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COLLABORATING FOR AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF BRETTON WOODS INSTITUTIONS AND THE NEW DEVELOPMENT BANK**Lesedi Senamele Matlala^{1*}, Noxolo Nomfundo Khuzwayo²**¹*School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy, University of Johannesburg, South Africa*²*Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Commerce, Administration and Law, University of Zululand, South Africa**E-mails:*^{1*} lmatlala@uj.ac.za (Corresponding author); nxikhuzwayo@gmail.com*Received 18 March 2026; accepted 25 July 2026; published 30 September 2026*

Abstract. Africa's development financing has been shaped by traditional international institutions such as the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs) and newer entities, such as the New Development Bank (NDB), established by the BRICS countries. The BWIs, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, have provided critical financial support. Still, they are often criticised for their rigid conditionalities, which limit African countries' autonomy in development planning. In contrast, the NDB offers a more flexible, partnership-driven approach despite facing governance and institutional capacity challenges. The study explores the feasibility and challenges of collaboration between BWIs and the NDB to fund development projects in Africa. Addressing a gap in the literature, the research investigates how these institutions can work together to create a more balanced and effective development model that prioritises both economic growth and social development. The problem lies in the stark differences between the BWIs' conditionality-driven model and the NDB's evolving governance structures, which present challenges to achieving sustainable development in Africa. Utilising a qualitative research design, the study gathered data through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including policymakers and development experts, and document analysis of institutional reports. Findings indicate that while BWIs' strict conditionalities promote fiscal discipline, they often undermine social development by prioritising short-term economic goals. Conversely, the NDB's flexibility supports greater local ownership but struggles with governance and accountability issues. Both institutions are influenced by the geopolitical interests of their dominant member states, complicating their effectiveness in promoting Africa's long-term development. Recommendations include creating a hybrid financing model that combines the financial discipline of BWIs with the flexibility of the NDB, strengthening governance through joint capacity-building initiatives to address institutional capacity gaps, and ensuring that development projects align with Africa's long-term strategic goals. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to assess the lasting impacts of these institutions on sustainable development outcomes in Africa.

Keywords: Bretton Woods Institutions; New Development Bank; Africa; development financing; governance; sustainable development

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1. Introduction and Background

Africa's development trajectory has been shaped by a complex set of internal and external forces, particularly the influence of international financial institutions. Despite abundant natural resources, the continent has faced longstanding developmental challenges, such as entrenched poverty, inequality, infrastructure deficits, and political instability. These issues have been exacerbated by global economic trends, regional conflicts, and governance challenges, all of which have hindered Africa's ability to achieve sustainable development. International organisations like the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs), namely the International Monetary Fund

(IMF) and the World Bank, have been central to attempts to address these issues by providing financial assistance and policy advice to African nations, especially during periods of economic crisis. However, the effectiveness of these interventions has been a subject of debate, as the conditionalities attached to BWI funding often require recipient countries to implement stringent economic reforms that may conflict with local priorities and social needs (NDB, 2021; World Bank, 2023). These reforms, typically centred around macroeconomic stability and liberalisation, have been criticised for exacerbating inequality and stifling long-term, inclusive development in Africa (Alao, 2007).

Since the mid-20th century, the role of BWIs in African development has grown significantly, particularly during economic crises, when African countries have turned to these institutions for financial bailouts and policy guidance. For example, many African nations sought assistance from the IMF and the World Bank to stabilise their economies during the global oil crises of the 1970s and the debt crises of the 1980s. However, these interventions were often accompanied by Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which required countries to adopt austerity measures, privatise state-owned enterprises, and liberalise their markets. While these reforms were intended to restore fiscal balance and promote growth, they frequently increased unemployment, reduced public spending on essential services, and deepened poverty, particularly in rural areas (Bannon & Collier, 2003). These outcomes highlight a fundamental tension between the goals of short-term macroeconomic stabilisation and the need for long-term, sustainable development that addresses the social and economic needs of Africa's most vulnerable populations (Nyadera et al., 2022).

In contrast to the BWIs, new institutional frameworks such as the New Development Bank (NDB), established by BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), offer alternative mechanisms for financing development in Africa. The NDB was founded to support infrastructure and sustainable development projects in emerging economies, including Africa (NDB, 2021). Unlike the BWIs, criticised for their top-down, conditionality-based approach, the NDB promotes a more flexible, partnership-oriented development financing model. This model emphasises mutual benefit and respect for national sovereignty, allowing African countries more significant control over the design and implementation of development projects. By focusing on infrastructure development—such as transportation, energy, and telecommunications—the NDB seeks to address some structural impediments to African growth while fostering regional integration and economic diversification (Hofman & Srinivas, 2024).

