

## The social issue in the BRICS Project

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**Abstract** *BRICS, the acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, is the first multilateral group created and run by non-western developed countries. The group aims to influence world geopolitics and market based on the right of developing and emerging countries to participate equitably in development. The social issue lies at the core of the group's justifications to achieve its goals. In this regard, this paper aims to analyze how the social issue has been addressed by BRICS. The methodology was based on bibliographic research and documentary analysis of the Declarations resulting from the nine BRICS Summits held from 2009 to 2017. Findings indicate that the social problem was necessary for the affirmation of the group's project in the global context. While there are advances in some social indicators and poverty has been reduced, the results in many social commitments of the group are weak. This can be attributed to the centrality of national contexts in the social issue, internal differences between countries, the non-mandatory nature of the group's initiatives, or because, while showing powerful strategies for new global arrangements, the social issue remains subsumed to geopolitical and market objectives.*

**Key words** *Social issue, BRICS, Social policy*

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## Introduction

BRICS, the acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, is the first multilateral group created and run by off-axis countries of developed and western nations. The term BRIC (still without South Africa) was coined by Goldman Sachs, who argued that these countries would become increasingly important in the global economic setting and in a few decades would be among the six largest economies in the world<sup>1</sup>. The primary objective of the group is to influence world geopolitics and the market, from the alleged importance of large developing countries with a crucial role in the economy. The BRICS account for 41.2% of the world's population and 29.6% of the Earth's territory. Domestic output in 2016 exceeded US\$ 16 trillion, and the group recorded a significant increase in its economies from 2007 (Table 1), even with recent declines in Brazil and Russia. GDP per capita follows the same trend, with a significant increase in China, obviously given its significant growth, but also in India, with a high gross birth rate (21.4 in 2015).

The novelty of the BRICS is its discourse and its proposals on global geopolitics centered on the right of all countries to develop, with emphasis on cooperation and the search for peace. As Wen and Zhaoyu<sup>2</sup> states, it is the first time that major powers have pursued peace and cooperation as their priority objectives, and not those of hegemony and war. The BRICS project is emphatic about the deficit of legitimacy of the Bretton Woods institutions, notably the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and the need to reform them. They recognize the role of the United Nations in addressing global challenges and threats but also advocate its reform to democratize international relationships, with more equitable participation among countries in the agency's decision-making processes. Social inclusion, the fight against poverty and inclusive and sustainable development, concerning the sovereignty of nations, are permanent flags of the group.

The innovative and bold proposal of new world governance is based on the objective of economic with human and social development. Such an association challenges the current hegemonic globalization model. According to Medeiros et al.<sup>3</sup>, BRICS is one of the most evident products of a change process in the international setting where economic power was distributed much more rapidly than political power, the regionalization processes have been consolidated with a form of development for the countries

and new regional powers have emerged, configuring a new multipolar or post-hegemonic order.

But this multipolarity does not necessarily imply confronting the developed countries of the north or the prevailing global capitalism model. Gray and Gills<sup>4</sup> argue that the field of analysis of global change is divided between those who believe in the potential of the so-called southern countries to break free from northern domination as a new third world idea, and others who say that southern power is embedded in the global capitalist model. The authors argue that the issue is whether the emerging elites of the South actually intend on challenging the dominant structures of capitalism or merely ensuring its reproduction, but changing their position and increasing their influence on the global stage.

The social issue is crucial in this debate, since it is, alongside armed conflicts and conflicts resulting from humanitarian crises, and the consequences for the environment, that which defines the worst effects of capitalism. On the other hand, it was the emergence and development of comprehensive social protection systems, not only economic growth that allowed for the definition of developed countries. Thus, it is not just the geopolitics that matters but the performance of countries in improving their social situation<sup>5</sup>.

BRICS shows good performance in reducing infant mortality rates and, to a lesser extent, maternal mortality rates (Table 2). Poverty reduction is significant for Brazil, South Africa and especially China. The GINI index, however, shows a persistent inequality in all the countries of the group, with little change in the selected years (Table 1). This is corroborated by the differences between the Human Development Index (HDI) and the Inequality-Adjusted Human Development Index (Table 2), which also evidences the unequal pattern of countries, Russia excepted. Data suggest a significant effort to reduce extreme poverty and its more visible consequences, but little investment in reducing inequalities. Public health expenditure, for example, remains below 5% of GDP in all countries, except Russia, with somewhat higher expenditure (Table 1).

