

Institutionalizing Women's Economic Participation in an Informal Grouping: A Qualitative Study of the BRICS Women's Business Alliance (2020–2025)

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ABSTRACT:

BRICS is an informal intergovernmental grouping: it rests on no founding treaty and maintains no permanent secretariat. Yet since 2020 it has operated a structured business mechanism for women, the Women's Business Alliance (WBA), which has developed national chapters, thematic working groups, written terms of reference, and an annual reporting cycle. This study examines how the WBA became institutionalized across its first five years, what thematic priorities it developed, how it connects to the wider BRICS economic architecture, and what forms of institutionalization are observable in its documentary record. The study adopts an instrumental single case study design, applying qualitative document analysis and thematic analysis to institutional documents published between 2020 and 2025, including annual reports, terms of reference, issues notes, and handover reports. Four findings emerge. First, the Alliance developed a replicated national-chapter template combined with cross-cutting thematic working groups, producing structure without central authority. Second, it substituted for the absence of a permanent secretariat through three mechanisms: a rotating chairship aligned to the BRICS presidency, the designation of a sherpa and national executive secretariats, and a shared digital platform. Third, its thematic agenda remained stable across successive chairships while

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individual initiatives varied by host country. Fourth, institutionalization is observable primarily in documentary and procedural form rather than in legal or financial delegation. The study contributes to scholarship on informal intergovernmental organizations by showing how structure develops within a subsidiary body of an informal grouping and offers the first systematic institutional account of the Alliance.

Keywords: BRICS, informal intergovernmental organizations, institutionalization, women's economic participation, global governance, transnational business networks.

Introduction**Background**

BRICS is in a unique position in the field of the study of international institutions. It lacks a founding treaty, permanent secretariat, headquarters, and standing bureaucracy, but meets in summits each year, makes collective declarations, and maintains an ever-growing set of subsidiary mechanisms. According to Vabulas and Snidal (2013), BRICS is an informal intergovernmental organization, which is an institutional form of cooperation that enables states to cooperate internationally without delegating authority to a supranational institution.

The Women's Business Alliance provides a particular perspective on the internal structure that can be created by such an association. The BRICS Heads of State in 2019 agreed to establish the Alliance, which came into existence in 2020 under the leadership of the Russian Federation with the participation of its member countries. It has been set with the aim of strengthening the economic participation of women and to promote cooperation between the businesses led by women in the BRICS context. In 2025, it consisted of national chapters in all member countries, six thematic working groups, a written terms of reference, national executive secretariats, a common digital platform, and a yearly cycle of reporting ending with published recommendations to the BRICS governments.

This is analytically interesting because it took place in the absence of any of the means formal international organizations have for

institutionalization. There is no treaty founding the Alliance, no independent budget, no permanent staff members for the Alliance and no competence to bind members. Structure nonetheless emerged.

Problem Statement

The literature on informal intergovernmental organizations has focused on the motives behind the choice of informality and on the attributes of the parent organizations (Vabulas & Snidal, 2013, 2021). The dynamics within the groupings have received little attention, and particularly that of the organization of the subsidiary bodies. In the absence of delegation by an informal grouping, the processes of continuity, coordination and institutional memory of its constituent bodies become an empirical matter rather than an assumption.

Transnational arrangements that govern gender, as part of feminist political economy scholarship, examine public-private partnership (Prügl & True, 2014; Roberts, 2015). Most of this literature has been directed towards initiatives that are based in the main multilateral institutions and large corporations of industrialized economies. A business mechanism for women in an informal grouping of emerging economies has not been studied comprehensively.

Research Significance

The study has three contributions. Empirically, it unfolds the first systematic institutional analysis of the BRICS Women's Business Alliance based on the documentary record of the Alliance in its first five years. As far as theory goes, it extends the literature on informal intergovernmental

organizations from the level of the parent organization to the level of its subsidiary bodies, and identifies the mechanisms of substitution which provide organizational continuity for these. It shows methodologically how the self-produced documentation of an institution can be analyzed as evidence of institutional development, while at the same time being treated as institutional self-presentation rather than as independent verification.

