BRICS AND CIVIL SOCIETY: CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD[1]

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the role of civil society (CS) in relation to issues of global concern, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, it focuses on the role of CS in the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Western CS has, over time, shown certain limitations that have exposed it to a number of criticisms, while in BRICS, CS could begin to play a decisive role as a "historical bloc," using Gramsci's expression. In fact, BRICS has repeatedly reiterated that it wants to reshape global governance (GG), and indeed its current growth has shown that it could effectively do so. Therefore, it is worth analyzing what role CS plays in this process. This analysis leads to an understanding of the many advances, and also the diverse limitations, that characterize the effectiveness of the work of CS in the BRICS countries. Thus, CS's ability to be decisive in policymaking remains unclear. The argument in this paper proceeds as follows: some classical theories on CS are analyzed, highlighting the ethical tasks in which CS should be engaged; then, criticisms directed toward western CS are debated. Finally, the limitations and potential that CS has in the BRICS countries is considered, above all in light of the recent response to COVID-19. The conclusions highlight the fact that, if the BRICS countries want to play a leading role in GG and, broadly speaking, in future multilateralism, CS must play a decisive role within them. Specifically, a solid cooperation, or even a stable alliance, is needed between the civil societies of BRICS countries in order to address pressing issues and demands coming from the Global South.

Keywords: BRICS; civil society; global governance; international cooperation; COVID-19.

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Introduction

The world is passing through precarious and turbulent times. In addition to the previous economic crises, the COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating effects. Apart from the lockdown phases, the emerging problems are mostly linked to the possibility of an even deeper global economic recession, an exponential increase in unemployment, and an ever-greater distance between people in every sense.

In particular, among these many problems, which are having increasingly dramatic effects, an ever-greater awareness is emerging of the extent to which inequality characterizes societies. Specifically, the gap between the "haves" and the "have nots" is steadily increasing. COVID-19 has highlighted that there is a greater distance between those people that Z. Baumann [1998] defined as the "tourists" and the others that he described as the "vagabonds" of globalization. With the former, he was referring to the world's elites, who have benefited most from neoliberal globalization. With the latter, he spoke instead of the "victims" of globalization: that is, those who are forced to follow the unpredictable and sometimes deadly flows of migration in order to have a job and be able to survive.

In short, the pandemic has increasingly highlighted the distance between the rich and the poor, between the winners and the losers of globalization. It is therefore logical to ask whether this situation will have repercussions and to what extent. Certainly, what can be highlighted is the need to address the most pressing issues that we are facing today: in addition to the pandemic, this includes climate change, migration, conflicts (including economic ones) on a global scale, and so on. However, to address these issues, we need to rely on multilateralism—which currently does not seem up to scratch, and which some scholars have defined as being in a state of gridlock [Hale, Held, Young, 2013]. More than ever, we need to break this gridlock and put in place a functioning multilateralism and governance with a "human" face [Falk, 1995].

In addition to the social consequences, the consequences of this situation at the global level, especially in terms of relations between North and South, are considered in this article. Specifically, the focus is on what role civil society (CS) could play in shaping these relations in the future, considering that this historical moment most certainly represents a watershed that will create future

challenges. Moreover, CS should give voice to those who suffer most from inequalities within societies given that it represents the link between the private and public spheres of peoples' interests. Thus, CS could be the most important place for the expansion of democracy and rights [Arato, Cohen, 1992].

Furthermore, the possible role of CS in the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), that is, those emerging powers that for some years have been demanding their right to have greater say at a global level in shaping global governance (GG) [BRIC, 2009, 2018, 2019], must be contemplated. Economically, geographically and demographically, this bloc is becoming increasingly important globally.[2] Its institutionalization as a forum that plays a parallel role to those of the Bretton Woods system, such as is the case of the New Development Bank (NDB), in addition to its strengthened cooperation and integration, has given increased impetus to BRICS' ambitions of elevating its members' international status and power [Abdenur, Folly, 2015; Esteves, Torres, Zoccal, 2016; Gao, Sergunin, 2018]. In this sense, BRICS' "collaborative interaction" has been the key to strengthening its members' positions on the world stage [Lesage, Zhao, 2020].

However, it remains unclear what the role of CS has within the major decision-making processes that characterize the group. For this reason, precisely because BRICS could truly represent a moment of transition toward what has been called a "post-western" world [Stuenkel, 2016], it is necessary examine the role CS has within the group, especially in light of recent events.