The consideration of these elements justifies our intention to find out about the social issue in the BRICS project, that is, how is the social problem addressed by a group of large countries that intends to change the global hegemonic dynamics of power and market, create new multilateral arrangements and, thus, set the developmental and inclusion needs of their populations at the core of their vindication.

**Table 1.** BRICS - Selected socioeconomic data.

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
GDP (constant prices) US\$ / billion										
Brazil	1,397	1,695	1,669	2,208	2,612	2,459	2,464	2,417	1,801	1,796
Russia	1,300	1,661	1,223	1,525	2,034	2,154	2,232	2,086	1,372	1,286
India	1,247	1,105	1,435	1,744	1,824	1,828	1,857	2,034	2,089	2,273
China	3,554	4,601	5,110	6,101	7,576	8,560	9,611	10,483	11,063	11,203
South Africa	299	287	297	375	417	396	367	351	318	295
Gini										
Brazil	0.521	0.513	0.509	...	0.501	0.499	0.497	0.494	0.493	...
Russia	0.422	0.421	0.421	0.421	0.417	0.420	0.419	0.416	0.413	0.414
India (urban)	...	...	...	0.371	...	0.367	...	...	...	...
China	0.484	0.491	0.490	0.481	0.477	0.474	0.473	0.469	0.462	0.465
South Africa	...	...	0.640	...	0.650	...	...	0.639	...	...
GDP per capita (US\$)										
Brazil	7,373	8,852	8,623	11,295	13,231	12,343	12,258	11,919	8,668	
Russia	9,101	11,635	8,563	10,675	14,227	15,044	15,551	14,053	9,098	
India	1,096	958	1,227	1,470	1,495	1,481	1,489	1,613	1,586	
China	2,697	3,473	3,839	4,561	5,636	6,338	7,081	7,684	8,027	
South Africa	6,146	5,818	5,938	7,389	8,090	7,592	6,890	6,483	...	
% Public health expenditure PIB										
Brazil	4.7	4.7	5.1	4.9	4.8	5.0	4.9	3.8 <sup>a</sup>	...	
Russia	4.2	3.7	4.3	3.7	3.2	3.4	3.3	3.2	3.4	
India	1.3	1.3	1.4	1.3	1.2	1.3	1.2	1.1	1.2	
China	4.3	4.5	5.0	4.8	5.0	5.2	5.3	5.5	6.0	
South Africa	3.1	3.3	3.8	3.9	4.0	4.1	4.1	4.1	...	

Source: BRICS Joint Statistical Publication, 2016<sup>6</sup>. a: Source: World Bank<sup>7</sup>.

## Methods

The literature on BRICS is extensive today. However, there is no production record dealing specifically with the social issue within the group. In this regard, the study is exploratory and aims to identify to what extent and how the BRICS incorporates the social question. The methodology was based on bibliographic research and documentary analysis of the Declarations resulting from the nine BRICS Summits held annually from 2009 to 2017. The realms are addressed separately from the first to the ninth. We aim to show the development of the social issue in the BRICS project. As Cellard<sup>8</sup> states, the time dimension in documentary analysis allows us to observe the path of consolidation or maturation of a phenomenon. This aspect is vital in understanding the BRICS project since the group has no formal organization or hierarchical structure. Thus, their conformation and established cooperation rely exclusively on the interests of member countries. The Declarations contain commitments that are not

mandatory and evolve with the maturity of the collaboration itself.

The analysis of the Summits' Declarations was accompanied by data selected from the countries to identify some general social characteristics of the states. Where necessary, available documents on BRICS sectoral initiatives have been incorporated. However, it was not the purpose of this paper to analyze these initiatives, nor the results of the commitments made in the Declarations, given their scope. Since the Declarations are general propositions and obligations, they do not include the effects of sectoral cooperation, such as agreements and targets, but countless initiatives are expanding at each Summit. The first Declaration of 2009 contains 15 points of understanding, while that of 2016 includes 107 points, with more than one hundred recorded activities between ministerial meetings, working groups, forums and seminars.

The Summits' Declarations are analyzed according to two main realms – social issue and world governance and intra-BRICS social issue.

