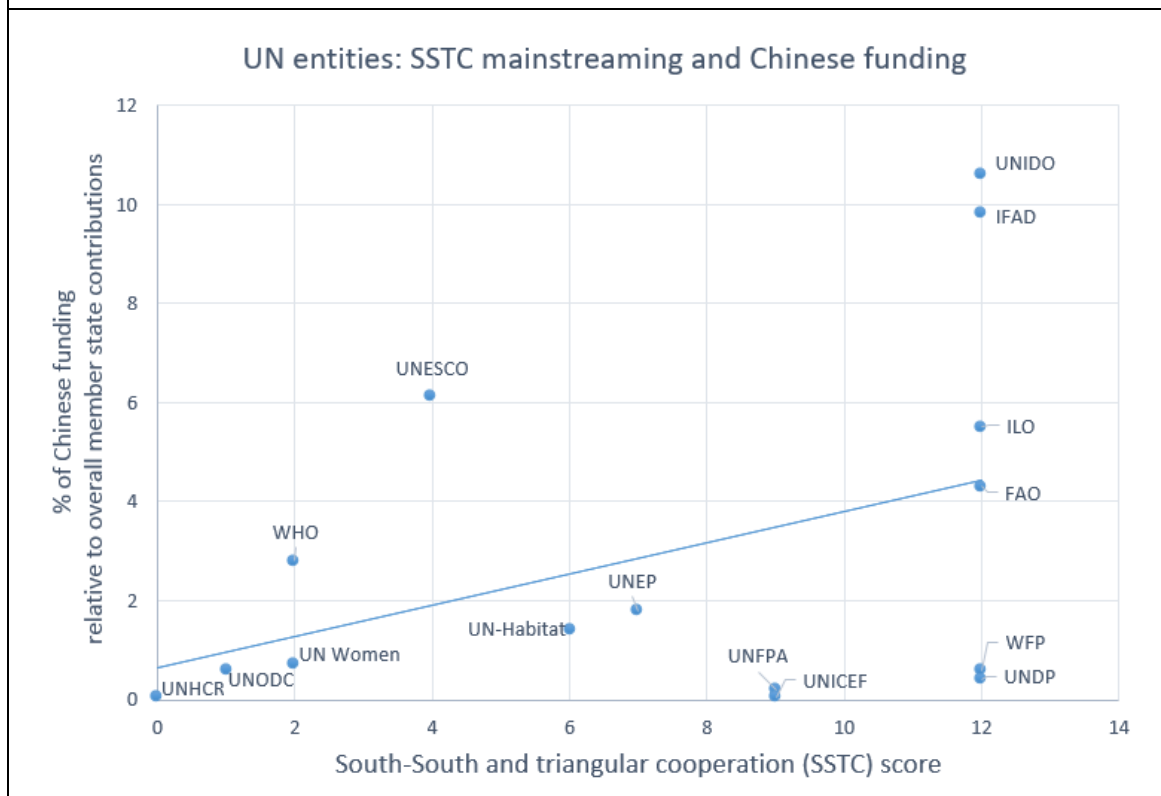
62 Interviews with UN officials and member state representatives, October and November 2020. Some concerns have also been related to a perceived lack of inclusion of traditional donors in the setup of UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks and, stemming from that, the framing of individual entities’ work programmes.

63 Interview with UN member state representative, November 2020.

64 The last formal UNEP-China Trust Fund cycle ended in 2018; see UNEP (s.a.). But there have still been initiatives implemented with Trust Fund resources (Tsinghua, 2019), such as a centre on ecosystem management set up by UNEP and the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Vijitpan, 2019).