Structure and Methodology

This article proceeds in the following way: after defining the role of CS, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses, the sphere of CS in the BRICS countries is examined. Then, its evolution and limitations are analyzed, especially in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the role that CS should play in the future is highlighted, especially with respect to the possibility that it can make a decisive contribution in designing a future GG that is truly committed to providing faster responses to global issues. The methodology outlined above is entirely based on bibliographic research, taking into consideration the literature concerning some of the major interpretations of CS. Subsequently, a

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[2] "BRICS brings together five major emerging economies, having 23 per cent of the global GDP and around 17 per cent of the share in world trade (they have a combined nominal GDP of USD 16.6 trillion). The five nations account for 50 per cent of the world economic growth, 42.58 per cent of the world population (over 3.6 billion people), 26.6 of the world land area and 13.24 per cent of World Bank voting power" [Times of India, 2019].

consideration of selected literature on BRICS, both from western thinkers and from the BRICS states themselves, will illustrate the challenges that CS faces in BRICS. Regarding the role of some initiatives from BRICS' CS, such as the BRICS Civil Forum or the BRICS From Below initiative, their official publications and the critical readings of them will be examined.

While an exhaustive analysis of the existing literature on the subject is not possible in this article, the data and texts consulted confirm that we need to give greater voice to CS (globally) and also that BRICS will have to face this challenge if it wants to be more accountable within the global framework and within the GG system.

In fact, the idea informing this article is that GG can only be effectively reshaped if CS begins to take on an increasingly active role within it. Since BRICS has always claimed its commitment to reshaping GG [BRIC, 2009], it is clear that, within this group as well, CS must play a fundamental role.

BRICS is demonstrating that it has grown in power and its ability to reshape international institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) [Stuenkel, 2020] and, broadly speaking, GG. Moreover, even if its weight is still lacking [Petrone, 2020], it seems that it is already beginning to play a decisive role in the promotion of multilateralism, as well as in the implementation of new values within the context of global regulation [Barabanov, 2012]. For this reason, the role of CS becomes increasingly important in promoting and/or maintaining multilateralism.

The conclusions will highlight the fact that there is still much to be done to achieve a more effective role for CS in the context of the BRICS states (as in many other countries, including those in the West). However, CS can nevertheless be the means by which decision-making processes can be made more democratic, injecting a new impetus to change GG. The pandemic crisis we are experiencing has increasingly highlighted the need to promote greater participation of CS in view of future global challenges.

What Is Civil Society? A Theoretical Debate

Over the years, the debate on the meaning and role of CS has been very intense. However, its definition remains vague and poorly defined, as M. Merle has highlighted [2002]. It is useful to trace the origins and evolution of the concept through a selective reading of the classics on political thought

regarding this term. Classical views about CS include some of the most important political and philosophical thinkers, such as Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx.

For Hegel [2010], CS is distinct from the state, and represents the moment in which the unitary system of the family is shattered into an "atomistic" system, which is essentially characterized by the economic-social and juridical-administrative spheres of living in a community. It is the meeting place of confrontation between particular and independent interests, which are placed in the position of having to coexist. In practice, it is the moment in which the particular interests of individuals converge, in the sense that they come together and confront each other. However, while representing a negative dialectical moment (antithesis), it is also a moment in which these particular needs coexist and learn to exist side by side.

Marx [2010], like Hegel, took up the distinction between CS and the state, but he radically diverged from Hegel in his interpretation: while Hegel considered CS as a pre-state sphere or a sub-structure of the state, Marx interpreted CS as a *structure* that contains within it the juridical and political *superstructure* and is consequently a sort of emanation of this. For Marx, CS emerges essentially from the sphere of needs, that is, from the economy (material needs).

One of the major readers of Marx was Antonio Gramsci. For Gramsci [1971], CS includes all ideological-cultural relations and not only the complex of material relations, as Marx believed. Hence, the whole complex of spiritual and intellectual relations converges in CS, not just the complex of commercial and industrial relations.

For Gramsci, CS is distinct from the state since these two spheres act on the basis of two different regulatory mechanisms that generate two different logics of action. The state represents the place from which coercive force emanates, which uses methods of legitimate use of force to minimize conflict (social and economic) of a specific territorial community. While the state therefore represents political power, which uses coercive force to manage conflicts, CS instead represents the place of consensus.

Gramsci's most original contribution was the introduction of the concept of hegemony. Its conception has also had a fundamental influence on globally recognized scholars of international relations such as Robert Cox and Immanuel Wallerstein. The term "hegemony" should be understood as an intellectual and spiritual reform that radically transforms the habits and customs of a given society [Fonseca, 2016; Gramsci, 1971]. It is therefore a sort of ability to define new cultural contents within which, with a new cultural production, economic relations must be conceived, and the actions

of the political actors who act within it must be interpreted. In Gramsci's view, the subject called to influence the sphere of CS was the factory proletariat, in line with the Marxist tradition. This historical subject is called to influence CS because this is the sphere in which the meaning of cultural values must be changed in terms of cultural hegemony. The proletariat must create a "historical bloc," that is, a set of social forces (including the peasants), which gravitate toward the proletarian political area, and at the same time toward a group of "organic intellectuals," that is, a group of intellectuals who place themselves within the working class by supporting its hegemonic struggles. In practice, it is in this sphere that the working class, supported by the organic intellectuals, should act to eliminate the hegemony of the dominant group and establish their own hegemony, to be exercised over the rest of society.