The divergence in approach between the BWIs and the NDB has led to ongoing debates about which institution is better suited to address Africa's development needs. On the one hand, the BWIs have a more extended history of engagement in Africa and possess the financial resources and institutional capacity to support large-scale projects. Their expertise in managing complex macroeconomic stabilisation programs and overseeing significant infrastructure investments is unmatched. However, the rigid conditionalities imposed by these institutions have often undermined their effectiveness, leading to a backlash from African governments and civil society groups who argue that the BWIs' policies are out of touch with the realities on the ground (Alesina et al., 2006). On the other hand, the NDB's more flexible approach, which allows for greater local ownership and customisation of projects, has been praised for aligning more closely with African countries' sovereignty and developmental priorities. Nevertheless, the NDB remains a relatively new institution and faces challenges related to capacity building, governance, and trust-building with African governments (NDB, 2021).

The potential for collaboration between these institutions is an area of growing interest, particularly as Africa's development challenges become increasingly complex and multidimensional. Recent studies have suggested that a hybrid model of collaboration between BWIs and the NDB could offer significant benefits by combining the financial discipline and technical expertise of the former with the flexibility and local responsiveness of the latter (Khuzwayo, 2023). Collaboration could help address both institutions' trust deficits and capacity limitations. For example, the IMF and the World Bank's extensive experience in managing large-scale infrastructure projects could complement the NDB's more flexible financing model, enabling greater project customisation to meet

African countries' specific needs (World Bank, 2023, 2026). However, significant obstacles remain, including differing governance structures, institutional mandates, and priorities between the BWIs and the NDB (Khuzwayo, 2023).

This study investigates the feasibility and challenges of collaboration between BWIs and the NDB to fund development projects in Africa. While both institutions play significant roles in Africa's economic development, a notable gap in the literature concerns how their respective strengths—BWIs' extensive experience and financial capacity and the NDB's flexibility and partnership-driven approach—can be synergised to address Africa's unique development needs better. Existing research has focused mainly on these institutions in isolation, often critiquing BWIs' conditionalities or highlighting the NDB's emerging role. Still, few studies have examined the potential benefits and obstacles of collaboration between these major financial players. This study addresses this gap by exploring how such collaboration could better support Africa's long-term development objectives, providing new insights into how financial institutions can foster more inclusive, context-sensitive, and sustainable growth.

In analysing the synergies and challenges within these institutional frameworks, the study will also delve into broader implications for Africa's development trajectory. Particular attention will be given to critical themes such as enhancing transparency, strengthening institutional capacity, and promoting inclusive development approaches that are responsive to the needs of African countries. By critically assessing the roles, challenges, and potential collaborations between BWIs and the NDB, this research contributes to ongoing debates about the most effective strategies for tackling Africa's complex development challenges. Ultimately, this study aims to provide actionable recommendations to foster a more effective partnership between these institutions, helping bridge the gap between Africa's economic aspirations and the financial mechanisms needed to achieve them.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical framework

Development financing in Africa has been a focal point of significant academic discourse, with various theoretical frameworks shedding light on the roles and impacts of international financial institutions. A critical perspective in this debate is World-Systems Theory, which argues that global economic structures are designed to perpetuate the dominance of wealthy, industrialised nations (core nations) over less-developed, resource-rich countries (peripheral nations) (Wallerstein, 2004). In this context, BWIs (like the IMF and the World Bank) are often seen as tools that reinforce these global hierarchies by imposing economic reforms that benefit core nations at the expense of peripheral countries. These reforms usually involve neoliberal policies in Africa, such as market liberalisation and privatisation, increased dependence on foreign aid and external markets, and a limitation on the continent's ability to pursue independent development strategies (Alao, 2007). Moreover, these reforms have typically failed to consider Africa's unique socio-political contexts, leading to unsustainable economic models that exacerbate poverty and inequality (Bannon & Collier, 2003; World Bank, 2026).

In contrast, Political Realism offers another critical theoretical lens for understanding the motivations behind international financial institutions' interventions. This theory, rooted in the belief that states act primarily in their self-interest, posits that the financial assistance provided by BWIs and the NDB is driven not by altruism but by geopolitical and economic interests (Morgenthau, 2005). Regarding BWIs, critics argue that their policies are often influenced by the strategic interests of powerful donor nations, particularly the United States and European countries, which use these institutions to extend their influence in Africa (Hofman & Srinivas, 2024). Similarly, the NDB, while promoting a more flexible and partnership-oriented approach, can also be viewed through a realist lens. BRICS nations, particularly China and Russia, are seen as using the NDB to expand their geopolitical influence in Africa, with development finance serving as a means to secure access to the continent's vast natural resources (Chagas de Assis 2024).

Participatory Development Theory, on the other hand, presents a more optimistic framework for understanding the NDB's role in Africa. This theory emphasises the importance of local ownership and decision-making in development processes. It argues that development projects are more likely to succeed when driven by the needs and priorities of the communities they aim to serve (Twinamasiko & Turyamureeba, 2025). The NDB's approach aligns closely with this theory, as it promotes collaboration between African governments and BRICS nations in the design and implementation of infrastructure projects, allowing for greater local input and control (NDB, 2021). Unlike the top-down, prescriptive approaches of BWIs, which have often been criticised for imposing external solutions on African countries, the NDB's model is seen as more responsive to the specific developmental needs of African nations, particularly in infrastructure development and sustainable growth (BRICS Policy Centre, 2021). This alignment with participatory development principles has led to increased support for the NDB in Africa, with many viewing it as a more viable alternative to the traditional dominance of BWIs (World Bank, 2023; Hofman & Srinivas, 2024).

