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Unpacking the youth experience within BRICS and its various structures

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The IGD is an independent foreign policy think tank dedicated to the analysis of and dialogue on the evolving international political and economic environment, and the role of Africa and South Africa. It advances a balanced, relevant and policy-oriented analysis, debate and documentation of South Africa's role in international relations and diplomacy.

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Introduction

The BRICS Youth engagement groups were established with the growing recognition that young people could make a significant contribution to shaping global relations and policies. They were established for the purpose of education, sustainable development and an understanding of the economic power of BRICS nations where the youth from all over the world get the opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge on BRICS countries whilst enhancing their skills with expert-led sessions. The following analysis examines the growing importance of youth led initiatives and processes within BRICS.

Overview of the BRICS Youth

In 2015, Russia hosted the first BRICS Youth Summit in Moscow as part of the Russian BRICS Chairmanship with the aim of broadening BRICS cooperation by fostering greater collaborations amongst the youth from BRICS countries. This forum was a platform for the youth to discuss common issues such as the inequality in education and unemployment whilst simultaneously empowering the youth and enhancing youth participation on the global stage. After a more structured cooperation of the BRICS bloc was formed, the BRICS Youth Forum expanded its diplomatic approach by using a multitrack diplomacy approach for a more comprehensive approach to diplomacy, and this would allow for multiple “tracks” of communication between state and non-state actors. This was seen as an effective approach because it recognises that to achieve sustainable peace, international relations cannot solely be conducted through official governments channels, but also through formal and informal channels such as non-state actors, civil society and individuals.

In 2018, BRICS “Youth Track” which was the 4th BRICS Youth Summit was hosted by the BRICS Forum in Johannesburg, South Africa as part of one of the official BRICS Summit activities. By using a multitrack diplomacy approach, this Forum provided the youth from across BRICS countries with the opportunity to engage in policy discussions and contribute to shaping international relations. The youth forms part of a track 3 diplomacy which provides a platform for people-to-people diplomacy including local communities, youth groups in international relations and recognises summer school youth initiatives, academic exchanges and cultural programmes. This was meant to bridge the gap between diplomatic channels and the youth when collaborating, however, one could argue that this is not the reality for the government and youth in South Africa as there aren’t many channels that the youth can engage in.



This can be for many reasons such as many youth participation platforms only existing during major events such as the BRICS Youth Summit which isn't a consistent way of ensuring that the voices of the youth are heard and integrated into policy processes. The youth structures in South Africa often lack stability and funding because the government tends to prioritise the economic crises over participatory processes, meaning that they see the youth diplomacy as "secondary" and focus on socio-economic issues instead. The government of South Africa should then develop permanent youth-government structures to enhance diplomatic engagements and make youth programmes more accessible and transparent because of the lack of capacity building and support. The youth structures are also fragmented across too many actors, meaning there is no single structure that coordinates all youth engagements. The following analysis highlights a number of factors that influence South Africans' participation in BRICS youth structures and initiatives.

The BRICS Youth Sphere and the Role of the BRICS Summer School

The BRICS Summer School in partnership with the University of Johannesburg and various other organisations is hosted by the South African BRICS Youth Association (SABYA) to bring forth the BRICS Youth Experience. The BRICS Summer school was developed in 2022 and aims to convene approximately 100 young leaders from BRICS and Global South countries. In South Africa, the BRICS Summer School is one of the only initiatives that slightly bridges the gap by giving the youth the opportunity to engage in diplomacy on a global scale by creating learning and engagement opportunities within the BRICS framework. They may be open to high school or university students or a combination of the two.

Together with the BRICS Summer School, some of the key avenues which the South African youth have been able to engage in are civic engagements where the youth are able to directly participate in democratic processes and debate policies and the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) which advocates for the development of young people by coordinating and implementing youth development programs to address the challenges faced by the youth. In recent times, at the 15th BRICS Summit in 2023, the youth called for the establishment of a BRICS Youth Council to further foster stronger collaborations amongst young people. The idea of a BRICS Youth Council has recently been an ongoing discussion and development across all BRICS countries which has been envisioned as a coordinating body to ensure that youth engagements in BRICS and international dialogue are more sustainable and structured.



