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# Africa beyond ‘South-South cooperation’: A frame with limited resonance

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## Abstract

With reference to frames as socially determined definitions of reality, this paper examines the discrepancies between the prominence of ‘South-South cooperation’ terminology in globally dominant discourses and its limited usage by African stakeholders. Based on insights from the United Nations, (cross-)regional collaboration formats and bilateral cooperation, we find that African officials employ ‘South-South’ terminology mainly when ‘Northern’ partners are present but use other frames when engaging with developing countries. This limited resonance poses a challenge to multilateral organisations and traditional donors in their attempts to expand engagement with ‘South-South’ relations. A focus on the usage and effects of frames, we argue, can clarify the assumptions based on which international cooperation unfolds.

## KEYWORDS

Africa, China, frames, India, South-South cooperation, United Nations

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, ‘South-South cooperation’ has become an increasingly popular term to describe partnerships among so-called developing countries across a wide range of different domains. In academic circles, references to ‘South-South’ relations have burgeoned, and a growing community of scholars is now engaged in ‘researching South-South development cooperation’ (Mawdsley et al., 2019; see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Daley, 2019; Gray &

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Gills, 2016). This engagement has built on, and sometimes fed into, a long trajectory of multilateral frameworks and debates. At the United Nations (UN), in particular, references to 'South-South cooperation' have featured in a wide range of resolutions and reports, notably on topics related to global development (UN, 2021; UNCTAD, 2018; UNDP, 2013).

Building on an understanding of the 'South' as a tricontinental space (Haug et al., 2021; Prasad, 2012), the bulk of discussions about 'South-South cooperation' has centred around partnerships within and across Asia, Africa and Latin America as the world's major 'developing' regions. The rise of China and India as development cooperation providers, in particular, has been a driving force behind the expansion of 'South-South' references in international policymaking, not only through their growing economic and political clout but also by their governments' explicit promotion of 'South-South' linkages (CIDCA n.d.; Gol-MER, 2019; IBSA, 2020; see Mulakala, 2016). A number of Latin American governments have also been active proponents of 'South-South' language, creating or contributing to a range of (sub and cross-) regional mechanisms to coordinate, monitor and report on 'South-South cooperation' (ECLAC, 2019; SEGIB, 2020; SICA, 2018).

While the use of references to 'South-South cooperation' has been uneven, and 'South'-related terminology has generally had more traction at the UN and in 'Northern' fora than in most developing countries (Waisbich et al., 2021, 2088), a cursory look at available evidence suggests that African policymakers and academics have not been at the forefront of using and promoting 'South-South' terminology (Kamwengo, 2020; see Haug, 2021a). Although references to African countries—usually as beneficiaries—have been prominent in 'South-South cooperation' debates, it is largely unclear how African governments themselves have engaged with 'South-South' language to make sense of their relations with each other or with their Asian and Latin American partners.

In this paper, we examine the extent to which, where and why African stakeholders have used references to 'South-South cooperation', and what concrete dynamics this (lack of) usage reflects and has contributed to. While we inevitably engage to some extent with the material practices associated with 'South-South cooperation', we are primarily concerned with interrogating the term and related language. Conceptually, we turn to the notion of frames as socially determined definitions of reality that allow individuals and groups to make sense of experience (Björnehed & Erikson, 2018). A focus on frames and their resonance allows us to investigate the traction of 'South-South cooperation' language among African stakeholders. Our analysis builds on insights from publicly available documents as well as 150 semi-structured and narrative interviews conducted between 2017 and 2021 with representatives from African governments, civil society organisations, regional bodies and the UN.<sup>1</sup>

The paper is structured as follows. First, we briefly outline our take on the usage and effects of international cooperation frames, presenting a three-step heuristic for analysing frames at multilateral, regional and bilateral levels. Putting this framework into practice, we start with examining whether and how African representatives and coalitions have engaged with the 'South-South cooperation' frame in multilateral circles, notably at the UN. We then turn to the prevalence of 'South-South cooperation' terminology at the (cross-)regional level, covering both intra-African relations as well as African collaboration formats with China and India. As Zambia has often been at the centre of debates about Africa's expanding relations with 'Southern' partners, particularly China (Carmody et al., 2020; Lubinda & Jian, 2018), we use insights from Zambia's partnerships to investigate how framings unfold in concrete cooperation practices at the bilateral level. Based on this empirical analysis, we discuss the implications of the (non-) use of 'South-South cooperation' language and the shift between frames within and across levels. We find that African stakeholders employ references to 'South-South cooperation' mostly in multilateral settings—notably at the UN—where these references seem to be required or expected. At regional and bilateral levels, African agents tend to use other frames, such as 'Pan-Africanism' for intra-African collaboration and 'win-win' cooperation among 'reliable partners' when describing their relationship with Asian and Latin American countries. With regard to China and

<sup>1</sup>We conducted 150 semi-structured interviews with international cooperation stakeholders and diplomats in Zambia and at different UN offices between January 2017 and May 2021; see Haug (2020) and Kamwengo (2020). While we are unable to cover all empirical dynamics possibly related to 'South-South cooperation' framing processes, our sources provide comprehensive insights into different settings and levels of analysis that allow us to identify patterns future research can build on.

