# RECONSIDERING THE ORIGINS OF THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN REGIONALISM THIRTY YEARS LATER:
# TOWARDS A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO THE ORIGINS OF SADC

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## Summary

The creation of SADCC has generated a debate over the real origins of the southern African model of regionalism. This paper develops the idea that the origins of SADC are both internal and external. Thus, southern African regionalism is understood as a constructivist articulation of internal and external inputs, which determined the creation of SADCC and its transformation into SADC.

## Keywords:

Southern Africa; SADC; SADCC; Front Line States; Regionalism; Constructivism

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## Introduction

The origin of SADC (the Community for the Development of Southern Africa) remains controversial as, on the one hand, authors such as Lee (2003) state that *SADCC* (Southern African Development Coordination Conference), as the predecessor of the SADC[1] is a western creation; and, on the other hand, researchers like Mandaza and Tostensen (1994) consider that SADCC was created by the states of Southern Africa based on their own experience of cooperation in the *Frontline States* (which included the member countries of the political alliance created in the 1970s against the white minority regimes in Southern Africa). Thus, based on the issue of the creation of SADCC in view of internal and external factors, this paper explores the debate on the origin of the regional organization based on the idea that SADCC is a result of a constructivist articulation, by States in Southern Africa, of their experience of regional cooperation and western contribution. As such, internal and external factors in the creation of SADCC are reconsidered here under the concepts of *continuity* of previous regional cooperation mechanisms and *adaptation* of international models on regionalism.

We aim to propose a theoretical understanding of the creation of this regional organization based on the evidences presented by those authors who claim that SADCC is western inspired as well as by those who state that it is the result of the regional cooperation in the Front Line States. Therefore, we will focus on the two opposing perspectives on the origins of SADC, considering they are in opposing poles, and we will propose a unifying point of view based on constructivism. This approach will lead to a series of questions and possible applications of constructivism in the study of regionalism in Southern Africa during the 1980s and 1990s.

## 1. The concept of regionalism

The current analysis of Southern Africa regionalism in the 1980s is based on the idea that there is a difference between regionalism and regionalization. The latter focuses on the economic dimension, the former on politics, of the cooperation among states (Mansfield and Milner, 1999: 591). Fawcett (2005: 24) proposes the concept of regionalism based on this assumption, emphasizing political intent. In fact, the author defines regionalism as politics and project through which states and non-states

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[1] In this paper, SADC is viewed as a *continuity* of SADCC. Therefore, we will refer to SADCC in terms of regional organization and we will use SADC to refer to the current and renewed organization.

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cooperate and coordinate strategies in a specific region. Based on that same idea that regionalism is politically-linked, Farrell (2005: 2) defines it as a response to the process of globalization and acknowledging the diversity and specificity of that response. Farrell has a plural perspective of regionalism. She states that regionalism is the product of actions standardized, on the one hand, by internal regional dynamics and, on the other, by external pressures, such as globalization, instability and security.

This possibility, proposed by Farrell, of a twofold approach to regionalism, is the basis of our argument to consider internal and external factors in the origin of SADC. Therefore, it is our contention that these two aspects are essential to understand regionalism in Southern Africa.

## 2. Polarization in the debate on the origins of SADC

The debate on the origins of regionalism in Southern Africa is even more meaningful due to the fact that the 'southern Africa type of regionalism developed from mere *cooperation* (Cardoso, 1991: 80; Haarlov, 1997: 61; Khadiagala, 1994: 229-242) to include a project on regional *integration* (Lee, 2003: 44-50; Poku, 2001: 74-78). This change is institutionally symbolized by SADCC having become SADC in the 1990s. To better understand SADC, we must understand the creation of SADCC.

In fact, some authors suggest that SADCC, as the forerunner of SADC, is the product of a western idea "sold" to countries in Southern Africa. Though unanimous in the claim, these authors do not agree in terms of SADCC being a creation of western Europe or there having been the contribution of the United States. For example, Amin (1987: 8), the editor of a collection of papers on SADCC, states that SADCC was not just a proposal by the Front Line States. There was strong encouragement by western countries that wished the region to be more connected to the west. This opinion is shared by Mandaza (1987) who, though recognizes the crucial role of the Front Line States in the creation of SADCC, affirms that its origin is externally influenced, namely by Europe and the United States.