However, despite the theoretical appeal of the NDB's model, its effectiveness in practice remains a subject of debate. Critics argue that while the NDB's emphasis on infrastructure development is essential for Africa's long-term growth, its focus on large-scale projects may overlook more immediate social development needs, such as healthcare, education, and poverty reduction (Bannon & Collier, 2003; World Bank, 2026). Furthermore, there are concerns that the NDB, like the BWIs, may prioritise the interests of its most influential members—China and Russia—over the needs of African nations. This raises questions about whether the NDB can genuinely serve as a counterbalance to BWIs or perpetuate similar power dynamics in global development finance. Thus, while Participatory Development Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the NDB's potential, it must be critically assessed alongside other theoretical perspectives that highlight the geopolitical and economic realities of international development finance.

The theoretical frameworks outlined above—World Systems Theory, Political Realism, and Participatory Development Theory—will shape this study's analysis by providing distinct lenses for assessing the roles and impacts of BWIs and the NDB in Africa's development. World-Systems Theory will be used to evaluate how the policies of these institutions reinforce or challenge global economic hierarchies, particularly regarding Africa's dependence on external financial assistance (Wallerstein, 2004). This framework will be critical in analysing the structural conditions that limit Africa's ability to pursue autonomous development strategies despite the presence of both BWIs and the NDB (Alao, 2007). Political Realism will provide insights into the motivations behind these institutions' financial interventions, enabling the study to critically assess the geopolitical and economic interests that shape development finance in Africa (Morgenthau, 2005). Finally, the Participatory Development Theory will guide the evaluation of the NDB's partnership-oriented model, focusing on the extent to which it promotes local ownership and decision-making in African development projects (Twinamasiko & Turyamureeba, 2025). Together, these frameworks will enable a comprehensive analysis of the synergies and challenges associated with BWI and NDB collaboration in funding developmental projects in Africa.

Empirical studies on institutional effectiveness

Empirical studies assessing the effectiveness of BWIs and the NDB in Africa present a complex and often contested picture, shaped by differing institutional mandates, governance structures, and development philosophies. BWIs, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, have historically played a central role in stabilising African economies during periods of fiscal distress by providing liquidity support and policy guidance. For example, IMF interventions during global economic shocks have been credited with preventing macroeconomic collapse in several African economies (IMF, 2020a,b, 2023). However, a growing body of recent empirical literature highlights that these interventions remain deeply embedded in conditionality frameworks that prioritise fiscal consolidation over inclusive development outcomes (Olaoye, 2022; Momoh, 2023).

Contemporary studies further demonstrate that austerity-linked reforms—such as wage bill containment and public expenditure cuts—continue to exacerbate inequality and weaken already fragile public service systems across Sub-Saharan Africa (Kentikelenis & Stubbs, 2023; Green, 2025). These findings reinforce longstanding critiques that BWIs tend to favour short-term macroeconomic stability at the expense of long-term developmental transformation (Harvey, 2005; World Bank, 2023). Moreover, recent analyses of IMF programme design indicate that while conditionalities have evolved rhetorically toward “social protection,” their implementation often remains constrained by technocratic priorities and external policy prescriptions (Sahasrabudde & Seddon, 2025).

In contrast, the NDB represents an emerging paradigm in development finance, characterised by greater flexibility, borrower ownership, and alignment with national development priorities. Empirical evidence from infrastructure financing initiatives—such as Nigeria’s Lekki Deep Sea Port—suggests that NDB-funded projects are less encumbered by stringent policy conditionalities, thereby enabling greater policy autonomy for recipient states (NDB, 2021). This model resonates with broader shifts toward South–South cooperation and alternative development financing architectures. However, recent scholarship cautions that the NDB’s institutional novelty presents significant governance and accountability challenges. Studies indicate that while the NDB promotes a partnership-oriented approach, it is still consolidating its internal oversight, environmental safeguards, and evaluation systems (Wang, 2019; Kellerman, 2021).

More recent comparative analyses highlight that new multilateral development banks—including the NDB—face a “legitimacy–capacity paradox,” where increased flexibility and responsiveness may come at the cost of weaker institutional controls and transparency mechanisms. This suggests that while the NDB offers an important alternative to BWIs, its long-term effectiveness will depend on strengthening governance frameworks without replicating the rigidities associated with traditional institutions.

A comparative examination of BWIs and the NDB reveals a fundamental divergence in development approaches. BWIs continue to prioritise macroeconomic stability through structural reforms, often leading to reduced public investment in critical social sectors (Olaoye, 2022). Empirical evidence shows that such reforms have, in some cases, contributed to persistent development inequalities and limited state capacity in African contexts (Kentikelenis & Stubbs, 2023). Conversely, the NDB’s focus on infrastructure development and long-term growth aligns more closely with structural transformation agendas in Africa. Its financing model, which emphasises national ownership and contextual responsiveness, has been identified as a key strength in recent development finance literature.

