SOUTH AFRICA'S INDIAN OCEAN RIM ASSOCIATION LEGACY: A MORE INCLUSIVE AND OPEN IORA

ALEX BENKENSTEIN[1]

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

South Africa is serving as chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), a 21-member regional organisation with significant potential to contribute to enhanced collaboration within the Indian Ocean region. While efforts to revitalise IORA have been underway for several years, South Africa has a strategic opportunity to consolidate and deepen this process. The greatest opportunities lie not in thematic or sectoral initiatives, but rather in supporting institutional and procedural reforms to enhance openness, transparency and effectiveness.

THE REVITALISATION OF IORA

South Africa took up the position of chair of IORA in October 2017. This marked a significant moment, given that South Africa's first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela, played a key role in promoting the establishment of a regional organisation to strengthen socio-economic cooperation among countries along the Indian Ocean Rim. At the time, Mandela's ideas were aligned with the regional vision of other key Indian Ocean states, including

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 South Africa should promote institutional and procedural reforms that will allow enhanced engagement by the broader research and policy community in IORA's activities.

2 South Africa should seek to strengthen linkages between the IORA Agenda and 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy, as well as support greater engagement by all African IORA member states.

3 IORA should critically evaluate its procedures and communication strategy to ensure greater openness and transparency, thereby supporting stronger collaboration in the implementation of the IORA Action Plan.

4 IORA should seek to strengthen partnerships with regional policy and research organisations of relevance to its priority themes.

Mauritius and India, thus allowing for the establishment of IORA's predecessor, the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) in 1997.

Despite initial enthusiasm, IOR-ARC underperformed as a platform for enhancing regional cooperation. Member states were highly diverse politically and economically, and geographically widely dispersed. Furthermore, the states expected to have played a strong leadership role (India, South Africa, Indonesia, Australia, Mauritius) did not prioritise the wider Indian Ocean region in their foreign policy agendas in the decade following IOR-ARC's establishment. Resultantly, as recently as 2013, IOR-ARC had been described as having a 'loose institutional structure, hardly any visible profile and only modest activities'.[2]

The renaming of IOR-ARC as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in 2013, as Australia took up the position of chair from India, was intended to represent a substantive effort by the 21 member states to break with the organisation's underwhelming past. IORA brought more focus to its agenda by identifying six priority areas: (i) maritime safety and security, (ii) trade and investment facilitation; (iii) fisheries management; (iv) disaster risk management; (v) academic, science and technology cooperation; and (vi) tourism and cultural exchanges. Women's economic empowerment and the Blue Economy were later added as two key cross-cutting focus areas. Under Australia's period as chair (2014–2015), the new IORA Charter was adopted along with the Perth Principles, a set of resolutions calling for greater cooperation in supporting conservation and sustainable marine resource management. Mauritius hosted the first IORA Ministerial Blue Economy Conference in 2015, which produced the Mauritius Declaration on Blue Economy and established the Blue Economy as a key priority for generating employment, food security and poverty alleviation, and ensuring sustainability in business and economic models in the Indian Ocean.

During Indonesia's period as chair (2016–2017), another significant milestone was reached with the convening of the first summit-level meeting of IORA. The summit produced the Jakarta Concord and an action plan for the period 2017–2021, bringing further focus to the organisation's cooperation efforts.

While the periodic adoption of various accords, declarations and communiqués by international organisations must be critically assessed for their contribution to tangible results, in the case of IORA these agreements have indeed supported improved cooperation and brought a clearer focus to the organisation's agenda. In 2017, when South Africa took over as IORA chair, it had been 20 years since the establishment of IOR-ARC. IOR-ARC's founding membership of 14 states,[3] which had been joined by four new members in 1999,[4] had expanded further with the addition of Seychelles (2011), Comoros (2012) and Somalia (2014), bringing the total membership to 21. Dialogue partners now included China, Egypt, France, Germany, Japan, the UK and the US. IORA had also increased its regional and multilateral engagement and had been granted Observer Status at the UN General Assembly, as well as being accredited to the AU.