This 80s movement questioned whether it was the states in Southern Africa which had initiative to create SADCC was resumed by Lee (2003), who states that the Southern Africa regional organization was the result of external factors and emphasizes its relative financial dependency from western governments and international financial institutions.

While some authors claim that SADCC is an external creation, others focus on its internal (regional) origins. For the latter, SADCC results from the cooperation among countries in Southern Africa, in keeping with the reality of the region. Thus, though they acknowledge that, since their foundation, states in Southern Africa have resorted to external support (in particular, technological and financial), these authors focus on the fact that SADCC is the historical and political result of the so-called Front Line States. Mandaza and Tostensen (1994: 4) declare that the most immediate basis for the creation of SADCC were the Front Line States. This idea is shared by Khadiagala (1994: 226) when the author states that SADCC was basically founded on the structures of political collaboration among the Front Line States. Other authors also discuss this link between the Front Line States and SADCC (Clough and Ravevhill, 1982: 162; Grungy, 1982: 160; Cardoso, 1991: 74; Mhone, 1991: 181-183; Rukudzo,

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2002: 158). For these authors, despites its challenges, the regional organization in Southern Africa is real and promising.

An analysis of the main arguments and the debate on the origins of SADCC, we realize it continues due to a polarization of points of view which are, however, not incompatible, as the concept of regionalism must be seen as dynamic and including both external and internal elements.  Therefore, Anglin's (1983) historical explanation of the origins of regionalism in Southern Africa is less controversial and allows for a coherent basis for a more comprehensive reconstruction of the origins of SADCC, evidencing both the formal and the informal conditions of its foundation.

As such, and in accordance to Anglin's perspective, it is our contention that we cannot have a comprehensive understanding of the origins of SADCC if the arguments focus on the polarization around internal and external factors. Thus, we must deconstruct this polarization by understanding the reasons why academics differ in their view of the creation of SADCC.

## 3. Arguments and evidences on the origins of SADC

Two main points may be examined in relation to perspectives on the origins of SADC: the *nature of the arguments* and the *historical evidences*. This analysis may be carried out through the most representative authors within each perspective.

Lee (2003) is one of the most recent authors to criticize those defending the internal origins of SADCC and may be seen as representative of those who advocate the relevance of external factors in the creation of SADCC. She bases her argument in other authors who raised the same question and provides some historical evidence for her claim in the external origins of SADCC. On the other hand, Mandaza and Tostensen (1994) may be considered the representatives of the advocates of the internal origins of SADCC. In fact, their work on the organization focuses on providing evidence of the creation of SADCC by the states in Southern Africa themselves.

As far as the *nature of the argument*, while Lee bases hers on *economic* and *financial* reasons; Mandaza and Tostensen explore *political* reasons. Lee (2003: 48) states that the regional organization was an external continuous creation, highly controlled by western governments and international financial institutions through financial support to the organization. This point of view, based on economic and financial elements, is confirmed when Lee later states that if international financing was withdraw, the organization (SADC) would probably not survive (*Ibid*: 49).

On the other hand, Mandaza and Tostensen (1994, 1994: 3) identify five elements to support the argument that SADCC has internal origins: geography, social and cultural context, colonial experience, alliance with Front Line States, and the apartheid regime in South Africa (as a common enemy). They argue that all these factors contributed to the foundation of Southern Africa's distinct personality and identity, which firstly supported political solidarity and then economic cooperation.

As far as *historical evidences* are concerned, Lee focuses on the *informality* in the creation of SADCC, while Mandaza and Tostensen are more interested in discussing the history of the organization's *formal creation*. Thus, quoting authors who have questioned the internal elements in the creation of SADCC, Lee refers to an interview to

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Daniel Ndela, a consulter from Zimbabwe, who reconstructs a series of (not always official) meetings between leaders from the countries in Southern Africa and the Managing Director of the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation, David Anderson, which contributed to the design of SADCC.

On the other hand, Mandaza and Tostensen (1994: 17) focus their studies on evidence in official documents, even suggesting that the misunderstanding about the origins of SADCC derives from a formal distinction between meetings and conferences:

> *"The debate about the origins of SADCC stems from the confusion over the Southern African Aid Coordination Conference (SAACC), the meeting; and SADCC the institution".*

From this point of view, we realize that while both perspectives provide an answer on the origins of SADCC, they focus and answer different sub questions. One is concerned with providing an answer to its *informal origins* while the other to its *formal origins*.