It is therefore evident that ideologies play an important role in the scheme developed by Gramsci, since they become autonomous instruments of intellectual and cultural influence. They thus become hegemonic, and within this hegemony the organic intellectuals play an important and central role since they are the intellectuals who choose to place themselves alongside a social class and its political expression in order to achieve hegemony over the whole of society. In this sense, the intellectual speculation of the Italian philosopher is truly interesting because he also defines a new way of collective construction. In practice, through his conception of hegemony, a vision of CS is created that is relevant in terms of current social movements, with of course the necessary contextualization. Even today, we are witnessing attempts by several social movements to undermine the ideological-cultural monopoly that seems oriented toward the subjugation of the masses in order to reproduce the logic of global capital. In this context, Gramsci's position is interesting because it offers some food for thought on the matter. This, in turn, is also useful for understanding how a historical subject is called to affect society. It goes without saying that Gramsci's theory of hegemony is specifically relevant to the historical moment in which it was developed, but it is also relevant in the contemporary world because it leads us to consider the importance of the movement of the historical bloc against hegemonic powers.

Another important thinker who has studied the concept of CS is Jürgen Habermas. He affirmed the importance of the institutionalization of CS which forms the associative structure that supports the public sphere. Habermas defended the importance of a democracy in which the public sphere is functioning and in which participation is guaranteed, leading, through this rational discursive process, to participation. Habermas elaborated a model of democracy which he defined as "deliberative democracy" [1998]. This democracy describes a moment of formation and legitimation of a decision

that is the result of a general deliberation. Deliberative democracy is, in Habermas's version, a discursive democracy (*Diskursbegriff der Demokratie*), that is, the result of a public debate between citizens who confront and reason in conditions of equality. Thus, CS establishes the foundation for public debate. This is made up of those associations, organizations, and movements that at the same time welcome, condense and affect social need and demands, amplifying public debate in the political public space, resonating social problems that occur in the sphere of private life. The heart of CS therefore consists of an associative fabric that institutionalizes, within the framework of organized public spaces, the discussions that aim to solve problems concerning issues of general interest.

The definitions considered so far are central to the discourse that will be established regarding BRICS; they also allow for an understanding of the actions of CS in the process of the democratization of policymaking and reshaping GG. If the BRICS countries have stated that they wish to be the architects of a different type of governance, especially from a financial standpoint [BRIC, 2009], then the role of CS within these countries must be examined. A functioning GG should use CS as its pivot, staying precisely in line with deliberative discourse, but should also be hegemonic in the Gramscian sense. This is so that it can give voice to demands from parts of the world thus far neglected.

In any case, a more recent definition, formulated by the Commission on Global Governance in 1995, describes the scope of CS' action in practical terms. According to the Commission [1995], the term in question:

> covers a multitude of institutions, voluntary associations, and networks—women's groups, trade unions, chambers of commerce, farming or housing co-operatives, neighbourhood watch associations, religion-based organizations, and so on. Such groups channel the interests and energies of many communities outside government, from business and the professions to individuals working for the welfare of children or a healthier planet … citizens' movements and NGOs now make important contributions in many fields, both nationally and internationally. They can offer knowledge, skills, enthusiasm, a non-bureaucratic approach, and grassroots perspectives, attributes that complement the resources of official agencies.

Departing from the theories of previous authors, this article draws on this definition of CS. However, in this discussion the business sector is not considered on the grounds that the economic power of certain organizations has often represented a limitation to more widespread and deliberative participation. Indeed, organizations with greater economic power have, on many occasions, played a predominant role in policymaking, thus reducing the ability of NGOs and other humanitarian

associations to influence common decisions. This is the case for the European Union's institutions, where there is a massive predominance of powerful private and economic lobbies, whose interests prevail over CS, influencing policymaking in a more decisive way [Kroger, 2008].

To conclude, a CS base that works honestly, advocates for citizen needs, and mobilizes civic virtues [Schmitter, 2000] is the key component in a governance that is also "ethical." In fact, the correct functioning of CS could lead to a more accountable GG given that it would bring into the center of the public sphere the demands and needs of those who do not have an decisive voice in issues of common interest. In fact, as J. A. Scholte stated [2011, p. 6], "efforts by citizen groups can—and, as the case studies show, often do—induce global authorities to be more answerable to various constituencies. In particular, civil society inputs can in some instances increase global governance accountability to disadvantaged and marginalized circles, including countries of the global south, impoverished people, women, and other social groups that experience silencing and exclusion."

Before discussing the possible impact that CS in the BRICS countries may have on the context of GG, the roles and limitations CS has in western countries, and in the BRICS countries themselves, must be analyzed. This will not be a definitive and exhaustive analysis; the aim is primarily to propose questions and provide some possible answers in light of the current situation. At the same time, questions and answers are always open to continuous improvements and insights.

