

Measuring South-South cooperation: Building a more complete picture

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Why measuring South-South cooperation matters

South-South cooperation (SSC) has become an increasingly important part of the international development landscape. Alongside expanding trade and investment among developing economies, South-South cooperation is facilitating the exchange of knowledge, expertise, technologies and resources through an expanding range of bilateral, regional and interregional partnerships. Yet, the statistical picture of these contributions remains incomplete.

This matters for both development and trade policy. Comprehensive and reliable information helps governments understand where resources and expertise are being directed, identify gaps and opportunities, coordinate cooperation more effectively and demonstrate its contribution to sustainable development. Better measurement also contributes to a more complete understanding of the resources mobilized for implementation of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including under SDG 17.3.1 on additional financial resources mobilized for developing economies from multiple sources.

Measuring SSC nevertheless presents particular challenges. Development finance statistics have historically provided extensive information on

Official Development Assistance and other forms of development support. SSC encompasses a wider diversity of cooperation practices, including financial and non-financial modalities. Technical cooperation, training, knowledge exchange, technology transfer, expert deployments and other in-kind contributions may be central to a partnership even where their value is difficult to express through conventional financial measures.

SSC can also involve multidirectional exchanges and mutual learning between partners, reflecting principles such as national ownership, equality, non-conditionality, non-interference and mutual benefit. Capturing these different dimensions requires statistical approaches that can reflect the specific characteristics of SSC while generating

sufficiently robust information for national and international use.

For the WTO, this issue has particular relevance to Aid for Trade. Existing monitoring provides extensive evidence on development finance directed towards building trade capacity. A fuller picture of SSC could complement this evidence by increasing the visibility of cooperation among developing economies in areas such as trade facilitation, productive capacity, infrastructure, standards, skills and knowledge exchange.

Advancing the measurement and reporting of South-South cooperation

Important progress has been made in recent years towards strengthening the statistical foundations for measuring development support. The United Nations Framework to Measure South-South Cooperation, and Total Official Support for Sustainable Development (TOSSD) contribute to this evolving data landscape, serving different yet complementary purposes.

United Nations Framework to Measure South-South Cooperation

Due to the challenges highlighted above and other challenges, historically there has not been an agreed approach for measuring South-South cooperation. In 2021, economies engaged in South-South cooperation came together under the UN Statistical Commission to develop and agree on a framework designed to capture various forms of South-South cooperation, built specifically to identify and define both financial and non-financial modalities of SSC. They asked UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) to provide the secretariat for a dedicated group, chaired by India, to develop the first ever economy-owned

framework to measure South-South cooperation, hosted by the United Nations.

UN member states welcomed this framework at the UN Statistical Commission in 2022¹ when endorsing the new methodology to measure SDG 17.3.1. They requested that further work on the framework, including on global reporting and capacity building, be supported by UNCTAD and led by developing economies, building on country-led mechanisms. They also called for its inclusion under SDG 17.3.1 and invited economies engaged in South-South cooperation to work closely with UNCTAD. The UN Framework reflects the principles of South-South cooperation,² including national sovereignty, ownership, equality, non-conditionality, non-interference and mutual benefit, promoting a country-led approach, adaptable to national priorities.

As explained in the UNCTAD *Manual for the Framework to Measure South-South Cooperation*,³ the UN Framework is a country-led initiative to strengthen how South-South cooperation is measured and made visible. It serves as the methodological basis enabling data reporting under SDG 17.3.1, giving economies a shared conceptual framework for reporting various financial and non-financial cooperation modalities.

The High-level Committee on South-South Cooperation, coordinated by the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), welcomed the UNCTAD *Manual for the Framework to Measure South-South Cooperation* in 2025, encouraging its continued refinement and broader application by developing economies, with the support of the United Nations development system, including through efforts to strengthen national statistical capacities for the

voluntary collection, analysis and reporting of South-South cooperation contributions.

UNCTAD coordinates the initiative by supporting economies' application of the *Manual*, promoting flexible reporting approaches including through an online platform, and supporting pilot implementation and capacity-building activities with partners such as the UN Regional Commissions.⁴ UNCTAD also ensures system-wide coordination with UNOSSC. The UNOSSC *Handbook on Integrating South-South and Triangular Cooperation in the Voluntary National Reviews* (2023)⁵ encourages the use of the UN Framework in country reports. The UN Regional Commissions leverage their regional networks and mechanisms supporting South-South cooperation, including to enhance data capacities.

With partners, UNCTAD aims to empower economies to collect, analyse and report their own South-South cooperation data, according to their national circumstances and priorities. Ten economies⁶ reported their SSC data for SDG 17.3.1 in the UN Framework for the first time in 2026. Nine of these were featured in the UNCTAD South-South Data Insights.⁷ Additional pilot projects are ongoing across the world to expand reporting. A regular country-led mechanism, hosted by UNCTAD, is under development to provide a platform for developing economies to further develop and decide on methodologies and concepts, exchange experiences and provide peer support. Interregional South-South data forums bring together policy-makers, statisticians, cooperation agencies and development partners to share lessons learned, strengthen networks and promote innovation in data collection and reporting.

Total Official Support for Sustainable Development

Total Official Support for Sustainable Development (TOSSD) is an international standard for measuring the full array of resources to promote the sustainable development of developing economies. TOSSD is a two-pillar framework. It is designed to monitor official resources flowing into developing economies for their sustainable development (Pillar I) as well as private resources mobilized through official means. It also measures contributions to international public goods⁸ (Pillar II). The TOSSD standard is governed by the International Forum on TOSSD⁹ whose membership is composed of traditional providers, South-South cooperation providers, other developing economies and international organizations.