After studying both perspectives, based on the arguments and historical evidence presented, it is important to acknowledge external influence in the creation of SADCC. However, this acknowledgment cannot deny the relative autonomy of states in Southern Africa in defining the type of regional cooperation which would best help them attain their objectives. As Mandaza declares (1987: 215), if SADCC had external origins or not, we must not forget that this organization "can truly reflect the aspirations of the African people and thereby generate genuine regional economic cooperation in southern Africa". This idea may foster an understanding of the origins of SADC from a constructivist point of view.

## 4. For a construtivist understanding og the origins of SADC

Mandaza's statement is in compliance with a crucial element in regionalism - affinity among member states. From Hettne's perspective, the concept of regionalism implies a political dimension supported by affinity among states. In fact, the author goes even further and uses Benedict Anderson's concept of '*imagined communities'*, to supports his view of regions and symbolically built entities:

> *"Like the formation of ethnic and national identities, the regional identity is dependent on historical context (…). And like nations and ethnies, regional formations (…) also possess a subjective quality, and can consequently be seen as «imagined communities»"* (Hettne, 1999: 9).

Hettne's contribution to the idea of regionalism includes important elements of the case of Southern Africa, often undervalued by those who emphasize the external origins of the creation of SADC. Therefore, a constructivist approach on the origins of SADC may help us understand those elements of conflict and identity which led to its creation without neglecting internal and external elements. In fact, the history of the creation of SADC shows how the region is not a static but dynamic structure, open to change and

adaption (Farrell, 2005: 8). Therefore, from a constructivist perspective, the region of Southern Africa should be studied in terms of *continuity* and *adaptation*.

In terms of *continuity*, we cannot fully understand the creation of SADC without considering the immediate history of regional cooperation in Southern Africa before SADCC. This history is deeply influenced by the existence of the Front Line States. After one of its most significant victories, the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980, the members of this alliance realized their efforts against South Africa's apartheid could not be effective against the country's economic power (Thompson, 1986; Khadiagala, 1994). This is why the declaration stating the creation of SADCC was signed under the title: "Toward Economic liberation" (Mandaza; Tostensen, 1994: 116)[2]. This declaration evidences the intention to decrease the economic dependency many states in the region had towards South Africa.

Considering its origin, SADCC may be seen as a regional project against the domination of South Africa's apartheid regime. It is from this perspective that we can understand Poku (2001: 100) when the author states that, in practice, it was the anti-South African feeling rather than economic interests joined together the countries in SADCC. Thus, the type of regionalism initially adopted, characterized by a low level of integration and a focus on cooperation, may be understood within the regional context of confrontation against the interests of the region's hegemonic power - South Africa. Hence, in his studies on the model of regionalism adopted by the countries of Southern Africa up to its change in the Southern Africa Development Co-ordination Conference, Haarlov (1997: 61) states that Southern Africa adopted a "*the cooperation approach*". Further in his text, he defines

> *this cooperation model of Southern Africa stating that the way SADCC operates is incremental in the search for consensus and decentralization, both in administration of regional cooperation areas and in project implementation".* (Ibid: 61).

It is important to consider the context of regional cooperation among the countries in Southern Africa before SADCC, as it helps explain the need of external contribution in the creation of this organization. In fact, in the 1970s and 80s, most new independent states in Southern Africa was somewhat economically dependent on South Africa. This country was the region's "hegemonic" power. As Khadiagala declares (1994 23), in terms of economic capacity (though not in terms of extension and population), there is a wide gap between the poverty and weakness of SADCC states and the wealth and power of South Africa. The economic dependency of SADCC countries was especially evident in the lack of transport and communication infrastructures and in the low level of industrialization when compared to South Africa (Khama, 1981; Mandaza and Tostensen, 1987).

This situation of "dependency" may explain the need of support by actors external to the region so that countries in Southern Africa could attain economic freedom. Therefore, SADCC's basic strategy was to attract external financial and technical

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[2]    in Appendices, 'Southern Africa: Toward Economic Liberation.

