BRICS IN THE SYSTEM OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

BRICS' Contribution to the Global Transition to Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns[1]

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Abstract

The rationalization of production and consumption patterns lies at the core of sustainable development as it determines the level of anthropogenic impact on the environment, which is ultimately the subject of all international climate arrangements. This topic broadly encompasses not only sustainable development goal (SDG) 12, but also certain aspects of SDGs 7 and 11.

The role of BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) in promoting the concept of sustainability globally is determined by their place among the leading producers and consumers of natural resources and emitters of pollutants, as well as the parties to major global agreements in this area. This article focuses on the institutional contribution of the BRICS agenda to the international community's efforts to achieve the SDG targets related to the rationalization of resource production and consumption.

In addition, because the socio-economic crisis of 2020 caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is seen as one of the factors impeding the implementation of the goals, the article also highlights the impact of COVID-19 and the crisis response of BRICS governments on long-term strategic planning for sustainable development.

Key words: sustainable development goals; sustainable production and consumption patterns; energy; climate policy; BRICS; COVID-19

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Introduction

The challenge of transitioning to sustainable production and consumption patterns is one of the key issues addressed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030), adopted by the United Nations (UN) in October 2015. This topic broadly encompasses not only sustainable development goal (SDG) 12 (responsible consumption and production), but also

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certain aspects of SDGs 7 (low-cost and clean energy) and 11 (sustainable cities and human settlements),[2] related to resource consumption and anthropogenic impact on the environment.

The BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) are among the largest producers and consumers of energy (Fig. 1), as well as emitters of greenhouse gases (Fig. 2). The energy intensity of gross domestic production (GDP) is also an important indicator, as Russia, South Africa and China are among the top 12 countries with the highest energy intensity in the world (Fig. 3). According to a BP energy forecast, by 2040 the BRICS members will only strengthen their positions in the world energy markets. Russia will retain its position among the largest producers and exporters of energy resources, while China, with a 22% share of world consumption, will, allegedly, be the largest consumer, comparable to all Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries combined [BP, 2019]. Thus, along with national interests and energy policy issues, BRICS bears the task of abating global environmental concerns related to the implementation of the SDGs. The institutional cooperation and national measures of the BRICS countries, as parties to the key international agreements affecting energy and climate aspects of development – the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and Agenda 2030 – could be an important factor in achieving the goals.

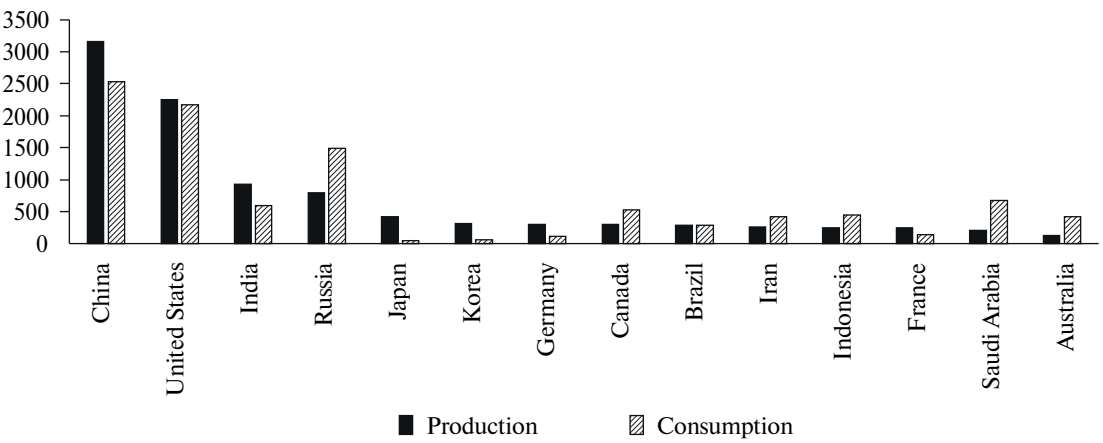

Fig. 1. Largest Energy Producing and Consuming Countries, Mtoe, Sorted by consumption (2018)

Source: [Enerdata, 2019].

