Emerging Agents of Change? Africa and International Negotiations

Executive Summary

*Emerging Agents of Change? Africa and international negotiations* was a one day seminar held at Chatham House as part of the British International Studies Association (BISA) Africa and International Studies working group’s seminar series on *African Agency in international politics*. The seminar was sponsored by BISA, Chatham House and the ESRC.

The purpose of the seminar was to critically examine the agency of African states in multilateral diplomacy and international negotiation in the areas of world trade, aid, and climate change. In all three areas, Western and increasingly emerging powers, as well as international institutions such as the UNDP and World Bank have sought actively to promote greater capacity and participation in Africa in international and regional forums, often in support of international objectives. The questions posed to workshop participants were: what is the extent of African states’ activity in these sets of negotiations? what are the sources of and constraints on this activism? and what are the implications for western policy and the international institutions?

This summary provides an overview of the key findings arising from the day’s discussion, followed by a more detailed summary of the contributions from the presenters in each session.

For further information on the African Agency series, see page 6 of this summary.
Summary

The extent of African activism in international negotiations

- Africa is forging a distinct role in the international diplomatic game. When acting as a regional block it can have a significant impact in multilateral processes.
- In aid negotiations there is a high degree of variability in how effective African states are at realising their preferences.
- African countries are no longer afraid to say no in global negotiations such as trade and climate change and have utilised the rhetoric of justice and fairness to exert blocking power.

Sources and limitations of African agency

- A key basis for African agency is by ‘playing the numbers game’ – exploiting situations where numbers of states count, such as multilateral forums like the WTO and the UN.
- The existence of multipolarity, due to the rise of new powers, has created new avenues and leverage for African states, but also has led to deadlock in key issues areas like trade and climate change.
- A key limitation on African agency is how to turn blocking power and numbers into influence and policy outcomes.
- Questions remain over the interests of South Africa, and the balance between its national interests and those of the region as a whole.
- The relationship with China is critical to the future of African agency: questions remain as to whether this can further African interests or whether Africa is just a useful ally for China’s diplomatic strategies.

Implications for policy and international organisations

- The rise of African activism is a crucial factor in the impasse that characterises trade and climate change negotiations; overcoming the impasse means dealing with African states’ interests.
- Problems in multilateral forums may lead to a greater emphasis on bilateral processes which may not be to Africa’s advantage.
- Despite this, the UK has both moral (justice) and self-interested (security) reasons to support greater African state capacity including participation in international processes.
Details of presentations

Africa in multilateral negotiations: a critique of African common positions – Dr Siphamandla Zondi (Institute for Global Dialogue, South Africa)

A new Africa emerged from the wave of democratisation after 1989 marked by forms of leadership responsible for advancing a new agenda for the region. This new agenda has led to a paradigm of pragmatism. Central to this has been the move away from concerns over sovereignty and safeguarding national interests to an ‘enlightened approach’ wherein states are willing to pool sovereignty in pursuit of common interests. These common interests have been most acutely seen in the common African position on UN reform and climate change. African states approach negotiations through formation of a harmonised position based on agreed principles for negotiations and common sets of demands and the building of alliances to further these. The challenges of a harmonised African position include how to leverage a regional approach in a global system that still sees states as the main actor in negotiations; and how to form a common regional position while still allowing flexibility for bargaining concessions.

The following questions were raised in response to Dr Zondi’s presentation:

- From an African position of common demands and principles, where is the space for compromise in negotiation?
- Is co-operation possible for a geographic region (Africa) with large differences between states?
- Which African states are showing leadership other than South Africa?
- What role do different sub-regions play and how do they influence effectiveness of the region?

Weapons of the Weak? Africa in Aid Negotiations – Dr Alastair Fraser (Cambridge University)

Despite the partnership and ownership agenda in aid policy, aid relations should still be seen as a process of negotiation. The key issue is how far African states are able to uphold their national interests. The level to which African states have agency in aid negotiations depends on: the global context of aid such as world economic conditions, geopolitical contexts, and indebtedness; a state’s ideological resources and ability to articulate a clear set of preferences; domestic political and economic conditions such as political support, tax base etc; and institutional factors such as the history of relations with donors and independent policy-making agencies. Among African states Botswana, Ethiopia and Rwanda had shown the greatest ability to exert their interests in aid negotiations but for rather unique and different reasons. However, for donors, deep problems remain. The ownership agenda has arisen because donors are uncomfortable with having responsibility for failure of reform programmes, they have lost confidence in the project of aid. The
addition of liberalism and democratisation to aid negotiation has led to confusion as to what they are doing. For their part, recipients are embarrassed about their seemingly undignified position within the international system. The aid system is a form of ‘therapeutic intervention’ where both sides have to off-load responsibility for failure.