TOSSD tracks resource flows regardless of their nature (financial or in-kind), their concessionality or whether they are delivered through bilateral or multilateral channels. It captures different financial instruments, including grants, debt instruments, equity, mezzanine finance and guarantees; frameworks of collaboration, including South-South and triangular cooperation; and financing arrangements, such as blended finance.

TOSSD data are collected from provider economies and organizations. As of July 2026, more than 130 economies and organizations had reported to TOSSD, including 19 developing economies. Multilateral organizations based in developing economies, such as the New Development Bank, also report to TOSSD.

In 2024, official support reported in TOSSD represented a total of US\$ 497.5 billion,

compared with US\$ 473.4 billion in 2023. Of this, US\$ 364.3 billion represented cross-border flows to developing economies and US\$ 133.2 billion addressed global sustainable development challenges. Mobilized private finance through official interventions amounted to a further US\$ 79.6 billion in 2024.

The International Forum on TOSSD ensures the alignment of reporting to TOSSD with the UN Framework to Measure South-South Cooperation, working closely with UNCTAD as its custodian and as Permanent Observer of the International Forum on TOSSD. All SSC data reported to TOSSD are available at activity-level on the TOSSD website.¹⁰ The availability of SSC data in TOSSD has increased across the years – however, several SSC providers do not report to the UN Framework for the time being, and some current providers continue to make efforts to broaden their reporting in TOSSD, covering the full array of SSC modalities.

From better measurement to better evidence for policy

The development of the statistical approaches outlined above represents an important step towards a more comprehensive understanding of the changing development cooperation landscape. However, data are still being gathered in both frameworks, and current coverage is not yet sufficient to support comprehensive global aggregates of SSC activities and flows.

The next challenge is to translate methodological progress into broader participation, stronger national data systems and information that can effectively support policy-making.

Strengthening national capacities and expanding reporting

Many developing economies continue to face practical and institutional challenges in collecting information on cooperation activities across different ministries and agencies. Continued capacity development, peer learning, investment in national data systems and strengthened data governance can enable more economies to collect, manage and report SSC information according to their national priorities.

In 2025, the United Nations General Assembly reiterated its request to UNCTAD for strengthened support to developing economies for applying the UN Framework and asked for regular reporting on progress in implementing its *Manual*.¹¹ In the Sevilla Commitment, agreed at the UN's 4th International Conference on Financing for Development, in 2025, member states reaffirmed support for enhanced reporting under SDG 17.3.1, encouraging broader reporting on South-South cooperation under the UN Framework for its statistical measurement, and supported UNCTAD's role as its custodian.

Improving coherence while reducing reporting burdens

As development cooperation statistics evolve, stronger support for digital and data capacities in developing economies can enable greater interoperability between data systems. It can also help economies collect information efficiently and use it for multiple national, regional and international purposes.

UNCTAD and the International Forum on TOSSD are working together to support coherent reporting

and comparability of data for SDG 17.3.1. The UN Framework serves as the source of South-South cooperation data for SDG reporting, while TOSSD submits data on North-South and other non-SSC official support flows to this indicator. As data availability increases, together these frameworks can contribute to a fuller understanding of triangular cooperation, including where developing economies play a key role.

Making trade-related SSC more visible

For the trade community, improved SSC data offer an opportunity to complement the existing evidence base on Aid for Trade. As reporting coverage expands, closer engagement among the WTO, UNCTAD, UNOSSC, the International Forum on TOSSD and national authorities could help better identify trade-related SSC and understand how it contributes to developing economies' trade capacity and sustainable development. Trade-related activities could be identified in both frameworks, including links to relevant trade-related SDG targets, including SDG 8.a on Aid for Trade.

Better measurement is not an end in itself. Its value lies in enabling economies to better understand and manage their cooperation, increasing the visibility of South-South cooperation contributions, and providing policy-makers with a more complete evidence base. Continued country leadership, stronger statistical capacity and cooperation among international organizations can help ensure that the evolving measurement and reporting approaches reflect the diversity of development cooperation while providing increasingly useful information for trade and sustainable development.

Endnotes

1. United Nations Statistical Commission (2022), Report on the fifty-third session, Economic and Social Council, Official Records, 2022, Supplement No. 4. Available at https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/session_53/documents/2022-41-FinalReport-E.pdf.
2. United Nations General Assembly Resolution, (A/RES/73/291).
3. UNCTAD (2025), *Manual for the Framework to Measure South-South Cooperation*. Available at <https://unctad.org/publication/manual-framework-measure-south-south-cooperation>.
4. Namely the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).
5. UNOSSC (2023), *Handbook on Integrating South-South and Triangular Cooperation in the Voluntary National Reviews (2023)*. Available at <https://unsouthsouth.org/knowledge-product/handbook-on-integrating-south-south-and-triangular-cooperation-in-the-voluntary-national-reviews-2023/>.
6. These are Argentina; Brazil; Chile; Colombia; Dominican Republic; Ecuador; Mexico; Namibia; Peru; Uruguay.
7. UNCTAD, "Data Insights", UNCTAD Data Hub. Available at <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/insights/theme/281>.
8. International public goods (or global public goods) are goods, services, resources, or benefits available to all economies and people, and where one economy's use does not reduce another economy's ability to benefit from them.
9. <https://www.tossd.org/en/international-forum-on-tossd.html>.
10. <https://tossd.online/>.
11. United Nations General Assembly Resolution, (A/RES/80/156).