



Brazil as a new international cooperation actor in sub-Saharan Africa: Biofuels at the crossroads between sustainable development and natural resource exploitation



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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, emerging economic powers have become increasingly influential actors in the formerly closed circle of donor countries. In the frame of south–south cooperation initiatives, large economies in the global south are working with less advanced developing countries. While a significant literature on China's role regarding mining and oil and gas exploration in Africa has developed, an analysis of the new dynamics of South–South cooperation and its effect on the political economy and sustainability of rural development and energy diversification in African countries is largely absent. As an effort to start filling this gap, we analyze the opportunities and frictions introduced by Brazilian actors in the biofuel sector in a set of sub-Saharan African countries. By assessing the political, technical and economic dimensions present in Brazil's south–south cooperation strategy for this region, we find that the arrival of Brazilian biofuel actors to Africa is leading to deep asymmetries between powerful and less preminent actors, undermining the overall sustainability of the offered development model.

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1. Introduction

Emerging economic powers, especially the so-called BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) are playing an increasingly important role in redefining the architecture of international cooperation. In the context of growing worldwide energy demand, cooperation initiatives among states from the global South (generally developing countries) are becoming a tool that emerging economies also use to foster biofuel production in Africa, via technical assistance, investment agreements and energy supply deals.

Brazil has a major role to play in this new type of South–South cooperation (SSC). With its extensive agricultural background and as a leader in the production and use of biofuels, Brazil is becoming a leading player in renewable energy in sub-Saharan Africa (hereafter referred to as simply Africa), the focus of this Special Issue. Recent studies [1–5] find that activities related to large-scale mono-culture for the production of biofuels as an alternative energy source is becoming one of the main sources for socio-environmental conflicts and disputes on the African continent.

Multiple linkages between solidarity and self-interest, values and pragmatism, enterprises and civil society dominate this new phase of Brazilian SCC [6]. This tension is the result of a double level process in Brazil's foreign actions: on a conceptual level, an effort to project the image of a non-hegemonic power in the search to differentiate itself from both northern and other emerging powers (particularly, China), but on the practical level development cooperation is promoted in other developing countries in a way that allows Brazil to support its own foreign policy goals [7,8].

International political economy, as a subfield of international relations concerned with the interplay between political and economic factors in international politics, has been identified as a prominent emerging approach for understanding global environmental [9] and global energy policies [10]. In that direction, we observe that the study of how the new dynamics of SSC are affecting the political economy and sustainability of rural development and energy diversification in countries in Africa remains relatively unexplored. From a political economy approach, this article proposes to analyze opportunities and frictions introduced by Brazilian international actors in the biofuel sector in African countries, especially Angola, Ghana, Mozambique and Senegal.

In Section 2, we introduce the North–South dimension responsible for globally boosting biofuels as a source of energy, thus

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providing the context for Brazil's biofuel internationalization through cooperation. In Section 3, we briefly discuss the drivers, conditions, capacities and tensions around which biofuels are being promoted in Africa by external players. In Section 4, we provide some theoretical insights around the concept of South–South cooperation, and introduce other concepts associated with the problematic impacts of activities by emerging international actors in Africa with particular focus on the transformation of the agrarian sector. In Section 5 we conclude by assessing Brazilian actor's engagement in developing a biofuel sector and policies in Africa by looking at the political, technical–scientific and economic dimensions in Brazil's actions. We argue that the production of liquid biofuels led by Brazilian actors in Africa introduces deep asymmetries and inequalities between the powerful and the less preeminent actors and sectors at a South–South level. Moreover, we conclude that the Brazilian initiatives fail to incorporate local actors in decision-making, promote the autonomy of African states in technological innovation and energy supply, and reinforce sustainable development.

2. Emerging powers redefining the architecture of international cooperation in a worldwide context of growing energy demand

Due to growing international demand for renewable sources of energy by industrialized economies¹ seeking to comply with international climate change commitments and achieve energy self-sufficiency, many countries in the global South have enlisted in the development of a strong biofuel industries based on a set of natural comparative and competitive advantages. Over the last few years, in South America and Asia, countries like Argentina, Brazil and Indonesia have become known as important global biofuel producers.