65 Interview with UNEP staff, October 2020.

Figure 3: Correlation between SSTC mainstreaming scores and the relative importance of Chinese funding



Source: Author, based on the SSTC scorecard and 2018 funding data (UNGA, 2020b)⁶⁶

Beyond illustrative evidence from individual UN entities on South-South-related controversies linked to rows between China and WEOG member states, an examination of Chinese funding patterns points to a slightly more complex picture when it comes to China's influence via South-South schemes. DAC donors still dominate the funding landscape of the UN development system (see Baumann & Weinlich, 2020; UNGA, 2020b; Weinlich, 2014), and although China is currently the second-largest contributor to the UN's regular budget (UN Secretariat, 2019), its share in member state funding for individual entities – similar to that of India and Brazil – is rather low when compared to DAC donors. According to 2018 funding data, the 15 UN entities under investigation received on average just under three per cent of member state funding from the Chinese government.⁶⁷ In relative terms, however, Chinese contributions outweigh those of other programme countries, and for some UN entities – such as IFAD and UNIDO – China's importance as a funding provider has markedly increased. A closer look at the relationship between SSTC mainstreaming efforts of UN entities and the level of funding they receive from China – calculated based on the SSTC scorecard and 2018 funding data – indicates an overall positive correlation (Figure 3). Although a more detailed investigation is needed in order to examine underlying

⁶⁶ The figures include all Chinese funding to UN entities in question, including assessed contributions as well as voluntary resources. Whereas the former are compulsory payments, the latter come with more leverage on how UN entities implement their mandates.

⁶⁷ Only UNIDO and IFAD received roughly 10 per cent of their member state funding from China, all others between 6 and less than 0.1 per cent; see UNGA (2020b).

dynamics and prominent outliers, the general trend suggests that UN entities which receive rather limited funding from China also tend to engage less with SSTC mainstreaming efforts. Although there is more variance among UN entities for whom China is a more important funder, overall they score higher on SSTC mainstreaming.⁶⁸

A triangulation of these findings with interview accounts suggests that, particularly among smaller entities – and among entities that receive close to no funding from China – there has been a somewhat growing reluctance to engage with mainstreaming SSTC. Against the backdrop of heightening tensions between China and the United States, many entities prefer to stay away from controversial debates that might alienate DAC donors – another factor potentially conditioning the recent decrease in SSTC references in annual reports or country-level initiatives.⁶⁹ So far, China’s financial and political clout at the UN development system (see Mao, 2020) has not reached a point where most UN entities would feel comfortable siding with China when faced with the above-mentioned “great fracture”, which would increase the distance to their main donors. Overall, however, the recent politicisation of SSTC in the context of tensions over relations between China and large DAC donors increases the likelihood of controversy. Member state geopolitics have thus had a palpable impact on the evolution of SSTC mainstreaming efforts. In addition to, and in combination with, (shifts in) strategies to employ SSTC as a tool to ensure organisational relevance as well as intra-organisational dynamics discussed above – ranging from senior management support and SSTC brain drain to low levels of general SSTC awareness – the increasingly politicised nature of South-South cooperation support has had an often hidden, but overall palpable impact on mainstreaming efforts across UN entities.

4 Beyond mainstreaming? The way ahead for UN engagement with South-South and triangular cooperation

The evidence discussed in this paper suggests that, overall, efforts to mainstream SSTC support at the UN have evolved in a complex environment and been far from homogenous. With reference to requests in UN resolutions and reports, the SSTC scorecard mapping reflects a roughly two-decades-old appraisal by the UN itself, namely that “despite some progress, the mainstreaming of [...] South-South cooperation in the programmes and projects of [...] United Nations organizations and agencies is [...] still not optimal” (UNDP, 2003, p. 11).

Mainstreaming efforts have differed widely across “champions”, “waverers” and “stragglers”, with some entities, such as FAO, employing SSTC teams at both the global and country levels, whereas others do not even have a designated SSTC focal point. The analysis of reports and key documents also suggests that, beyond champions, references to SSTC have recently been on the decline, further increasing the heterogeneity among UN entities. Even for champions, mainstreaming SSTC support has been far from linear, as the example of UNDP illustrates. This general picture is also reflected in evidence on the recent

68 While Chinese contributions to UNDP and WFP are rather low in relative terms, both entities are among the most important recipients of Chinese funding in absolute terms; see Mao (2020).

69 One of the few WHO publications that makes reference to SSTC reports a decline in the use of SSTC per WHO country offices, from 74 per cent in 2017 to 49 per cent in 2019; see WHO (2019).

reform of the UN development system: References to SSTC do not figure prominently in global coordination documents (UNSDG, 2020; cf. UNSDG, 2019). Available cooperation frameworks signed between the UN and host governments – providing the first concrete references for how a reformed UN development system is supposed to support programme countries – indicate neither a common understanding of, nor a mainstreamed approach towards, SSTC (see UNSDG, s.a.).⁷⁰ Latest inter-agency efforts to streamline UN support thus seem to reflect the fact that, so far, SSTC mainstreaming efforts have led to uneven and – compared to the aspirations in resolutions and reports – rather modest results.