India, in particular, 'X+Africa' formats have been at the forefront of (re-)framing country-to-continent cooperation mostly without drawing on 'North-South' assignments.

Overall, we argue that the contrast between an intensifying discourse on 'South-South cooperation' in (often 'Northern'-led) academia, multilateral circles and specific regional settings, on the one hand, and its relative absence from African debates, on the other, points to an apparent disconnection or misfit in framing patterns. Multilateral bodies such as the UN and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as well as ('Northern') academics and policy pundits have largely come to assume that stakeholders in developing countries are aware and generally supportive of 'South-South cooperation' terminology. Insights from African settings suggest that the picture is more nuanced, and that attempts at initiating, expanding or supporting 'South-South' schemes require a more explicit engagement with framing practices.

## 2 | STUDYING FRAMES IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION: A THREE-LEVEL APPROACH

As socially determined definitions of reality, frames allow individuals and groups to make sense of experience (Goffman, 1974). As the ways in which issues are framed affect how people act (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981), frame analysis focuses on the link between discourse and action. A focus on frame *usage*, on the one hand, asks for how frames are employed, by whom, where and to what end. Björnehed and Erikson (2018) have developed a theory of frame institutionalisation focusing on processes 'in which a frame gradually gains influence and regulative functions' (113), notably through the expansion of use across individuals and organisations. Through different steps—agenda access, support by key actors, acknowledgement by an official body and formal institutionalisation—they 'capture the process in which frames gain or lose influence and new meaning is established' (111). A focus on frame *effects*, in turn, engages with the implications of (the use of) particular frames for concrete practices. When frames are strategically employed, they usually aim at creating resonance among target audiences. Beyond intended outcomes, however, frames may have all kinds of effects as they become part of shared space and, once established, contribute to shaping perception (see Benford & Snow, 2000; Björnehed & Erikson, 2018).

Frame usage and frame effects unfold at different levels (see Benford & Snow, 2000; Björnehed & Erikson, 2018; Schön & Rein, 1994). For the study of frames and framing processes in international cooperation, we suggest a three-level approach that centres on multilateral, regional and bilateral framing practices. At the *multilateral* level, language employed in member state negotiations, terminology promoted through reports published by international bureaucracies, or the names of newly created organisational entities provide insights into dominant frames. At the *regional* level, intra-regional collaboration schemes, regional integration processes or cross-regional cooperation—such as inter-continental conferences and engagement initiatives—are spaces where frames come to play. At the *bilateral* level, finally, the ways in which two countries present links between them through diplomatic commissions or joint cooperation programmes—implemented through technical and financial assistance projects, for instance—offer insights into framing practices. The multilateral–regional–bilateral framework provides a three-step heuristic for analysing frame usage and effects at levels of interaction that are of particular relevance for inter-governmental cooperation. It offers a basic structure for distinguishing between different scales and fora that, together, provide a systematic overview for discussing how African stakeholders and their partners frame international cooperation practices.

### 3 | MULTILATERAL FRAMES: A PRAGMATIC TAKE ON THE UBIQUITY OF 'SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION'

The origins of cross-regional cooperation in the 'Global South' are often traced back to the 1955 Bandung Conference. At Bandung, Asian and African countries agreed to jointly address structural inequalities in the global economy inherited from the colonial era and to assert their non-alignment in Cold War geopolitics (Phillips, 2016; Prashad, 2012). Collaboration within what was then usually referred to as the 'developing' or 'Third' world gradually unfolded through fora such as the Non-Aligned Movement, the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation, the UN Conference on Trade and Development, the Group of 77 (G77) and the UN Conference on Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries (UN, 1978). The first references to 'South-South cooperation' in the 1970s and 1980s were part of these attempts to mobilise developing country solidarity (Haug, 2021a). The observation that the prominence of 'South-South' language was expanding primarily in UN fora led scholars such as Mahbub ul Haq (1980) and Samir Amin (1980) to question whether 'South-South cooperation' was anything more than a slogan or rhetoric for technocratic UN proposals. There were also concerns that 'South-South cooperation' would not lead to significant transformation as long as the UN—largely dominated by 'Northern' member states—was at its forefront, and political leaders in the 'South' continued to show a lack of interest in the modality (see ul Haq, 1980). Indeed, multilateral cooperation among developing countries did decline in the late 1980s, as a global economic recession and the end of the Cold War pushed most countries to focus on their domestic development challenges (Prashad, 2012).