**Table 2.** BRICS - Selected Social Indicators.

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2007/2015
Child mortality /1,000 births <sup>1</sup>										
Brazil	20.0	19.0	18.1	17.2	16.4	15.7	15.0	14.4	13.8	-31%
Russia	9.4	8.5	8.1	7.5	7.4	8.6	8.2	7.4	6.5	-30.8%
India	55.0	53.0	50.0	47.0	44.0	42.0	40.0	...	...	-27.2% <sup>a</sup>
China	15.3	14.9	13.8	13.1	12.1	10.3	9.5	8.9	...	-41.8% <sup>b</sup>
South Africa	50.0	48.4	43.6	41.0	39.7	39.0	36.4	35.3	34.4	-31.2%
Maternal mortality/ 100 thousand live births <sup>2</sup>										
Brazil				65					44	-32%
Russia				29					25	-13.7%
India				215					174	-19%
China				35					27	-22.8%
South Africa				154					138	-10.3%
Life expectancy at birth <sup>1</sup>										
Brazil	72.8	73.1	73.5	73.9	74.2	74.5	74.8	75.1	75.4	3.5%
Russia	67.6	68.0	68.8	68.9	69.8	70.2	70.8	70.9	71.4	5.6%
India	65.7	66.1	66.1	66.1	...	...	...	...	...	0.6% <sup>c</sup>
China	...	...	...	74.8	...	...	...	...	76.3	2% <sup>d</sup>
South Africa	57.5	58.7	59.7	60.0	59.7	60.2	61.3	62.5	62.5	8.7%
HDI/HDIAD <sup>3</sup>										
Brazil									0.754/0.561	
Russia									0.804/0.725	
India									0.624/0.454	
China									0.738/ ...	
South Africa									0.666/0.435	
Poverty <sup>1e</sup>										
Brazil	5.8	4.9	4.7	...	4.5	3.8	...	...		-34.5% <sup>f</sup>
Russia	0.0	...	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0		
India (urban)	...	...	...	...	...	13.7	...	...		...
(rural)	...	...	...	...	..	25.7	...	...		...
China	...	3.07	...	2.0	1.3	...	...	...		-57.5% <sup>g</sup>
South Africa	...	...	10.7	...	7.4	...	...	...		-30.8% <sup>h</sup>

1. BRICS Joint Statistical Publication, 2016<sup>6</sup>. 2. WHO. Global Health Observatory (GHO) data<sup>9</sup>. 3. United Nations Development Programme<sup>7</sup>. a: from 2007 to 2013. b: from 2007 to 2014. c: from 2007 to 2010. d: between 2010 and 2015. e: % population with less than 1.25 \$ per day PPP except India, with its own methodology. f: from 2007 and 2012. g: between 2008 and 2011. h: between 2019 and 2011.

The global governance realm seeks to identify the principles and propositions in the BRICS declarations that relate to the worldwide community of countries. It is understood that these propositions affirm the place of the group in the international community. Considering that the group primarily aimed to establish its autonomy as sovereign states, demand greater participation in the decision-making processes of international organizations and affirm its power as emerging markets in the global dynamics, it is sought to identify to what extent and how the social question is inserted in this proposed reorganization. The

intra-BRICS realm aims to determine the principles, proposals and mechanisms recommended for the social issue between the countries of the group. The notion of the social aspect is widely addressed in the literature and there is a relative consensus about its characterization as a social intervention movement against the risks arising from the inequalities generated by capitalism. Without rejecting this notion, we adopt here a more practical meaning of the social issue as identification and answers to the collective social needs, through principles and possible suggestions by BRICS.

### The BRICS Summits and the social issue

The Declaration of the first BRIC<sup>10</sup> Summit, held in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in 2009 focuses on the situation of the global economy, then under the symptoms of the recent crisis of 2008, and the demand for democratization and transparency in the decision-making processes of financial organizations. The Declaration affirms BRIC's support for a fairer and democratic multi-polar world order based on international law, equity, mutual respect, cooperation, coordinated action and collective decision-making with all countries and reiterates that international disputes must be resolved peacefully through political and diplomatic efforts.

The group emphasizes that developing countries are the hardest hit by the financial crisis and that the international community should support them to minimize the effects of the crisis and ensure the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Declaration affirms intra-BRIC cooperation for vital social areas, albeit without specifying what it would be. The group's commitment to strengthening international humanitarian assistance and global food safety stands out.

The Declaration of the second BRIC<sup>11</sup> Summit, held in Brasilia in 2010, contains 31 points of understanding. It is more emphatic about propositions concerning reforms in international institutions, demanding greater representation from emerging and developing countries. In 2010, the best performance of the BRIC member countries was already visible in coping with the 2008 crisis, which strengthened the group internationally.