IORA's apex body is the Council of Foreign Ministers, which meets annually. A committee of Senior Officials meets twice a year to support implementation of decisions made by the Council of Foreign Ministers. The work of the organisation is supported by a small Secretariat based in Mauritius. In addition, cooperation is facilitated through various sub-structures, including the Indian Ocean Rim Business Forum, the Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group, the Working Group on Trade and Investment, and the Working Group on Heads of Mission. The IORA Charter also allows for the establishment of specialised agencies. There are currently two such agencies: the Regional Centre for Science and Transfer of Technology, established in 2008 and hosted by Iran, and the Fisheries Support Unit, established in 2003 and hosted by Oman.

The IORA Action Plan foresees the extension of the above structure. Specifically, the plan calls for the establishment of three new working groups on maritime security and safety, the Blue Economy and women's economic empowerment respectively. A core group, which generally serves as a less formal precursor to working groups, would be established for tourism and an existing core group on culture would be strengthened.

The Action Plan clearly reflects the enhanced engagement and focus of member states; however, the effectiveness of IORA as a platform for promotion of cooperation remains stymied by capacity constraints and elements of the organisation's design and principles. IORA's Charter emphasises that decisions on all matters at all levels must be taken on the basis of consensus and that issues 'likely to generate controversy and be an impediment to regional co-operation efforts' would be excluded from deliberations.[5] This has arguably prevented IORA from serving as a platform to engage with the more complex

geostrategic and security challenges facing the region. Although maritime safety and security is now included in IORA's agenda, the focus has been predominantly on the less controversial matters of cooperation around safety at sea, search and rescue and similar matters. This is a missed opportunity, particularly as security concerns related to piracy in the Gulf of Aden, as well as the emergence of regional development frameworks such as China's One Belt One Road and Japan and India's Asia Africa Growth Corridor, have underscored the geostrategic importance of the region.

IORA's Charter further emphasises that the association follows a 'member-driven approach'.[6] In practice this has allowed IORA to maintain a degree of continuity despite a limited budget and small secretariat, as member states have taken the initiative to host various workshops and forums related to the association's core focus areas, as well as hosting and carrying a large share of the operational costs of the specialised agencies. A downside of this approach is that there is often a lack of continuity, integration and focus in these activities. Information sharing also remains a significant challenge and, although efforts have been made to improve this in recent years, it is often difficult for stakeholders who have not participated in meetings or workshops to gain information about the activities and outcomes of various forums and even entire agencies, such as the Fisheries Support Unit. This, in turn, limits the regional impact of certain IORA activities and institutions. Concomitantly, there is a need to strengthen the monitoring and reporting functions of the Secretariat. While implementation will ultimately continue to rely on the actions of member states, more comprehensive and transparent monitoring and reporting by the Secretariat can play an important role in supporting such implementation and ensuring continuity and integration between the various activities that occur within the IORA framework.

SOUTH AFRICA AS IORA CHAIR: POTENTIAL LEGACY IMPACT

During the 17th Council of Ministers' meeting in October 2017, when South Africa assumed its position as IORA chair, then minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, announced that South Africa would focus on three key priorities, namely (i) maritime safety and security in the region, including prioritising the establishment of the Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security; (ii) improving resilience and responses for disaster risk management, including

prioritising the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding on Search and Rescue; and (iii) sustainable and responsible fisheries management and development, including dealing with the important issue of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.[7]

There is a strong alignment between the Blue Economy focus highlighted by IORA and South Africa's own Operation Phakisa. Modelled on Malaysia's 'Big Fast Results' Programme, Operation Phakisa is aimed at unlocking barriers to investment and promoting cross-departmental and multi-stakeholder cooperation, with a strong focus on job creation and economic growth. The first thematic 'Lab' under Operation Phakisa focuses on the Ocean Economy, particularly shipping, aquaculture, offshore oil and gas, harbour development, coastal tourism and ocean governance and protection services.

The priority areas identified by the South African government for its period as chair of IORA play to the country's strengths and provide opportunities to leverage existing capacity and expertise. Under Operation Phakisa, South Africa has been positioning itself as a strong maritime nation seeking to take advantage of its strategic position bordering three major oceans: the Atlantic, Indian and Southern. This is occurring at a time when ocean health and the Blue Economy is being highlighted in regional as well as global policy agendas through, for example, the 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy and the UN Agenda 2030 (Sustainable Development Goal 14: 'Life under water').

