



# South Africa, Sweden, and Good International Citizenship

By Suzanne Graham

## Abstract

There are those who argue that a state embodying good international citizenship (GIC) must actively seek to improve the world around it, thereby making a positive contribution to overcoming global challenges. A good international citizen (state) must also be a proponent of multilateral cooperation, usually manifesting in global platforms such as the United Nations (UN). Scholars refer to middle power states being ideally situated in the power rankings of international affairs, respected by major and minor powers, to become custodians of emerging international norms and to pave a pathway forward for the community

of states. Both South Africa and Sweden are seen as pivot countries in their respective regions and have a long history of shared desires and supports for freedom. This article will explore the notion of GIC and its desirability, and applicability, in relation to South Africa and Sweden. It employs a case study methodology approach in its research design and interrogates the extent to which South Africa and Sweden qualify as good international citizens according to four characteristics, drawn from the literature. The article finds that both Sweden and South Africa demonstrate elements of good international citizenship.

## Introduction

After World War II and the increasing growth, and interest, in multilateral organisations, the spirit of state harmony and cooperating for peace had become a sought-after goal in the liberal international community, with many states attempting to work collectively to respond to global problems. Unfortunately, the Cold War interrupted this process, making this goal a simmering and unrealised vision for many parts of the globe. When former United States President George Bush (senior) spoke of a new world order in 1991 (Bush as cited in Nye, 1992), reflecting just treatment of all peoples and peaceful nations working together, the concept of good international citizenship (GIC) had already surfaced in diplomatic fields many years before<sup>1</sup> – although it is most often attributed to Gareth Evans, former Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs (see Evans, 1989).

When a group of like-minded states, such as democracies, 'conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions', an international society exists (Bull, 1977: 13). Although some have dismissed the notion of an international community as a cliché (and unattainable) (see Beeson, 2015); if ever there was an example of states needing to cooperate to resolve global challenges, it is the global coronavirus pandemic – an unprecedented (in the 21<sup>st</sup> century) disease sweeping across the world regardless of borders, nationality, wealth, land size, or population. One could argue that in the face of this global disaster, states should work together for the good of all, in harmony and not with selfish interests in mind because the problem is everyone's problem. However, even then examples of discrimination, unfairness, and inequality persist, in relation to vaccine access and roll out across the globe (see Achiume, 2022 and Bajaj and Maki, 2022 for reference to what has been labelled 'vaccine apartheid' by these and other authors). At the potential tail end of the pandemic, a possible third world war arises with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, solidifying for realists that 'states will always be states' and causing liberals to scratch their heads in bewildered disbelief. What does it take for states to stand up and advance a global cause ahead of selfish national interest but as part of a natural and moral obligation to contribute and make a difference in the international system of

states? Where are the good guys? Where and who are the good international citizens? This article will explore how (if at all) South Africa and Sweden may fit within this category of states. It will begin by offering a literature review of GIC, then move on to apply the four characteristics of GIC as deduced from the literature to the two cases: South Africa and Sweden. It will then offer a conclusion based on this application.

## Literature Review

GIC represents a role identifier for states keen to promote multilateralism and inclusive diplomacy and the facilitation of state harmony through mediation and other dialogic measures. International relations theories such as realism, cosmopolitanism, and rationalism each try to make sense of what defines GIC: '[R]ealism beats a path for the state, rationalism defines a middle road in international politics, and cosmopolitanism attempts to change the world for the better through the moral unity of human society' (Graham, 2008: 87).

Pert (2014) as cited by Abbondanza (2021:181) highlights five areas that characterise GIC: 'compliance with the international law; support for multilateralism, willingness to 'pitch in' to international tasks, 'international good deeds', and leadership.' Scholars, such as Ahlhaus (2014) and Youde and Slagter (2013) refer to middle power states<sup>2</sup>, ideally situated in the power rankings of international affairs and respected by major and minor powers, as potentially Good International Citizens. Examples from the literature include Canada (Wylie, 2009); Australia (Lightfoot, 2006; Hoffstaedter and Lamb, 2019; Abbondanza, 2021); and South Africa (Graham, 2008; Jordaan, 2010; Geldenhuys, 2011 and 2015).