4.1 Mainstreaming reconsidered

This lack of coordination on SSTC support has not gone unnoticed. In 2017, the UN Secretary-General asked UNOSSC to set up a framework that would allow a more coordinated approach across agencies (UNGA, 2017). Under the guidance of UNOSSC, representatives of UN entities have drafted a UN system-wide strategy and an action plan on SSTC, with many officials hoping that a shared guiding document will ensure not only “more coherent and coordinated support by the United Nations system” (UNGA, 2017, para. 94), but also more systematic institutional efforts across entities. The system-wide strategy draft builds on some of the more comprehensive strategic documents of individual UN entities, notably those of the “champions”,⁷¹ and it is set to become the go-to reference for UN support for SSTC across the board. At the same time, however, it is highly unlikely that the system-wide strategy will bring full clarity to questions of monitoring and reporting, and on how to classify funding, as this would touch upon issues of definitional vagueness that have been important for influential member states, including China (see above). The current strategy draft does not include concrete indicators,⁷² and while the accompanying action plan might go as far as putting forward some tentative operationalisations, it is likely to fall short of establishing a comprehensive or mandatory base for coherently mainstreaming SSTC support. The heterogeneity of mainstreaming efforts is thus set to remain a defining feature of the SSTC support landscape at the UN.

Given the decades-long requests for – and the rather sluggish and fissured approaches to – SSTC mainstreaming across UN entities, a broader question for the future of SSTC support concerns the very notion of mainstreaming itself. If comprehensive mainstreaming – that is, the notion of considering SSTC with regard to “any planned action [...] in all areas and at all levels” (ECOSOC, 1997) – is apparently far from being an empirical reality across UN entities, is it at least (still) a desirable reference for future efforts? Is it actually useful to have SSTC brought into all major strategies, budget templates, monitoring tools, reporting schemes and organigrams? Some entities identified as SSTC mainstreaming “stragglers” –

70 As of October 2020, the eight publicly available Cooperation Frameworks beginning with implementation in 2020 (UNSDG, s.a.) refer to SSTC as a component of financing strategies (DRC and Republic of Congo), or as a tool for collaboration with large Southern partners such as China (Ethiopia), mention it in passing (Angola, Sierra Leone) or not at all (Colombia, Iraq). Only one of the currently available Cooperation Frameworks (Paraguay) uses SSTC as a systematic focus of engagement, including performance indicators.

71 Interview with UNOSSC staff, September and November 2020.

72 Interview with UNOSSC staff, November 2020.

such as UNODC and WHO – have de facto answered this question in the negative. For years, and often decades, they have engaged with, supported and promoted programme country to programme country cooperation without calling it SSTC support or adapting their workflows to SSTC as a cross-cutting issue. There is little evidence suggesting that this will change in the foreseeable future. During interviews, most SSTC focal points indeed highlighted that SSTC “is one modality among others”⁷³ and that it was currently neither imaginable nor desirable to actually include the SSTC lens in all workstreams at all levels. Even a UNOSSC official stated that SSTC

does not need to be everywhere; we should use [SSTC support] whenever it is useful and appropriate [...] Unlike universal principles such as human rights or gender equality, South-South cooperation is a *cooperation modality*. The logic of application [of this modality] should be different [from applying universal principles].⁷⁴

This reflects a rather clear stance against applying the notion of mainstreaming to SSTC support as an integral dimension of policies and programmes in all spheres, and resonates with the most recent authoritative framework on SSTC: The outcome document of the 2019 BAPA+40 conference mentions mainstreaming efforts only once, tellingly with reference to gender equality and not SSTC itself (UNGA, 2019, p. 4; see also UNGA, 2020c, para. 35).⁷⁵ When it comes to the role of UN entities, the outcome document emphasises the long-term insistence that funds, programmes and specialised agencies should “continue incorporating South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation into policies, programmes, strategic frameworks and other planning instruments” (UNGA, 2019, p. 6), but it refrains from using mainstreaming terminology. Strengthening SSTC frameworks and tools is still at the centre, but not necessarily with regard to “any planned action, in all areas and at all levels”. This reading of BAPA+40 turns against or goes beyond previous guidelines on SSTC support, and it suggests that future UN engagement with SSTC should be less about mainstreaming and more about expanding the capacity of UN entities in specific areas, for the processes and spaces where it is deemed to make sense.