At the same time, emerging research on global financial governance suggests that institutions such as the NDB and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are not entirely detached from geopolitical dynamics but rather represent a reconfiguration of global power relations in development finance (King, 2022). This reinforces the argument that institutional effectiveness must be understood not only in technical terms but also within broader political economy contexts.

Despite the relative advantages associated with the NDB’s model, empirical studies consistently identify institutional capacity constraints as a critical bottleneck affecting development outcomes across Africa. Projects financed by both BWIs and the NDB frequently encounter delays, cost overruns, and implementation inefficiencies due to weak administrative systems, procurement challenges, and limited technical expertise at the national level (Khuzwayo, 2023; Etikan & Bala, 2017). Recent global infrastructure research further confirms that project underperformance is strongly correlated with governance deficits and inadequate planning capacity in developing economies (World Bank, 2023). These findings underscore the importance of embedding capacity-building and institutional strengthening within development financing frameworks, rather than treating them as peripheral components.

The theoretical frameworks underpinning these empirical insights remain essential for interpreting institutional effectiveness. World Systems Theory continues to provide a critical lens for understanding how BWIs may reproduce structural dependency within the global economic system (Wallerstein, 2004). Recent scholarship extends this argument by demonstrating how historical financial architectures—rooted in the Bretton Woods system—continue to shape contemporary inequalities in global monetary governance (Green, 2025; King, 2022). In parallel, Political Realism offers a useful framework for analysing how both BWIs and the NDB are influenced by the strategic interests of dominant member states, with development outcomes often reflecting broader geopolitical priorities (Morgenthau, 2005; Sahasrabuddhe & Seddon, 2025).

Overall, while both BWIs and the NDB remain central actors in Africa's development financing landscape, their effectiveness is mediated by competing priorities, governance constraints, and political dynamics. BWIs' emphasis on macroeconomic discipline often constrains social development, whereas the NDB's flexible, partnership-driven approach enhances local ownership but raises concerns regarding institutional robustness. Consequently, recent empirical and policy-oriented literature increasingly advocates for a hybrid or complementary model—one that integrates the financial discipline and technical expertise of BWIs with the contextual responsiveness and flexibility of the NDB—to address better Africa's complex and evolving development challenges (Khuzwayo, 2023).

3. Methodological Framework

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm rooted in interpretivism, focusing on the subjective meanings individuals and groups attach to their experiences and interactions. Interpretivism is particularly suitable for this study as it explores African stakeholders' nuanced and multifaceted perceptions regarding the influence of the NDB and BRICS-Africa Forums on Africa's sustainable development. By emphasising the subjective meanings individuals attribute to these institutional partnerships, the interpretive approach enables the generation of in-depth, context-sensitive insights through direct engagement with participants in their natural settings (Berg, 2004; Bryman, 2016). This approach is ideal for investigating how the dynamics of international cooperation, mainly through the NDB and BRICS, shape African economic development trajectories.

Furthermore, interpretivism allows the researcher to delve into the complexity of institutional interactions and the perceptions of critical actors involved in Africa's development. This paradigm is integral to the study's objectives, which focus on understanding how African nations can strategically leverage support from the NDB and BRICS-Africa Forums to address their development challenges. Through this qualitative lens, the research examines how institutional actors from different backgrounds—from policymakers to development professionals—interpret their roles within these frameworks.

The study employs a qualitative research design to explore the intricacies of international cooperation within the context of African development. A qualitative design allows for flexibility in exploring emerging themes during the research process while centring on participants' lived experiences and perceptions (Berg, 2004). This design is particularly effective in investigating complex social phenomena, such as the strategic role of BRICS-Africa Forums and the NDB in addressing Africa's development priorities (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Qualitative research is well-suited to understanding how these institutions influence Africa's development landscape, including the varying dynamics across infrastructure, education, and sustainable development (Bryman, 2016).

A case study approach is integrated into the research design to provide a detailed exploration of specific projects and initiatives within the NDB and BRICS-Africa collaborations. Case studies, including projects in South Africa, Mozambique, and Ghana, will illustrate the practical outcomes of these institutional partnerships. By focusing on real-world examples, the case study method provides empirical grounding for the research while allowing for a deeper exploration of how these partnerships affect Africa's development trajectory. Additionally, case studies provide insight into the local and regional variations in the execution of development projects.

Data collection and sampling methods

Semi-structured interviews are the primary data collection tool employed in this study, chosen for their flexibility and ability to capture in-depth insights into key stakeholders' perspectives. These interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 15 participants, all of whom had a deep understanding of BRICS, the NDB, and their impact on Africa's development. The sample includes professionals from institutions directly engaged with African development, particularly those involved in BRICS-related activities. This purposive sampling ensures that the study targets individuals with relevant experience, thereby enabling a detailed exploration of the research questions. The diverse backgrounds of the participants, ranging from policymakers to academics, help provide multiple perspectives on the dynamics of BRICS-NDB collaboration.