The social issue is present in several points and the relationship between the social and economic aspects of development is more evident. The group affirms the need for joint work among countries to seek more balance in world economic development and the promotion of social inclusion and stresses that developing countries have the potential to play a more significant and more active role in economic growth and prosperity.

The Declaration reaffirms the greater impact of the economic crisis on developing countries and proposes to support less favored nations in meeting the MDGs through technical cooperation and financial support in the implementation of development and social protection policies concerning the development models adopted by the states.

The group stresses the meeting of the agriculture ministers of the four countries, which decid-

ed to set up a common agricultural information system to develop strategies for access to food for vulnerable populations through the development of agricultural technology and the reduction of the negative impact of climate change on food security. The group calls on the international community to combat poverty, social exclusion and inequity in poor and developing countries. The social issue is associated with sustainable social development, full employment, decent work and particular attention to vulnerable groups such as the poor, women, youth, migrants and people with disabilities. Brasilia's Summit established several cooperation meetings in various areas, but none of them are specific to social sectors.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> BRICS Summit held in 2011 in Sanya, China, is the first to include South Africa. The Sanya Declaration<sup>12</sup> is also the first to incorporate Action Plans and new areas of cooperation. The declaration states that "eradication of extreme poverty and hunger is a moral, social, political and economic imperative of humankind and one of the greatest global challenges in the world today, particularly in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs)...<sup>12</sup>" – free translation). This summit reiterates BRICS' commitment to dialogue and cooperation in the fields of social protection and decent work, including gender equity, public health and the fight against HIV/AIDS.

The Declaration of the 4<sup>th</sup> BRICS<sup>13</sup> Summit, held in New Delhi, India, in 2012, highlights the group's concern about the unstable situation of the world market and the stability policies adopted by central countries that adversely affect emerging countries. Concerning the social issue, the group reiterates the aspects of sustainable growth and development associated with food safety, eradication of poverty, hunger and malnutrition, and the urgent need to create jobs to improve the standard of living in the world. The Declaration welcomes the initiative of cooperation in agriculture, with the two meetings of agriculture ministers of the five countries already held. The goal of food safety is now associated with productivity, transparency in markets and reduced volatility in commodity prices.

For the first time, the group incorporates public health objectives, resulting from the first meeting of health ministers defined at the previous Summit held in 2011. The declaration affirms the need to address common challenges such as universal access to health services, health technologies and medicines, as well as jointly address the increased costs of the sector and the growth of communicable and non-communicable diseases.

The action plan of the New Delhi Summit included new areas such as the Youth policy of Youth and population themes. BRICS information cooperation efforts generated in 2012 the first report on the group<sup>14</sup>.

The 5<sup>th</sup> BRICS Summit was held in Durban, South Africa in March 2013, resulting in the eThekweni Declaration<sup>15</sup>. The economic crisis takes on much of the points in the Declaration, where the group again criticizes the measures taken by the central countries to protect their economies, with negative impacts in other countries, especially the increasing internal debts and rising unemployment, maintaining world instability. In the Declaration, BRICS announces its most daring initiative, which was the decision to create the New Development Bank, the BRICS bank.

The group affirms the need for peace concerning state sovereignty and support from the international community for the humanitarian crisis in the various conflict-ridden countries. They are all initiatives that confirm a non-hegemonic position in international conflicts and attest to the group's option for autonomy vis-à-vis the positions of developed nations.

The group expresses interest in cooperating in the field of human rights and welcomes the 20 years of the World Conference on Human Rights and its Vienna Declaration. This is the first time that the subject of human rights has entered the group's agenda without referring to situations of conflict.

The achievement of the Millennium Development Goals for 2015 remains in this Declaration. The group once again expresses concern about the possibility of retreating the accomplishment of goals by low-income countries due to the international economic crisis. Attention is drawn to the need for Goal 8 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to remain at the core of the United Nations system discourse and that commitments made to support developing countries be honored.

Other issues related to the social problem, which had been included in previous declarations, such as food safety and public health, do not appear in this Declaration but remain in the group's activities in the Plan of Action.

A new cycle of the group's summits is inaugurated with the 6<sup>th</sup> BRICS meeting, held in Fortaleza, Brazil, in 2014. The central theme is "Inclusive growth: sustainable solutions" with the objective of "maintaining inclusive macroeconomic and social policies ... and facing the challenges posed

by the need to simultaneously achieve growth, inclusion, protection and preservation"<sup>16</sup>.