Research Questions

RQ1. What was the process of building up the institutional structure of the BRICS Women's Business Alliance from 2020 to 2025?

RQ2. What have been the Alliance's thematic priorities and how have these changed over time, from one rotating chair to the next?

RQ3. How is the Alliance linked to the BRICS economic structure?

RQ4. In the Alliance's documentary record, what can be seen as institutionalization?

Scope

Institutional structure, documented priorities, and organizational development are analyzed. The study does not monitor results, determine the impact of the Alliance's activities, or compare the member states' gender-related policies. These are beyond the parameters of analysis used here and would need to be supported by evidence which the documentary record does not provide.

Literature Review

The literature explored in this study is threefold – informal intergovernmental organizations and institutional design, feminist political economy scholarship on transnational governance of gender, and the smaller literature on BRICS as an institution.

Informal Intergovernmental Organizations and Institutional Design

Vabulas and Snidal (2013) have added the concept of informal intergovernmental organizations to the study of international institutions, which are such organizations that have no treaty basis, nor any permanent

headquarters, staff or secretariat, but nevertheless have ongoing meetings of high-level state representatives. They made a major contribution with the concept of a continuum of intergovernmental arrangements, in which intergovernmental institutions are more or less formally structured, instead of simply being either formal or informal. They hypothesized that states choose informal arrangements if they need flexibility, want to preserve their sovereignty, want to regulate information, want to lower transaction costs in the short term, want to minimize bureaucracy, and when they are confronted with conditions of uncertainty.

The literature that has followed since then has been largely empirical. Vabulas and Snidal (2021) compiled a data set of informal IOs, noting that the number of formal IOs had stagnated, but that states were creating informal IOs to tackle important issues at the global level. In Roger (2020), the historical transition to informality in the legal underpinnings of global governance and its effects for the accountability and durability of international arrangements are explored.

One question that is still relatively underdeveloped is the one dealing with internal functioning. While Vabulas and Snidal (2013) provided an explanation as to why states opted for informality, less attention has been paid to the process by which the informal groupings function and evolve over time. If an organization does not delegate to a secretariat, then coordination must be achieved in another way; the identification of how this is done is an empirical activity. That is a gap which is pertinent to the Alliance in the present case, as it is part of a grouping that has no such centralizing mechanisms as formal organizations do.

Transnational Governance of Gender and Business

A second literature explores initiatives in which a strategy of gender equality is pursued through business and public-private partnerships. True (2003) examined the spread of gender mainstreaming in global public policy, and True and Mintrom (2001) illustrated how transnational networks facilitated this spread of adoption,

revealing that diffusion travelled through network channels and not only through legal obligation.

Transnational public-private partnerships are discussed and investigated as tools of gender governance, examining the institutional forms of collaboration between states, international organizations and corporations to achieve gender-related goals (Prügl & True, 2014). Roberts (2015) followed the evolution of what she calls transnational business feminism, a project put together by a coalition of states, financial institutions, United Nations organizations, corporations, and non-governmental organizations that developed an economic argument for gender equality in terms of quantifiable returns to firms and to national competitiveness.

This literature provides the conceptual vocabulary for identifying the type of institutional arrangement to which the Alliance belongs, namely a transnational arrangement which aims to achieve gender-related economic goals using business actors in collaboration with intergovernmental processes. Its empirical emphasis, however, has been on programmes which are based in existing multilateral institutions and in the corporate sector of industrialized economies. The Alliance is not the same on either of these aspects: it is based in an informal grouping, and it involves business federations and enterprises from emerging economies.

BRICS as an Institution

There have been two types of scholarship on BRICS itself. One of these has been looking at the role of the grouping in the broader international system, its growth, and its interaction with existing multilateral institutions (Cooper, 2016; Stuenkel, 2020). A second, smaller line is in the direction of institutional questions, and BRICS is said to be a prime example of informal organizations (Vabulas & Snidal, 2013, 2021).