4.2 Work in progress: Expanding space for cooperation beyond North-South

Although SSTC mainstreaming efforts have been patchy across the UN development system, and although the notion of mainstreaming, as such, might step by step disappear from guidance documents on SSTC support, mainstreaming attempts over the last decade have contributed to something unheard of in the three decades following the 1978 BAPA: Attempts to integrate considerations for South-South cooperation across a wide range of organisational dimensions have contributed to cooperation between programme countries now being “a thing” across the UN and beyond. This is no minor issue in a context in which, notably due to funding patterns, UN entities have remained attached to traditional donor-recipient logics, with Northern donors providing funding to UN entities for work in, and with, Southern recipient countries. The significant increase in earmarked funding (Weinlich

73 This formulation was used by many focal points during interviews.

74 Interview with UNOSSC staff, September 2020; emphasis added.

75 The latest version of the system-wide strategy also does not use mainstreaming language; see UNOSSC (2021).

et al., 2020) – where (mostly Northern) donors provide financial resources to UN entities with explicit limits on where and/or how they are to be spent – has arguably increased the tendency to operate according to Northern preferences, and not to support the systemic ramifications of Southern interests through the promotion of cooperation among programme countries.

Against this backdrop, the increasing focus on South-South schemes across a substantial range of UN entities covering a large number of mandates has arguably widened the space for alternative forms of cooperation, not only including large Southern providers such as China, Brazil and India, but also a growing number of often less resource-intensive and mostly shorter-term initiatives of peer learning, knowledge-sharing and technical assistance among programme countries, facilitated by UN entities. Although the processes leading to this long list of initiatives as well as their outcomes and impact have often remained outside systematic monitoring and evaluation efforts, the increasing space for South-South dynamics is seen as a rather positive development, notably with regard to the need of mobilising all available venues and mechanisms to increase the likelihood of reaching the SDGs (Centro de Pensamiento Estratégico Internacional, 2017; Sustainable Development Goals Fund, s.a.). As a UN official put it during an interview, “We need this explicit focus on South-South; we need [UN support] to be continued if we want to move at some point beyond the dominance of traditional donors, [...] we need more not less of this.”⁷⁶

For the last five decades, UN support for SSTC has been work in progress. There have often been setbacks (see Gosovic, 2016) and, in many ways, SSTC support is unfinished business. One central promise of South-South cooperation has arguably been to make the international sphere a more inclusive and equitable one, and to explore interaction that unfolds beyond practices dominated by Northern donors. Even though cooperation among programme countries might reflect vertical cooperation structures similar to those associated with ODA – particularly, but not only, with regard to China as provider – it offers an additional set of options for addressing development-related concerns. Mainstreaming, streamlining or promoting SSTC across the UN is one way of making space for these alternative forms of cooperation. If questions of access, legitimacy and equitable burden-sharing matter, it is arguably in the long-term interest of all member states to make sure these “other” forms of cooperation, beyond ODA, receive institutional support.

A central aspect of how this support for South-South cooperation can or should unfold has turned around the “T” in SSTC. At least in theory, triangular cooperation has been a door for players outside the state-based South – notably but not exclusively DAC donors – to engage with South-South processes. Appeals to Northern partners to support South-South schemes via triangular arrangements go back to the very beginning of debates about TCDC at the UN and also feature in the 1978 BAPA (UNGA, 1978, p. 25). Although triangular formats long played a limited role in discussions connected to South-South cooperation, the interest in – and clout of – triangular cooperation at the UN and beyond has recently expanded (OECD, s.a.-b; see above). There have been attempts to analyse global patterns of triangular cooperation practices (GPEDC, s.a.; GPI-ETC, 2020), and the 2019 BAPA+40 outcome document rather prominently highlights the importance of triangular engagement (UNGA, 2019, para. 28). With reference to this explicit endorsement, UNOSSC is now in

