

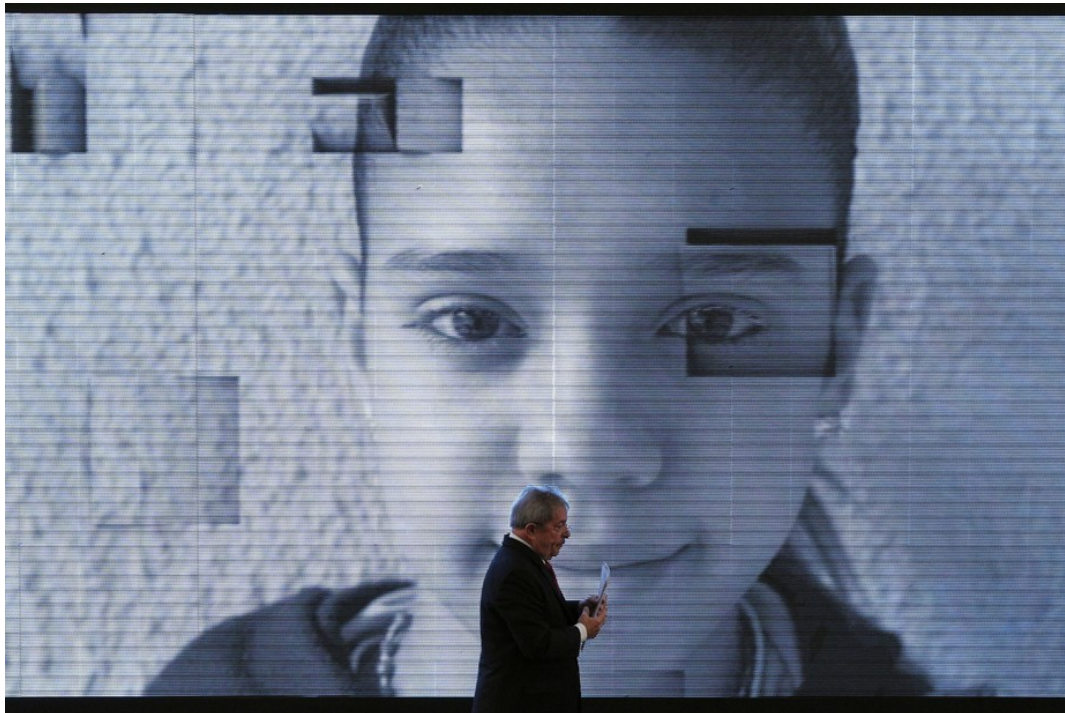
# THE CONVERSATION

## How Brazil missed its golden South-South co-operation moment

March 15, 2016 8.34pm AEDT

**Lídia Cabral**

Doctoral researcher, Institute of Development Studies



Former Brazilian president Lula da Silva's development aid programme has fizzled out. Reuters/Ueslei Marcelino

Compared to China or India, Brazil is a relatively small player in development aid. Yet it has managed to make a mark in Africa and globally, especially under the leadership of charismatic Lula da Silva.

From 2003 to 2010 Lula led an unprecedented shift in the country's foreign policy towards the global South. He also helped elevate Brazil to the status of a global player.

Back in 2010 the outlook was promising yet cautious. Brazil's aid programme was dubbed a "global model in waiting". Its potential was acknowledged but there were some tangible (institutional and operational) issues to address to fulfil its ambitions. But, six years on, the expectant waiting has turned into tired disillusionment.

### An unrealised dream

Brazil, it seems, is vanishing from the international development cooperation scene. This is happening before it has proved its South-South promise to be more than rhetorical hype. Many may never have been convinced by the South-South euphoria. Others may regard

Brazil's premature retreat as a missed opportunity. This article sways towards the missed opportunity view.

A comeback is needed. Yet, the omens do not look favourable. For the last couple of years, Brazil has been wrestling with major economic and political turmoil at home. This has severely hampered its engagement abroad.

The country is preparing to host the Olympic Games in a few months amid concerns about overpriced infrastructures and unfitting venues. The Zika epidemic and strikes add further strain.

And then the news of Lula's alleged connections to a mega corruption scandal. This is a major blow to the image of success that Lula had so skillfully cultivated internationally. This is now on the verge of being irremediably tainted.