The thematic areas of climate change and energy industry development are embedded in the overall context of efforts to transition the global economy to a sustainable growth model and are key to enhancing consumption and production patterns worldwide. Energy production is the leading source of greenhouse gas emissions (around 42%). Despite the stated targets for reducing emissions, the indicators of anthropogenic impact on climate processes remain high. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), from 1990 to 2017, total annual carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere increased from 20.5 thousand Mt to 32.8 thousand Mt [IEA, 2018]. During the same period, the ratio of carbon dioxide emissions to population increased from 3.89 to 4.4. The share of renewable energy in the total energy mix continues to be small. From 2013 to 2017, the share of renewable energy in total global energy generation increased from 7.4% to 8.4% (including nuclear and hydropower). At the same time, the share of coal in 2017 remained at the 1998 level of 27.6% [BP, 2018]. Innovative renewable energy

[2] See Table 1.

sources (excluding nuclear power) accounted for just over a quarter of total renewable electricity generation, while hydropower accounted for 72.6% [IEA, 2018].

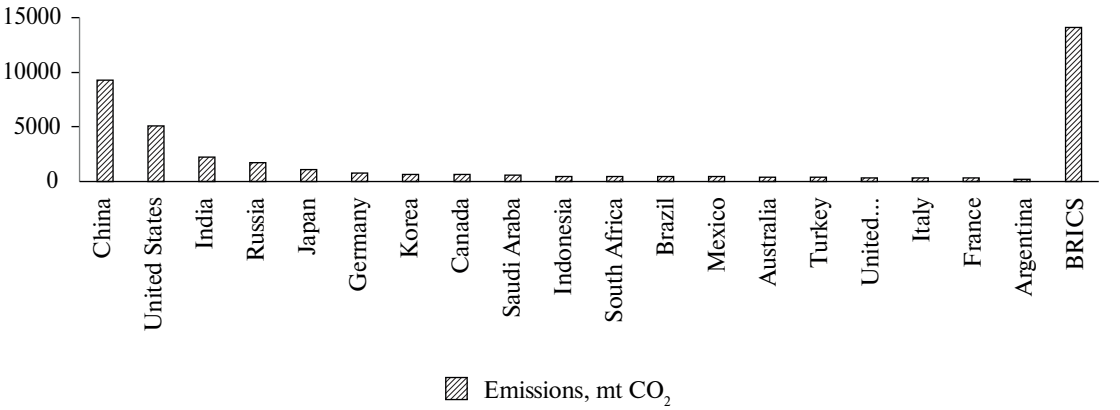

Fig. 2. Leading CO2-Emitting Countries

Source: [Enerdata, 2019].

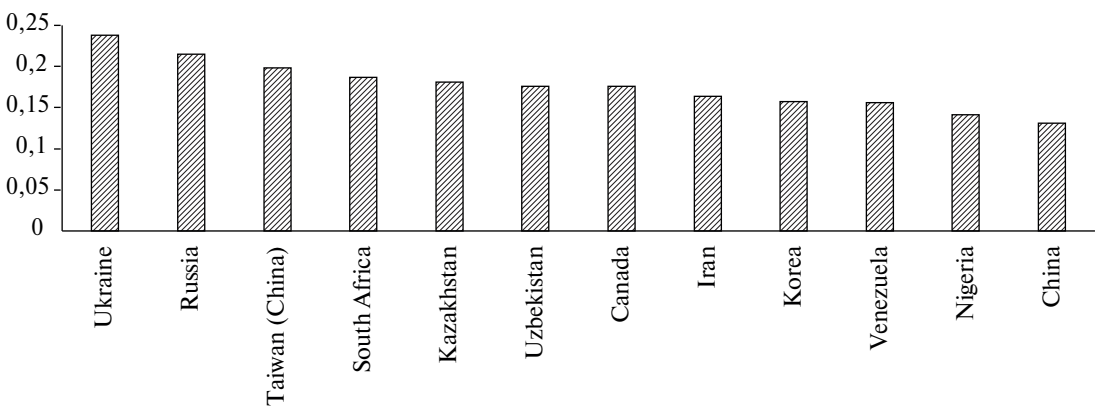

Fig. 3. Countries With the World's Highest GDP Energy Intensity, Mtoe per U.S. Dollar (2018)

Source: [Enerdata, 2019].

Nevertheless, progress is being made on some indicators. For example, as energy-efficient technologies are introduced and renewable energy capacities are put into operation, the global community is gradually moving toward reducing the energy intensity of global GDP. After a relative stagnation in the 2000s, since 2011 there has been a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions per unit of GDP from 0.46 kg to 0.42 kg [IEA, 2018].

The purpose of this article is to analyze the collective contribution of BRICS to international efforts to achieve the SDG targets related to the problem of rationalizing resource production and consumption patterns.