In the 1990s, however, cross- and sub-regional cooperation in the 'Global South' began to expand and then skyrocketed with the rise of China, India, Brazil and other 'emerging economies' in the early 2000s (Ekoko & Benn, 2002). These changes signalled the emergence of what Mawdsley (2019) has referred to as 'South-South cooperation 2.0'. Whereas early iterations of partnerships between developing countries that were framed as 'South-South cooperation' had focused on anti-colonial political solidarity, technical cooperation or the campaign for a New International Economic Order, the second phase of 'South-South cooperation' has been characterised by large—and often combined—flows of development cooperation, infrastructure financing, trade and foreign direct investments (UNDP, 2013; see Mawdsley, 2012). Against this backdrop, references to 'South-South cooperation' in multilateral circles have increased significantly. Over the last two decades, and building on inter-governmental frameworks that have explicitly centred on 'South-South' language (UN, 2009; UN, 2019; UN, 2021), a considerable number of UN entities have set up structures for promoting and supporting 'South-South' linkages as well as 'triangular cooperation', a modality where 'South-South' exchanges are supported by a multilateral body or an OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donor (Haug, 2022; Milhorance & Soulé-Kohndou, 2017; see OECD, 2019). This expansion of multilateral 'South-South' spaces has been proactively shaped by the G77 and its member states (G-77, 2003, 2020). China and India, in particular, have led or contributed to G77 attempts to replace UN references to 'Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries' with 'South-South cooperation', highlighting the expanding clout of 'Southern' member states well beyond the realm of collaboration on technical matters (Haug, 2021a). They have also been strong supporters of the expansion of what is now the UN Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), charged with coordinating and promoting UN support for cooperation among developing countries and led by a UN Secretary-General Envoy (UNOSSC, n.d.-a). Similar to the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) funding facility set up in 2006 as an initiative of three 'Southern leaders in South-South cooperation' dedicated to promoting collaboration 'for the benefit of other Southern countries in partnership with the United Nations system' (UNOSSC, n.d.-c, n.p.; see IBSA, 2020), their funding facilities—including the China South-South Climate Cooperation Fund (CIDCA, n.d.), China's South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund (Khor, 2016) or the India-UN Development Partnership Fund administered by UNOSSC (UNOSSC, n.d.-b)—have provided a major boost to 'South-South' framing practices.

Following Björnehed and Erikson (2018), 'South-South cooperation' can thus be regarded as a highly institutionalised frame in multilateral circles. It successfully entered global agendas and has received the support of a large number of (increasingly vocal) member states. It has been officially acknowledged through UN resolutions, and it has become formally institutionalised through strategies, work plans, funding frameworks and organisational

entities that bare its name. From an annual General Assembly resolution to dedicated units across different UN entities and the growing clout of UNOSSC, 'South-South cooperation' has become an entrenched organisational reality (Haug, 2022; UN, 2021; UNOSSC, n.d.-a). While the usage of and meanings attached to the 'South' and 'South-South cooperation' have been far from clear-cut in countries usually categorised as part of the 'Global South' (see Kohlenberg & Godehardt, 2021; Waisbich et al., 2021), in multilateral circles, Chinese and Indian representatives have been among the most visible proponents of the rise of the 'South'. They have used 'South-South cooperation' language with varying levels of intensity and with reference to a wide range of venues and engagement mechanisms (see Cooper, 2021; Mulakala, 2016).<sup>2</sup>

In comparison, African policymakers seem to have had minimal engagement with the 'South-South cooperation' frame in multilateral fora. While African countries have at times been hosts of multilateral debates on 'South-South cooperation'—notably in 2003 in Marrakesh and in 2009 in Nairobi (Fidail, 2009; G-77, 2003)—they have mostly, and often implicitly, figured as recipients of assistance provided by major 'Southern' providers. Publicly available information suggests that African representatives have been reluctant to use 'South-South' terminology when describing their cross- or sub-regional partnerships with other developing countries. Statements by the Africa Group at the UN, for instance, only mention 'South-South cooperation' in passing (Adom, 2021; African Group, 2021) or when other stakeholders—such as UN entities themselves—refer to it (African Group, 2019; see Mkwesalamba, 2011). Except for South Africa's explicit engagement with 'South-South cooperation' via IBSA and Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) formats,<sup>3</sup> African countries do not seem to have been at the forefront of using or advocating for that frame in multilateral fora. Our semi-structured interviews with African diplomats at the UN reflect the same pattern. As a senior representative of an East African mission in New York put it during an interview:

They all talk about South-South cooperation [...] We use it when we prepare statements [...], everybody uses it, we are part of [the G-77]. But to be honest, I do not really care. It's just words. What matters is if we get funding, votes [...] or other things we need. Nobody [from the capital] has ever asked me about [South-South cooperation].<sup>4</sup>

Other African officials at the UN made similar statements; some of them raising their eyebrows or shrugging when asked about the relevance of 'South-South cooperation'. According to a West African diplomat at the General Assembly's Second Committee in charge of development-related affairs:

[Other member states] mention South-South cooperation all the time. [UN entities] write reports [about it], I think they think this is helping us. I'm not so sure. I do not know what all this is really about. We do cooperation, we can call it whatever they want, we can [also] call it South-South.<sup>5</sup>

While Asian diplomats explicitly promote 'South-South cooperation', African diplomats at the UN do not see themselves as 'South-South' champions. Although there is considerable interest in engaging with, and asserting greater agency over, the material flows and partnerships others might label as 'South-South', what transpires from publicly available statements and interview accounts is that among African stakeholders, the institutionalised frame of 'South-

<sup>2</sup>For other Asian countries and 'South-South cooperation' framings; see Mulakala (2016). Latin American governments, in turn, have also been actively engaged in discussing and reporting on 'South-South cooperation' initiatives (Gómez Ramírez, 2019), using national and regional frameworks that explicitly define how 'South-South cooperation' is to be operationalised. For example, see Colombia (APC n.d.) and Mexico (AMEXCID, 2014). Through the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and the Ibero-American Secretariat, among others, they have developed a considerable number of (sub)regional coordination mechanisms to inform multilateral or multi-stakeholder debates on the matter (ECLAC, 2019; see GPEDC, 2021; SEGIB, 2020).

<sup>3</sup>See IBSA (2020). Explicit references to 'South-South cooperation' have been scarce in official BRICS declarations and statements; see BRICS (2018); BRICS (2021). See also Diko and Sempijja (2021).

<sup>4</sup>Interview, March 2017, an African mission to the UN, New York City.

<sup>5</sup>Interview, January 2017, UN headquarters, New York City.

South cooperation' in multilateral circles has met with limited resonance. While African diplomats are aware of reports or debates about 'South-South cooperation', that frame has not been at the heart of how they engage with their own roles and positions. Instead, they pragmatically use 'South-South' references when stakeholders are involved that actively promote 'South-South' language or are thought to expect Africans to explicitly refer to it.

Conditioning factors behind this pattern are variegated. While a number of African diplomats perceive the 'South-South cooperation' agenda as generally beneficial because 'it offers more space and resources for the needs of developing countries',<sup>6</sup> most representatives seem to prefer to keep their distance from 'South-South cooperation' terminology due to the increasingly politicised nature of 'North-South' dynamics. In inter-governmental negotiations on development, competitive tensions unfold mostly between financially dominant 'Northern' donors and vocal 'Southern' players, including China and India. At the UN, 'Northern' member states regularly put forward demands for 'Southern' providers to strengthen the conceptual contours and accountability of 'South-South cooperation' and increase their contributions to global development concerns, but China and India prefer to keep the meaning(s) attached to 'South-South cooperation' broad and inclusive, arguably also in order to reduce external scrutiny (see Haug, 2021a; Waisbich, 2021). Against this backdrop, African diplomats often see no reason 'to jump into South-South discussions'.<sup>7</sup> As a UN official of East African origin put it during an interview:

[African missions] are usually small and need to focus on what matters most [...]. Most [African] diplomats I know only care about political terminology in as far as it makes a difference for their interests. The South, South-South, these are words you do not need to look for investment [...] or to ask for support. They let others talk [about South-South cooperation] and focus on what really matters.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4 | (CROSS-)REGIONAL FRAMES: 'PAN-AFRICANISM' AND 'X+AFRICA' TRUMP 'SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION'

Outside UN circles, and at first sight, the 'South-South cooperation' frame seems closely connected to Africa as a continent and region. African countries have arguably been among the most cited recipients of projects and initiatives set up with China, India or other 'Southern' partners (see Gieg, 2016; UNDP, 2019). South Africa has received significant attention not only as part of the BRICS and IBSA alliances but also as a 'South-South cooperation' provider for other African countries (Besharati & Rawhani, 2016). Morocco has included an explicit reference to 'South-South cooperation' in its 2011 constitution (see AMCI, 2021; OECD, 2019), and government sources in countries as variegated as Botswana, Egypt or Rwanda have used 'South-South cooperation' terminology when describing their engagement with African peers (Dow, 2019; EAPD 2021, n.d.; Nkurunziza, 2021), also to transform their global image from assistance beneficiary to cooperation provider (see El Bey, 2020; Karuhanga, 2018; Oudrhiri, 2019). Regionally, the African Peer Review Mechanism has organised forum meetings under the banner of 'South-South cooperation' to discuss development-related concerns in comparative perspective (APRM, 2018, 2021), and in 2019, the 'First African South-South Cooperation Report' was published by the African Union Development Agency/New Partnership for African Development (AUDA-NEPAD) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP). The authoring institutions have hailed this report as 'an important milestone for South-South Cooperation [...] showcasing the important contributions that African countries have made' (AUDA-NEPAD and UNDP, 2019, p. 3).

Despite these obvious links and attempts to promote 'South-South' frames in Africa-related exchange and coordination processes, however, a wide range of publicly available sources suggest that in most African countries, the explicit use of 'South-South' terminology has not been institutionalised.<sup>9</sup> Official bodies in most of the countries

<sup>6</sup>Interview with an African diplomat, February 2017, UN headquarters, New York City.