The association between social and economic development as a strategy for global growth is placed early in the Declaration, when the group reiterates its commitment to international law and multilateralism and emphasizes that its place in global dynamics is already recognized for its "contribution to global peace, economic stability, social inclusion, equity, sustainable development and cooperation with all countries"<sup>16</sup>. The group says it stands ready to explore new areas of cooperation and partnerships to facilitate market relationships and financial integration. This is evidenced by the launch of the New Development Bank, or BRICS Bank, at this Summit. The Declaration supports BRICS' contribution to the stability of the world economy with its economic growth and social inclusion policies, which would have created jobs and reduced poverty and inequity.

Human rights are advocated in the Declaration and include the "right to development, in a fair and equal manner, at the same pace and with the same emphasis" (as human rights)<sup>16</sup>. In a clear statement against criticism of human rights violations, the group advocates the "need to promote, protect and realize human rights in a non-selective, non-politicized, constructive way and without double standards"<sup>16</sup>. This statement is followed by another in defense of democracy and the peaceful resolution of conflicts in various countries, drawing attention to the grave humanitarian situation and violation of human rights arising from interventionist solutions and unilateral sanctions, as well as from disrespect to the sovereignty of nations.

The eradication of poverty remains a central theme, but without specific intra-BRICS proposals. It is instead the core of an "intergovernmental process of building an integrated universal development agenda"<sup>16</sup>.

Education enters for the first time in the Declarations of the group, also as an element of development and economic growth. The group declares its willingness with education for all and initiates cooperation in the area, with the meetings of ministers of education and the BRICS Network University.

Population themes are also present in the Declaration of Fortaleza, with emphasis on initiatives that affect the social issue, such as demographic transition and post-transition, aging and reduction of mortality. Attention is given to the commitment announced by the group to address the social problems related to gender inequality,



women's and youth's rights, and to ensure the sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights for all. Population themes have generated the BRICS Agenda for Cooperation on Population Issues, which includes topics such as gender equality, violence against women, youth and the elderly<sup>17</sup>.

The Fortaleza Action Plan includes, for the first time, cooperation initiatives in the area of social security. A study by the International Social Security Association, which compared the BRICS systems, indicated the growth of inequality in the five countries, partly as a result of the social security coverage itself, segmented and mainly covering workers from the formal labor market. Among the challenges for the area, the study affirmed the need to expand coverage, especially for the rural area, the elderly and people with disabilities, as well as increase services, address problems arising from government decentralization and its different subsystems, increase funding and equate benefits<sup>18</sup>. While commissioned by BRICS, this study did not have repercussions on the following Summits, but would return in 2017, with an essential document of principles and purposes for the area.

The 7<sup>th</sup> BRICS Summit was held in Ufa, Russia, in 2015. The Ufa Declaration<sup>19</sup> reaffirms the commitment to human rights and criticizes its politicization; and it goes further, announcing that the group will strengthen its positions with human rights institutions, including the UN. This more incisive position responds to criticisms by Amnesty International and the UN of violation of rights, especially in China and Russia in the period. The protection of human rights is more a political statement than a set of non-hegemonic proposals for global action or even an area of intra-BRICS cooperation.

Concerning the agricultural issue, access of vulnerable populations to food remains, but the text's priority is for market actions, trade and adaptation of agriculture to climate change.

For the first time, a single item of the Declaration deals explicitly with social protection, where the group notes with satisfaction the progress achieved in coordinating efforts concerning human resources and employment, social welfare and social security, as well as a social integration policy<sup>19</sup>. These efforts are, in fact, initiatives for joint studies and meetings in the areas of population, work and employment and, more recently, social security and social inclusion. The Ufa Action Plan defines the staging of a BRICS Forum on Comprehensive Social Protection Systems at

the meeting of experts from the group of countries on social and labor issues. However, no records of this activity are available. The elderly appear for the first time among specific population groups that require attention, alongside women, youth and people with disabilities.

Health also comes into this statement with more emphasis. The group declares "the right of all individuals, without distinction, to the highest possible standard of physical and mental health and quality of life necessary for the maintenance of their health and well-being and the health and well-being of their family"<sup>19</sup>. The group calls on the international community to strengthen cooperation among countries to achieve health goals, which include implementing "universal and equitable access to health services" and "ensuring the provision of good quality and affordable services, taking into account the different national circumstances, policies, priorities and capacities" and through partnerships with the public and private sectors, civil society and the academia, improve health for all<sup>19</sup>.