76 Interview with UN official, November 2020.

the process of setting up a workstream dedicated to triangular cooperation, and the current UNOSSC leadership is interested in expanding the links between South-South processes and collaboration with traditional donors, also through financial support. Although the UN Trust Fund for South-South Cooperation explicitly “invite[s] all countries to contribute” (UNGA, 1995c, para. 5), the vast majority of funds received so far – with the exception of substantial contributions by the Republic of Korea and limited donations from Germany, Japan and Norway – has come from Southern member states themselves (UNOSSC, 2017, p. 7). In addition to direct engagement in triangular initiatives, trust fund contributions thus offer one concrete way for member states and multilateral bodies outside the South to support expanding South-South engagement at the UN.

4.3 Summary, further research and recommendations

This paper has provided the first systematic comparative examination of UN entities’ efforts to mainstream support for SSTC. Tracing the rise and evolution of South-South terminology (Section 1) has shown that the use of North/South tropes at the UN had its origins in debates about international inequalities in the 1960s and has expanded in the context of globalisation processes since the 1970s. It also shows that it is developing countries themselves that have taken up and rallied behind notions of South-South. The ensuing review of definitions and uses of South-South cooperation has provided insights into the vagueness and diversity of approaches, including the diverging practices regarding the concrete relevance of South-South principles. Against this backdrop, and based on interview accounts, I have presented a de facto understanding across UN entities that treats South-South cooperation as a shorthand for inter-state cooperation beyond North-South schemes, often including all kinds of interaction outside ODA flows without systematic consideration for the operationalisation of South-South principles. Through a scorecard (Section 2), I have mapped and analysed SSTC mainstreaming efforts across 15 UN entities. The combination of insights from strategies, reports, monitoring frameworks, funding and operational setups has provided the basis for grouping entities in what I have tentatively labelled as champions, waverers and stragglers. The analysis of patterns within and across these groups has provided the backdrop for discussing key dynamics (Section 3) that, while mostly unfolding behind the scenes, have conditioned how UN entities engage with SSTC support. Key factors include strategic considerations for positioning individual entities in an evolving funding environment; internal bureaucratic dynamics that centre around individuals and shape day-to-day engagement; as well as (the rise of) geopolitical tensions connected to the increasingly visible fracture between the United States and China, with South-South cooperation being often seen by traditional donors as an umbrella for the expansion of China’s clout across the UN development system.

Against the backdrop of these findings, there is a considerable range of issues future research could focus on. I limit myself to mentioning three that seem of particular relevance for expanding our understanding of the contours and relevance of UN support for SSTC. Further research might – first – want to take a detailed look at the soon-to-be-published UN system-wide strategy on SSTC support and evaluate the extent to which it responds to the dynamics and challenges identified above. This could be connected to a meta-analysis of the level and quality of SSTC integration into country-level cooperation frameworks, as the guidelines for cooperation between UN entities and host governments stemming from the recent UN development system reform process have put a rather prominent focus on

regional and cross-border engagement (UNSDG, 2019, 2020). Another insightful step of inquiry would – second – consist of examining bilateral funding patterns and their link with SSTC support across UN funds, programmes and specialised agencies. With reference to China, it would be of particular interest to also focus on “outlier” entities – such as WHO and UNESCO – that do not seem to fit with general trends and, ideally based on programme country accounts, identify whether a surge in South-South funding has contributed to increasing the quality of SSTC support. Third, yet another strand of research could examine the scorecard groupings of champions, waverers and stragglers in more detail and expand the focus on institutional mainstreaming by including a comprehensive assessment of programme and project activities to examine what kind of initiatives different entities support under the SSTC umbrella, and to what extent these concrete practices follow patterns. More generally, this could feed into an assessment of how SSTC schemes contribute to SDG implementation, and/or suggestions on how to overcome measurement challenges in order to make the contributions of SSTC support to the 2030 Agenda more tangible (see IAEG-SDG [Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goals Indicators], 2020; UN, 2019c). Overall, UN engagement with cooperation beyond traditional North-South schemes offers a dynamic, evolving and rather timely field of inquiry that is set to provide detailed insights into the evolving landscape of multilateral cooperation practices.