<sup>7</sup>Interview with an African diplomat, November 2016, UN headquarters, New York City.

<sup>8</sup>Interview, January 2017, UN headquarters, New York City.

<sup>9</sup>This observation is not unique to African settings; see Waisbich et al. (2021).



mentioned above have only started to expand their use of 'South-South' terminology to frame their cooperation practices,<sup>10</sup> with a senior government representative arguing in 2019 that Botswana was 'the first African country to embark on the route to develop a South-South Cooperation and Triangular Cooperation Strategy'.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, African Peer Review Mechanism events on 'South-South cooperation' and the engagement of a limited number of African countries with global debates on the measurement of 'South-South cooperation' have only unfolded over the last couple of years and often in collaboration with or under the auspices of UN-led processes (APRM *n.d.*; GPEDC, 2021). At a closer look, recent references to 'South-South cooperation' appear to be somewhat of an imported phenomenon, proactively supported by UN entities and not necessarily in tune with African framing practices.<sup>12</sup> As one UN official put it during an interview: 'We have invested a lot to [...] establish these [South-South cooperation] frameworks, but people are not using that language. Partnerships happen, but they are not calling them South-South'.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, a review of African Union documents suggests that references to 'South-South cooperation' are primarily employed with regard to UN processes (AU, 2011, 2016, 2019a) or in interactions with non-African players, like Latin American countries that usually put a strong emphasis on 'South-South' terminology (see AU, 2013; Mwencha, 2013; AU, 2019b).

This marginal role of references to 'South-South cooperation' is also reflected in key frameworks for intra-African collaboration. Among the 207 paragraphs of the 2001 NEPAD founding document, for instance, only one—the shortest—makes a rather generic reference to 'South-South' partnerships (NEPAD, 2001, para. 185). Agenda 2063, the African Unions' vision and flagship strategy for the coming decades, does not even mention it once. Instead, references to 'Pan-Africanism', 'African renaissance' and regional 'integration' have been prominent frames to present and discuss intra-African cooperation (AU, 2015a, 2015b, *n.d.*; see Martin, 2012). Where 'South-South' terminology is used, it usually relates to initiatives set up by UN entities or the 'huge growing interest in South-South Cooperation' (Nkurunziza, 2021, *n.p.*) across the globe as a general reference. Overall, the Pan-African or regional integrationist narratives that stand at the centre of cooperation attempts within the continent have largely stayed away from incorporating 'South'-related terminology.

Cross-regional cooperation frameworks with 'Southern' partners beyond Africa—notably China and India—have followed a similar pattern.<sup>14</sup> Declarations and official statements under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC; see Taylor, 2011; King, 2019) and the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS, 2015; Modi, 2017) have at times mentioned 'South-South cooperation' in passing but never as a key frame. If at all, FOCAC documents employ 'South-South' terminology as a general reference to global processes and not to address the specificities of China-Africa relations (FOCAC, 2018a, 2018b). Over the last 15 years, both FOCAC and Forum Summit declarations have stated that cooperation with Africa is 'a good example' (FOCAC, 2009, *n.p.*), 'a useful example' (IAFS, 2008, para. 19) or 'a true manifestation' (IAFS, 2011, para. 26) of 'South-South cooperation' without providing a detailed account of what that entails. Reflecting India's explicit but evolving stance on 'developing country' solidarity (Cooper, 2021), one Forum Summit declaration has used 'North-South' terminology with reference to UN language on international burden sharing to stress that 'South-South Cooperation should be a supplement to North-South Cooperation and not a substitute for it' (IAFS, 2011, para. 9). Beyond these broad—and within individual documents usually one-off—references, however, 'South-South' language has remained a marginal phenomenon.

Instead, both India and particularly China have used the Forum Summit and FOCAC to establish 'X+Africa' formats that, at their core, do not rely on references to 'North' or 'South'.<sup>15</sup> The 'country-to-continent' frames they promote are part of connectivity patterns that promote broad cross-regional frameworks which, notably for China,

<sup>10</sup>Outliers include Egypt and Morocco, see EAPD (*n.d.*) and KoM (2011).

<sup>11</sup>Cited in Botswana Daily News (2019, *n.p.*); see Dow (2019).

<sup>12</sup>For details, see AUDA-NEPAD and UNDP (2019); UNDP and UNOSSC (2021); see also Botswana Daily News (2019).

<sup>13</sup>Interview, UN official, New York City, May 2021.

<sup>14</sup>While Russia, South Korea and Turkey are often cited as partners of a growing number of African countries (Soulé, 2020), their belonging to the 'South' is complicated (see Haug, 2021b); 'South-South' frames have therefore not played a key role for their engagement.