Limited information exists on the internal institutional development of BRICS subsidiary mechanisms. The grouping has created a

significant number of these, including business, academic, scientific, and sectoral cooperation. Little has been written about their forms of organization, their ties to the summit process, or how they maintain their continuity as the chairship rotates.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The three literatures share a common question that has yet to be explored. The informal organizations literature does not look at the subsidiary bodies of the parent organization but at the reasons behind why the parent organization is informal. The feminist political economy literature identifies the institutional type to which the Alliance belongs but has examined cases situated in formal multilateral settings. The BRICS literature covers the grouping as a whole while leaving its internal mechanisms largely undocumented.

The present study takes up this convergence by posing the question of how an institutional structure is achieved for a subsidiary body of an informal grouping, based on the documentary record of the Alliance during its first five years.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The Main Lens: Institutionalization Without Delegation

The main analytical lens adopted is that of Vabulas and Snidal (2013), which views formalization as an issue of degree and not of kind. Their spectrum of intergovernmental arrangements allows an institution to be defined by the specific attributes it possesses and lacks, rather than by an aggregate classification as formal or informal.

The present case will be analyzed based on four attributes. The first is legal foundation, that is, whether the body is based on a treaty or other binding document. The second is permanent administration; that is, does the body have standing personnel serving the organization as a whole, as opposed to serving individual members? The third is written procedure: does the body follow specific rules in its membership, meetings and outputs, or is there no set procedure? The fourth is institutional memory:

does the body maintain a continuous record that outlasts a change of leadership?

What is useful about breaking these attributes down is that, for instance, a body could score low on the first two dimensions and high on the latter two. When this happens, the question becomes: what performs the coordinating function that a permanent secretariat would otherwise provide? These arrangements are called substitution mechanisms in this study.

The Secondary Lens: Transnational Governance of Gender

The secondary lens is based on Prügl and True (2014) and Roberts (2015) to describe the type of institution. There are two features that are pertinent. Firstly, the Alliance is run by business actors – the national chapters are made up of executives and entrepreneurs and not state officials – and yet has a link to an intergovernmental process. Second, its outputs are presented in the form of recommendations to governments instead of commitments that bind the members, and thus it stands in an advisory rather than a regulatory relationship to state authority.

Analytical Propositions

The empirical analysis is organized into three propositions. Firstly, in the absence of a permanent secretariat, institutional continuity will be maintained through identifiable substitution mechanisms and not through central administration. Second, the duplication of a common template across the national chapters will serve as a source of structure, without the need for central authority to enforce it. Thirdly, institutionalization will manifest most clearly in documentary and procedural terms and less in terms of legal and financial delegation.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a single case study design of an instrumental type. Stake (1995) makes a distinction between the instrumental case study (examination of a specific case to contribute to the understanding of a more general question)

and the intrinsic case study (conducted for interest in the case itself). The Alliance is explored in this work as an example of institutional development in an informal grouping. Yin (2018) provides the procedures for specifying a case's boundaries, for collecting evidence, and for analysis.

The case is limited temporally to the timeframe of the Alliance's founding (2020) to the end of the Brazilian chairship (2025) and the handing over to the Indian chairship; substantively to institutional structure, documented priorities, and organizational development; and evidentially to publicly accessible documents.

Document Selection

Documents have been identified by systematically searching the official repositories of the Alliance and BRICS institutional document collections. There were four categories included. The establishment declaration, the handover report for 2020, and the terms of reference adopted in 2024 are included in the foundational documents. Periodic documents consist of annual reports and issues notes published over the course of the study period. Summit-level documents comprise BRICS declarations referring to the Alliance. Chapter-level documents are documents that have been created by national chapters.

Inclusion was defined as a document published by the Alliance, a national chapter, or a BRICS institutional process, that has a substantive focus on the Alliance's structure, priorities or activities and that can be publicly retrieved so that the analysis can be independently verified. A systematic identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion process was followed, and the rationale for exclusion at each of the steps was documented.

Thematic Coding

Analysis was conducted using the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization; initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes against coded extracts and the entire data set; definition and naming of themes; and the analytical account. Document

analysis procedures were used, following Bowen (2009), with the use of skimming, close reading, and interpretation.