Limitations and Criticisms of Western CS and the Role of the BRICS

The concept of CS has been subject to many criticisms, especially when it comes to western CS. Among these, the one that draws the most attention argues that there is a hegemony project hatched by a transatlantic CS [Friedrichs, 2005], which acts to prop up the strong political and/or economic powers [Hermet, 2008; Polman 2011]. According to this critique, western CS acts in a functional way such that its governments can impose their influence on the rest of the world. Although this is open to debate, it is a fact that in the Global South many associations and NGOs have been seen as instruments through which northern countries impose their views and interests [Abdenur, Marques da Fonseca, 2013]. This vision has also defined relations between the BRICS countries and segments of their CS. In fact, oftentimes governments of BRICS countries have seen the *longa manus* of western governments operating in their national NGOs, associations, and foundations [Poskitt, Shankland, Taela, 2016].

However, it is worth questioning whether CS plays an important role in BRICS. As already mentioned, BRICS is not only beginning to have an increasingly decisive role at the global level, but

it has also experienced a considerable increase in its weight in terms of cooperation and development assistance [Guo, Sun, Demidov, 2020], as well as increasing its presence in the Global South [Nayyar, 2016; Petrone, 2020; Thakur, 2014]. Given this tremendous growth at the global level and the decisive role BRICS is playing in the transition to a multipolar world, what effective role does BRICS' CS play? Can CS in the BRICS countries play the "historical bloc" role that was theorized by Gramsci on a global level?

Indeed, the BRICS countries are increasingly providing an alternative to the global leadership of western, industrial countries [Moilwa, 2015; Poskitt, Shankland, Taela, 2016]. Therefore, CS in BRICS countries, riding this rise in power, will more than likely increase their own global voice "as vehicles of alternative ideas, models and leadership to the industrial country global consensus" [Tandon, Bandyopadhyay, 2013].

If BRICS is able to provide an alternative to the current global system, it is worth asking whether it is also capable of giving greater voice to an organized CS (CSO) that can promote alternative and innovative global issues and thus re-establish the very value of CS, so often criticized in western countries.

Other criticisms directed toward western CS focus on certain contradictions, such as CS's principal interest in obtaining private or public funds for projects instead of pursuing ethical and humanitarian behaviours [Polman, 2011]. Moreover, dependence on these funds contributes to the perception that CS is a means by which the western/northern public/private sector has been able to establish its influence in the Global South [Abdenur, Marques da Fonseca, 2013].

BRICS and Civil Society: Evolution and Limitations

Within the international context, the role of CS appears to be increasingly compromised. As mentioned above, in western countries the limitations related to the nature and the scope of CS, as well as its participation capacities, are still relevant and prevent a decisive contribution in shaping policymaking. In the rest of the world, the role and the importance of CS also faces major limitations. For example, in the specific case of BRICS, there are several indicators that these countries are still struggling to build a concrete dialogue with CS. If CS is called to defend private interests in the public sphere, and consequently to play a greater ethical role, it should have all the necessary means by which to provide a new impetus to democratic processes.

In the BRICS countries, some progress has been made lately regarding the inclusion of CS in decision-making processes. However, despite this progress (which is of some interest in terms of giving adequate responses to global problems), it also seems that there are contradictions, deriving not only from the inability to create networks but also from the presence of elites in BRICS countries who play a central role within CS [Poskitt, Shankland, Taela, 2016].

The BRICS Civil Forum (discussed below) undoubtedly shows that there is tendency among the various representatives of CS to have a common dialogue, and as such, to seek greater cooperation. However, there are still many limits to be overcome. First among these is that of achieving greater influence, and following from that, to create greater cohesion between the various members of CS. Not surprisingly, the on-going pandemic has highlighted several limitations in this sense.

CS in BRICS could play an important role in fostering participatory democracy. At the same time, it could represent a stronger voice for the peoples of the Global South. In fact, BRICS could become a true representative of the Global South in the international arena, a role it has repeatedly claimed, because BRICS countries share a common history with the Global South with respect to the processes of colonization, imperialism, and therefore, of subjugation, especially by western countries [Petrone, 2019; Rodney, 1972]. Moreover, the growing presence (in terms of investments, cooperation, strategic partnerships, and so on) of the BRICS countries in the Global South (as in the example of Africa), which has steadily grown in recent decades, is an important key point that demonstrates that the strengthening of relations may lead to greater development in these countries [Petrone, 2020].

In short, new pathways are opening up for the BRICS countries that could truly represent new possibilities to redirect global problems. In this sense, CS could play a very important role as a new "historical bloc" and could act as a bridge to the Global South. The question that remains is whether CS in BRICS can also play that ethical role to bring the Global South's issues to the centre of the global agenda, and therefore position them as central topics for GG for the future.

There are many limitations in this sense, both internal and external—internal because the governments of the BRICS countries have often achieved uncertain outcomes regarding the initiation of greater participatory processes with CS, and external because this mission should be accompanied by a strengthening of cooperation, or even an alliance, between the CS in each BRICS country [MacKenzie, 2012].