Müller and Wunderlich (2013) explore Canada, Germany, and Sweden in the field of GIC with a focus on arms control. This article intends to contribute to the literature by offering an updated and more holistic, albeit brief, exploratory review of South Africa and Sweden and GIC in relation to four key descriptors or characteristics of GIC as drawn from the literature. The characteristics will be outlined later in this article. Both South Africa and Sweden are perceived to be middle powers<sup>3</sup> and pivot countries

in their respective regions and have a long history of shared desires and supports for freedom (Cilliers, 2018). A moral reputation is important in international affairs. It helps to influence cooperation as a form of a state's soft power (Crescenzi and Donahue, 2019). It has economic weight too: 'Reputation determines whether people support a country through their behaviors [sic]. Good reputation means more exports, more investments, more people coming to visit' (Trad, Chief Operating Officer at the Reputation Institute, quoted in Forbes, 2019).

## Methodology

This article briefly explores the notion of GIC in relation to South Africa<sup>4</sup> and Sweden. It employs a case study methodology approach in its research design. Although Sweden is considered to be the 19<sup>th</sup> wealthiest<sup>5</sup> state in the world, compared to South Africa in 93<sup>rd</sup> position (Ventura, 2021), both states can be labelled as middle powers with between 0.3% and 2% of global power potential<sup>6</sup> (Cilliers, 2018).

In terms of bilateral relations, historically Sweden has longstanding ties with South Africa dating back to 1930 when a South African legation opened in Stockholm. In 1994, relations were raised to Ambassadorial level. Sweden supported liberation efforts during the apartheid regime in South Africa and former Swedish Prime Minister, Olof Palme, was well known for his speeches in international platforms against the 'repulsive system' (Palme quoted in The Presidency, 2022). Palme was awarded The Order of the Companions of O.R. Tambo in Gold by the democratic South African Presidency for his 'exceptional contribution to the struggle against apartheid and for a just world' (The Presidency, 2022).

This article will critically interrogate the extent to which South Africa and Sweden qualify as GICs according to the following four characteristics, drawn from the literature, and summarised by Graham (2008: 90–94):

- As the largest multilateral international organisation in the world, a good international citizen must respect the UN<sup>7</sup>, its goals for peace, and especially its chief operating organ, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).
- Good international citizens must place

international society's welfare ahead of the incessant pursuit of national interests and must 'forsake' those interests where they conflict with human rights. Good international citizens should not support regimes which are gross violators of human rights.

- Good international citizens must respect the equal sovereignty of other states, uphold international law and respond to demands for justice. They must act multilaterally by relying on diplomacy and must seek to extend the level of harmony between states by mediating conflicts.
- AGIC must help to build regional and international organisations and promote democratic values including equality and human rights.

## Sweden and South Africa: GIC Status?

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index (2021), which measures the democratic political institutions and freedoms in most states worldwide, Sweden is labelled as a full democracy and receives a score of 9.26 out of a possible 10. Full democracies are consolidated with an independent media; well-functioning, legitimate and accountable systems of governance, and protected liberties and freedoms. South Africa is a flawed democracy and scores 7.05 out of 10. Flawed democracies have free and fair elections;

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fundamental liberties are protected but in practice there are inconsistencies, as well as governance issues. Sweden is ranked at number 4 in the world, and South Africa is number 44. According to Freedom House (2022), Sweden is 100% 'Free' and scores perfectly with 60/60 and 40/40 for civil liberties and political rights respectively. South Africa is also rated as 'Free' with a score of 79 out of a 100 with 33 out of 40 for political rights and 46 out of 60 for civil liberties. Based on these measuring tools, both countries are considered to be democratic, although South Africa can improve in areas (for example: addressing corruption; low voter participation; unemployment rates creating desperate citizens; mass looting as witnessed in July 2021; and xenophobic attacks (Gounden, 2021)). In terms of the World's Most Reputable Country Index (2019), Sweden is number 1. South Africa is number 38 (although the first out of African-listed states). Admittedly, only 55 countries are considered in this index and only a Group of 7 countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States) are surveyed for their views so it does depend on their familiarity with the countries under investigation. Sweden has been ranked at number 1 in 2018 and 2019.