The coding started from a framework that was developed based on the research questions – governance structure, membership and representation, thematic priorities, coordination mechanisms, documentation practice, and connection to BRICS processes – but was open to inductively emerging codes. The mechanisms of substitution identified in the findings below were not anticipated by the original framework but emerged inductively.

Treatment of Institutional Self-Documentation

The corpus comprises documents generated by the Alliance, for the most part concerning itself. As in Bowen (2009), these are not independent proof of the effects of this institution's activities, but evidence of the institution's own presentation and organization of itself, which is the object of this study.

This has a particular analytical implication. The corpus supports claims of structure, procedure, membership and documented priorities, because these are matters the documents constitute and not merely describe. No claims with respect to outcomes are advanced, since it would need evidence outside the corpus to establish them. This boundary is retained throughout the analysis.

Trustworthiness

The study uses the criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985) in attaining trustworthiness. Triangulation was employed across document types: structural claims were corroborated across at least two independently issued documents. Transferability is aided by thick description of the institutional context and explicit specification of case boundaries. The use of search terms and retrieval dates was documented in a search log to address dependability, as well as inclusion and exclusion decisions and coding revisions. Confirmability was provided by the use of retrievable documentary evidence to support interpretive

statements and by maintaining analytic memos and coded extracts separately.

Limitations

The results have three limitations. First, the corpus is largely self-produced, and the analysis, accordingly, is limited to institutional form rather than institutional effect. Second, records are not consistently kept by national chapters; some have more public records than others, so structural claims are made from Alliance-level sources rather than on a chapter-by-chapter basis wherever possible. Thirdly, single case analysis does not allow for statistical generalization, but rather analytical generalization.

Findings I: The Institutional Structure and Its Development

This section discusses RQ1.

Origin and Establishment

The BRICS Heads of State in 2019 agreed to establish the Alliance, which came into existence in 2020 under the leadership of the Russian Federation with the participation of its member countries. The Alliance was therefore authorized from above and constituted from below: the summit decision supplied the authorization, and the national business organizations that subsequently populated it supplied the membership that gave that decision organizational content. The analytical importance of this sequence lies in that combination.

The National Chapter Template

The Alliance is organized around national chapters, each country having one. A chairperson and four other women members lead each chapter and are involved in official discussions, as well as helping to make strategic decisions. Every chapter is independent in how it selects its chairperson and the four members.

This is a replicated template: a common structural pattern, used in the same form in all chapters, with national discretion over the actual composition of each chapter. The template provides comparability without the necessity of enforcement by a central authority. No body selects the national representatives, yet all

chapters present this same structure, which allows them to interact on symmetrical terms.

The template was also found to be easily extensible. After the enlargement of the grouping, chapters were established for the countries that joined, and the integration of the teams of the new member countries is mentioned as an explicit priority of the Brazilian chairship in the issues note of 2025, while the annual report of 2025 carries the signatures of the chapters of an extended set of member countries. The same year, there is documentation of executive secretariats in the chapters then constituted. Thus, the record reveals that integration was taking place through the same replicated structure and not through the establishment of a differentiated membership level.

Thematic Working Groups

There are six thematic working groups which span the national chapters, each made up of female experts and executives: Healthcare, Innovative Development, Inclusive Economy, Creative Industries, Tourism, and Food Security and Environmental Safety.

The working groups form a second organizing axis. For the chapters, participation is organized at country level, while for the working groups it is organized at sector level, and members of different chapters meet within the working groups. The 2025 annual report shows working group leadership held by executives of the chairing chapter for that year, which means the leadership of the thematic axis rotates with the national axis. The consistency of the six categories across the documentary record indicates that the thematic structure has remained stable while its leadership has rotated.

Codification: Terms of Reference and Regional Offices

The most significant structural change in the corpus took place in 2024 under the leadership of the Russian chapter, with the signing of two documents. The terms of reference provided an outline of the basic elements of the Alliance – its purpose, the timing of the annual meetings and working group sessions, and the preparation of

the annual report – and established its governance structure and work processes.