Another limitation is linked to the fact that CS in the BRICS countries and, in general, in the Global South, has often been seen as an instrument of the governments of the North, as already mentioned. In practice, through their advocacy and monitoring skills, CS associations that operate in the BRICS have played a part in implementing policies of the governments of the North. The humanitarian case that they often make in developing countries has become a form of parachuting the political priorities and interests of northern governments into the southern hemisphere. In this sense, the concept of "good governance" has formed the basis of the liberal imposition coming from the North. As scholars have observed [Hermet, 2008; Weiss, 2000], good governance represents the entire set of practices that the international institutions of Bretton Woods—the IMF *in primis* [Stiglitz, 2002]—require the countries of the South to follow in order to receive funds and to attain greater participation in the globalized world more generally. This aspect, criticized not infrequently [Stiglitz, 2002], has over time increased the mistrust on the part of these countries toward western (or northern) CS. Consequently, even in the BRICS countries, this aspect has represented a limitation for CS. Through their monitoring, CS associations have been seen as a means of interference by the western countries.

Yet, it should be noted that even in BRICS the primary limitations concern precisely the participation and weight that the various components of CS have. In fact, in their report on CS in BRICS, A. Poskitt, A. Shankland and K. Taela noted that "even when an officially recognised permanent space for policy engagement is established, CSOs must still grapple with issues of power, voice and representation. Several interviewees commented that the space that exists to discuss and contribute to foreign policy and SSDC debates across all the BRICS is dominated by elite groups in civil society" [2016, pp. 22].

The report also notes that "meetings with government officials and sherpas, and events organised at the BRICS summits, and attendance at international conferences such as those held around the BRICS Summit or G20, have primarily been restricted to international NGOs, thinktanks, academics and small elite organizations that usually receive foreign funding. National and community-based organizations are often absent from these debates and arenas" [Ibid.].

Thus, the perception has been that only a small elite group has any influence on decision-making. The almost non-existent ability of CS to influence foreign policy has been highlighted, as in the cases of India [PRIA, 2013] and South Africa [Pressend, 2013]. It therefore appears that CS in the BRICS countries suffers from this lack of influence at the international level. In fact, discussions

related to foreign policy and international relations are dominated by "an elite group of thinktanks, experts, international NGOs and representatives from business forums" [Pressend, 2013].

Other limitations identified in the report by Poskitt, Shankland and Taela [2016] include the fact that CS in BRICS has often suffered from deficits linked to its limited ability to have an active role in policy debates that could have given it greater participation and decision-making weight. However, over the years, there have been initiatives like the Brazilian International Relations Reflection Group (GR-RI), founded in 2012, which is a discussion forum to promote CS participation and interest in public debates. South Africa established the South African Forum for International Solidarity (SAFIS) in 2011 to increase debate within society about South Africa's role internationally. Additionally, since 2007 Russia has developed an important international development assistance programme. By doing so, and with a significant inclusion of CS stakeholders, Russia has become an active global development cooperation partner and has expanded considerably its development assistance sector [Larionova, Rakhmangulov, Berenson, 2016].

Although these initiatives sought to give a major impulse to CS, the results are, as of yet, quite unsatisfactory. In fact, it seems that despite efforts to significantly develop the role of CS, CS in BRICS remains fragmented. Above all, due to unprecedented issues and challenges related to the ongoing pandemic, BRICS should provide a new direction in strengthening and developing the inclusion of CS in policymaking processes.

In any case, if, on the one hand, there have been limitations, on the other, various initiatives have been taken to respond to this deficit. One of these stands out—the BRICS Civil Forum. This was launched in 2015 as a discussion platform for CS in the BRICS countries. The aim of this forum is to consolidate citizens' priorities for the BRICS agenda and to act as a platform from which a series of civil initiatives can be proposed, with the prospect of including them in the agenda of the BRICS leaders' summits. This is an important initiative that involves BRICS' CS with the aim of providing "the leaders with an opportunity to look at the problems from the viewpoints of different groups of the population, [and] put[ting] the peoples' needs at the heart of the BRICS agenda" [Civil BRICS, 2020].

From 2015 to 2020, the BRICS Civil Forum contributed to important achievements during the annual BRICS summits. The signs are that a progressive effort has been made to include BRICS' CS in decision-making processes. For instance, during the first Civil Forum, held in Moscow in 2015, many stakeholders from CS discussed common public policies and social issues. The second meeting,

held in New Delhi in 2016, continued the effort to build a space for CS engagement within BRICS. In 2016, among other things, the participants "deliberated on effective implementation of SDGs and the need to develop a robust monitoring and evaluation framework as well as follow-up and review" [Ibid.]. During the Chinese presidency, the third BRICS Civil Forum was hosted in Fuzhou on 10–12 June 2017 (where the theme of the BRICS summit was "BRICS: Stronger Partnership for a Brighter Future"), and CS was invited to "pool wisdom and strength for common development and a brighter future" [Ibid.]. In the subsequent meeting in Johannesburg, proposals from BRICS' CS covered different areas ranging from land, mining, agriculture, inclusive economic development, climate change, gender and inequality, peace and security, youth, and the NDB.