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assistance to pursue internal objectives defined by the organization[3]. The need for outside support provides a partial explanation to the contact between states in Southern Africa and external actors during the creation of SADCC. As acknowledged by the former president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere:

> *"We did have invaluable technical help from individual non-African experts as we establish SADCC, but SADCC was formed on the personal initiative of the late President Seretse Khama, with quick and enthusiastic support from the other Frontline States' leaders"* (in Mandaza and Tostensen, 1994: 17).

The fact that the states in Southern Africa received technical and financial support from western countries for the creation of SADCC may be partially explained in terms of a rationalistic perspective. As such, the relations between countries in Southern Africa and western countries may be viewed within the scope of maximizing interests. As a matter of fact, if, on the one hand, Mandaza and Tostensen believe it was ironic that SADCC, made up of states politically linked to the Soviet Union and ideologically closer to socialism, received technical and economic support from western countries such as the European Community and the Commonwealth, on the other side, western interest in supporting SADCC is explained by Lee in terms of a strategy of distraction. She understood that SADCC was a strategy for western states to cover their support to South Africa's apartheid regime (Lee, 2003)[4].

Though there is basis for the rationalistic explanation, it focuses exclusively on either external or internal factors. Therefore, applying a constructivist theoretical approach to the debate on the origins of SADC may contribute to a more thorough explanation of regionalism in Southern Africa and its evolution.

Within the scope of this theoretical perspective, we consider the regionalism created by the states in Southern Africa a blend of existing models on regionalism and the experience on regional cooperation among those states. In fact, the exchanges of experience among African leaders and non-African technicians, during the design of SADCC, cannot be understood merely as a strategy to maximize the interests of countries in Southern Africa. External and internal contributions are part of a *learning and socialization process* which is still typical of regionalism in Southern Africa.

Thus, the fact that countries in Southern Africa search support from western countries, despite the fact that they disagree with some western political and economic positions, is not ironic. On the contrary, it evidences a deep structure of international relations and regional cooperation. As Wendt (1995: 71-72) emphasizes, the fundamental

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[3] For example, Lee declares that in the 1980s, 90% of SADCC budget came from its cooperation with western countries and international financial institutions.

[4] In terms of the conceptual creation of SADCC, though authors such as Lee (2003) mention the direct involvement of individuals connected to the Commonwealth, technical and economic assistant was not only provided by Commonwealth states. Mandaza and Tostensen (1994) present a long list of economic and political support from different sources, including the United States of America (during the Carter Administration) and the United Kingdom. The list these authors propose includes the following states and international organizations: The European Union, the Nordic countries, the United States of America, the Commonwealth, the United Nations, the USSR /CMEA and Japan.

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structures of international politics are social rather than strictly material and they shape the identities and interests of the actors, not just their behaviour.

The fact that regionalism is not a new reality, but had already been tried by other states in the social context of international relations, changes the conditions in which new regional organizations emerge and are set up. The new integration or regional cooperation experiences are not oblivious to previous experiences. The structures of new regional cooperation organizations are informed and shaped by the previous experience. Thus, newcomers to regionalism learn and internalize existing models.

However, *internalization* is not simply repeating models. As in intra-national societies, an international society is defined by the dynamics of new actors, which are not just shaped by existing structures but also influence those structures; regional models (structures) are not merely copied by new agents. As stated by Acharya (1997: 320), the impact of ideas and regulations, especially if from a certain regional social and political context, depends largely on the self-defined identity of local actors. Therefore, we may state that, as social models, regionalisms are *adapted* at the very moment of their *adoption.*

The argument of creative adaptation goes beyond the dichotomy between internal and external factors in the creation of SADC. In fact, adaptation presupposes the intervention (in this case coordination or synthesis) of internal and external factors. This implies the reference to existing models of regionalism and the innovation of actors who *adapt* the models they *adopt*. As Poku declares (2001: 9) when discussing constructivism, while the structural properties of social life are constructed and reconstructed by agents, they are also part of those agents. Evidence of the adaptation of regionalism in Southern Africa is the fact that, in the beginning, countries in Southern Africa adopted a type of regionalism which emphasized cooperation (Lee, 2003; Haarlov, 1997; Khadiagla, 1994). If they had simply repeated the European model, perhaps SADCC would have adopted a regionalism aimed at market integration. As Cardoso states (1991: 80),