The second document provided a structure for the regional offices. Each national chapter is allowed to negotiate a memorandum of understanding for setting up an Alliance office in its region, in order to enhance cooperation with women entrepreneurs from BRICS countries and other interested countries. Two design characteristics are documented: each regional office is responsible for its own structural and staffing costs, and regional offices do not hold a seat at the Alliance's annual and strategic meetings.

Both of these features are of analytic importance. The regional office framework allows for geographic expansion without fiscal commitment and without any dilution of decision-making membership. It is a way to solve the problem faced by any body that attracts outside interest while lacking the resources for expansion: the arrangement grants affiliation while withholding both cost and vote. The documentary record indicates that country centres and regional offices were set up in several countries outside the membership during the study period.

The 2024 codification also represents a turning point in institutional development. Before it, the Alliance worked on practice; after it, on written procedure. Applying the framework outlined above, the Alliance moves from low to high on the written procedure attribute while remaining at the bottom on the legal foundation attribute, because the terms of reference are not legally binding on any state and the Alliance does not have legal personality.

Findings II: Substitution Mechanisms and Thematic Continuity

This section attempts to answer RQ2 and the first analytical proposition.

Three Substitution Mechanisms

There is no permanent secretariat that serves the Alliance as a whole. Three arrangements are documented which perform those functions that would otherwise be discharged by a secretariat.

Rotating Chairship

The Alliance leadership rotates every year according to the rotation of the chairship of BRICS. There is a record of the chairship held by Russia in 2020, South Africa in 2023, Russia again in 2024, Brazil in 2025, and passing to India from 1 January 2026. In each instance, a national business organization of the chairing country oversees the chairing role. Rotation provides leadership continuity without a standing office and helps to synchronize the Alliance calendar with the parent grouping calendar.

Designated Coordination Roles

As of 2025, the annual report records a coordination architecture which includes a global chairperson, a sherpa, national executive secretariats in every chapter, and a chairship coordination team that has clear project management responsibilities in each thematic area. It is notable that the designation of a sherpa reproduces, at the level of a subsidiary body, a coordination mechanism typical of informal groupings at summit level. Administrative capacity is distributed across the membership, in that each chapter maintains its own executive secretariat.

Shared Digital Platform

In 2024, a common digital platform was launched and, according to the 2025 record, its moderation and leadership were undertaken by the chairing chapter that year. The platform is a single registration and information channel for the Alliance's events and initiatives. It does what a permanent office would do – maintaining a presence and a record that persists across chapters and across changes of chairship.

These three mechanisms substitute for centralization: rotation provides leadership; distributed secretariats provide administration, and the shared platform provides persistence. The pattern supports the first analytical proposition and indicates that the lack of a secretariat should not be interpreted as an organizational limitation, but as a design condition which is addressed by other means.

Thematic Stability with Rotating Leadership

The themes of the six working groups are constant through the documentary record, showing that the thematic agenda was stable across the successive chairships. Within these categories, however, there are records of an initiative originating with a specific chapter in a specific year, and the record indicates that an initiative put forward under one chairship was continued under the next.

Two examples in the corpus illustrate this pattern. A women-led start-up competition initiated under one chairship was recorded as ongoing under the next chairship, with the new chapter as organizer. In the same way, the digital platform that was created in one chairship year was documented as moderated by the chairing chapter of the following year. Continuity of an initiative across a change of leadership is an expression of institutionalization, as it shows that the activities are not dependent on the chapter that started them.

The pattern that form is one of the stable categories with rotating content. The thematic framework remains; the projects populating it change based on the national context and the chairing chapter. This division allows an agenda to be recognizable over the years and allows for different capacities and priorities of successive hosts.

Documented Priorities

The Brazilian chairship had four priorities for 2025: to promote business led by women; to implement cooperation projects; to develop policy recommendations for governments to increase women's economic participation; and to improve governance together with the integration of the teams of the new member countries. Governance improvement and member integration were included alongside the substantive objectives, which indicates that institutional development was itself treated as a priority rather than as a background condition.

Findings III: Connections with the BRICS Architecture

This section discusses RQ3.