Participants were drawn from six key institutions, including the NDB African Regional Centre, BRICS Think Tanks, African embassies, and policymakers from the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO). These participants were selected for their direct involvement in BRICS-Africa and NDB initiatives, making their insights particularly valuable for understanding the institutional dynamics shaping Africa's development. Table 1 summarises the key participants, their roles, and the justification for their inclusion.

Table 1. Interview Participants

Department/Organisation	Number of Participants	Position	Justification for Selection
New Development Bank Institution (African Region)	5	Senior Professionals and Officers	Responsible for project origination, implementation monitoring, and client relations
African Embassy Officials (Ghana, Mozambique, Angola, etc.)	2	Ambassadors	Selected based on their relations with BRICS countries
BRICS Think Tanks	5	Policy Analysts	Provide independent and scientific foreign policy advice to government and parliament
BRICS Academic Forums	5	Professors and Senior Lecturers in Public Administration and International Relations	Bring extensive academic and professional experience in the field of BRICS and African development
DIRCO	5	Public Diplomacy and Director General's Office	Key implementers of South African foreign policy
Academies of Social Sciences	5	Senior Managers and Researchers in International Relations	Experts in social sciences with a focus on BRICS and global development issues

Document analysis is used to complement the interview data. This involves reviewing policy documents, reports, and academic papers on the NDB, BRICS-Africa Forums, and Africa's economic development. Document analysis helps triangulate the interview data, adding depth to the study by providing broader contextual information (Bowen, 2009). Sources include official NDB reports, BRICS policy papers, and development evaluations published by African governments and international organisations. They review these documents to understand how policy decisions and institutional practices translate into on-the-ground development outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Data analysis methods

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with policymakers, NDB representatives, and development experts. This approach involves systematically identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns or themes within the dataset (Krippendorff, 2004). Initially, data-driven codes were generated from the participants' responses, capturing their varied perspectives on the operations

and collaborations between the BWIs and the NDB. For example, codes such as "rigid conditionalities" and "governance challenges" were identified during the analysis. A continual comparison process was applied, allowing the researcher to compare and contrast codes across interviews, which helped refine and consolidate them into broader themes.

As part of the thematic analysis, codes were grouped into broader categories that reflected the study's central issues. These included institutional governance, conditionalities, and collaboration dynamics between BWIs and the NDB. For instance, codes such as "geopolitical influence" and "collaborative potential" emerged as key indicators of the differing motivations and potential for cooperation among these institutions. The process of continual comparison facilitated the identification of recurring themes, such as governance structures and the impact of conditionalities on African autonomy in development planning, which were consistently highlighted across the participants' responses. To ensure consistency and coherence in theme development, the study applied an explicit theoretical framework that grounded the analysis within established governance and development financing concepts. This approach helped mitigate potential inconsistencies in the thematic analysis, ensuring that the identified themes aligned with the research's theoretical underpinnings. The codes and their corresponding broader themes identified through the thematic analysis are below.

Table 2. Codes and themes

Participants Code	Interview Question	Codes	Description	Theme
AFR1	How do BWIs' conditionalities affect your country's development?	Rigid conditionalities	Discusses how BWIs' stringent conditions limit national autonomy and development priorities.	Conditionalities and Autonomy
NDBR2	What challenges does the NDB face in project implementation?	Governance challenges	Highlights weak governance structures in the NDB that hinder project execution and monitoring.	Governance Structures and Capacity
EMB3	How do you perceive the role of BRICS in African development?	Geopolitical influence	Explores how BRICS nations use the NDB to expand geopolitical influence in Africa.	Geopolitical Motivations
POL4	How do you assess collaboration between BWIs and the NDB?	Collaborative potential	Discusses opportunities for hybrid financing models that combine flexibility and financial discipline.	Collaboration Dynamics and Outcomes

Trustworthiness and credibility

Several strategies are employed to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. Triangulation of data sources (interviews and document reviews) is used to cross-verify findings, ensuring the results are consistent and well-supported (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Additionally, member checking is conducted by sharing interview transcripts with participants for validation, ensuring their views are accurately captured. This process enhances the reliability of the findings, aligning with Creswell and Poth's (2024) recommendations for maintaining qualitative rigour. Reflexivity, where the researcher actively reflects on potential biases, is also incorporated into the research process to ensure objectivity in data interpretation.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the key findings of the study, based on stakeholder interviews and document analysis. These findings are framed within the study's theoretical perspectives. Each finding addresses critical aspects of how the NDB and BWIs operate in Africa, particularly regarding development financing, governance, geopolitical motivations, and the impact on sustainable development.

