

South Africa's role in the region

It is generally accepted that South Africa is an 'economic power' house (relative to other countries) in the Southern African region. This is borne out by the fact that the country accounts for two thirds of the region's gross domestic product (GDP). Does this then qualify South Africa to lead the development of the region?

The ideal situation is that such leadership should be exercised in a manner that does not alienate other countries and citizens of the region. One of the main conditions for South Africa's 'benign hegemonic' role in the region is to drive a developmental agenda. However, the adoption of the growth, employment and redistribution strategy (Gear) has prevented this from occurring. For me, the adoption of neoliberal policies are not reconcilable with the type of developmental role that South Africa should be playing in the region.

For South Africa to be the dominant player who acts in the long term interests of the countries in the region, not only just those of the home state ('benign hegemon'), it will have to be cautious in its use of power in the region. It has to ensure that it leads the development of the region with 'consent'.

The minimum conditions for South Africa to play a 'benign hegemonic' role in the region include the following:

- Southern African Development

International pressure is often placed on South Africa to play a constructive role in the region. Mondli Hlatshwayo questions whether it is possible and desirable for South Africa to play a constructive and developmental role in SADC.

Community (SADC) member states must accept South Africa's hegemonic leadership.

- South Africa must create consent in the region.
- Countries must have some economic capacity to be part of the economic bloc. On the other hand South Africa needs economic capacity in order to play a dominant role.
- Countries of the region need institutional capacity to implement the decisions taken in SADC forums.
- The question of political acceptance, peace and stability in the region is critical. The war in Congo raised big questions about the acceptance of South Africa's political leadership there as well as other countries such as Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia. The intervention of South Africa in Lesotho

led some commentators to think that South Africa was a 'bully'. There is an indication that South Africa is not 'fully' embraced by the region. On the other hand, South Africa, through former President Mandela, was 'accepted' in the peace processes in Rwanda.

The conclusion of the European Union Trade Agreement by South Africa without consultation in the region is an indication that South Africa treats its regional partners as 'juniors'. This approach has also been criticised by the likes of Cosatu. More importantly, it is not possible for South Africa to play a dominant role in the region because of the adoption of its neoliberal policies. The shift away from the 'developmental' agenda to the neoliberal agenda indicates the increasing power of capital in the region and internationally. The investment of South African capital in the region is not driven by the need to ensure access to basic services but rather an indication of the need to participate in the 'race to the bottom line'.

South Africa's 'begin hegemonic' role in the region was based on an approach that put the needs of the people of South Africa and the region at the centre. The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) was an attempt to achieve this. It argued for balanced trade, the development of the economic capacity for SADC countries, development of the regional industrial base, mutually benefiting joint projects and minimum standards with regard to workers' rights in the region.

In 1995 the South African Department of Trade and Industry developed an investment initiative for the region called Spatial Development Initiatives (SDIs). One of the most prominent projects is the Maputo Development Corridor and the Mozal project. The projects are in line with the governments' approach, which

emphasises export orientation and the integration of the region into the 'competitive' global economy. South Africa encouraged capital to invest in Mozambique. However, we cannot assume that the investment of capital in the region will automatically lead to development.

South African companies are investing in Mozambique because of access to tax benefits, cheap labour, cheap infrastructure and low cost of labour. These investments are not driven by a 'developmental' agenda rather one motivated by profit maximisation. We should condemn South African companies that are searching for cheap black labour in the region. I am not saying there should be no investments in the region. However, investment should be linked to a developmental agenda coupled with granting workers decent wages and employment conditions.

The new agenda is deepening inequalities in the region. In addition, countries in the region are faced with challenges such as HIV/AIDS, debt payment, cut in social expenditure, etc. For me the neoliberal policies are not reconcilable with the developmental role South Africa should be playing in the region. These policies promote 'recolonisation' and the 'race to the bottom'.

Conclusion

The abandonment of Gear is critical if South Africa is to play a leadership role in the development of the region. In the meantime, trade unions, civil society in South Africa and the region should struggle for such ideals. Their struggle should be 'connected' to the struggles of 'anti globalisation and exploitation' forces of the South and the North. This is difficult but we can achieve it!

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