In terms of profiles at the UN, both nations have an impressive scorecard. Dag Hammarskjöld, a Swedish economist and diplomat, served as the second Secretary-General of the UN from 1953–1961 (United Nations, 2022). He was very well-liked and did much to unify the organisation and improve its responsiveness. Navanethem Pillay, a South African jurist, served as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights from 2008 to 2014 (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022). Sweden has consistently contributed troops to UN peacekeeping operations – over 80,000 since 1948. South Africa too has contributed to UN operations since the late 1990s, with an average of 2000 uniformed personnel deployed per month to UN missions (De Carvalho, 2018). As of 31 May 2022, Sweden had 200 troops and South Africa 1131 in the field (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2022).

Sweden has served as an elected, non-permanent, member of the UNSC four times (1957–1958; 1975–1976; 1997–1998; 2017–2018). In its relatively short democratic history, South Africa has served three times already on the Council (1997–1998; 2011–2012 and 2019–2020). South Africa and Sweden began working

together in the lead up to South Africa's third term on the Council. In late 2018, the two countries led an initiative for non-permanent members to meet up and talk about Council working methods, as a way to strengthen the role of these members in the Council. The South African delegation continued this initiative throughout its term and beyond (Mbetse, 2021).

Sweden has never served on the 47-member UN Human Rights Council (HRC), although it has submitted its candidature to the body. South Africa has served four terms on the HRC (two terms between 2006 and 2010 and two further terms between 2014 and 2019); and played an important role in the transition of this body from the Commission on Human Rights to the HRC in 2006. South Africa has also submitted its candidature to the HRC for a further term (2023–2025). Despite the promotion of human rights serving as a principle priority in South Africa's foreign policy goals upon democratisation (Mandela, 1993), it has not fared too well in this regard, refusing to comment on country-specific human rights situations in global platforms, preferring to recommend that internal state processes be allowed to unfold or that regional bodies take ownership of human rights crises, and being criticised for its inconsistencies in this regard (Graham, 2016: 299). Despite never having served on the HRC, Sweden has nevertheless been an active participant in the workings of the HRC and has 'contributed to a wide range of cross-regional resolutions and initiatives' (Government Offices of Sweden, 2012: 4). The country has also successfully projected a very public persona to the international community of a nation 'committed to promoting and respecting human rights...[as] a core commitment [in its foreign and domestic policy]' (Government Offices of Sweden, 2012: 1).

This continued in April 2022, when Sweden voted along with 92 other nations, in favour of suspending Russia's membership of the Human Rights Council in response to Russia's invasion of the sovereign territory of Ukraine and related reports of human rights violations against the Ukrainian people by Moscow's troops. In that resolution, South Africa chose to abstain (United Nations Digital Library, 2022). There was backlash for South Africa on this, and other related UN votes on Russia's actions, as this was considered by some to be a soft and weak response (Charbonneau, 2022). South Africa's second

in charge at the UN, Ambassador Xolisa Mabhongo, explained that the Republic preferred to afford the 'newly established international commission of inquiry to investigate all alleged violations and abuses of human rights and violations of international law, and related crimes in Ukraine' the time to do its job. He declared that the resolution to suspend Russia was premature and political and instead the use of mediation and diplomacy and non-biased decision-making in the UN systems should be emphasized (A/ES-11/PV.10, 2022: 9). A technical argument exists that by supporting the workings of the UN system, South Africa demonstrated its commitment to good international citizenship, as this is one of the criteria. However, what of a GIC's role to respect the equal sovereignty of states? It appeared to onlookers that South Africa was not willing to do enough, to stand with the majority, in defending Ukraine's sovereignty against Russian aggression. A case can also be made for the argument that good international citizen states should make use of the global, liberal, platform to loudly advocate for human rights promotion and the protection of democratic principles and not reduce the organisation to a political talk shop through inaction. South Africa's reputation wobbled a bit over this,<sup>8</sup> although the Government did respond quickly to explain its reasons via national and international communication channels.