The "golden age" of Brazil's South-South cooperation that marked Lula's years in power is over, as suggested by researcher Laura Waisbich at a recent conference on the rising powers and global development at the Institute of Development Studies in the UK.

## The myth behind Brazil's affinity with Africa

On President Dilma Rousseff's watch Brazilian cooperation has, for the last couple of years, gradually receded to the backstage.

It is time to take stock of what happened. Several of the rhetorical claims of Brazilian cooperation need to be challenged. Brazilian actors need to be forced into a more self-critical and less self-centred attitude.

The myth of Brazil-Africa affinities based on common history, culture and racial kinship needs deconstructing. Ethnographic research by Susanne Ress, a postdoctoral researcher at Humboldt University of Berlin's Center for Comparative and International Education, gives an account of the difficulties of striking the envisioned interaction and integration, not least because of the gap that separates Brazilians' imaginaries of Africa and contemporary Africa. Afro-Brazilians and Africans are separated by different struggles and interests.

Also, the forthcoming work by Katia Taela, a doctoral researcher at Institute of Development Studies, exposes the myth of 'sisterhood' and 'brotherhood' by Brazilian aid workers towards their Mozambican counterparts. She also challenges claims of mutual learning.

My own research shows that Brazilian researchers working on development projects in Mozambique are able to engage fruitfully with local counterparts more because of an individual's personal attributes and attitudes than on presumed affinities and South-South credentials.

## Recipes that don't translate

There is also the questionable claim that Brazil's recipes can fit in African contexts.

This is particularly noticeable in agriculture. Landscape-based similarity claims have been a particularly strong feature of Brazil in Mozambique. This has led to parallels being drawn between Brazilian and African countries' tropical geography which has justified the deployment of Brazil's "tropical technology".

Other parallels have been drawn. For example, the presumed relevance of Brazilian

concepts such as family farming and social struggles against agribusiness and modernisation.

Yet when they arrive in Africa, Brazilian imaginaries, technology, policy templates and political struggles land in a different context. They get reinterpreted and often reconfigured.

The impact of Brazilian cooperation on the lives of those it was supposed to benefit has yet to be assessed. In the meantime, its impact on local politics and state-society interactions has already been significant.

Natacha Bruna, a researcher from *Observatório do Meio Rural*, a Mozambican NGO, shared a critical view of Brazilian cooperation's footprint in her country. It shows how ProSAVANA – a trilateral initiative between the governments of Brazil, Japan and Mozambique – is regarded as a threat to local communities.

## But there is still potential

Yet, there are many exciting elements in the Brazilian development trajectory that deserve being more effectively incorporated into international development cooperation. These include policy interventions that tackle different development challenges in an integrated fashion. Examples include:

The **Bolsa Família**, a conditional cash-transfers programme that tackles income poverty as well as education and health issues.

The practice of the “**industrial-health complex**” whereby local health care industries are supported to develop national health systems.

The **More Food** programme that aims to boost the farming machinery industry, while raising family farmers' productivity, increasing food production, and keeping youth in rural areas.

The problem is that these complex policy experiences have been tremendously simplified into transferable recipes where only certain components get through.

Take agriculture. Agribusiness clusters, family farming mechanisation, peasant farming resistance, agroecological systems are all part of the mix. Yet they don't arrive with the same weight in Africa. A predisposition towards modernisation and Green Revolution-type of interventions is also a factor. The Africa version of the More Food programme, for example, has largely promoted **four-wheel tractors**, overshadowing alternatives such as small-scale mechanisation solutions. This is an area where Brazil has plenty of **experience** that has apparently failed to permeate development cooperation.

So, yes, Brazilian cooperation has disappointed in many ways and its brand is under stress. But let's not prematurely dismiss Brazil from international development cooperation on the basis of its exuberant rhetoric and sloppy performance. Brazilian actors have a meaningful role to play in sharing the country's rich and complex experiences.

The challenge, of course, is avoiding ready-made recipes, marketed as tropical silver bullets, and focusing more on processes or ways of developing policies that suit local contexts. This approach is less amenable to quick wins and requires the sort of enduring engagement on the ground that Brazil is still far from delivering. And so the waiting continues.



3/22/2016

How Brazil missed its golden South-South co-operation moment

China

India

Brazil

BRICS


Development aid


African politics

Mozambique

global South

 Tweet47

 Share43

 Get newsletter