> *"the name chosen by the organization, Development Coordination Conference, reflects the strategy adopted (of small and agreed upon steps), as well as the resistance SADCC has, even now, posed to the attempts of changing it into a classical body of regional integration, mainly focused on commerce".*

Likewise, the slow change in the west, evident in the support to SADCC, cannot be explained in rationalistic terms only. The western attitude was not simply an involvement aiming to distract countries in Southern Africa, as Lee emphasizes (2003). Western involvement must be seen in a wider context of apartheid's loss of international legitimacy and international internalization of the new role of regionalism, not just in terms of cooperation among states but in terms of cooperation among regions.

The focus on economic and political interests of western countries towards Southern Africa (Asobie, 1985) prevented some authors from exploring the fact that in the 1980s the South Africa's apartheid regime was not simply losing internal legitimacy as well as

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its international legitimacy. Though the mid 1980s were the peak of western discomfort towards South Africa, its roots may lie much earlier[5]. This situation reinforced South Africa's isolation not only in Southern Africa as well as in other regions in Africa and the world.

This legitimacy we are referring to cannot be restricted to economic interests (see Hurd, 2007). Hence the possibility of a constructivist perspective helping us understand, for example, the involvement of Nordic states in Southern Africa. In fact, it is somewhat limiting to affirm that those states were simply motivated by economic interests. As Sellstrom declares (1989: 13),

> *"the involvement of the Nordic countries should be understood, first and foremost, as a political statement towards two obsolete and inhumane regimes in Southern Africa after WWII, i.e., colonialism and apartheid".*

The case of the support to SADCC by the Nordic States shows how the rationalistic approach understands and explains only a part of reality, it fails in understanding important elements in regional and international environment which altered the states' position.

Applying a constructivist approach to understand the creation of SADCC does not merely complement the rationalistic perspective. It provides thoroughness to the study of regionalism in Southern Africa. Though beyond the scope of this paper, we may mention that applying a constructivist approach leads us to realize a coherence in the regionalism in Southern Africa, even when discussing the change from SADCC to SADC (from a more cooperative to a more integrative perspective). In fact, the models of regionalism, just as identity and interest, are *socially constructed*. Adapting these models implies that conventional structures are absorbed by the social context of the reality adopting the model. Newcomers cannot ignore the experience of others but learn from their predecessors. However, the learning process is active; it shapes existing models. This social adaptation process implies internal and external factors.

Another aspect which may be cleared through a constructivist analysis is that of SADCC efficiency and its relation with other regional organizations, mainly European ones. In fact, though literature tends to assess SADCC success focusing on the economic area, which is entirely justified, the success of a regional cooperation organization cannot be limited to its economic achievements. As such, the constructivist approach may help raise a few questions and explore other explanations on the design of regional cooperation in Southern Africa and its relation with other regional organizations and international actors. For example, we may question how much SADCC contributed to the change in perception between countries in Southern Africa and western countries. How legitimate was western intervention in the Southern African region through the cooperation with SADCC? How different was the perception of states in Southern Africa as far as the old colonial powers and their allies are concerned? Although the answer to these questions may not yet be evident, the constructivist approach seems better equipped to help in its understanding.

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[5]   See Gibb (1987, p. 396).

## Conclusion

To conclude, we believe the debate on the internal and external origins of SADC is largely motivated by the dichotomization and polarization of the arguments and historical evidences. Some authors focus on formality and politics, others on informality and economics. Though a rationalistic analysis of the creation of SADC should not be ruled out, it evidences only some elements in the creation of SADC, leaving others behind, such as those socially constructed, crucial in the understanding of SADC from a teleological point of view based on the causative factors of SADCC. Thus, a constructivist approach helps to understand that the construction of regional organizations such as SADC involves internal and external factors.

These factors were here linked using the concepts of continuity and adaptation. SADCC is a continuity of previous regional cooperation mechanisms in Southern Africa. However, this cooperation changed its form, ideas and rules; it also was a creative adaptation of existing models of regionalism. In this sense, reconsidering the origins of regionalism in Southern Africa based on a constructivist approach, linking internal and external factors, may be used as the basis for an explanation for SADCC becoming SADC and, more importantly, for the role of SADCC in the change in perception between states in Southern Africa and western counties.

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