Regarding the group's objective initiatives, however, the focus is on reducing or eradicating communicable diseases that "hinder development", especially HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, neglected tropical diseases, polio and measles. In this regard, the Ufa Plan of Action defines the International Conference on "Common threats – joint actions: the response of the BRICS countries to dangerous infectious diseases" to be held in 2015, but no records of this initiative are available. Cooperation in health and communicable diseases research is not among the cooperation initiatives published in the same Declaration for Science, Technology and Innovation.

The Ufa Summit takes place in 2015, the Millennium Development Goals assessment year, repeatedly reiterated in previous BRICS Declarations. The meeting welcomes efforts towards the MDGs, and already indicates its commitment to the post-2015 development agenda, but does not announce the situation of the group's own countries vis-à-vis achieving the MDGs. The Declaration reaffirms its position that poverty eradication is an indispensable element for sustainable development and reiterates the need for a coherent and balanced approach between the economic, social and environmental components of sustainable development for the post-2015 agenda. This approach would be a common framework of objectives that are universal, but applicable to each national reality according to its characteristics and priorities.

Among Ufa's strategic decisions is the consolidation of the "Strategy for a BRICS economic partnership", a long-term plan for economic cooperation among the group's countries, to be reviewed every five years. Among its purposes, the plan aims to "fight for inclusive economic growth to eradicate poverty, fight against unemployment and promote social inclusion"<sup>20</sup>. However, of the eight priority economic areas of the plan, only Science and Technology incorporates themes related to the social issue, such as food safety and medical research.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Summit of the BRICS group was held in Goa, India, in 2016. The Declaration of Goa<sup>21</sup> includes several items that address the position of the BRICS group on world governance, which are highlighted again after the first Summits of the new cycle, started in 2014 in Fortaleza, when the topics of trade and cooperation had been more emphasized.

The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, which updates the Millennium Development Goals, is welcomed in the Declaration due to its centrality in eradicating poverty and a balanced approach between the economic, social and environmental realms of sustainable development. The group draws attention to the principle of "Common but Differentiated Responsibilities" of the Agenda, which responds to the conception of respect for national particularities already claimed in previous Summits and commits itself to the implementation of the G20 Action Plan for the 2030 Agenda<sup>22</sup>, which includes support to developing countries for achieving the goals. One of the items of the Agenda emphasized in the Declaration is the group's commitment to gender equity and the empowerment of women and girls. An important initiative was the creation of the BRICS Women's Parliamentary Forum, which in a meeting in 2016 outlines strategies for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda<sup>23</sup>.

Concerning young people, the group ratifies the conclusions of the BRICS Youth Summit<sup>24</sup>, which recognizes the importance of education, employment and entrepreneurship for the social and economic inclusion of young people. Health highlights support to the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) 90-90-90 strategy and intra-BRICS<sup>25</sup> cooperation to promote research and development of drugs and diagnostic tools to eradicate epidemics and "facilitate access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines"<sup>21</sup>.

The 9<sup>th</sup> BRICS Summit was held in 2017 in Xiamen, China. The Xiamen Declaration<sup>26</sup> re-

cords more than 70 common documents already produced by the group. The Declaration welcomes the ten years of BRICS cooperation and reiterates the principles of mutual respect and understanding, equity, solidarity, inclusion and collaboration. The group emphasizes the elaboration of the BRICS Declaration of the Ministers of Labor and Employment<sup>27</sup>, which contains the document Structure of Cooperation in Social Security of BRICS, where intra-BRIC cooperation objectives in these areas are developed and aim to ensure full employment, protect decent work, advance relief and reduction of poverty through skill development and achieve universal and sustainable security systems. The cooperation provides for studies, among other things, to generate intra-BRICS agreements for exchanges on employment and social security.

The skills development approach as a mechanism to combat poverty appears for the first time in the group's declarations. According to the Declaration of Ministers, "BRICS countries agree to (...) improve the level of skills and employability of individuals, especially the poor, through professional training, to achieve reduction and elimination of poverty"<sup>26</sup>. Professional training of the less-favored to increase employability is a contentious issue, especially in countries where poverty is linked to a broad set of needs and vulnerabilities. The risk of this perspective, which is widespread in current social policies, is to address poverty as the non-adaptability of individuals, which hampers the very notion of inclusion reiterated by the group.

The health area is present in the Xiamen Declaration with the objectives already submitted in previous Declarations, mainly of cooperation in the areas of communicable diseases. For the first time in the Declarations, of note is the inclusion of a commitment to expanding health systems and increasing their funding.