<sup>15</sup>Whereas others speak of 'Africa+1' mechanisms, we suggest that the 'X+Africa' formula better reflects intentions behind schemes where a given external player 'X' tries to take centre stage with respect to 'Africa' as an allegedly singular space; cf. Soulé (2020).



are primarily directed at strengthening bilateral ties and cultivating soft power partnerships (Gieg, 2016; Kohlenberg & Godehardt, 2021). While African representatives have used FOCAC and other 'X+Africa' formats for their own—usually also bilateral—purposes (Soulé, 2020; see Carmody et al., 2019; Large, 2021), the political and economic dominance of partners like India and particularly China means that cross-regional engagement mostly unfolds in hierarchical terms.<sup>16</sup> A comparative view on China and its African interlocutors highlights obvious discrepancies in outlook and capacity that undermine any attempt at suggesting equal standing, including the 'South' as joint umbrella (Acharya, 2018; Cooper, 2021; see Waisbich et al., 2021). When asked about the underlying dynamics in FOCAC and Forum Summit processes, a West African diplomat stated during an interview:

This is far from equal. This is not a Benin-Cameroon-China encounter, or whatever country joins, it is a China-a-country with Africa-a-continent encounter. We are not of the same worlds. China is in a league of its own. [...] To say that we are all [part of] the South [...] does not mean much to me.<sup>17</sup>

## 5 | BILATERAL FRAMES: COOPERATION BEYOND 'SOUTH-SOUTH'

The rather pragmatic use of 'South-South cooperation' language by African stakeholders in multilateral circles and the marginal role of 'South-South' references in intra-regional and cross-regional cooperation frameworks are also reflected at the bilateral level. Whereas it happens that senior African government representatives use 'South-South' terminology when discussing their relationship with Asian or Latin American countries at the UN, the closer one moves to the implementation level, the more the 'South-South' frame seems to disappear from collective consciousness. Bilateral cooperation between African countries and/or with developing countries from other world regions is often presented as being based on a history of anti-colonial solidarity and focused on securing 'win-win' arrangements in economic and policy spaces. While this combination of solidarity rhetoric and mutual benefit arguably lies at the heart of 'South-South cooperation' traditions, the term as such is usually not employed to describe these relations.

The frames used to describe Zambia's relationship with African countries, India and China tend to follow this broad pattern. In line with the growth of references to 'South-South cooperation' in UN fora, statements on the need to 'seek greater South-South cooperation' emerged in Zambian government communications and national development plans during the late 1970s and 1980s (see Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1981; NCDP, 1988). The term 'Pan-Africanism' was also commonly used to describe sub-regional solidarity from the 1960s to the early 1990s, when Zambia was a leading figure in the Organisation of African Unity and a frontline state in the struggle to end colonial rule in southern Africa (see Chan, 1992). Today, the terms 'African regional integration' or 'African cooperation' are more commonly employed to describe Zambia's economic and political relations with other countries on the continent (see Simfukwe, 2022). In press statements on Rwandan President Paul Kagame's state visit in April 2022, the Zambian government laid emphasis on the two countries' 'longstanding' bilateral 'ties', 'cooperation' and 'strategic partnership' founded on 'mutual benefits' (Lusaka Times, 2022).

India's material and intellectual support that pre-dated Zambia's independence in 1964 and Zambia's establishment of ties with China through founding President Kenneth Kaunda's relationship with Mao Zedong are often invoked by senior Zambian government officials when discussing bilateral relations with the two countries (see High Commission of Zambia, 2015; Kakubo, 2021; Mwila, 2019). The principles of 'mutual respect' and 'mutual benefit' are also regularly emphasised in discussions on infrastructure financing, trade, investments and technical cooperation from China and India, as well as Zambia's reciprocal support for both countries at the UN, without explicit reference to 'South-South cooperation' (Ibid). The Chinese government, often describes its longstanding bilateral cooperation with Zambia 'as a model of unity and friendship among developing countries' (MoFA-C, 2021, n.p.). Similarly, the

<sup>16</sup>On hierarchical dynamics in 'South-South' relations, see McCann (2021).

<sup>17</sup>Interview, New York City, March 2017.

Indian government boasts that senior Zambian officials often describe it as a 'reliable partner' or an 'all-weather and time-tested friend' (High Commission of India, 2019, n.p.).

At the implementation level, most civil servants, academics and technical experts we interviewed were either oblivious to the meaning of 'South-South' and, indeed, 'North-South' cooperation or did not employ the terminology in their day-to-day practices. Several Zambian stakeholders in projects promoted by donors as cases of 'South-South and triangular cooperation' refused to discuss the project unless the researcher used their preferred terms of 'developed country' and 'developing country' instead of 'North' and 'South' (Kamwengo, 2020). In another instance, key stakeholders involved in the implementation of the China-Zambia-Denmark-UNDP project (2014–2019) were reluctant to use 'South-South' or 'triangular cooperation' terminology to describe their project activities since, as they pointed out, the project appeared similar to bilateral initiatives they had worked on with diverse partners in the energy sector.