Despite the alignment between South Africa, IORA and broader global debates regarding the Blue Economy, the greatest potential for South Africa to have a lasting impact on IORA during its time as Chair will lie not in the thematic areas outlined above, but rather in the contribution South Africa can make in strengthening the institutional structure and procedures of IORA. There are indications that South African stakeholders are aware of this, with a group of authors, including members of the South African government and the South African Chapter of the IORA Academic Group, recently publishing an outline of proposed reforms for the broader IORA Academic Group.[8] The article notes that there are currently no terms of reference for the various IORA working groups, including the Academic Group, nor are there clearly defined pathways for researchers who are not identified through political and national focal points to engage in IORA activities. It notes further that IORA 'hosts a number of meetings and workshops that

could benefit from increased academic involvement but are usually attended by government officials with limited or no feedback shared with the broader national community'.[9] These comments speak directly to the central challenges of IORA – visibility, openness and the limitations imposed by a government-dominated, membership-led approach. An important element of this discussion, which does not receive adequate attention in the article referenced above, is the potential contribution that researchers and policy actors not based at academic institutions can make to IORA processes. Think tanks and other non-governmental organisations are deeply engaged in debates around the governance of the Blue Economy and other thematic areas of IORA. It is noted that the Indian Ocean Dialogue (IOD) has become institutionalised within IORA as a 1.5 track process for broader engagement by diverse stakeholders in the IORA agenda, but the linkages between the IOD and IORA's programming must be strengthened and broader opportunities for engagement beyond the periodic IOD created.

An issue associated with the challenges outlined above is the extent to which IORA is able to engage with and draw from the expertise and processes of regional organisations that address issues directly related to IORA's priority thematic areas. Although IORA has been granted Observer Status at the UN General Assembly and accredited to the AU, there has been limited engagement with other regional policy and research-oriented organisations, such as the West Indian Ocean Marine Science Association. Such engagements and collaborations hold great promise in contributing towards the implementation of the IORA Action Plan.

A further area in which South Africa can play a key role is though encouraging and supporting more extensive engagement of IORA's other African state members. Such engagement has been relatively weak, undoubtedly influenced by capacity and resource constraints. Given South Africa's increasing emphasis on the Blue Economy, both nationally and in its external engagements, the country is in a strong position to develop the synergies between the IORA Action Plan and the 2050 AIM Strategy, while also supporting enhanced involvement in IORA's activities by African member states.

CONCLUSION

South Africa has a strategic opportunity to make a lasting impact on IORA through focusing on addressing procedural and institutional constraints that have limited the impact of the organisation to date. The IORA Action Plan represents an important programme for change, and the significant changes that have taken place in IORA under the chairing of India, Australia and Indonesia must be acknowledged. South Africa must now embrace the opportunity to further support these processes in order to enhance effective regional cooperation in the Indian Ocean.

ENDNOTES

1   Alex Benkenstein is Programme Head of the Governance of Africa's Resources Programme (GARP) at SAIIA.
2   Wagner C, 'The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation (IOR-ARC): The futile quest for regionalism?', *Journal of the Indian Ocean*, 9, 1, 2013, pp. 6–16.
3   Australia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Yemen.
4   Bangladesh, Iran, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates.
5   See IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association), 'Charter of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA', section 2 (g), http://www.iora.net/en/about/about-iora, accessed 5 March 2018.
6   *Ibid.*, section 2 (f).
7   South Africa, DIRCO (Department of International Relations and Cooperation), 'Country Statement and Opening Remarks by Minister Nkoana-Mashabane', speech delivered at IORA 17th Meeting of the Council of Ministers, Durban, 18 October 2017, http://www.dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/2017/mash1018.htm, accessed 12 March 2018.
8   Du Plessis N *et al.*, 'The proposed institutional reform of the Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 14, 2, pp. 230–236.
9   Ibid.*, p. 4.