Although this paper has focused on the analysis of empirical patterns rather than the formulation of policy guidelines, there are some basic recommendations that follow from what has been discussed above. A key issue set to remain unsolved centres around the lack of a *shared concrete operationalisation* of what South-South cooperation – and thus triangular cooperation as well as SSTC support – consists of and how it can be monitored, evaluated and reported on. This contributes to the contested nature of schemes that sail under the South-South flag, also and maybe particularly at the UN as the most inclusive multilateral space. Ongoing deliberations within the Inter-Agency and Expert Group focussing on SDG indicators currently reflect concrete efforts to design a common framework for operationalising SSTC (IAEG-SDG, 2020), even though negotiations have again highlighted the lack of agreement on how to measure South-South cooperation (Brathaug, 2020). Although processes of institutionalising SSTC in Latin America and the Caribbean provide an important reference for attempts elsewhere, UN officials have also put their hopes on suggestions from outside of what they perceive as the often limiting walls of multilateral processes. As UNOSSC or UNCTAD in and of themselves are unlikely to present detailed proposals on how to define or quantify SSTC, scholars and experts operating beyond the UN – including the Network of Southern Think Tanks, for instance – have arguably an important role to play in contributing and advancing this complex debate.

When it comes to individual *UN entities*, those that so far have not engaged systematically with SSTC support might want to review the extent to which a focus on SSTC makes sense for their operational work, and whether and how SSTC can be integrated into established structures (e.g. as a stand-alone issue or as part of existing frameworks and process templates). The work of SSTC “champion” entities can provide valuable insights into examples of how to organise SSTC support. In order to ensure the long-term relevance of UN engagement with SSTC, however, there is no blueprint for engagement. The priorities of member states – in both South-South and triangular schemes – as well as questions about financial resources are likely to remain key, particularly in cases where direct funding from Southern partners has remained limited. If UN entities decide to expand their engagement

with SSTC support, the trust funds administered by UNOSSC arguably offer an important source and reference for first steps.⁷⁷ The UN development system as a whole should continue to strengthen its coordination mechanisms for SSTC support, not only in light of the system-wide strategy and action plan set to be approved by the High-Level Committee on South-South Cooperation, but also with reference to the strengthened focus on cross-border work in the framework of the UN development system reform process.

In their interactions with UN entities, *Southern UN member states* – above all programme countries – might want to explore possibilities of explicitly addressing what they understand as South-South cooperation, and the kind of support they need. A more proactive engagement by Southern partners would arguably help UN entities to focus on those aspects that are particularly meaningful in practice, instead of following rather abstract mainstreaming or streamlining strategies. If Southern member states were ready to embrace the UN's SSTC agenda, financial support for specific projects or – even better – softly earmarked contributions dedicated to engagement with SSTC more generally would allow those UN entities with a limited or mixed SSTC support record to review and possibly redefine their engagement strategies.

Finally, *Northern UN member states* – notably but not only WEOG and DAC members – might want to consider engaging more actively with SSTC. UN processes on SSTC arguably offer the most appropriate space for Northern engagement with South-South cooperation, not only due to the inclusive multilateral setup, but also because funding UN entities dedicated to basic SSTC-related costs often stems from core contributions predominantly provided by DAC members, and thus offers a concrete basis for expanding collaboration. What is more, with the prominent embrace of triangular cooperation by the BAPA+40 outcome document, there is currently a window of opportunity for increasing Northern engagement. The soon to be expanded workstream on triangular cooperation at UNOSSC would certainly benefit from the support of traditional donors, also but not only through (softly earmarked) contributions to triangular engagement via the UN Trust Fund for South-South Cooperation. By and large, engagement with SSTC at the UN is reflective of a more general question for member states usually seen as positioned outside the multilateral South: whether they want to continue with the traditional (and in many ways dated) forms of engagement, or whether they are ready to deal with and embrace alternative cooperation formats beyond ODA that, although currently limited, are set to play an increasingly visible role over the next decades. If the answer to the latter question is in the affirmative, UN support for SSTC offers one venue for expanding engagement.

77 The setup of an inter-agency pooled fund for SSTC support would further strengthen the system-wide implications of SSTC funding; see ECOSOC (2019) and Hendra and Weinlich (2020).