The 2020 crisis caused by the outbreak and spread of coronavirus infection (COVID-19) on a global scale also affected the energy industry. According to the IEA, restrictions on the movement of people reduced energy demand by an average of 18–25%, depending on the se-

verity of the lockdown. Global average demand declined by 3.8% in the first quarter of 2020 [IEA, 2020]. At the same time, despite the positive dynamics in terms of emissions reduction demonstrated in the first half of 2020 [Ibid.], the future of renewable energy, as well as the prospects for implementing the SDGs' climate targets in the coming decade, is called into question by the emergence of short-term social and economic challenges and the need to support and accelerate the recovery of traditional energy and industrial sectors. In this regard, the impact of the pandemic and the anti-crisis measures of BRICS governments on long-term strategic planning for sustainable development in the post-crisis period will also be highlighted in the article.

BRICS' Energy and Climate Agenda

Energy cooperation was already a key issue at the first BRIC summit in Yekaterinburg (2009). A total of five energy-related commitments were made at the leaders' meeting. Initially, BRIC energy cooperation was discussed primarily with energy security in mind. BRIC leaders declared their intention to strengthen coordination between governments, national producers and consumers of energy, including in transit countries, in order to reduce uncertainty and volatility in energy markets. Support was also expressed for energy mix diversification in BRICS countries, both by expanding the range of trading partners and by introducing renewable technologies. The leaders agreed to develop the appropriate infrastructure, promote energy sector investment and improve energy efficiency.

The issue of climate change was discussed at the Yekaterinburg summit in conjunction with energy issues. The leaders recognized energy-efficient technologies as one of the instruments for combating climate change. Declaring their readiness for a constructive dialogue on climate change, BRIC countries declared that it was necessary to collate environmental policy measures with the needs of socio-economic development [BRIC, 2009]. Thus, the economy-society-environment triad, typical of the concept of sustainable development, began to take shape at the first stages of the institution's work.

The 2010 Brasilia summit joint statement had separate sections devoted to energy and climate issues with nine specific commitments made on the former and one on the latter. The leaders drew attention to the role of energy in improving living standards and pointed to the need to develop environmentally and socially sustainable energy systems. Thus, in the second year of BRIC's existence, the forum's agenda also exhibited features characteristic of the concept of sustainability. In this regard, the summit in Brasilia addressed the diversification of energy sources, the introduction of energy-efficient and clean energy technologies, and job creation in the energy sector. Additionally, BRIC countries' cooperation in the field of energy technologies and skills transfer was discussed for the first time.

At the summit in Brasilia, BRIC leaders declared their unity in regard to climate change and their intention to jointly confront this threat. BRIC called on all countries to join efforts in the negotiations of the 16th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and other formats in order to ensure a balanced and comprehensive agreement that would oblige parties to comply with the provisions of the convention and the Kyoto Protocol [BRIC, 2010, Para. 15–6].

In 2011, in addition to the development of renewable energy sources, BRICS also addressed the future of nuclear energy, focusing on the safety of infrastructure and the application of technology. The leaders made one commitment on energy and six on climate issues. The climate agenda remained virtually unchanged from the previous year. Despite that, in the Sanya summit declaration, the leaders paid considerable attention to sustainability, viewing the

energy-climate nexus through the prism of the challenge of transitioning to a qualitatively new model of socio-economic development [BRICS, 2011, Para. 25].

During 2012–14, the BRICS energy-climate agenda was effectively frozen. The leaders' statements during this period included only two commitments on energy and five on climate change. Nevertheless, at the Delhi summit in 2012, the leaders decided to coordinate efforts and study best practices and available technologies in the field of urbanization and urban construction. The leaders commissioned the BRICS Forum on Urbanization and Urban Infrastructure [BRICS, 2012], with its first meeting held in February 2013. The forum focused on sustainable urbanization and the exchange of experience among BRICS members in this area. However, despite the forum's decision to meet annually [BRICS, 2013], to date only three events have taken place (two in 2013 and one in 2014).

The Russian presidency in 2015 initiated ministerial level meetings to intensify cooperation. In 2015, the first meeting of BRICS ministers responsible for the environment was held, resulting in the establishment of the Working Group on the Environment [BRICS, 2015a]. From 2015 to 2020, meetings were held annually.