While some senior bureaucrats were aware of and employed 'South-South' terminology in their discussion of project activities, they explicitly or inadvertently challenged geographical meta categories. The Project Coordinator for the Japan-Malaysia-Zambia *Triangle of Hope* project, for instance, asserted:

This was not a triangular cooperation project. Malaysia was not a major factor in this project [...] I would say the *Triangle of Hope* project was more of a bilateral partnership between Zambia and Japan, but project implementation involved several Asian countries [...] However, I would agree to say that it was a South-South exchange because all of these Asian countries are part of the South. Isn't Japan part of the South also?<sup>18</sup>

Whereas Japan is usually categorised as part of the 'Global North',<sup>19</sup> Zambian interviewees made use of global cartographies differently, and—if at all—employed 'South-South cooperation' as a shorthand for collaboration between non-Western countries. Similarly, insights from Rwanda suggest that the distinction between 'Western' and 'Asian' partners has been far more relevant than 'North-South' frames (Grimm et al., 2011). Despite some—recently expanding—references to 'South-South cooperation' in Rwandan policy documents, for instance, existing research suggests that Rwandans tend to perceive China not as 'Southern' but as an Asian partner—similar to DAC members Japan and Korea—that acts in a supply-driven way and with a strong focus on tangible 'win-win' results, such as infrastructure delivery (Grimm et al., 2011, 54f; see Grimm, 2015). This resonates with broader debates about (East) Asian development cooperation models that cut across traditional 'North-South' divisions and thus challenge the relevance of mainstream terminology (see Sohn et al., 2020; Stallings & Kim, 2016).

Our interviews show that the differing understandings and assumptions behind the use of these frames have contributed to unease or confusion among African representatives and a general lack of interest in proposals for 'South-South' support through 'triangular' cooperation put forward by external partners. Despite Zambia being categorised as one of the top 10 beneficiaries of 'triangular cooperation' in Africa (see OECD, 2022), Zambian stakeholders have been largely uncomfortable with the terminology and unsure what a 'triangular cooperation' project proposal—by partners ranging from China and India to DAC donors or UN entities—requires from them and whether it fits with their established modalities for international cooperation (Kamwengo, 2020). This has also been reflected in differing expectations about what their role as a 'South-South beneficiary' in 'triangular' projects should look like. Whereas global policy frameworks and DAC donors promote the beneficiary partner's leadership over the project cycle including design, implementation and evaluation (NeST, 2017; OECD, 2011), for instance, Zambian stakeholders understand beneficiary ownership to centre less on process and more on outcomes, such as the ability to secure technical skills or technologies. While more research is needed to examine the extent to which 'South-South' and 'triangular' terminology has been used in other bilateral settings across the continent, and what its (lack of)

<sup>18</sup>Interview, Lusaka, January 2018.

<sup>19</sup>For a general discussion of 'North-South' frames, see Haug et al. (2021).

resonance has contributed to, insights from Zambia throw a different light on established narratives. Despite being regularly used as examples for the expanding clout of ‘South-South’ and ‘triangular’ schemes, the practice of international cooperation in African countries seems to have largely kept a distance from these frames.

## 6 | IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION: THE LIMITED RESONANCE OF ‘SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION’ AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

The evidence discussed in this paper suggests that ‘South-South cooperation’ terminology has had limited resonance among African stakeholders. Across multilateral, regional and bilateral levels of interaction, most African government officials, diplomats and development practitioners seem to have a rather pragmatic—and by no means proactive—stance towards the use of ‘South-South’ language. External partners such as China and India, in turn, have put references to anti-colonial solidarity and ‘win-win’ at the centre of attempts to (re)frame their relations with the African continent through ‘X+Africa’ formats, largely bypassing the frames of ‘North’ and ‘South’. Taken together, insights from across our three levels of analysis suggest that the ‘South’ makes most sense with reference to (the dominance of) the ‘North’ as its Other. African officials seem to employ ‘South-South’ terminology in spaces where ‘Northern’ stakeholders are present, exhibiting a strategic agency in how they manoeuvre and make use of established language in international development fora. Outside multilateral circles such as the UN where ‘North-South’ dynamics continue to play a role, however, references to ‘South-South’ linkages are rarely employed. Without the ‘North’ as key player in the picture, the ‘South’ as a frame—and with it the notion of ‘South-South cooperation’—seems to lose significance. This is particularly palpable in bilateral relations observed in the Zambian context but also applies at the regional level. While narratives on historical ties and particularly win-win rhetoric are part and parcel of ‘X+Africa’ formats and thus reflect key tenets usually associated with ‘South-South cooperation’, ‘South’-related terminology as such has been mostly absent from African (cross-)regional ‘intra-South’ engagement practices, be they among African countries or with India and China.<sup>20</sup>

