



international UPDATE

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CO-OPERATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

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1. CO-OPERATION - A PROCESS OF "THRESHOLDS"

The establishment of international and/or regional co-operation is characterised by multi-speed process with specific "thresholds". The latter stands in history as unidentifiable benchmarks, which have all had an impact on the process of closer co-operation which followed.

The international economic and political order has for the best part of the last three decades been engaged in a process of transition towards new global structures. A process which has led to a world of growing complexities, characterised by increasing integration, regional trade bloc formation, vigorous competition for export markets and capital, as well as declining commodity prices in relation to those of manufactured exports.

In the 1970s and 1980s this process was dominated by the "cold-war" era and a growing North-South conflict, but with the demise of the Soviet bloc, and the easing of East-West tensions, the focus has shifted to fostering the three major blocs in the North.¹ The centre stage in the 1990s would thus seem to be captured by further developments around these three, mainly inward-looking, structures and attempts at the GATT negotiations to provide impetus towards the process of global multi-lateralism.

This process of close co-operation went through various "thresholds", reflected in the build-

up towards the Canamerico Agreement, the current process to ratify the Maastricht Treaty and the latest round of GATT negotiations, which have not yet been concluded.

Although the Developing World, and specifically Africa, stand as marginalised players in the international process, the continent and southern Africa too have embarked on a process towards closer co-operation. A number of thresholds will have to be crossed in this process over the forthcoming decades.

The South African Customs Union (SACU); the Organisation of African Unity (OAU); the Lagos Plan of Action; the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC); the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); the Preferential Trade Area for Eastern and Southern African States (PTA); and more recently the Southern African Development Community (SADC) all had their "thresholds" and stand in the African history of closer co-operation as benchmarks.

Today, after three decades of estrangement and hostility, South Africa's relations with its neighbours and more distant African countries are in the process of being normalised. South Africa's re-integration within the international community and indeed, into Africa and southern Africa, has arguably created the most important 'threshold' thus far for closer co-operation in southern Africa, if not in Africa.

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2. CO-OPERATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA - MORE CONTEMPORARY EVENTS

More contemporary events that will influence future co-operation in southern Africa include:

- the manifestation of the concept of popular participation which is sweeping through Africa and the related challenges to the legitimacy of governments and moves towards the establishment of real democracies and multi-party states;
- the fact that the 1990s will be the decade of change from the "old school" of liberation-orientated political leaders in southern Africa to a new generation of more technocratically orientated leaders;
- the extent to which a democratic South Africa will play a responsible role to assist itself and its southern African neighbours to reconstruct their economies towards growth and development;
- the nett result of World Bank/International Monetary Fund structural adjustment initiatives, economic liberalisation demands, the African response to these initiatives and specifically whether these national initiatives could be formatted within a regional context;
- the nett result of the Global Coalition for Africa's commitment to establish a "re-dedicated partnership for serious co-ordinated action", as referred to in its First Annual Report of 6 November 1992; and
- lastly, the extent of international attention and support that Southern African efforts towards closer co-operation will enjoy on the basis that, with South Africa 'on board', there is reason for optimism that the tide of three largely wasted decades in Africa, southern Africa and South Africa is about to turn.

In recent times, important developments directly associated with the process of co-operation in southern Africa have also taken place, that will surely assist in shaping the process. These include:

- the reformatting of the SADCC Plan of Action and the establishment of the SADC with the associated objective of building a Southern African Development

Community;

- the PTA's process of internal reflection, based on the reality that its members entered the 1990s poorer than in the 1980s and 1970s;
- the perceived need for the SADC and the PTA to merge in the best interests of the southern African region;
- the realisation that the current SACU arrangement is dated and the need to reformat this arrangement;
- a range of international and regional conferences with southern African co-operation in a post-apartheid period as theme; and
- lastly, a series of serious study programmes and research projects and programmes (eg. Sapes Trust study programme; the SAFER research project; the IBRD/EC/AfDB study on market and production integration in southern and eastern Africa; and the AfDB study on southern African economic integration).

In view of international experience of regional co-operation, Africa's own experience, and the various research assignments, discussions and conferences held on the topic of southern African co-operation, the question to be asked is: What lessons should be used as a springboard to enhance the process of re-formatting co-operation relations in southern Africa?

3. CO-OPERATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA - A NEW PARADIGM FOR THE FUTURE

The international experience has brought to the fore necessary principles guiding closer regional co-operation. The research projects and programmes on southern African co-operation have also, not surprisingly so, underpinned these principles. These are:

- * Peace, stability and growth (the essential pre-requisites);
- * Outward-orientation (non-defensive and pro-competition);
- * Co-ordination of macro-economic policies (complementarity);

- * Broad participation (especially involving the private sector and civil society);
- * Regional policies to ensure equitable distribution of benefits (realistic compensation mechanisms);
- * Strong and independent institutions (ensuring accountability, monitoring and openness);
- * Subsidiarity (handling responsibilities at the appropriate levels);
- * Variable geometry and a process of multi-speed co-operation (selective participation at stages).

It would thus seem as if the decision makers in southern Africa will have to ingrain these guiding principles into their mindsets if they hope to make rapid progress towards sustainable co-operation in southern Africa which serves the interests of all its people.

In addition to these guiding principles, the programme of action for closer co-operation in southern Africa, and the implementors of such a programme, will have to meet the following prerequisites to enhance the chances of success:

- * A rededicated partnership should be established firstly between South Africa and its neighbours and secondly between southern Africa and the international community;
- * Whereas much depends on the economic performance of South Africa, the process of sustainable revival of the South African economy should be fostered and the aspect of regional co-operation should not be excluded from this process;
- * The regional economic dominance of the South African economy should be managed sensitively;
- * The fact that southern Africa is inextricably interwoven in a wide variety of ways should be accepted and should lead to increased levels and changed patterns of investment in the region. (In this respect, there is a need for further improvement and revitalisation of the physical bulk infrastructure, while higher levels of investment in the productive sectors of the region will be needed);

- * As a result of the burgeoning democratic process in the region, the realisation of the need to increase investment in social infrastructure should lead to action programmes. If actions are directed towards the lower-income sections of the population, it will have stimulating downstream economic effects and will also contribute to overall civil stability;
- * Given the fact that South Africa is faced with the same developmental challenges as its neighbours, and is also involved in the process to alleviate poverty, a situation whereby it becomes pre-occupied with its domestic needs should be prevented (if not, the opportunities for regional co-operation might not receive the required attention);
- * The current unrealistically high expectations of the benefits to be reaped over the short term resulting from closer co-operation in southern Africa should be brought down to more realistic levels.
- * Finally, the individual countries in southern Africa would have to pursue the national processes in which they are engaged to restructure their economies and should not view regional co-operation as the answer to national economic problems.

ENDNOTES

1. NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) and the Canamerico Agreement

The European Community after Maastricht and as it might expand

Apec (Asian-Pacific Economic Co-operation) and the consolidation of the ASEAN pack.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The South African Institute of International Affairs is an independent organisation which aims to promote a wider and more informed understanding of international issues among South Africans.

It seeks also to educate, inform and facilitate contact between people concerned with South Africa's place in an interdependent world, and to contribute to the public debate on foreign policy.