In Xiamen, the first report of the BRICS Economic Partnership Strategy<sup>20</sup> is submitted. Among the areas with an impact on the social issue with available records are those of food security and education, focusing on technology sectors. Other social areas are not included.

## Discussion

Chart 1 summarizes the most relevant principles and standings of the nine BRICS Summits on the social issue. It is possible to identify that, as the group's cooperation progresses, social issues are



Chart 1. Social issue in the BRICS Summit Declarations (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa).

	<p><b>1<sup>st</sup> SUMMIT</b> 2009 Yekaterinburg, Russia 15 points of understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ensure the achievement of the MDGs</li> <li>- strengthen international humanitarian assistance and world food safety</li> </ul>	<p><b>2<sup>nd</sup> SUMMIT</b> 2010 Brasília, Brazil 31 points of understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ensure the achievement of the MDGs with financial and technical support to developing countries</li> <li>- promotesocial inclusion</li> <li>- fight poverty, social exclusion and inequality</li> <li>- promote sustainable social development with social protection, full employment, decent work and particular attention to vulnerable groups such as the poor, women, young people, migrants and people with disabilities</li> </ul>	<p><b>3<sup>rd</sup> SUMMIT</b> 2011 Sanya, China 30 points of understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ensure the achievement of the MDGs</li> <li>- sustainable growth and development as key to the elimination of poverty</li> <li>- eradication of extreme poverty and hunger as a moral, social, political and economic imperative for humanity</li> <li>- to implement the outcomes of the 2010 UN High-Level Plenary Meeting on the MDGs</li> </ul>	<p><b>4<sup>th</sup> SUMMIT</b> 2012 New Delhi, India 48 points of understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ensure the achievement of the MDGs by 2015</li> <li>- sustainable growth and development with food security, eradication of poverty, hunger and malnutrition</li> <li>- creation of jobs to improve the world standard of living</li> </ul>	<p><b>5<sup>th</sup> SUMMIT</b> 2013 Durban, South Africa 45 points of understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ensure the achievement of the MDGs by 2015</li> <li>- support for human rights and World Conference on Human Rights / Vienna Declaration</li> </ul>	<p><b>6<sup>th</sup> SUMMIT 2014</b> Fortaleza, Brazil 70 points of understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- achieve growth, inclusion, protection and preservation simultaneously</li> <li>- human rights with the same emphasis as the right to development</li> </ul>	<p><b>7<sup>th</sup> SUMMIT</b> 2015 Ufa, Russia 75 points of understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- commitment to human rights</li> <li>- advocacy of rights to the highest possible standard of physical and mental health</li> </ul>	<p><b>8<sup>th</sup> SUMMIT</b> 2016 Goa, India 107 points of understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- support for the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030</li> </ul>	<p><b>9<sup>th</sup> SUMMIT</b> 2017 Xiamen, China 69 points of understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- support for the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social Issue and World Governance</b></p>									

it continues

Chart 1. Social issue in the BRICS Summit Declarations (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa).

	1 <sup>st</sup> SUMMIT 2009 Yekaterinburg, Russia 15 points of understanding	2 <sup>nd</sup> SUMMIT 2010 Brasília, Brazil 31 points of understanding	3 <sup>rd</sup> SUMMIT 2011 Sanya, China 30 points of understanding	4 <sup>th</sup> SUMMIT 2012 New Delhi, India 48 points of understanding	5 <sup>th</sup> SUMMIT 2013 Durban, South Africa 45 points of understanding	6 <sup>th</sup> SUMMIT 2014 Fortaleza, Brazil 70 points of understanding	7 <sup>th</sup> SUMMIT 2015 Ufa, Russia 75 points of understanding	8 <sup>th</sup> SUMMIT 2016 Goa, India 107 points of understanding	9 <sup>th</sup> SUMMIT 2017 Xiamen, China 69 points of understanding
	- cooperation for vital social areas (unspecified)	- develop strategies for access to food for vulnerable populations	- increase dialogue and cooperation in social protection, decent work, youth, gender equity and public health	- protection of universal access to health services, health technologies and medicines - jointly address rising health sector costs and the growth of communicable and non-communicable diseases	- cooperation in food security and public health	- cooperation in food security and public health - eradication of poverty with an integrated agenda for universal development - cooperation in education - cooperation to ensure gender equity, women's and youth's rights.	- develop strategies for access to food for vulnerable populations - Forum on BRICS Comprehensive Social Protection Systems - protection for the elderly, women, youth and people with disabilities - universal and equitable access to health services - reduction or eradication of communicable diseases - research, development, production and supply of medicines for the treatment and prevention of communicable diseases	- reduction or eradication of communicable diseases - cooperation in drug research and development and diagnostic tools to eradicate epidemics - commitment to 90-90-90 goals of the Joint United Nations Program on HIV / AIDS - BRICS Parliamentary Women's Forum - ratification of the decisions of the BRICS Youth Summit	- reduction or eradication of communicable diseases - expanded health systems - increased health financing - support to the Declaration of the Ministers of Labor and Employment of BRICS and Structure of Cooperation in Social Security of BRICS
<b>Intra-Bricas Social Issues</b>			- group of cooperation in the pharmaceutical industry	- cooperation in research, development and innovation in health - cooperation in youth policy and population issues		- cooperation on BRICS Population Issues - cooperation on information for social indicators			

