

“CIVIL SOCIETY-BRICS ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE”

International Civil Society Meeting on Future Strategies for Civil Society-BRICS Engagement, 19-20 March 2013, Johannesburg

A Brief History of the Initiative

The rise of the BRICS represents a grouping of nation states with a combined population of close to three billion. BRICS members include some of the fastest growing economies in the world. The increasing formalisation of this alliance clearly indicates a realisation by all members, that through more systematic collaboration, they can have a greater influence on global governance.

Since its first formal Summit in Yekaterinburg (Russia) in June 2009, the BRICs have had four Summits – second in Brasilia (Brazil) in April 2010, third in Sanya (China) in April 2011 and fourth in New Delhi (India) in March 2012. It was in late December 2010 that South Africa was formally invited to join the collective to make it BRICS. All the declarations emphasised many agreed upon areas of closer collaboration among the BRICS countries. Virtually all of these areas are of prime interest to civil society activists, both within and outside of the BRICS states. Several action steps have been agreed upon and/or will be looked into. These include meetings with business leaders, academic institutions, sports and cultural activities and joint meetings on finance and health matters. While this declaration paints a portrait of inclusivity, collaboration and outreach, there is no explicit reference to civil society.

FIM – Forum for Democratic Global Governance in Montreal, Canada launched the Civil Society-BRICS Engagement Initiative in November 2011. Although the project was housed within FIM, it was essential that the leadership of the project come from civil society within the BRICS countries. Towards that end, FIM and PRIA, India agreed to coordinate the initiative in collaboration with Polis Institute in Brazil, Isandla Institute in South Africa and Participation Centre in China. The primary objective of this initiative was to develop a strategy whereby civil society actors from within the BRICS countries can begin to influence this key multilateral initiative. Following the first four official BRICS meetings there has been no evidence of a civil society component to the BRICS outreach. Thus the timing was right for civil society to take a proactive position.

The first planning sessions was held in Stockholm on 1-2 November 2011 with participation from civil society leaders from each of the BRICS countries. It was recognised from the outset that the BRICS alliance is new and, at best, partially understood, even by its own leaders. Therefore, civil society actors will consider working on two fronts from the outset. One will be how to best sensitise broad civil society within the BRICS countries to the importance and potential of BRICS. The second priority will be to identify appropriate entry points for influence within BRICS. These entry points could be issue-oriented where an issue of common concern allows for ready collaboration, or country-oriented where one or more BRICS members share the view that civil society engagement is necessary to achieve certain objectives.

Following the initial planning meeting in Stockholm, PRIA in consultation with FIM prepared a Briefing Note summarising the emergence, history, purpose and declarations from four official BRICS summits. This note served as a background document for various in-country consultations with civil society. The objectives of in-country consultations were defined as: (i) informing civil society of the BRICS countries about the current governance, functions, and priorities of BRICS, and, (ii) facilitating civil society engagement with key BRICS actors with a view to influence their policy priorities and governance processes. Till date four in-country consultations were organised as part of this initiative as follows:

- India Consultation, 23 March 2012 in New Delhi organised by PRIA, India
- China Consultation, 24 August 2012 in Beijing organised by Participation Centre, China
- Brazil Consultation, 27 November 2012 in Sao Paulo organised by Polis Institute, Brazil
- South Africa Consultation, 19 February 2013 in Johannesburg organised by Isandla Institute, South Africa
- The in-country consultation in Russia could not be organised. However, Nigel Martin from FIM visited Moscow in January 2013 and met several civil society organisations and key officials of BRICS

The activities carried out under the current Civil Society-BRICS Engagement Initiative in the past one year have helped develop a deeper understanding of the functioning BRICS and the challenges and opportunities for civil society engagement in the BRICS processes, as well as mapping of other domestic and international initiatives with which the FIM initiative could foster strategic partnership.

One such initiative is “Engaging with the Rising Powers’ Impact on Development Studies, Development Policy and Development Practice” currently hosted by the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), Sussex, UK. FIM and its BRICS partners have been in dialogue with IDS colleagues with a view to learn from each other, provide complementarities and exploring opportunities together.

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Taking advantage of the presence of BRICS partners of both FIM and IDS in South Africa, it is proposed to organise a series dialogues and meetings on 19-20 March 2013 in Johannesburg. All the partners also find it as an opportune moment as South Africa will be hosting the Fifth BRICS Summit on 26-27 March 2013 in Durban.

The **purposes** of the International Civil Society Meeting on Future Strategies for Civil Society-BRICS Engagement are as follows:

- Sharing the experiences and outcomes of in-country consultations
- Stock-taking of Civil Society-BRICS Engagement Initiative of FIM (focusing on revisiting the relevance, challenges, opportunities and pitfalls)

- Defining future strategies for civil society engagement with BRICS processes (focusing on thematic priorities, missing agenda, capacities and resources)

The following **participants** will attend the meetings:

1. Nigel Martin, FIM, Canada
2. Alex Shankland, IDS, UK
3. Jennifer Constantine, IDS, UK
4. Silvio Caccia Bava, Polis Institute, Brazil
5. Julia Neiva, Polis Institute, Brazil
6. Zhuang Ming, Participation Centre, China
7. Mirjam van Donk, Insandla Institute, South Africa
8. Isobel, SPII, South Africa
9. Rajesh Tandon, PRIA, India
10. Anshuman Karol, PRIA, India
11. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay, PRIA, India

The broad **programmes** are as follows:

19 March 2013 – 09.00 am to 01.00 pm	Review of FIM Civil Society-BRICS Engagement Initiative
19 March 2013 – 02.00 pm to 05.00 pm	IDS Seminar on International Development Policy
20 March 2013 – 09.00 am to 05.00 pm	FIM and IDS BRICS Partners Meeting