At the first meeting of BRICS energy ministers in Moscow in 2015, the Memorandum of Understanding on Energy Saving and Energy Efficiency was approved. Among the key decisions stipulated in the document were: identifying the "list of energy efficient and clean technologies in which BRICS countries are interested"; creating a database of existing energy efficient technologies in BRICS countries; intensifying cooperation between "public sector, private companies and international financial institutions to encourage investments in energy efficient projects and technologies" in the designated areas; approving the list of forms of cooperation in the energy sector; and creating the Working Group on Energy Saving and Energy Efficiency [BRICS, 2015b].

Additionally, the 2015 Russian presidency resulted in the adoption of the Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership. The key goals of the strategy were to support strong, balanced and inclusive growth, sustainable development and financial stability, and to adopt balanced measures aimed at ensuring socio-economic development and environmental protection [BRICS, 2015c]. The envisaged measures of BRICS energy cooperation, related to the implementation of SDGs 7, 11 and 12, included: providing mutual support to energy mix diversification efforts; developing energy infrastructure; promoting universal access to energy; improving energy efficiency, including the joint development and exchange of energy efficient and cleaner technologies; implementing environmentally friendly energy production, storage and consumption technologies; and promoting the efficient use of "cleaner" energy resources, such as natural gas [Ibid.]. It should be noted that the strategy was focused primarily on the development of cooperation among BRICS countries and did not aim to provide assistance to developing states.

The 2016 Indian presidency was marked by the adoption of two commitments in the field of combating climate change. In addition, a commitment was made to enhance cooperation to strengthen urban governance, make cities safer and more inclusive, modernize urban transport, finance urban infrastructure, and build sustainable cities [BRICS, 2016], bringing the BRICS agenda even closer to the socially aimed targets of Agenda 2030.

At the 2017 Xiamen summit, BRICS made six commitments on energy and three on climate. In particular, the leaders touched upon the issues of improving the efficiency of hydrocarbon energy sources, expanding the use of relatively clean (compared to coal and oil) energy sources such as natural gas, as well as hydro- and nuclear power. In addition, the leaders expressed their intention to continue the dialogue on the establishment of the BRICS Energy Research Cooperation Platform and called on all countries to facilitate the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

At the 2018 leaders' meeting in Johannesburg, two commitments were made on energy and three on climate change. BRICS leaders reaffirmed their intention to strengthen energy cooperation, especially in regard to the transition to more sustainable energy systems. They also made a commitment to diversify energy sources, including renewable and low-carbon sources, and to develop investment in energy and energy infrastructure. In addition, the leaders endorsed the measures to promote "cooperation in the field of water on the basis of sustainable development in an integrated way, addressing the themes of water access flood protection, drought management, water supply and sanitation, water and climate, systematically facilitating water pollution prevention and control, river and lake ecosystem restoration and preservation, ecosystem conservation, and water resources management" [BRICS, 2018a].

A meeting of energy ministers held in June 2018 under the South African presidency endorsed the creation of the BRICS Energy Research Cooperation Platform, with the aim of conducting joint studies and collaborating in developing "environmentally and economically sustainable energy resources, technologies, industries, markets and finance" [BRICS, 2018b].

During the 2019 Brazilian presidency, two energy and six climate commitments were made. The leaders decided to "continue the efficient use" of fossil fuels and pledged to increase the share of renewable energy in the energy mix, including biofuels, hydropower, solar power and wind power. On climate change, BRICS expressed its commitment to the goals of the Paris Agreement and pledged to combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, and "strive to ensure that land is not degraded globally," in line with SDG target 15.3 [BRICS, 2019].

The 2020 Russian presidency was marked by the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, causing the agenda of the forum to undergo certain changes. The communiqué of the energy ministers' meeting on 14 October 2020 noted the need for collective efforts to overcome the consequences of the crisis, improve the sustainability of the energy sector and promote its inclusive recovery. The issues of long-term transition to sustainable energy systems were, thus, supplemented and complicated by the need to ensure short-term recovery. BRICS energy ministers expressed their intention to strike a balance on these two fronts, noting the importance of achieving SDG 7 – universal access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern sources of energy. Nevertheless, the approach to the implementation of the climate aspects of the SDGs can be characterized as cautious – BRICS countries recognize that fossil fuels will long play a leading role in their national energy systems, and note that the "climate agenda should not be used for perpetuation of inequality, unfair competition, discriminatory practices and erection of barriers to energy trade and investments" [BRICS, 2020a]. BRICS also traditionally regards natural gas as a "cleaner" energy source for the foreseeable future.

