

South-South cooperation advanced further when the two-day Africa-South America (ASA) summit concluded its deliberations on September 28 at Venezuela's Margarita Island. There the leaders of the two continents issued a lengthy declaration outlining the views of the developing South and committing the two continental blocs to cooperate in the fight against poverty.

The 12 countries of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and 49 from the African Union (AU) attended this second ASA summit which saw the participation of 8 South American and 20 African presidents, along with numerous vice-presidents and foreign ministers.

The summit declaration called for reforms in the UN Security Council to ensure greater involvement by South American and African countries and to correct the current imbalances in the UN system. In championing this position, Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva declared: "We're 65 countries with more than one billion inhabitants who want to be heard."

The document also condemned racism, discrimination and trafficking of persons, and reasserted the commitment to intensify efforts to eradicate poverty and hunger in the context of the Millennium Development Goals.

With respect to this, the South American and African leaders urged the developed world to uphold the commitment reaffirmed in the Monterrey Consensus in 2002, whereby industrialised countries are to set aside at least 0.7 percent of their GDP to official development assistance in favour of developing countries. Seven years after the Monterrey conference, this commitment is still waiting to be fulfilled.

Much discussion centred on energy and mining issues, and the leaders agreed to share and exchange experiences in terms of energy sources and savings, especially clean, renewable and alternative sources.

On the sidelines, bilateral discussions led to the signing of energy agreements between Venezuela and some African countries. These included pacts with Equatorial Guinea, Mauritania, Cape Verde and Niger to study the construction of a refinery in West Africa.

Venezuela also agreed to partner with South Africa's state oil company PetroSA in developing oil fields in Venezuela, and offered to help with oil projects in the other countries. The South American oil giant also signed mining agreements with Namibia and Mali.

Coinciding with the summit, the presidents of seven South American countries-Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela-signed the document creating the Bank of the South, which will have \$20 billion in start-up capital, and to which Brazil, Argentina and Venezuela will eventually provide \$12 billion in equal parts. The bank will fund anti-poverty and development projects and will hold the foreign reserves of its participating members. Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez proposed that the bank should establish an alliance with a similar institution in Africa, in order to create a major "South-South" bank to finance development programmes.

Touching on environmental matters, the summit, while sharply blaming the industrialised North for the rapid rise in global warming, supported the creation of a special fund to help developing countries to deal with climate-related disasters.

During the plenary session, leaders from both continents expressed support for bi-continental cooperation in the areas of food and agriculture. In discussing food security and production, the leaders agreed to conduct joint studies and exchange experiences with the aim of improving the current situation. Significantly, on the weekend of the summit, Venezuela also signed an agreement with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization offering agricultural assistance in Africa, by supplying seeds and helping with irrigation systems. Brazil also offered technical assistance to cultivate crops in semi-arid areas in both Africa and South America.

Even though Brazil has advanced its trading relations with many African countries, the leaders recognised the limitations of South-South trade and investment and both the AU and UNASUR were mandated to prepare a strategy to promote sustainable development, while respecting the sovereign rights of each country to manage and regulate natural resources.

A plan of action for the implementation of a series of cooperation projects could not be completed in time for the summit and will be presented within the next six months. This plan will, inter alia, emphasise projects involving social and cultural cooperation.

Advancing cooperation on health issues, the summit agreed to strengthen integration by identifying structural weaknesses and other illness-determining social factors on both continents. This is aimed at preventing the high maternal and infant death rates, malnutrition, and improving access to drinking water, as well as fighting the transmission of HIV/AIDS and their impact on the population. Emphasis will also be placed in combating other poverty-related illnesses such as tuberculosis, malaria, and other epidemics coexisting with non-transmittable diseases, through the production and equitable distribution of new vaccines and widen the access to essential medicines.

And on the question of education, the summit recognised the incidence of illiteracy as a factor of social exclusion in the development of South American and African countries. It therefore agreed to consolidate efforts, from a perspective of social and gender equality, to contribute to eradicate this problem through the exchange and the promotion of successful practices in teaching people to read and write.

The promotion of cultural links received much attention and the leaders committed their respective nations to strengthen relations among the peoples of Africa and South America in order to recognise their cultural and historic heritage.

In a practical sense, these cultural links were enhanced when the ASA member states unanimously agreed to advise their national Olympic committees to back Brazil's bid to host the Olympic Games in 2016. In all likelihood, this solid support helped Brazil a week after the summit to achieve this honour at the International Olympic Committee's election in Copenhagen, a success now widely regarded as a victory for the South.

Significantly, the summit advanced the organisational structure of ASA through a follow-up mechanism, by setting up a permanent secretariat to be housed on Margarita Island. Sectoral working groups, led by high level officials, will also meet in the next few months to present proposals to a gathering of foreign ministers within the next year. These administrative processes, undoubtedly, will move South-South cooperation to a higher level.