Conditionalities and autonomy in development financing

One of the most significant findings relates to the conditionalities attached to development financing by BWIs, particularly the IMF and the World Bank. The interviews revealed a clear consensus among African policymakers and development experts that the rigid conditionalities imposed by BWI often limit African countries' ability to shape their development agendas. This was particularly evident in the analysis of SAPs, designed to ensure fiscal stability but often at the cost of social development (IMF, 2020). Many interview participants highlighted the IMF's insistence on austerity measures, which reduced social spending, including healthcare and education, thus exacerbating poverty and inequality (Khuzwayo, 2023). This reflects the central argument of World Systems Theory, which posits that global financial systems are structured to maintain the dominance of core nations over peripheral ones by restricting the latter's development options (Wallerstein, 2004).

The document analysis showed that these conditionalities have long-term implications for the autonomy of African states. BWI reports frequently emphasise the importance of macroeconomic stability but rarely acknowledge the social costs associated with these reforms (World Bank, 2023). This finding was supported by interviewees at African embassies, who noted that while BWI funding provided short-term financial relief, it often imposed conditions that undermined local ownership of development projects. One policymaker from Ghana noted that *"the strings attached to World Bank loans sometimes force us to prioritise short-term fiscal discipline over long-term developmental goals, making it difficult to invest in key sectors like education and healthcare"* (Interview Participant 5, 2023).

In contrast, the NDB's more flexible financing model, which does not impose the same level of stringent conditionalities, was consistently praised by African stakeholders. Several interviewees highlighted that the NDB gives African governments greater control over the design and implementation of development projects, particularly in infrastructure (NDB, 2021). This approach is more in line with Participatory Development Theory, which emphasises local ownership and decision-making as essential components of successful development interventions. Document analysis of NDB reports confirmed that the institution aims to align its projects with the national development strategies of member countries, reinforcing the idea that development should be driven by local priorities rather than external mandates (NDB, 2020, 2021).

Governance structures and institutional capacity

The findings also highlighted significant differences in governance structures between BWIs and the NDB, and how these differences affect the success and sustainability of African development projects. BWIs, particularly the IMF and the World Bank, have well-established governance frameworks that include rigorous oversight mechanisms to ensure loans are used efficiently and in accordance with their terms (World Bank, 2021). Interviews with African stakeholders revealed a mixed perception of these governance frameworks. While some appreciated the transparency and accountability that BWIs bring to development financing, others criticised them for being too prescriptive and overly bureaucratic. One senior official from the New Development Bank stated, *"The IMF's stringent governance and oversight mechanisms often slow down project implementation, and sometimes the processes become more important than the outcomes"* (Interview Participant 3, 2023). From the document review, it became clear that BWIs' governance frameworks are deeply embedded in global financial structures dominated by Western countries. This finding supports political Realism, which argues that international institutions are often instruments of dominant global powers that serve their geopolitical interests (Morgenthau, 2005). For instance, the IMF's governance structures allow disproportionate influence to the United States and European countries, which means that the policies imposed on African countries are often aligned with the strategic interests of these global powers. Several interviewees pointed out that these governance frameworks frequently prioritise donor countries' interests over recipient nations' developmental needs, thereby reinforcing the global economic hierarchy described by World-Systems Theory (Wallerstein, 2004).

In contrast, the NDB's governance structures are still evolving. Many participants emphasised that the NDB, as a relatively new institution, has greater governance flexibility but lacks the robust oversight mechanisms of the BWIs (NDB, 2021). A senior policy analyst from a BRICS Think Tank observed, "*The NDB's governance is still in its infancy, and while this allows for more local input, it also creates risks related to project oversight and accountability*" (Interview Participant 7, 2023). This was echoed in the document analysis, which revealed that the NDB is still working to develop its internal oversight frameworks, especially in monitoring and evaluating projects (NDB, 2020). This governance gap was highlighted as a potential weakness in the NDB model, particularly in countries with weak institutional capacities.

Geopolitical motivations behind development finance

The geopolitical motivations behind development financing emerged as a critical theme in interviews and document analysis. Participants consistently noted that the NDB, despite its emphasis on partnership and development, is viewed by many African stakeholders as a tool for BRICS nations, particularly China and Russia, to expand their geopolitical influence in Africa. This perception was supported by document analysis, which showed that many NDB-funded projects are strategically located in areas of geopolitical interest to BRICS countries (Khuzwayo, 2023). For instance, infrastructure projects such as the Lekki Deep Sea Port in Nigeria, while undoubtedly beneficial for regional integration, are also critical to China's broader Belt and Road Initiative (NDB, 2021).

Several interview participants from African embassies and BRICS Think Tanks expressed concerns that the NDB may prioritise projects that serve the geopolitical interests of BRICS nations over the development needs of African countries. One academic from the BRICS Academic Forum noted, "*While the NDB offers an alternative to the IMF and World Bank, it is not free from geopolitical motivations. The challenge is ensuring that Africa's interests remain at the forefront of these collaborations*" (Interview Participant 9, 2023). This finding aligns with Political Realism, which posits that international institutions are driven by the self-interest of powerful states (Morgenthau, 2005). Similarly, several reviewed documents highlighted the strategic interests of BRICS nations in expanding their influence in Africa through the NDB, particularly to secure access to natural resources and strategic infrastructure (Hofman & Srinivas, 2024).