At the same time, BRICS countries expressed their intention to expand cooperation in reducing the environmental impact of the energy sector, including in the context of the development of renewable energy sources. The Road Map for BRICS Energy Cooperation approved at the ministerial meeting contains provisions for the development of cooperation in such areas as:

– technology exchange;

– development of energy efficiency, including through the introduction of digital technologies, development of "smart energy systems," use of more efficient energy carriers;

– development of renewable energy sources, biofuel technologies and increasing the efficiency of natural gas utilization and transportation;

– sustainable development of transport systems, through expanding the use of natural gas, biofuels, the spread of electric transport.

It is noteworthy that the document also provides for cooperation to improve the efficiency of coal generation, since, according to the text of the document, all BRICS countries "will continue to use coal" and "ecological factors and needs increase the importance of introduction of new technologies both in the areas of coal mining and cleaner use of coal" [BRICS, 2020b].

Overall, a comparison of the Road Map for BRICS Energy Cooperation with the provisions of the 2015 Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership reveals little to no effect of the 2020 crisis on the BRICS priorities for cooperation on energy and climate issues. The strategy itself, however, was updated during the Russian presidency. The new Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership 2025 contains a separate section on sustainable development [BRICS-Russia, 2020a]. In particular, it provides for increased cooperation in combating climate change, energy, infrastructure development, food security and improving the quality of life (including poverty alleviation, education and income equality). The new strategy reflects the main areas of sustainable development outlined by the UN in 2015, with the exception of human rights and justice issues (SDG 16) but does not address the new challenges that emerged during the coronavirus outbreak crisis of 2020. This fact, as well as the relatively low level of practical cooperation on the implementation of the previous version of the document [BRICS-Russia, 2020b], calls into question the prospects for implementing the provisions of Strategy 2025.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on BRICS Strategic Planning for the Transition to Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns

The profound economic crisis that followed the COVID-19 outbreak and the restrictions imposed to limit the transmission of the virus have intensified discussions about the prospects for achieving the SDGs within the UN's timeline, especially in the environmental sphere. Even before the crisis, the indicators of anthropogenic impact on the environment were well above the target levels set by the Paris Agreement [UN CC, 2020]. At the stage of post-crisis recovery, short-term interests will take centre stage, while long-term objectives such as environmental sustainability and efficiency of production and consumption patterns may recede into the background. The example of BRICS countries only confirms this thesis.

Brazil

After a severe recession, Brazil is going through a phase of very low economic activity. The country's annual growth rate plummeted from 4.5% (between 2006 and 2010) to 2.1% (between 2011 and 2014). In 2015 and 2016, there was a significant decline in economic activity, with GDP falling by 3.6% and 3.4%, respectively. The economic crisis was the result of falling commodity prices and the country's limited ability to implement necessary fiscal reforms at all levels of government, which undermined consumer and investor confidence. Brazil's economic activity began a slow recovery in 2017, with GDP growth of 1.1% in 2017 and 2018 – mostly due to a weak labour market, investments delayed by election uncertainty, and a general strike by truck drivers, which led to a drop in economic activity in May 2018 [WB, n. d.].

Against this background, the measures taken by the Brazilian government to minimize the effects of the 2020 crisis were mainly limited to supporting citizens affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of forced restrictions. In particular, such measures included: tax vacations; trade policy measures to support the supply of critical goods on the domestic market; preferential credit for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); and support for employment through direct financing for enterprises that maintained jobs. Directly related to the energy sector were the 90-day deferral of payments for electricity adopted by the Electricity Agency, 100% discounts on utility bills for three months for nine million low-income families and the National Development Bank's concessional lending programmes for businesses (including in the transport and mining and energy distribution sectors). The government also approved pref-

erential loans to energy companies for the development of energy infrastructure amounting to $200 million [Federal Government of Brazil, n. d.].

One of the policies of the Brazilian government that could indirectly influence the rate of improvement of the country's production models is the stimulation of investment activity. The National Investment Plan, published on 17 August 2020, included a programme of action through 2022 aimed at increasing regulatory transparency, actively promoting investment projects and improving regulatory mechanisms during the post-crisis recovery [Federal Government of Brazil, 2020].