So what, then? Why does it matter whether ‘South-South’ terminology is used in a context where African stakeholders are actively engaged in cooperation initiatives with an increasing number of partners? We suggest that the extent to which references to ‘South-South cooperation’ are employed and resonate points to underlying issues of voice and visibility in global debates and to how established power patterns condition agendas intended to provide alternative approaches to international cooperation. On the one hand, our findings join an expanding body of work that discusses the complexities of and shifts within designations of ‘North’ and ‘South’ (Armillas-Tiseyra & Mahler, 2022; Haug et al., 2021; Waisbich et al., 2021). While some—including a growing number of ‘Northern’-based academics—are increasingly accustomed to ‘North-South’ language, also in the spirit of emancipatory research,<sup>21</sup> this picture is considerably more nuanced in other parts of the world and outside limited groups of diplomats, development cooperation professionals and pundits. Our paper provides evidence for some of the stratification dynamics in the usage of ‘North-South’-related terminology that social science research needs to take into account in order to remain attentive to the heterogeneity of meaning making practices. More specifically, scholars engaged with researching ‘South-South (development) cooperation’ need to be aware of and factor in potential confusion around the terminology they use, not only in African contexts.

On the other hand, and with regard to concrete cooperation experiences, our findings throw a somewhat different light on attempts by international organisations and traditional donors ‘to support developing countries’ in their joint endeavours. For UN entities, the rise in references to ‘South-South’ and ‘triangular’ cooperation has been one dimension of a broader attempt to reposition themselves and showcase their continued value in a changing

<sup>20</sup>This reflects broader attempts, notably by the Chinese government, to define global belonging less with regard to ‘North-South’ frames and more in line with bilateral links; see Kohlenberg & Godehardt (2021).

<sup>21</sup>This includes ourselves; see Haug (2019) and Kamwengo (2019). For the heterogeneity—or polyphony—of ‘Global South’ uses, see Waisbich et al. (2021).

development cooperation landscape. While UN efforts to promote or push for 'South-South cooperation' language might make sense against the backdrop of global attempts to strengthen and mainstream UN engagement,<sup>22</sup> evidence from African settings suggests that a considerable number of players supposedly standing at the centre of 'South-South cooperation' dynamics do not endorse or work with this framing. In a similar vein, and as noted above with reference to the Zambian context, the 'triangular cooperation' schemes a number of DAC donors have tried to establish with African stakeholders sometimes fail to resonate with partners on the ground, not necessarily because of a lack of interest in these partnerships but because it remains unclear to them what 'triangularity' as 'South-South' support is about.

Irrespective of whether African stakeholders are actually interested in initiatives that bring together 'Southern' providers, multilateral organisations and/or DAC donors, confusion about modalities thus carries the potential of upsetting partners and increasing transaction costs. This resonates with research on the different and contrasting ways in which stakeholders from different world regions understand and operationalise development cooperation principles such as 'country ownership' or 'mutual respect' and how this creates impediments for collaboration (Kamwengo, 2020; OECD, 2022). More generally, the promotion of 'South-South' and 'triangular' schemes by UN entities and DAC donors also contributes to a broader pattern where the terms of collaboration—including and often starting with the terminology used—tend to be defined and advocated for by dominant (bilateral or multilateral) players. This is particularly noteworthy as references to 'South-South cooperation' usually come with an ostensibly emancipatory drive vis-à-vis 'Northern'-dominated development assistance.

The evidence discussed in this paper is by no means exhaustive. While we have focused on general patterns at the multilateral and regional levels and illustrative evidence from bilateral relations, there is a lot more to be said about sub-regional discussions, specific national contexts or individual project-level dynamics. For instance, further research might want to engage with cases like Rwanda, Morocco or Egypt where 'South-South' and/or 'triangular' language has moved to the centre of institutional cooperation efforts and examine the interplay between domestic and international actors in (re)framing cooperation practices. Also, the lack of shared understandings of what constitutes 'South-South cooperation' points to questions about the data available to quantify and analyse collaboration. With overlapping frames operating at different levels, future research could examine the various material cooperation practices subsumed under 'South-South cooperation', 'win-win' partnerships, 'Pan-African' solidarity and/or 'X+Africa' formats in order to provide a more comprehensive account of cooperation between African countries and with their partners across Asia and Latin America.

Overall, the limited role references to 'South-South cooperation' have played in African settings points to the need to reconsider language that is often taken for granted. The de facto unease with or explicit reservations against 'South-South' terminology among a wide range of African stakeholders reflects the porosity and ambiguity of categories used to make sense of global space and one's place in it. The evidence discussed in this paper contributes to a global cartography of cooperation increasingly difficult to grasp through existing taxonomies. A focus on the usage and effects of frames, we suggest, can contribute to clarifying assumptions and meanings that condition (research on) international cooperation.

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<sup>22</sup>For the contours of and factors shaping these mainstreaming efforts, see Haug (2022); see also Abdenur and Fonseca (2013); McEwan and Mawdsley (2012); Milhorance and Soulé-Kohndou (2017).

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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