Within the emerging economies, generally understood to be the BRICS, Brazil quickly took the lead in the biofuel industry, framing this productive development as the chance to overcome national challenges such as rural development, energy self-sufficiency or climate change. However, the opportunities provided by the international market became as important of a driver as these national priorities. In the first phase, the new export opportunities provided by the European Union (EU) and United States of America (USA) markets encouraged governmental internal and external policies to position Brazil as a leading biofuel global actor. In this sense, the 2006 Agri-energy National Plan (*Plano Nacional de Agroenergia*) sought to “induce the creation of a biofuel international market, guaranteeing Brazil's leadership in the sector” [70] (pp. 9). In March 2007, the International Biofuel Forum was created as an inter-governmental initiative that brought together all main emerging economies (Brazil, China, India and South Africa), the European Commission and the USA. The states launched the forum launched with the stated goal of “promoting the sustained use and production of biofuels around the globe.”² Trade played a crucial role in the Forum's creation, as energy demand for transport fuel was rising at an accelerated rate. These states planned for the Forum to last one year, with several periodical meetings. As such, one year later it

vanished, never becoming a significant space for policy deliberation and rule making in the sector.

Nonetheless, despite the collapse of a formal global initiative to create a biofuel market, the major global players in biofuels have accelerated international trade and investments in the sector. In the case of Brazil, both the government and the private sector have found in biofuels an ideal platform to integrate into the global economy. As a result, biofuels are no longer only a national strategy for oil import substitution, as it used to be when the ethanol industry was formalized back in the 1970s, but rather a way of inserting the Brazilian economy into global production chains throughout the transnationalization of capital.

Brazil's irruption on the map of international donors as a *development partner* (as officially presented by the Brazilian government), provides the country with an innovative tool to exert influence consistent with its national fiscal surpluses, the international projection of national interests, a consolidated regional leadership, and the desire to become a more autonomous player in the global political economy [11]. Bilateral cooperation initiatives represent the second phase of Brazil's plan to internationalize its energy policy and energy actors. Since the last decade, the Brazilian government has been signing a series of side agreements for cooperation in the fields of agriculture, energy and biofuel production with many African countries. In that direction, SSC stands as a very functional ‘*letter of introduction*’ for achieving this goal.

In this article, we seek to explore the nexus between international cooperation developed by Brazil as an emerging economy and sustainable biofuel production in Africa: specifically, to what extent do international cooperation actions developed by Brazil in Africa contribute to providing a sound and sustainable source of energy?

To answer that research question, we have employed the following methods: Firstly, a complete review of the literature on emerging powers, SSC, and international and African biofuel developments in academic and professional journals, books, reports and international organizations' documents on these subjects. This information was complemented in a second phase by conducting ten semi-structured interviews with key informants in Brazil and African countries including representatives of the Brazilian Ministry of International Relations (*Itamaraty*), of the Brazilian Enterprise for Agricultural Research (*EMBRAPA Agroenergia*) of international organizations with representation in Africa (European Union's Agricultural Officer in Mozambique) and of national related ministries (public officers in Senegal). Thirdly, as one of the major challenges of this work was to obtain official statistics, we used press reports on investments and production released by Brazilian biofuel producing companies and Brazilian national media when necessary to supplement other sources. Finally, the strengthening of Brazilian ties with Africa is the result of the actions developed not only by governmental actors and organs, but also by decentralized semi-public and private actors that have acted under distinct logics and following different objectives and priorities.

3. Overview of current liquid biofuel developments in Sub-Saharan Africa

The promise of liquid biofuels as key drivers for rural development, energy security and climate change mitigation through renewable energy has begun to fade over the last few years turning into a set of ever-evolving debates on global and regional issues such as food security, land use change, deforestation, land concentration and other relevant environmental and social impacts [12–16]. Uncertainties and the stakes are so high, latecomers to the

¹ We refer to the European Union's Renewable Energy Directive of 2009 and the USA's Renewable Fuel Standard of 2005 which introduced blending mandates leading to the creation of a global biofuels market.

² According to the United Nations' Department of Public Information on a press release issued after the Press Conference on “Launching International Biofuel Forum”. Available at: <http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2007/070302-Biofuels.doc.htm> (accessed January 2014).

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