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Are we on the BRINCS of a new BRICS? – Or should we be?

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The 4th BRICS summit concluded about a fortnight ago with a lot of media fanfare, but little member consensus on key issues of mutual concern. This is not terribly controversial, because while the idea to the grouping is just over ten years old on paper, the BRICS are a little over three years old in practice, if one takes their annual summits as marker. While the original construction of the group is well documented and explained, not least so the inclusion of South Africa raises questions about the size and direction of the BRICS. Is there room for another African member, namely Nigeria? This would result in BRINCS instead of BRICS. Would that be desirable, given the contested position of South Africa in the African setting?

With regards to the size and directions of the group, it remains a fairly exclusive little club. The BRICS might not yet be one of the globe's most influential groups of countries, but it is certainly the international bloc creating the most hype in South Africa and beyond at the moment. (Try set a Google Alert on the BRICS, and your mailbox will be swamped within a day). The lumping together of Brazil, Russia, India, China and latterly South Africa into some sort of G8-lite was first coined in debates over a decade ago, and then in 2009, the group actually sat down together amidst much international excitement to capitalise on... well, it was never explicitly clear what the BRIC group was going to do from the outset, other than grease the wheels of opportunity between members, and maybe add weight to their occasional collective wishes in other international forums.

Likewise, there is no real barrier to the eventual size the group could assume- BRICS-coiner Jim O'Neill already published his "Next Eleven"- a group of 11 countries, including Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Turkey, South Korea, and Vietnam, that, while not quite on the runway, are certainly in the departure lounge when it comes to the qualities that first associated the BRICS. So, if you're the right shape, and the right size, and most importantly, have something tangible to bring to the table, then surely you are in?

Again, not exactly. There was no specific application procedure for South Africa to join other than much lobbying from the former before the time before the grand invitation was extended by the original four members. Is "exclusivity" an important factor when it comes to the BRICS? The answer is still unclear, because beyond the bare economic and political weight of the club (mostly China and India's), their international impact is yet to be felt.

The programme in Delhi focused on restructuring global finance to make it easier for BRICS countries (and others) to access funds for infrastructure projects and investment- but there was no specific proclamation on the finance need for this – or the number of members required to make this happen.

The original concept of the group was a (diverse) grouping of (large) developing countries whose economies and socio-political footprint were growing at a discernible momentum in the early 2000s that would project them to be among the most influential nations on earth by 2050 in terms of global economic share and pure weight of their populations. In the original thinking of Jim O'Neill, South Africa did not, and still does not, fit the bill. South Africa may be the largest economy on the African continent, but it is not the fastest growing. Nor is its population the largest in Africa.

From an African point of view, a question was around the role that South Africa was to play - given that its debut summit was now past and Delhi was the first working summit, so to say. Surely this was the time for South Africa to bring the African continents' agenda to the table? Not so much. As the two-day summit progressed, and the big hitters of the group tussled over global investment finance, South Africa didn't seem to feature too heavily, leading to resumption of the chorus of questions wondering what exactly South Africa was doing in the group.

Speaking to the BBC on 12 December last year, South Africa's Minister of Finance, Pravin Gordhan, couldn't come up with too many reasons that South Africa should be a member other than the "largest economy in Africa" angle, and the slightly more crucial fact that South Africa is viewed as having a stable, investment-oriented financial- and business architecture. South Africa claims to offer a stable gateway into Africa for the BRICS members (questionable for numerous investors in numerous countries), while the BRICS offers South Africa a shining ladder into the upper echelons of the global economic powerhouses. This is positive for South Africa, no doubt, but is it the only African country that meets the grade of size of economy? Nigeria by far has the continent's largest population, and Angola and Ethiopia could easily stand in the company of Nigeria when it comes to impressive economic performance.

So, while the "original concept" of BRICS membership provides foundation for entry, the actual ticket for entry is finding some comparative advantage that the other BRICS members cannot afford to ignore. South Africa used this (being a big African economy with stability) and a heavy helping of political guile to get into the club, and without similar advantage and the means to make said advantage clear to the BRICS, there could be a next one hundred and eleven without a single extra member to this exclusive club.

From the African perspective, Nigeria has the size, and the economic weight, and it might very well overtake South Africa as Africa's largest economy within ten years. Nigeria certainly also has the economic activity to its credit – but it still lacks stability. The members may also prefer another Asian candidate, or a candidate with that holds favour with another heavyweight international organisation. Aspirant countries, in any case, will have to find that niche advantage that the BRICS will not be able to ignore. We will only see the BRINCS emerging if the contender successfully sells its advantage rather than sour others. 