Overall, however, the country's anti-crisis measures were short-term and did not aim to build the basis for sustainable recovery, at least in the initial phase of overcoming the effects of the pandemic. The Brazilian government's priority was clearly socio-economic stability and the preservation of an acceptable level of well-being for vulnerable segments of the population. Nevertheless, the multi-year plans remain the key tool for long-term strategic planning in Brazil. The 2020–23 plan, released in 2019, contained several programmes dedicated to energy with specific goals and numerical targets. The plan's thematic programmes included: sustainable agriculture, fossil fuels, electricity, oil and gas, biofuel development and combating climate change, with specific programmes devoted to "conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and natural resources," "urban environmental quality," "applied technologies providing innovation for sustainable development," and "hydropower resources development" [Federal Government of Brazil, 2019].

Russia

The anti-crisis measures of the Russian government were also focused on minimizing the socio-economic impact of the crisis. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Economic Development named "acceleration of technological development of the economy and growth of labour productivity, including those based on digitalization," as well as the development of non-resource exports, as the key reference points for the economic recovery plan. Thus, along with solving the problems of the industries affected by the pandemic, the plan laid the foundations for stimulating long-term growth and development of the country's economy.

After several iterations and refinements, a draft national action plan, which would ensure the recovery of employment and incomes, economic growth and long-term structural changes, was approved at a government meeting on 23 September 2020 [Garant, 2020]. However, there was no mention of environmental sustainability or energy efficiency among its goals. The main objective of government policy in all three phases of the recovery referred to in the document is to maintain and, in the long term, reach the growth of real incomes of the population. The means for achieving these goals include reducing the pressure on business in the field of environmental regulation. For example, it is proposed to not increase compensation payments for negative impact on the environment in 2021, to extend the terms of state ecological expertise and to simplify the procedure of granting the right to use subsurface sites for the extraction of common minerals.

At the same time, separate measures are also planned to some extent aimed at improving environmental sustainability, in particular: modernization of urban water supply systems to provide housing construction in accordance with the requirements of the national project "Ecology"; stimulating the modernization of oil refineries; and creating conditions for the development of production and export of agricultural products, raw materials and food with improved environmental characteristics [Ibid.].

Thus, the objectives of the long-term sustainable development of the Russian economy are not the priority of the recovery programme. However, the adjustment of long-term goals

will be carried out by amending national projects, state programmes and plans to implement the decree on the national development goals of Russia until 2030. The draft Unified Plan for Achieving Russia's National Development Goals, presented in October 2020, contains specific targets for the period 2021–24 and for 2030 [Belousov, 2020]. Some of the Agenda 2030 targets (including SDGs 7, 11 and 12) found their way into the decree, for example, via the creation of a sustainable system for managing solid municipal waste to ensure 100% waste sorting and reduce the volume of waste sent to landfills, and the reduction of emissions of hazardous pollutants that have the greatest negative impact on the environment and human health.

India

The Indian government's approach to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic is reflected in Prime Minister Modi's Self-Reliant India (Atmanirbhar Bharat) initiative, announced on 12 May 2020. This five-phase plan for the recovery of the Indian economy attempts to use the crisis as an opportunity for the formation of the country's long-term development agenda [National Portal of India, n. d.]. The five phases of the plan are: support for business, including micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs); support for the poor, including migrants and farmers; development of agriculture; "new horizons of growth"; and reforms in governance and incentive mechanisms [GoI, 2020 a; b; c; d; e].

It is planned to allocate 20 trillion Indian rupees (about $270 billion) for the implementation of the entire anti-crisis package [GoI, 2020a]. Of these, about 188 billion rupees will be spent on modernizing the energy sector, including the development of nuclear power and renewable sources, and 119 billion rupees will be put toward developing sustainable agriculture and the accompanying rural infrastructure. Also among the long-term priorities of the government's initiative is the simplification of the regulatory regime for investments.

Despite the progressive tone of the Self-Reliant India initiative, the country continues to face the socio-economic problems of the pre-crisis period, which have only worsened with the spread of COVID-19. In particular, some 100 million Indians currently lack access to electricity and another 260 million people depend on solid biomass for cooking. Given India's rapid economic growth, rising per capita consumption and significant increase in the number of communities being connected to the grid, overall energy demand is likely to increase dramatically over the next few years. Thus, the country faces long-term challenges of providing energy security and, at the same time, sustainability. In this regard, the Indian leadership cannot support cuts to one of the key contributors to atmospheric pollution – the coal industry – and the government's anti-crisis plan proposes instead to liberalize the regulatory regime in the sector and increase annual generation quotas by 40% [GoI, 2020d].