The presentation generated questions and discussion in regards to:

- Has aid the analysis of aid become over-complicated? Are development and political objectives somehow separate?
- How has China shaped aid negotiations and do donors have less leverage with the waning of the Washington Consensus?
- Isn’t the presence of ‘good governance’ in aid negotiations just a reflection that donors have to check aid is well spent?
- Is the idea of aid as compensation for injustice coming back in the form of aid for trade deals?
- What long and short term price do African states have to pay to assert themselves and their strategies within aid negotiation?

**African Activism in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) – Prof. Donna Lee (University of Birmingham)**

African states have taken an active, influential role in the Doha Development Agenda of the WTO and have been the major cause for deadlock in completing the Doha round of trade negotiations. The key issues for Africa have been: agriculture, trade-related intellectual property rights (TRIPS), market access and special safeguard measures. African activism has been articulated through a discourse of rights, development, and a voice for African states within global governance. Africa is the largest strategic group within the WTO and is effective in playing the numbers game: it has the numbers of states and thus votes in the WTO to block decisions and put issues on the table. African states have gone beyond ‘the crying game’ highlighting issues of inequality and bias through partnerships with large NGOs to engage in what Robert Zoellick describes as a ‘won’t do strategy.’ The African group within the WTO are effective at playing groups off against each other, taking advantage of technical training and capacity building provisions, and building on alliances. Africa thus has deliberative capacity within the WTO but is limited by the ability of states to negotiate effectively with limited market power, ensure presence to vote, and how it responds to new regional and bilateral trade agreements that come increasingly to the fore as WTO deadlock persists.
Prof. Lee’s presentation generated discussion around the following issues:

- Why are poor countries able to offer an alternative discursive terrain, as they did in the past with the New International Economic Order (NIEO), yet not achieve much?
- Is blocking the conclusion of the Doha Round counter-productive for Africa as the WTO is not as bad for Africa as alternative bilateral agreements?
- Is there such a stark divide between the WTO and the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA)?
- Given growth in world trade, does ‘crisis’ of the WTO matter?

African decision-making in climate change negotiations – Dr Jean-Christophe Hoste (Egmont University)

African states suffer the most from climate change yet lack the capacity to respond to the crisis. This lack of capacity is due to poverty and development, internal dynamics and relationships within the region, and the absence of African analysis of its own position or single voice on the issue. Despite the African Union seeking a common position, the realisation of such a position is undermined by the role of South Africa and tensions within the region between Ethiopia, the Sudan and Libya. South Africa is responsible for 40% of all sub-Saharan Africa’s carbon emissions and has a prominent position as an emerging economy in need of investment, specifically from China, for growth. Meles Zenawi’s role in negotiation at COP15 in Copenhagen suggested a break from previous agreements within the African Union. The combination of Zenawi’s role and the history of disputes between Ethiopia and the Sudan over water management, China’s investment and Sudan’s elections all complicated the ‘common position’ of African states towards climate change and an ability to identify the region’s own role, capacity and leverage within negotiations.

The following points were made in response to Dr Hoste’s presentation:

- How will the ‘common position’ or lack thereof affect South Africa’s ability to lead on COP17?
- How African is the African ‘common position’? Does Sudan’s leadership of the G77 mean that this position is China’s position?
- Do African concessions matter as a deal breaker? Most important players still the USA and China
- Is the money for adaptation being spent well? How is this measured? Or does this not matter as no money is coming?
- What might Africa gain if they did not support China’s position? Can and should they say no to China?
Making Africa’s Voice Heard in Climate Change negotiations – Hilary Benn MP

The relationship between a state’s emissions size and international voice is changing. However, the voice of Africa is not heard as loudly as it should considering the importance of the continent to tackling environmental issues, poverty and trade relations. This responds partly to insufficient capacity to address some of the issues, and on the limited power and influence of domestic political actors in climate change policy. This has been compounded by the financial crisis and the region still continuing to lack political and economic clout. Africa seems to be lagging behind in two key areas: the development of forestry and carbon markets (where funding is needed to implement low carbon technologies and renewable energies) and the green revolution (also linked to production and scientific investment). Finally, Africa has to be more flexible with its bargaining position if it wants to capture some of the benefits of the mechanisms set out in Kyoto and move the environmental agenda forward vis-a-vis developed countries.

The presentation generated questions and discussion in regards to:

- What is the UK’s interest in enhancing Africa’s position in negotiation? How does the UK benefit?
- How do we go beyond the tendency to see Africa as a single country?
- Was African Agency some form of moral project for New Labour?
- How do distinctions between food sovereignty and food security manifest in policy? Are these important distinctions?

African Agency

For further information and access to the full papers featured in this workshop, please visit http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/bisa-africa/african-agency/

Emerging agents of change? was the first of a series of seminars on African Agency. The next four seminars in the series are:

Peace, Conflict and Intervention University of Birmingham 7th April 2011
Transnational Security University of Kent 16th June 2011
African Agency: Implications for International Relations Theory City University 14th September 2011
Agency and Southern Africa University of Stellenbosch November 2011

If you are interested in attending these seminars please contact Sophie Harman sophie.harman@city.ac.uk or Will Brown w.brown@open.ac.uk