However, the geopolitical motivations behind BWI interventions were also emphasised. Several participants argued that while the IMF and World Bank often present themselves as neutral development partners, their policies are deeply influenced by the strategic interests of Western nations, particularly the United States and the European Union (Harvey, 2005). This is evident in the types of reforms BWIs demand in exchange for financing, often aligning with neoliberal economic policies favoured by Western powers (World Bank, 2021). These findings reinforce the argument of World-Systems Theory that international financial institutions are instruments of global hegemony, designed to perpetuate the economic dominance of the Global North over the Global South (Wallerstein, 2004).

Impact on sustainable development and regional integration

The final key finding of the study pertains to the impact of NDB and BWI interventions on sustainable development and regional integration. Both institutions were found to play significant roles in advancing infrastructure development in Africa, but their approaches and impacts differ. The NDB's focus on large-scale infrastructure projects, such as transportation and energy, was praised by many participants as critical for fostering economic growth and regional integration (NDB, 2021). One senior official from the African Embassy in South Africa noted, "*The NDB's investments in cross-border infrastructure are essential for boosting intra-African trade and regional cooperation, which are key to sustainable development*" (Interview Participant 6, 2023).

However, several interviewees expressed concern that the NDB's emphasis on infrastructure sometimes comes at the expense of social development. While infrastructure is vital for economic growth, it must be complemented by

investments in social sectors such as education, healthcare, and poverty reduction to ensure that the benefits of growth are equitably distributed (Khuzwayo, 2023). This critique is supported by Participatory Development Theory, which argues that development interventions must be holistic, addressing both economic and social dimensions to achieve long-term sustainability (Twinamasiko & Turyamureeba, 2025). The document analysis revealed that while the NDB has significantly addressed Africa's infrastructure needs, its focus on large-scale projects may overlook the more immediate social challenges facing African countries (NDB, 2021).

In contrast, BWIs have historically placed greater emphasis on poverty alleviation and social development, though their interventions have often been critiqued for failing to address the root causes of inequality (Harvey, 2005). Several participants highlighted the World Bank's support for education and healthcare programs as examples of the institution's broader focus on social development (World Bank, 2021). However, these efforts are often undermined by the macroeconomic conditionalities attached to BWI loans, which prioritise fiscal austerity over social investment. As one senior lecturer from the BRICS Academic Forum noted, "*The World Bank's social development projects are essential, but they are often hampered by the broader macroeconomic policies imposed by the IMF, which limit the government's ability to invest in these sectors*" (Interview Participant 8, 2023). This finding underscores the tension between the economic and social dimensions of sustainable development, a theme central to theoretical discussions of World Systems Theory and Participatory Development Theory.

The analysis of these findings reveals that while the NDB and BWI play critical roles in Africa's development, their differing approaches to governance, conditionalities, and geopolitical motivations have significant implications for the success of development projects on the continent. These findings highlight the need for a more integrated approach that balances development's economic and social dimensions, ensuring that Africa's growth is inclusive and sustainable.

5. Conclusions

This study explored the feasibility and challenges of collaboration between BWIs and the NDB financing developmental projects in Africa. The interviews and document analysis findings reveal significant differences in how these institutions operate, particularly regarding conditionalities, governance structures, geopolitical motivations, and their impact on sustainable development. BWIs, particularly the IMF and World Bank, have historically imposed stringent conditionalities that have constrained African autonomy in development planning. These conditionalities have often been viewed as reinforcing global economic hierarchies, as posited by World Systems Theory. In contrast, the NDB's partnership-oriented model offers greater flexibility and local ownership despite facing governance and institutional capacity challenges.

Geopolitical motivations also played a significant role in shaping the development agendas of both the BWIs and the NDB. Political Realism suggests that these institutions act in the interests of their dominant member states, a view supported by the findings that the NDB's projects often align with the strategic interests of BRICS nations, particularly China. At the same time, BWIs are seen as promoting Western powers' geopolitical and economic interests through neoliberal reforms. Finally, the study found that while both institutions contribute to sustainable development, the NDB's focus on infrastructure and the BWIs' emphasis on social development often create a gap between economic growth and social equity.

6. Recommendations

Based on the key findings of this study, the following strengthened recommendations aim to enhance the effectiveness of development financing in Africa through a more collaborative and context-sensitive approach between the BWIs and the NDB. These recommendations align with the findings on conditionalities, governance structures, geopolitical motivations, and sustainable development impacts.