shifting from the world governance realm to the intra-BRICS actions realm. This indicates that the social issue was important for affirming the group's project in the global context, and reiterates the power of social issues in the power struggle in world geopolitics. On the other hand, the growth of the social issue in intra-BRICS commitments goes from generic statements in favor of social inclusion to incorporate most contemporary social issues such as poverty reduction, universal access to health and education, food safety, full employment and decent work, human rights, gender equity, social inclusion of the elderly and people with disabilities, youth, etc. Work groups and cooperation in strategic areas such as populations, health, education, work, social security and protection are consolidated with the second cycle of the Summits initiated with the 6<sup>th</sup> Summit in Fortaleza.

However, it is not possible to identify whether these commitments have had any impact on the social structure of the BRICS countries. The social advances recorded are somewhat related to national domestic policies than cooperation, and this may be due to several factors. Firstly, the non-imposing design of BRICS, if innovative regarding multilateral arrangements, does not imply commitments within countries such as the European Union or even Mercosur. This generates an inherently positive and purposeful agenda, favoring cooperation and solidarity in the group, but also makes propositions seem harmless if structures underpinning social policies avoid proposals.

Secondly, there is little emphasis on country-specific policies as part of social problems. In the group's discourse, social issues are more linked to world imbalance, which impairs the development of poor and developing countries, than to national domestic problems. As the group continually emphasizes respect for each country's internal policies and given the recognition of the considerable gaps between them, there is a void in identifying national problems that favor the permanence or difficulty of facing social challenges. Some recent initiatives have been made to address the social systems of member countries, but they have not turned into joint propositions and many are of unknown outcome.

Third, the social issue design in the group's project is linked entirely to growth and development. While this notion differs from the neoliberal agenda of developed countries, it maintains the social issue as a justification and consequence of development, not an intrinsic part of it.

All these factors allow us to assume a weakness in the BRICS project, insofar as it uses the social question in its discourse to advocate for a new dynamic of world governance, which respects and preserves the right of poor and emerging countries to development, but it does not incorporate it into concrete commitments to be adopted by the nations of the group.

## Conclusion

BRICS reiterates in its Summits the legitimacy deficit of international institutions and the need to reform them. It affirms its role and importance in a new world economic governance based on the democratization of international relationships and the equitable participation of emerging and developing countries. The social issue is at the core of the justifications for the advocacy of a new global arrangement that allows for fair and inclusive development. Several initiatives in the social area are now part of the cooperation among the countries of the group, in line with the central principles that countries are highlighting. However, despite significant advances in the reduction of poverty and the improvement of relevant social indicators, inequalities persist and in some cases even progressed. No social outcomes in the countries can be related to the participation in the group. This can be attributed to the difficulty of making commitments to very diverse national contexts with very different structures of social policy systems. The social issue is historically related to the development of national states and the notion of citizenship and is part of the political institutionality of country contexts. And there is no way to tackle social problems without intervening in organizational structures through sound public policies.

On the other hand, the type of BRICS arrangement, without formal organization or hierarchy, which favored its growth, may also be

a hindrance. With so many differences within it, BRICS took advantage of the flexibility and was able to move quickly without the restriction of rules and regulations<sup>28</sup>. This informality, undoubtedly a significant innovation in diplomatic engineering, can, however, establish weak commitments and compromise the BRICS objectives. If these commitments are valid, the challenge remains of making the many propositions assumed about the social issue a reality. If not, the social problem will have demonstrated its potency in strategies for new global arrangements but will remain subsumed to geopolitical and market objectives.

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