Overall, despite India's strategic vision for long-term sustainable development and its success in introducing clean energy sources (India ranks fourth in the world after China, the U.S. and Germany in installed renewable energy capacity), the country is unable to ensure positive dynamics in key indicators of anthropogenic impact on the environment in the near term under pressure from demographic and socio-economic factors.

China

The People's Republic of China (PRC), as the first country to face the COVID-19 outbreak, began taking special socio-economic measures to deal with the consequences of the pandemic earlier than other states.

The programme to combat the socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 included tax benefits for consumers of some important services (transportation, delivery, housing), tempo-

rary abolition of income tax for some categories of citizens [KPMG, n. d., a] and benefits for SMEs (tax vacations, reduction or cancellation (compensation) of rent, subsidies for research and development, preferential lending) [China Daily, 2020; KPMG, n. d., b]. The measures taken by the Chinese leadership have been primarily palliative in nature and were not perceived as an opportunity to fundamentally modernize production and consumption patterns in line with the Agenda 2030 targets. Five-year plans, as well as related departmental plans and programmes, continue to regulate long-term strategic planning in China. For example, the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016–2020), adopted in March 2016, explicitly commits the Chinese authorities to implementing Agenda 2030 [POC, 2016a, Ch. 3]. Based on the provisions of the plan, all provincial and municipal governments in mainland China have adopted their own five-year plans [POC, 2016b].

Sustainable development objectives are detailed in industry documents, provincial-level documents, and in China's National Plan on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [Ibid., p. 12]. The plan places special emphasis on the coordination of PRC authorities, society and business. One of the key goals outlined in this document is to ensure a coordinated and balanced development of the country, contributing to an increased quality of life for the population [POC, 2016c].

The extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the PRC's long-term planning priorities will become more evident with the adoption of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025). According to the Chinese government, it will reflect, to varying degrees, the key objectives of the SDGs, including more efficient use of natural resources, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, optimization of spatial development with environmental factors, and urban and rural development [Xinjua, 2020b]. It is likely that the government will take steps to minimize the risks of epidemiological threats on a similar scale to COVID-19 and increase the resilience of society and the economy to such phenomena.

The risks of new pandemic waves, geopolitical factors, volatility of global markets and the multilateral trading system as a whole, as well as the existing internal challenges – the aging population, environmental degradation and sociopolitical changes – may become obvious obstacles to implementing the long-term vision of the PRC's leadership. Nevertheless, by the third quarter of 2020 China was the first major economy in the world to achieve positive growth rates (0.9% year-on-year) [Xinhua, 2020a], while the International Monetary Fund adjusted its GDP growth forecast from 1.2% to 1.9% by the end of 2020 [Cooper, 2020], evident of a sufficiently high level of resilience to existing and probable risks.

South Africa

The package of measures introduced by South Africa to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic consequences also included traditional measures to support vulnerable populations and small businesses: debt repayment assistance for MSMEs; financial and material assistance for healthcare and food sectors; financial assistance for grocery stores; grants for agricultural producers; grants to MSMEs in the tourism sector; tax incentives and soft loans for the affected companies; and direct transfers to unemployed citizens [RSA, 2020a].

The coronavirus pandemic in South Africa emphasized the country's traditional socio-economic challenges – inequality (ethnic, gender and economic), high unemployment and migration problems. In this regard, measures to support the population during the COVID-19 pandemic were partly based on pre-existing mechanisms such as the Employment Tax Incentive, which encourages employers to hire young people. This mechanism was temporarily extended to the employment of all South African citizens and refugees [SARS, n. d.].

The key long-term planning document in the new socio-economic environment, the Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan of South Africa, was released on 15 October 2020 [SA News, 2020]. The plan was intended to adjust the goals of South Africa's National Development Plan 2030 and provided for urgent actions to support employment and vulnerable industrial sectors, as well as long-term investments in the development of the energy sector, which has been identified as one of the priority areas. In particular, new capacity of more than 11800 MW is to be commissioned by 2022, more than half of which will come from renewable sources. In addition, measures are planned to develop the transport and logistics infrastructure with a focus on ensuring its sustainability and environmental neutrality [RSA, 2020b].

One of the key principles of the plan to implement the South African Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan is the need to address the immediate challenges while ensuring the medium- and long-term sustainability of the sectors affected [RSA, 2020c].