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Annex 1: Interview details

In addition to insights from participant observations between 2012 and 2015 as well as interviews with UN and member state officials since 2016, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 representatives (in the case of UN entities, notably SSTC focal points) from the following organisations:

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)

Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC)

Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD)

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

International Labour Organization (ILO)

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

The South Centre

UN Children's Fund (UNICEF)

UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)

UN Department for Social and Economic Affairs (UN-DESA)

UN Development Programme (UNDP)

UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UN Environment Programme (UNEP)

UN Population Fund (UNFPA)

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

UN High-Level Committee on South-South Cooperation

UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

UN Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC)

World Food Programme (WFP)

World Health Organization (WHO)

At interviewees' request, I have kept personal details confidential. Except for written exchanges with WHO and UNICEF representatives, all interviews were conducted via phone or videoconferencing between September and November 2020.

Annex 2: Interview template

Interviews followed a semi-structured design and usually included the following elements, which were adapted to interviewees' positions and circumstances:

1. Terminology and concepts

- What do “South-South cooperation” and “triangular cooperation” mean for you in practical terms?
- How are these terms/concepts operationalised in your day-to-day processes?

2. Coordination

- How is your organisation's work on SSTC coordinated across different levels (HQ, regional, country offices) and organisational branches (external relations, programming, etc.)?
- To what extent and how have you been engaged with UN system-wide coordination processes on SSTC?

3. Resource mobilisation

- How does your organisation mobilise resources for SSTC?
- Is there a target for how much your organisation should annually spend on SSTC?
- Is there an effective UN system-wide resource mobilisation strategy on SSTC that is relevant for your work?

4. Member state relations

- Which countries are particularly strong in supporting your organisation's work on SSTC financially and/or politically?

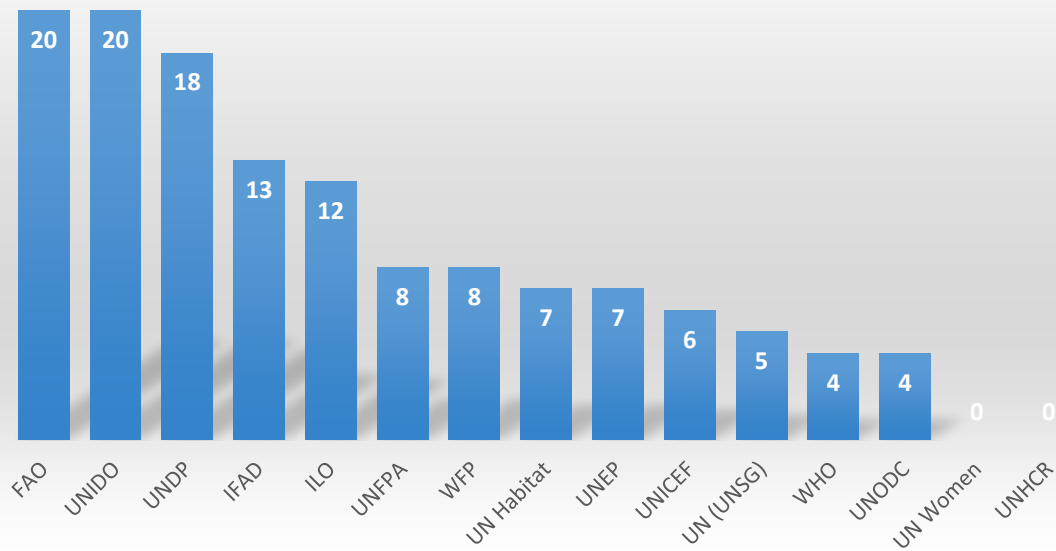
5. Monitoring and reporting

- How do you measure progress and results re: SSTC?
- Do you use separate reporting lines for SSTC, specific SSTC indicators or specific reporting tools?