During the 2020 meeting in Moscow, several propositions were presented in a final document, Advancing BRICS People2People Cooperation for Sustainable Future. These recommendations were the result of both the recent experiences at prior summits and of the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the document states that the work of the Civil Forum is dedicated "to the key topics of BRICS development in the light of the new challenges of the post-COVID era. These topics include food security, healthcare, education and science, human capital development, labor legislation during digital transformation, sustainable development, climate change, agriculture, women's agenda, and the struggle to ensure the quality of information in the era of fake news and post-truth" [Civil BRICS, 2020].

This period seems also to be a great test case with regard to the issue of COVID-19—have the BRICS governments been able to accommodate the demands of CS? In the document cited above, references are made to the fact that "in the BRICS countries, CSOs, NGOs and individual activists have been highly engaged in programs to help the most vulnerable groups, in assisting medical volunteers to support patients and health workers in hospitals, in research and testing of vaccines and in supporting citizens in other countries who remained abroad during the border closure. Nonprofit organizations, media and scientists participated in information and prevention campaigns and timely information notification. Under the most challenging conditions, these combined efforts of the civil society helped to slow down the spread of the virus in the BRICS countries and significantly consolidated government measures to combat the pandemic and its consequences" [Civil BRICS, 2020].

However, both positive signs and shortcomings have been shown during the COVID-19 pandemic to date.

BRICS' Responses to COVID-19

During the pandemic emergency, some positive responses have emerged from the BRICS countries. For example, a speedy bureaucracy has worked to provide loans to members of the NDB. Thanks to the establishment of an Emergency Assistance Facility (EAF), BRICS countries adopted a quick tool to receive financial aid in order to manage the COVID-19 crisis [Financial Express, 2020; NDB, 2020].

However, despite these initial responses and this rapid injection of funds, infection rates from the pandemic remain high (as indeed is the case in the rest of the world). In any case, it is also important to consider what the response of local people in the BRICS countries has been; the way these countries have listened to CS during the pandemic allows for an assessment of gaps with regard to how effective they have been in initiating the processes of democratization and governance reform. Also, it would be interesting to understand if CS and social movements have attempted to work with governments or instead to challenge them.

There has been growing inequality and precarity worldwide, and indeed, the BRICS countries have been characterized by increasing social protests due to this very situation. In reality, however, even before the COVID-19 pandemic the BRICS countries had started to exhibit a wide range of popular responses aimed at protesting diverse social injustices. In fact, even though the group has made strong efforts to overcome social issues like extreme poverty, strong social inequalities remain [Lobato, 2018]. The pandemic crisis has highlighted the many social discrepancies beyond those in BRICS; criticism has arisen around the world of the political measures taken by governments to deal with the crisis, and protests have erupted almost everywhere. However, these protests have been characterized by a lack of coordination and the inability of CS to create a solid network. This was especially due to lockdown measures, which prevented adequate organization. For example, in Italy many voices were raised against the measures taken by the government, accusing it of having created a "state of exception" [Agamben, 2020] to permit the restriction of the fundamental rights of freedom of individuals through measures which were, in certain cases, repressive. These signs of discord were followed by protests by many social groups affected by the drastic measures taken by the government, but which were characterized as being one-off and isolated from one another. Similar developments can be seen in many other countries, raising the question of to what extent these restrictions exercised real social control [Amadeo, 2020]. Sometimes, these were repressive but could probably fall within

the logic of coping with such an unprecedented situation. In general, all this has led to a loss of capacity on the part of CS at a global level to maintain and strengthen its network.

Even in the case of BRICS, during the pandemic strong measures have been used to try to deal with the contagion. These measures have also inevitably weakened the organizational capacities of CS. In fact, in India the lockdown has prevented large, organized protests. However, a number of protests have come from migrant workers and from some activist and CS networks. In South Africa, there have been more protests and mobilizations at the local level but they have not been able to achieve coordination at a national level, which activists have aspired to. Also, Russia has witnessed a number of protests "ranging from online live-streams to mass gatherings," above all directed against the way in which government has been dealing with the pandemic [Nilsen, von Holdt, 2020]. In Brazil, much criticism has been directed toward Bolsonaro's handling of the pandemic—at the beginning, he even denied its importance. Civil society networks have organized activities ranging from mutual solidarity to food supplies, demanding healthcare, and talks against the government's actions in dealing with COVID-19. However, it also seems that in Brazil a lack of coordination has characterized these actions by CS. Moreover, the large number of infections has weakened the ability of organized CS to get better results. In China, the majority of protests have been held in Hong Kong, which is undergoing a period of turbulence and political dissent. The coronavirus first appeared in China, and after a severe lockdown to try to contain it, the Chinese government has worked to establish global leadership in dealing with the virus [Gramer, 2020; Ninio, 2020; Soendergaard Larsen].