Conclusions

Throughout its history, the BRICS agenda has been focused on intensifying the dialogue among its members, which was also characteristic of the forum's sustainability agenda. This focus on internal coordination and cooperation in part helps to avoid duplication of functions with other global fora, such as the Group of 20 (G20).

In terms of thematic coverage of its sustainable consumption and production agenda, BRICS only partially reflected the priorities set in the SDGs, focusing on energy and related environmental issues, with food waste management (SDG 12.3), chemical management (SDG 12.4), waste reduction and recycling (SDG 12.5), and working with private enterprises on climate reporting (12.6) remaining virtually untouched (see Table 1).

Table 1. Targets of SDGs 7, 11 and 12 on the BRICS Agenda

SDG Target	BRICS Agenda
7.1 By 2030, ensure universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy services	2009, 2010, 2015, 2018, 2020
7.2 By 2030, increase substantially the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix	2009–12, 2017–20
7.3 By 2030, double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency	2009–12, 2017–20
11.3 By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries	2012–13
12.2 By 2030, achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources	2009–12, 2017–20
12.3 By 2030, halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses	No mention

SDG Target	BRICS Agenda
12.4 By 2020, achieve the environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle, in accordance with agreed international frameworks, and significantly reduce their release to air, water and soil in order to minimize their adverse impacts on human health and the environment	No mention
12.5 By 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse	No mention
12.6 Encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle	No mention

The 2015 Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership, a key instrument of intra-institutional cooperation until 2020, outlined priorities and specific measures to develop cooperation between the countries in the energy and climate sectors. The Road Map for BRICS Energy Cooperation adopted five years later specified this strategy, but did not complement it significantly. It is necessary to note the inconsistent and uneven nature of BRICS energy cooperation – in 2013–16 there were no energy commitments in the leaders' documents. In total, BRICS held four meetings of energy ministers and six meetings of environment ministers. For a full-fledged assessment of this area of cooperation it is necessary to wait for specific tangible results of cooperation under the adopted road map.

The Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership 2025, adopted in November 2020, set ambitious goals for sustainable development and interstate cooperation on these issues. However, as in the case of the road map, the effectiveness of this document will depend on the creation of specific mechanisms of cooperation between BRICS countries and systematic work in this area, which was not observed in regard to the previous iteration of the strategy.

In terms of backing the global sustainability agenda, BRICS has consistently supported the ratification and implementation of the Paris Agreement on combating global climate change. For example, at the BRICS leaders' meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Osaka in June 2019, the heads of state reaffirmed their commitment to the full implementation of the Paris Agreement; they noted the crucial role of cooperation for the transition to cleaner, more flexible and efficient systems that combine growth and with a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and ensure security, accessibility, sustainability and affordability of energy supplies. BRICS energy ministers made a similar call for the implementation of SDG 7 at a virtual meeting in October 2020.

However, despite institutional achievements and statements on the development of interstate cooperation, over the past decade BRICS has failed to achieve one of the main global goals in the fight against climate change – reduced global carbon dioxide emissions. Although many countries, including Russia, have achieved reductions, the combined emissions of the world's largest economies in 2018 were 20% higher than in 2005. The largest contributors were the major emerging economies and members of BRICS – China, India and Brazil. In addition, in 2018 alone, after three years of stabilization there was a worldwide increase in CO2 emissions of 2.1%. In this context, the implementation of the SDGs' objectives of rationalizing resource production and consumption patterns at the national level is becoming increasingly relevant.

Regarding the reflection of sustainability aspects in the crisis response measures of BRICS countries, it should be noted that, as of the end of 2020, the pandemic has had little impact on the formation of national long-term plans for sustainable development, including with regard to the rationalization of production and consumption patterns. The prioritization of short-term socio-economic measures, such as employment support, in the context of the crisis was natu-

rally reflected in the anti-crisis packages of the five countries adopted in the first half of 2020. However, of the five BRICS countries, only two – South Africa and India – have directly incorporated climate resilience measures into their crisis response plans. In the other countries, sustainability goals are reflected in pre-existing long-term planning documents and have not undergone significant adjustments at this stage of the crisis. In addition, it is necessary to take into account the traditional planning cycles in the states in question, including the budget cycle, as well as the five-year cycle in the PRC. Further development of the epidemiological situation, the severity of forced restrictions, as well as the depth of their impact on economic growth in 2021 could lead to changes in the targets and priorities of the BRICS countries' long-term planning for sustainable development for the foreseeable future.

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