Summit-Level Anchoring

The Alliance's linkage with the BRICS process is rooted in the very process of its creation – it was decided upon by the Heads of State and welcomed in the language of the summit declaration. This anchoring gives the Alliance its distinctive difference from a typical transnational business association. It has no authority of its own but is recognized at the highest level of the grouping, and its annual cycle is synchronized to the summit calendar.

The Recommendation Channel

The main product of the Alliance is a set of recommendations which are put forward to the BRICS governments and documented in the annual report according to working group. The 2025 report gives recommendations in each of the six thematic areas with suggested actions for governments. Recommendations are addressed to governments collectively rather than to any single member, and they do not have binding effect.

This output form locates the Alliance within the institutional type identified by Prügl and True (2014): a body composed of business actors, connected to an intergovernmental process, producing advisory rather than regulatory output. The recommendation channel provides a means of transmitting business-sector deliberation into the state-level process, and its annual periodicity gives that transmission a regular rather than an occasional character.

Relations With Other BRICS Bodies

The record documents three different types of linkage to the broader BRICS institutional framework. The Alliance is described as working in collaboration with the BRICS Business Council and other economic cooperation mechanisms. Its outputs have been channelled towards other BRICS institutions, such as a dedicated financing facility for women-led enterprises, recorded as originating during the South African chairship in 2023 and reiterated in the recommendations for 2025, which is addressed to the development bank of the grouping. A policy document on the care economy was presented to the Heads of State at the 2024 summit.

These links suggest that the Alliance is not a stand-alone organization but a node in an institutional network, and that its outputs are directed to identifiable recipients within the grouping.

External Engagement

The corpus documents involvement beyond the membership. Alliance events during the study period are recorded as involving participants and institutions from a significant number of countries outside BRICS, including regional business associations and international organizations, while cooperation instruments are recorded as signed with business associations outside the grouping. Combined with the regional office framework described above, this indicates an outward-facing orientation pursued through affiliation rather than through extension of membership.

Discussion: Forms of Institutionalization

This section is dedicated to answering RQ4 and returns to the four attributes outlined in the theoretical framework.

Assessing the Four Attributes

The Alliance scores the lowest on legal foundations. It is not based on a treaty, has no legal personality, and its terms of reference are not binding on any state.

It scores low on permanent administration too, though not at zero. The Alliance as a whole does not have a secretariat; rather, executive secretariats are maintained on an ongoing basis in each of the chapters, together with a coordination team of the chairing chapter, which changes every year.

The Alliance shows much higher figures on written procedure, and an increase over the course of the study period. The 2024 terms of reference document the goals, meeting schedule, working group sessions, reporting requirements, and governance structure. Documented rules of affiliation, cost, and voice are added by the regional office framework.

In terms of institutional memory, it also scores high. Reports are produced and published

annually in a consistent format, handover reports are created to pass institutional knowledge between chairships, and a digital platform maintains a persistent record which is available across a change of leadership.

The profile that emerges is asymmetric: the legal and administrative attributes are low while the procedural and documentary attributes are high. This confirms the third analytical proposition and indicates what kind of institutionalization takes place in this instance. The Alliance institutionalized through writing and procedure rather than through law and bureaucracy.

Why the Template Matters

Of particular interest is the replicated national chapter template, since it addresses a problem that informal bodies face acutely. Formal organizations make rules which a central authority applies to all their members, creating comparability across them. The Alliance accomplishes this by means of a form which every member applies to itself. Each chapter is similarly structured, allowing the chapters to interact symmetrically; that is, nobody holds authority over composition.

This is also the reason for the extensibility observed. As the grouping grew in size, all that was needed was for the new members to instantiate the existing template. There was no need to renegotiate the structure, since it was replicated rather than centrally administered. This supports the second analytical proposition and indicates that template replication may be a general resource available to bodies that cannot delegate.