The situation in the BRICS countries remains quite mixed, as in many other parts of the world. In each country there have been different protest reactions. In some cases, more vehement, in others less so. The common denominator of these protests, on first reading, seems to show that there has been little coordination at the level of CS. In part, this is because lockdown conditions have not allowed for effective organization and also because one of the most important gaps at the level of CS organizations is precisely the fact that an organizational network is missing. However, the problem seems to become even more acute with respect to relations between the CSs of the five countries. In practice, despite a whole series of initiatives in conjunction with the summits that have thus far been held, it is important in the future to seek greater cooperation and build networks between CS in the various countries.

Therefore, it seems, the pandemic may be weakening those achievements earned by CS in recent years. In short, with COVID-19 it seems that some issues have arisen that highlight certain cracks in the relationship between CS and governments in the BRICS countries. However, at the same time, this crisis may open up new scenarios for CS organizations in these countries.

The Future of Civil Society Within Global Governance: A New Opportunity for the BRICS?

CS in BRICS countries could play a fundamental role in bringing to the centre of the global agenda, with particular reference to the 2030 Agenda, the problems that concern the Global South. However, CS must be included in decision-making processes, something which for now does not seem to take place in full, despite multiple requests for inclusion. In the BRICS countries, this issue has several limitations. In fact, the leadership role of BRICS countries is open to question precisely because of the limited role they give CS, even while China and Russia have claimed world leadership in dealing with the virus, and the institutions created by them (such as the NDB) have responded more quickly to the crisis than those of the western countries [Financial Express, 2020].

In fact, CS still has innumerable shortfalls, as mentioned above. Also, during past summits CS also directed criticism toward BRICS governments. As an example, a People's Forum on BRICS was held in Goa, at the same time as the seventh annual BRICS meeting was also being held there. The aim of the People's Forum was to create a debate between CS, social movements, and academia of the five states. The final declaration of the forum contained many criticisms regarding transparency and accountability of BRICS, regarding its members' extractive policies, and the environmental degradation they have been responsible for instigating [BRICS Policy Center, 2016].

Another initiative has tried many times to warn BRICS of the possible fallout from the way it acts. This is the so-called BRICS From Below. Founded in 2018, this initiative has played, and continues to play, an important role in discussing the possible limitations in different areas of BRICS policymaking [Bond, 2018]: "social justice versus the diplomacy game"; finance, trade and climate negotiations; the work of the NDB and its relations with civil society; discussion about the "subimperial" projection that BRICS may have in its growth, especially in the Global South, and the way in which BRICS operates domestically. In fact, "it is useful to indicate overlapping interests of western and BRICS powers, or ways that BRICS firms penetrate their societies and hinterlands in a manner comparable to Western Multinational Corporations" [Bond, 2018, p. 9].

In practice, this initiative, like others such as the BRICS Think Tank Council (BTCC) and the BRICS Academic Forums, which have regularly gathered since 2009, undoubtedly expresses

important issues that BRICS governments should take into account to open up a constructive dialogue. Unfortunately, not all BRICS CS initiatives can be analyzed in this article. However, the importance of all of them lies in the fact that in order to offer greater democratization in governance processes, these initiatives should have an important weight in the dialogue between the BRICS and CS.

If BRICS countries really want to provide greater impetus to GG, this can only come about by also giving greater weight to CS. In fact, as stated by H. MacKenzie [2012, p. 165], "CSOs in the BRICS countries must increase their participation in GG by building sustainable relationships with the BRICS multilateral grouping. Large, richer transnational NGOs can contribute to strengthening indigenous CSO capacities to shape their own destinies. Transferring their experience and knowledge on monitoring and advocacy, along with providing needed financial resources will serve to build the free and independent (global) civil society required to further the democratization of global governance in a shifting world."

In recent decades, GG has been subject to several criticisms. Above all, in the view of many scholars, it has reflected the western imprint which has been imposed in the international arena. It has given greater hegemony to western countries in several frameworks: in international trade, international institutions, and also in the field of international cooperation. The structure of GG as it currently exists has been somewhat rejected by those who would like to reshape it, such as BRICS. This bloc has stated in several arenas its desire to provide a new impetus to the international order, so as to reflect the changed world and its commitment to multilateralism. For instance, apart from the UN, the World Bank, and the IMF, BRICS wishes to provide new input within the context of the Group of 20 (G20) framework [Larionova, Shelepov, 2019]. And even though there still exist some contradictions between their stated intentions and what they put into practice [Cooper, 2020], it seems that the objective of their complaints is "leveraging their position inside the G20 for great fairness and equality of the system" [Cooper, 2014, p. 106]. Moreover, BRICS has strengthened policy coordination, the promotion of growth in the world economy, and the development of cooperation among its members, and has become a representative of the emerging world in GG [Xiujun, 2020]. Thus, broadly speaking, its strengthened involvement in the system of GG has resulted in benefits that it can provide by promoting multilateralism within the current world order [Larionova, Kirton, 2018; Stuenkel, 2020]. At the same time, alongside the context of the G20, BRICS can play an important role in the future of global infrastructure [Qureshi, 2017] and in the implementation of the

trade-related UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to international trade [Sakharov, Andronova, 2019].