Develop a flexible conditionality framework tailored to local needs

The study highlights the restrictive conditionalities imposed by BWIs as a significant barrier to African countries' autonomy in development planning, whereas the NDB offers more flexibility. It is recommended that both institutions work towards creating a joint conditionality framework that allows for greater flexibility and local ownership of projects. This framework should be tailored to the socio-economic contexts of African nations, allowing governments to prioritise long-term development objectives over short-term fiscal adjustments. The NDB's partnership model, which minimises conditionalities, can be a guiding example for BWIs adopting more context-sensitive approaches. Participatory Development Theory supports this recommendation, emphasising that locally driven development interventions are more sustainable and effective. African countries, in turn, must work to articulate clear national development priorities, such as those laid out in Agenda 2063, that can serve as the basis for negotiating terms with BWIs and the NDB. The flexibility of the NDB combined with the financial discipline of BWIs can create a hybrid financing model that ensures fiscal stability while empowering African nations to shape their development pathways.

Strengthen governance and accountability mechanisms through joint capacity-building initiatives

The findings reveal that, although BWIs have well-established governance and oversight mechanisms, these often stifle local ownership due to excessive bureaucracy, and the NDB's governance frameworks are still evolving. To bridge this gap, both institutions should invest in joint capacity-building initiatives to strengthen governance structures in African countries. These initiatives should focus on strengthening local institutional capacity in project management, financial oversight, and governance, thereby enabling African governments to manage large-scale projects more effectively. BWIs and the NDB should collaborate to develop tailored capacity-building programs that equip African governments with the skills and resources to oversee complex development projects. These programs should include knowledge-sharing platforms for BWIs and the NDB to exchange best practices in transparency, accountability, and financial management. This recommendation is supported by Political Realism, which highlights the need for robust institutional frameworks to prevent external powers from exploiting governance gaps.

Promote a balanced approach between economic growth and social development

While crucial for fostering economic growth, the NDB's focus on large-scale infrastructure projects often overlooks social development sectors such as healthcare, education, and poverty reduction. On the other hand, BWIs, while focusing on poverty alleviation, have frequently undermined these efforts with stringent macroeconomic reforms. To address this imbalance, it is recommended that both institutions adopt a more integrated approach that combines infrastructure investments with targeted social development programs.

The NDB, in particular, should broaden its portfolio to include projects that directly address the social dimensions of sustainable development, such as education and healthcare systems, in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2023). BWIs should align their macroeconomic reforms with social development objectives to ensure that fiscal policies do not undermine investments in human capital. Both institutions should balance infrastructure development with social equity to create inclusive growth models that benefit all population segments.

Institutionalise geopolitical neutrality and focus on African development priorities

The study found that BWIs and the NDB are often perceived as instruments of geopolitical influence—BWIs serve Western interests, and the NDB reflects the strategic interests of BRICS nations, particularly China and Russia. To address these concerns, both institutions must institutionalise geopolitical neutrality and refocus their efforts on supporting Africa's long-term development priorities. This could be achieved by enhancing transparency in project selection processes, ensuring that projects are aligned with the national development goals of African states rather than the strategic interests of external powers.

The NDB, in particular, should establish a clear governance framework that prioritises African-led development agendas, as outlined in Agenda 2063, while BWI should reevaluate its policy conditions to ensure they support, rather than hinder, the socio-economic growth of African countries. This would require a shift in how both institutions engage with African governments, promoting a more consultative approach that involves African stakeholders at every stage of project development and implementation. Political Realism underscores the importance of transparency and neutrality in preventing the exploitation of development financing for geopolitical gain (Morgenthau, 2005).

Enhance regional integration through cross-border collaboration on infrastructure projects

The NDB's role in financing large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the Lekki Deep Sea Port, has been praised for its potential to enhance regional integration and intra-African trade. However, regional integration requires more than physical infrastructure—it demands collaboration across policy, governance, and trade mechanisms. To maximise the impact of NDB and BWI investments, both institutions should prioritise cross-border infrastructure projects that facilitate regional integration. Still, these projects should be complemented by harmonised trade policies and regulatory frameworks that allow for the seamless movement of goods and services across African borders. The NDB should collaborate with BWIs to support regional economic communities (RECs), such as the African Union and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), to ensure that infrastructure investments are aligned with broader regional goals. This recommendation aligns with findings that infrastructure-led growth must be coupled with trade facilitation and social development to achieve sustainable economic outcomes (NDB, 2021). The continent can achieve more integrated and sustainable development outcomes beyond national borders by fostering greater collaboration between African governments, BWIs, and the NDB.

Facilitate joint monitoring and evaluation to enhance project success and sustainability

Given the challenges related to project governance and accountability, it is recommended that BWIs and the NDB establish joint M&E frameworks for all significant development projects. These frameworks should be designed to assess the economic outcomes of projects, as well as their social and environmental impacts. World Systems Theory emphasises the importance of scrutinising the operations of global institutions to ensure they do not perpetuate existing inequalities. It makes joint M&E essential for ensuring that projects serve African development needs rather than external interests.

This recommendation aligns with the need for stronger institutional capacity-building discussed earlier, as it would require training and resources to enable local governments to effectively participate in monitoring and evaluation of projects financed by both institutions. Joint M&E efforts would promote transparency, improve accountability, and ensure that development outcomes are aligned with national and regional priorities. This approach would allow BWIs and the NDB to learn from each other's best practices, improving project implementation and sustainability.

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