BRICS Youth Engagement Opportunities

The BRICS Summer School offers learning and engagement opportunities for South Africa's youth; however, the majority of the country's youth do not get to experience it due to structural conditions that are further highlighted by socioeconomic disparities and inequalities in the country. The socioeconomic disparities amongst the South African youth are deeply rooted in the political and economic history of the apartheid legacy. During the apartheid era, certain policies were developed and implemented which isolated black South Africans and those of other races from receiving the same quality schools and education as white South Africans. As much as certain laws and policies were put in place to ensure quality education for all South Africans, the reality is that the legacy of apartheid of unequal opportunity still hasn't fully been dismantled yet. Hence, having access to quality education and employment opportunities post-apartheid has become very complex as South Africa's education system remains fundamentally unequal.

The engagement spaces for the youth within BRICS are still extremely urban-focused spaces. In comparison to the privileged in the urban areas who are provided with high quality and effective schools, the youth in rural areas receive sub-standard education and have limited access to quality education as the schools have fewer resources and the costs of education are also a significant barrier. Considering that formerly white only schools only opened for all races after apartheid, the quality of education in urban areas is not an exception either as the high quality "model C" schools are still generally operating under a dysfunctional education system which benefits the privileged and excludes the disadvantaged in rural areas. Statistics suggest that [20% of South Africa's 25000 government schools provide a good quality education whilst the other 80% of schools remain dysfunctional](#), essentially ranking the country's education system as amongst the worst in terms of output and performance in the world with a worsening literacy crisis.

Nevertheless, the population of South Africa's youth that gets to go to university get the opportunity to engage in university diplomatic channels through youth programs and student-led initiatives. However, the youth of South Africa are limited to this, considering that many youngsters in South Africa don't get the opportunity to go to university. Therefore, without the diplomatic channels, there are very limited opportunities for the youth because the curriculum of South Africa doesn't necessarily provide for such international relations programmes to be implemented in high schools. This isn't the case for other BRICS nations like Russia and China which have made large investments to equipping young leaders for the future in



different industries. Russia and China have formulated youth structures to support youth participation in schools through having strong education systems and promoting youth educational exchanges. For example, Russia has a BRICS Russia project office under its youth ministry that has been passed to deal with youth participation in BRICS. BRICS nations do however have different societies, the youth in China engage in BRICS through a very government focused lens, but in South Africa and Brazil, youth engagement is done at grassroots level because of the more liberal approach they have to civic engagements. Notwithstanding that in Brazil, there hasn't really been a grassroots or government led youth platform established but there are think tanks and universities that contribute to the work of BRICS.

Addressing BRICS Youth Challenges

To further address the lack of youth participation in schools, the South African government is working to address these socioeconomic disparities by promoting education and skills development, improving the quality of schools and education in both urban and rural areas, supporting youth entrepreneurship and internship programs, and supporting SMME's and youth-led startups. The government also needs to build a stronger education system with a curriculum that provides a platform for the youth to engage in BRICS and to further enhance their understanding on global affairs, ultimately preparing them for future roles in international relations.

In addressing socioeconomic disparities, South Africa's membership and relevance in BRICS plays a significant role because it can leverage its strengths and expertise to promote regional cooperation. BRICS and South Africa can collaborate on advancing the educational practices and systems in South Africa through improving teaching and learning methods in schools and addressing the digital divide by improving the quality of education in both rural and urban areas. There haven't been investments in terms of the resources needed to use BRICS as a tool to empower the youth in rural areas as there should be, considering that resources are spent on conferences/initiatives that are difficult for the rural youth to reach. Therefore, the government needs to design programmes that speak to what they need because they are the ones who need to be socially uplifted to enter the economy. It is also important that the perspectives from the rural youth are included in youth engagements because they are still very urbanised, not by design or intention, but due to the lack of support and strategy

Moreover, leadership in schools is a critical factor in addressing the education system crisis. [Principals who automatically assume leadership roles could be agents of change by finding solutions to the problems their schools face.](#) Hence, providing training and support programmes for educators to improve their teaching is necessary.



Advocating for youth entrepreneurship and internship programs, promoting SMME's and investing in startups for the youth are some of the steps that can be taken by both the youth and government to address the socioeconomic disparities in South Africa. By prioritising high-impact SMME's and startups in technology, agriculture and creative industries for the youth, the government would tap into the needs of locals and create greater opportunities for them. This would make it easier for the youth to have access to funding and mentorship and networking opportunities for young entrepreneurs who are starting small businesses. A BRICS structure that could address the challenges in South Africa's education is the BRICS New Development Bank which provides funding for infrastructure projects such as building schools and institutions, especially in marginalised (rural) communities.