Annex 3: Scorecard operationalisation								
OPERATIONALISATION OF SCORES								
	SS(T)C in strategies	SS(T)C in annual reports	SS(T)C publications	SS(T)C monitoring framework	SS(T)C - specific funding	SS(T)C - specific organisational capacity	Overall score tags	
SCORES	2	SS(T)C mentioned in detail in corporate strategy and/or a separate SSTC strategy	SS(T)C mentioned throughout (at least over the last five years)	More than two stand-alone publications on SS(T)C	SS(T)C monitoring in place, such as explicit SS(T)C indicators	Major and/or long-term funding explicitly dedicated to SS(T)C	SS(T)C unit with staff	Predominantly scoring 2 (more than 3x): champions
	1	SS(T)C mentioned in corporate strategy	SS(T)C mentioned occasionally (not consistently over the last five years)	A limited number of (up to two) stand-alone publications on SS(T)C	Some basic form of SS(T)C monitoring in place	Some funding explicitly dedicated to SS(T)C	SS(T)C focal point but no unit/team	Predominantly scoring 1 (at least 3x): waverers
	0	SS(T)C not mentioned in major organisation-wide strategies	SS(T)C never mentioned in annual reports (2000-2019)	No stand-alone publications on SS(T)C	No SS(T)C-related monitoring tools in use	No funding explicitly dedicated to SS(T)C	No SS(T)C focal point and no unit/team	Predominantly scoring 0 (at least 3x): stragglers
Source: Author								

Annex 4: South-South cooperation in annual reports (per entity)

South-South cooperation in annual reports (by UN entity)
 Number of annual reports mentioning South-South cooperation, 2000-2019



Source: Author

Publications of the German Development Institute /
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Discussion Papers

- 14/2021 Domínguez, J. Carlos. *Identity and discourse within diverse international networks: The Managing Global Governance network seen through the lens of thematic oral history* (33 pp.). ISBN 978-3-96021-151-8. DOI:10.23661/dp14.2021.
- 13/2021 Stender, Frederik, & Tim Vogel. *Murky trade waters: Regional tariff commitments and non-tariff measures in Africa* (29 pp.). ISBN 978-3-96021-150-1. DOI:10.23661/dp13.2021.
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- 11/2021 Leininger, Julia, Christoph Strupat, Yonas Adeto, Abebe Shimeles, Wilson Wasike, Mariya Aleksandrova, Axel Berger, Clara Brandi, Michael Brüntrup, Francesco Burchi, Eva Dick, Amirah El-Haddad, Charlotte Fiedler, Christine Hackenesch, Annabelle Houdret, Ina Lehmann, Daniele Malerba, Paul Marschall, Karina Mross, Armin von Schiller, Benjamin Schraven. Sebastian Ziaja, Marian Adel & Florian Gitt. *The COVID-19 pandemic and structural transformation in Africa: Evidence for action* (96 pp.). ISBN 978-3-96021-148-8. DOI:10.23661/dp11.2021
- 10/2021 Pegels, Anna, Stefanie Heyer, David Ohlig, Felix Kurz, Lena Laux, & Prescott Morley. *¿Es sostenible el reciclaje? Propuestas para conciliar los aspectos sociales, ecológicos y económicos en Argentina* (48 pp.). ISBN 978-3-96021-147-1. DOI:10.23661/dp10.2021.
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- 8/2021 Segadlo, Nadine. *Navigating through an external agenda and internal preferences: Ghana's National Migration Policy* (59 pp.). ISBN 978-3-96021-145-7. DOI:10.23661/dp8.2021.
- 7/2021 Fiedler, Charlotte, & Christopher Rohles. *Social cohesion after armed conflict: A literature review* (40 pp.). ISBN 978-3-96021-144-0. DOI:10.23661/dp7.2021.
- 6/2021 Sommer, Christoph. *The impact of patient capital on job quality, investments and firm performance: Cross-country evidence on long-term finance* (46 pp.). ISBN 978-3-96021-143-3. DOI:10.23661/dp6.2021.
- 5/2021 Schlumberger, Oliver. *Puzzles of political change in the Middle East: Political liberalisation, authoritarian resilience and the question of systemic change* (109 pp.). ISBN 978-3-96021-142-6. DOI: 10.23661/dp5.2021.
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- 3/2021 Burchi, Francesco, & Federico Roscioli. *Can integrated social protection programmes affect social cohesion? Mixed-methods evidence from Malawi* (28 pp.). ISBN 978-3-96021-140-2. DOI:10.23661/dp3.2021.

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