However, it is still not clear which direction BRICS would like to take in a reformed GG. Indeed, it stated [BRIC, 2009] that it has to reflect the international multipolar order that is already in place, as mentioned above. However, there remain many limitations that need to be overcome by BRICS. One of the most interesting issues to work out is the role that CS has to play in the reshaping of GG. If BRICS really wants to give a major impulse in this field, CS has to play a key role. Several questions arise in this context. First, will it be possible for BRICS to overcome these limitations? Given that the presence of joint projects and greater cooperation between the CS of the BRICS states does not necessarily imply the existence of a strong and established network among them, how can this be managed in the future? Will it be possible to overcome both the internal and external limitations in BRICS' CS? Also, in the future of GG, will BRICS promote democracy and human rights, or is it likely to use political repression [Bond, Garcia, 2015]?

These are key questions (without doubt among many others) that have to be answered in order to give a clearer vision in terms of what kind of GG the BRICS wants to build in the future, above all within a post-pandemic perspective [Petrone, 2021].

Conclusions

If the disastrous global response to the coronavirus pandemic reveals anything, it is that government officials should draw on the knowledge and participation of experts from CS to inform policy decisions. Sometimes government policy has shown interest in dealing with global issues by giving more importance to economic problems (see, for example, the European Stability Mechanism) than in giving importance to those of individuals or society. The economy prevails over humanity; this is not a new thing, but the pandemic crisis has shown more than ever the importance of taking action by taking care of human beings.

In this context, the role of CS is fundamental, because "civil society activities are an enactment of citizenship, that is, they are practices through which people claim rights and fulfill obligations as members of a given polity" [Scholte, 2011, p. 34].

Within the BRICS framework, CS plays an important role for the future. Even though there is still much to do, "civil society organizations within BRICS must pool their resources, campaigns and

ideas. They have to form strategic alliances across the BRICS countries. Strategic alliances among BRICS civil society organizations will give them the critical mass not only to influence the BRICS agenda but also give them critical mass to influence the global agenda, debates and priorities of global multilateral organizations" [Gumede, 2018].

The decline of the West [Acharya, 2017; Mandelbaum, 2016] could also have important repercussions in the context of CS. In fact, western CS may have lost sight of its struggles, falling into capitalist schemes, or trying to act as an arm of western, capitalist governments, in order to dominate emerging countries [Petrone, 2013], thereby frustrating more inclusive dialogue.

Thus, if on the one hand, in western countries CS associations often show weak institutional significance and a fragmentation of intentions, in BRICS societies a new scenario may unfold. Although the group is heterogeneous and geographically disadvantaged by the physical distance between member countries, it must be said that there is an effective possibility for it to provide a new impulse to GG in different directions. First, this can be done by giving voice through CS to those who still have little access to democratic dialogue and, therefore, giving a greater impulse to, and increasing participation in, democratic processes. Second, this can be achieved by ensuring that CS acts as a voice for the Global South, raising awareness of the problems faced by people in this part of the world. In this way it can also find a greater voice for CS in the Global North.

In short, distinct scenarios are opening up for BRICS that may require a different approach to issues of a general nature. And these issues could see an increasingly decisive recognition of CS. "BRICS will remain an important factor of international life in the foreseeable future" [Toloraya, Chukov 2016, p. 81], and if it wants to achieve and maintain a core role in reforming the system of GG, the challenge of achieving a more inclusive CS is key.

Will BRICS be able to meet this challenge? At the moment, it seems that its ability to respond still suffers from several deficits. As discussed in this article, not only are there limitations within the CS of every BRICS country, but also in terms of creating a stronger, cooperative BRICS-level CS network. However, it could be a decisive moment to lay the foundations for new forms of interaction, those which see CS recognized as important and necessary in the tasks that must be carried out in the future of these countries and, in general, in international relations. For example, states could seek to include more CS representatives through practices of dialogue and more active participation. Above all, each BRICS country could try to give more tangible answers to the social issues that CS represents. Initiatives such as the BRICS Civil Forum are very important in this sense and certainly

lead to a greater dialogue between institutions and CS. However, the pandemic has given rise to new and major challenges. This period may be taken as a keystone in the development of new responses to social challenges and therefore, in giving greater weight to the voice of CS. At the same time, the function of CS is important for the correct functioning of governance and for its progressive democratization since "governance is not the sole responsibility of the state, but something in which people participate to decide what is good for them" [Rajesh, Ranjita, 2016, p. 19]. Therefore, we are faced with a two-fold path which involves, on the one hand, the various countries that need to grant greater space for inclusion and participation, and on the other, the members of CS who must act as critical and proactive subjects in order to provoke a greater democratization of governance processes.

A functioning CS in BRICS could also play an important role in the development of multilateralism. Perhaps COVID-19 could be a starting point for reflection on how to create deeper bonds and cooperation for the future. Above all, this should be aimed at trying to avoid what could become a "complex multilateralism" [Woodward, 2008], creating instead a multilateralism that can decisively contribute to providing an ethical and positive boost to GG and the international order.

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