South Africa faces the persistent challenge of the GDP growth per capita not keeping pace with the labour market expansion. This disconnect is related to issues of skills mismatches, high youth unemployment and deepening inequalities. Through platforms like the BRICS Youth Forum, South African youth can engage with these challenges by advocating for policies that better align labour market growth with economic development. This includes addressing skills mismatches, promoting equitable job creation, and leveraging inclusive economic policies within the BRICS framework to support more sustainable and inclusive growth.

BRICS Youth Initiatives

Despite the socioeconomic disparities that exist in South Africa, the opportunity to participate in BRICS initiatives continue to inspire the youth to contribute to the global system by advancing their research in addressing global issues in their academic or professional pursuits. Pursuing education or careers within international organisations also attracts young people to global networking opportunities, exposing them to diverse political and cultural perspectives.

The youth comprise the majority of the population in BRICS countries seeing that [BRICS countries have the youngest demography](#). This has been recognised in recent years with the emergence of youth led organisations and initiatives which have made impactful contributions to policymaking and decision making. These organisations are also the driving force behind sustainable development in the just energy transition and climate action through exploring new sustainable energy practices. These practices include [raising awareness about the importance of energy sustainability](#) by organising conferences and workshops, introducing energy entrepreneurship and technology development for the youth through conducting extensive research as well as upskilling initiatives. The youth have thus become an important asset to BRICS nations at local and national level. In South Africa's case there has been a large emphasis on youth



development being one of the key drivers behind sustainable economic growth in the country despite the high rate of youth unemployment. In that, the youth have become an asset for the future of BRICS economies.

BRICS is also an economic bloc focusing on trade and finance which makes youth entrepreneurs in economic sectors more important for the future by investing in them and ensuring that they are capacitated to take up the policies and structures advanced by BRICS. BRICS have encouraged the contributions of the youth through their initiatives by dedicating frameworks such as the [BRICS International Youth Forum](#) and [BRICS Youth Energy Agency](#) where several youth-led events are held to foster intra-BRICS, knowledge sharing, dialogue and cooperation amongst the youth from BRICS countries. Through this, BRICS recognises the importance of the youth's participation in addressing the common challenges in developing countries and have called for joint efforts with the youth to building a more inclusive and sustainable future.

Consequently, the youth are often treated as a secondary thought but are ultimately a very cross-cutting demographic who can make significant contributions to BRICS because there is always youth interest in almost every issue discussed within BRICS. Within the global arena, there are different ideologies competing for youth minds so to ensure that young people can enter different sectors, the youth's education and upskilling are used if there's no steady stream of young professionals 'coming into these sectors. All this leads to the future of BRICS as they will essentially become the young leaders who take over from the leaders in industries, politics and society.

All BRICS Summer Schools share a common goal to empower the youth to know more about BRICS-related opportunities and to encourage their participation on the global stage, whether through public service or entrepreneurship. The BRICS youth experience has created local and regional impacts, through outreach programmes that strengthen youth engagement across the region. These initiatives contribute to local economic growth by increasing international exposure to BRICS countries, especially in global markets. Sub-national diplomacy is enhanced during the summer schools as they offer a platform for subnational entities such as local, municipal, state or regional governments to conduct international relations and foreign policy activities independent from national governments. This fosters regional cooperation aimed at addressing shared challenges. The collaborations formed during the BRICS Summer schools also opened doors for deeper regional integration and long-term cooperation within the BRICS bloc.

Conclusion

There is a growing desire for the BRICS bloc to establish more structured forms of



cooperation, or institutionalisation, that reflect its evolution and ongoing engagement with the younger generation. After the 2023 expansion of BRICS, Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were invited to join the alliance. Argentina formally declined to join BRICS. In 2024, partner countries Belarus, Bolivia, Kazakhstan, Cuba, Malaysia, Thailand, Uganda, Uzbekistan and Nigeria were invited. Overall, there is a concern that the BRICS in its expanded format will not be able to integrate a bigger youth community with similar structural issues.

This experience has fostered a sense of global collaboration amongst young leaders to participate in discussions around sustainable development, global affairs and political diplomacy in the context of BRICS. South Africa has the responsibility to uplift its youth who make up a large portion of the population by making meaningful contributions to their future especially in addressing the high rate of youth unemployment in the country. Fostering more engagement and learning opportunities through avenues such as the BRICS Summer School is also fundamental for strengthening global partnerships for the youth. BRICS needs the youth to stay sustained and to ensure that no young person gets left behind in the process of youth development, the South African government should design systems and structures that support inclusion, equality access and empowerment. Overall, the BRICS Youth cooperation has shaped the youth into becoming future global visionary leaders and empowered them to make meaningful contributions on the global stage.