Advisory Position and Its Institutional Consequences

The Alliance's output is advisory. This is typically interpreted as an indicator of institutional weakness, but the current analysis proposes a more specific interpretation. Its recommendations are not binding; hence the Alliance requires no compliance mechanism, no dispute settlement, and no monitoring apparatus, each of which would demand precisely the permanent administration it lacks. The advisory

form is thus in line with the institutional resources available to it. What the annual reporting cycle does provide is regularity – a fixed point at which deliberation becomes a documented output, addressed to identified recipients.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

The study discussed the institutionalization of the BRICS Women's Business Alliance from 2020 to 2025.

In response to RQ1, the Alliance has evolved through a national chapter template replicated across the member countries, combined with six thematic working groups, and adopted a codified structure in the terms of reference in 2024, accompanied by a framework for self-funded regional offices which hold no seat at the Alliance's decision-making meetings.

Regarding RQ2, the thematic agenda was consistent from chair to chair, with individual initiatives changing from chair to chair, and there are records of initiatives that were started under one chair and carried over by the next.

As to RQ3, the Alliance is linked to the BRICS process through its origin at the summit, conveys its deliberation into that process via a documented annual recommendation channel to governments, and has documented links with other BRICS bodies such as the business council and the grouping's development bank.

As for RQ4, institutionalization can be seen mostly in procedural and documentary form. The Alliance scores low on legal foundation and permanent administration, and high on written procedure and institutional memory.

Theoretical Contribution

The study has three contributions. First, it builds on the Vabulas and Snidal (2013) framework of informal intergovernmental organizations, extending it from the level of the parent organization to the level of the subsidiary bodies, and identifies three types of substitution that allow such a body to maintain continuity without a central administration: a rotating chairship,

which follows the calendar of the parent grouping; a distributed coordination system, including a sherpa and national executive secretariats; and a shared digital platform, ensuring institutional persistence.

Second, it suggests that template replication can be a source of structure for those bodies which cannot be delegated. Where comparability cannot be imposed by a central authority, a common form which each member voluntarily adopts can create it and can accommodate enlargement without structural renegotiation.

Third, it adds to the literature on transnational governance of gender (Prügl & True, 2014; Roberts, 2015) a case constituted within an informal grouping of emerging economies, a context that literature has not previously examined and shows that the institutional type it describes is not confined to arrangements based in formal multilateral settings.

Limitations

The results are qualified by the limitations set out in the methodology. The corpus is substantially self-produced, so that only a question of institutional form, and not of institutional effect, can be raised, and no claims are made about the effects of the Alliance's activities. Documentation is not equally distributed throughout the chapters. Analytical generalization, and not statistical generalization, is supported by single case analysis.

Recommendations

For Future Research

This analysis leads to four directions. First, comparative analysis from one study to another regarding the BRICS subsidiary mechanisms would help determine if the substitution mechanisms identified here are unique to BRICS or are a general trend throughout the grouping. The parent grouping has many sectoral bodies that have not been documented in terms of their institutional forms, and comparison would allow us to see if there are recurring chairs that are

rotated, distributed secretariats, and common digital infrastructure.

Second, the BRICS cases might be compared with similar ones in other informal groupings to examine the extent of the generality of the results. Structurally similar positions are occupied by business and engagement groups that are linked to other informal groupings, and comparative analysis would show whether the replication of the template is a common way of solving the coordination problem found here.

Third, a research methodology based on interviews would reach out to the deliberative reasoning that underlies institutional choices, and which is documented only as outcomes. There are questions in the documentary record that do not include answers for the 2024 codification, the structure of the regional offices, and the thematic categories.

Fourth, the way outcomes are assessed is still open; it would take an evidentiary base beyond the corpus in their hands to assess outcomes. However, a standalone data set and a causal design study are required to assess if the Alliance has an impact on women's economic participation in its member states, or not. The present study sets the scene for such an assessment by establishing the institutional form within which it could be achieved.

For Documentation Practice

For institutional documentation, the following two observations can be made. Firstly, the inconsistencies in public documentation at the chapter level constrain the conclusions that can be drawn on the Alliance's activities beyond its central products – if the chapter-level public documentation were more regular, the Alliance would be more open for independent analyses. Secondly, the annual report format is a vehicle for institutional memory which has successfully endured changes of leadership and its continuity is one of the clearer signs of institutionalization identified in this study.

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