The Swedish Institute offers the world a bird's eye view of the country, telling a very neatly packaged and well-branded story of Sweden's policies and global goals on its website 'Sharing Sweden' (2022). Impressively, what Sweden sells on the global market is not simply rhetoric. It has been praised for its progressive feminist foreign policy position, being the first country to launch such a policy, in 2014, and its dedication to gender equality. Swedish Foreign Minister at the time, Margot Wallström, explained the move as a significant attempt by Sweden to stand 'against the systematic and global subordination of women' (Wallström, quoted in Vogelstein and Bro, 2019). Although a seemingly radical move at first, Sweden has set the bar and led other nations<sup>9</sup> to take up the call to action as Canada and Australia, amongst others, have now taken 'steps to integrate a focus on gender equality and women's rights into their international work' (Vogelstein and Bro, 2019). South Africa has also taken up the mantle in relation to the global women, peace and security (WPS)

agenda. In 2019, former South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Minister Lindiwe Sisulu, declared that South Africa would use its third term to prioritise the WPS agenda including overseeing negotiations around, and the eventual adoption of, UNSC Resolution 2493. This resolution commits countries to supporting the full inclusivity of women at all stages of peace processes and although the final resolution was seen as a watered-down version, it was nevertheless a positive step forward for WPS. However, South Africa's reputation in this area has been tarnished somewhat as South African peacekeepers have been implicated in allegations of sexual abuse in African peacekeeping missions (Mail & Guardian, 2018).

South Africa has emerged as a moral leader in the field of global disarmament. Regardless of the debated motivations behind the decision of the F.W. de Klerk Government (see Friedman, 2017), South Africa is the only country to have voluntarily dismantled its nuclear weapons programme in 1989/1990. Since then, South Africa has continued to play a prominent role in this field at the UNGA's Disarmament and International Security Committee or First Committee, as well as at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and in other arenas such as signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), which it joined in 1995, and which it chaired for the period 2007–2008. South Africa was also the 'first African state to destroy its stockpile of anti-personnel landmines and the first to publicly support the Ottawa Process by hosting the first Continental Conference of African Experts on Landmines in Kempton Park in May 1997' (Graham, 2016: 160). South Africa became a member of the UN Conference on Disarmament in 1996. South African diplomat Abdul Minty sat on the IAEA Board of Governors and was in the running for the Director-General position in 2009, although he was later defeated by Japan's Yukiya Amano.

Similarly, Sweden has also played a prominent, consistent role in multilateral platforms on disarmament and non-proliferation – referred to as the 'White Knight state' on these issues. This term is 'applied to a select few countries well known for long-established support and advocacy of nonproliferation and disarmament' (Bergenäs, 2010). Swedish diplomat and politician Hans Blix became Director General

of the IAEA from 1981 to 1997. Later, he took on the position of Executive Chairman of the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC). Sweden's former foreign minister, Anna Lindh, spearheaded the initiative leading to the European Union's strategy to combat the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (Bergenäs, 2010). In 2019, Sweden's capital city was host to the launch of the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament involving Ministers of 16 Non-Nuclear Weapon states. This grouping worked as an advocacy group to ensure that the role of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its review conferences be upheld and reaffirmed as the cornerstone of the global disarmament and the non-proliferation regime.

South Africa has also chaired regional and continental bodies and has declared itself an advocate of Africa's interests in multilateral forums. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa chaired the African Union in 2020 and was lauded for his initiatives to increase Africa's access to vaccines (in response to the coronavirus pandemic sweeping the globe), through the establishment of the AU's Africa Vaccine Acquisition Task Team (AVATT) (Mlaba, 2021). Whilst South Africa's Government worked to project the vaccine interests of developing nations, Sweden contributed to the global vaccination campaign by donating 5 million AstraZeneca vaccines through Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX). In Sweden's 2022 budget, the state has allocated the equivalent of 3 billion South African Rands 'to support access to vaccines in low-income countries' (Donor Tracker, 2022). The Swedish government has consistently committed to supplying Official Development Assistance (ODA) to countries in need of aid, ranking number 6 in the world and number 1 in terms of proportion of aid in relation to the size of its economy (spending around 1.4% of its gross national income) (Donor Tracker, 2022).

Sweden took on the international responsibility of accepting Iraqi refugees in 2006 and 2007, taking on nearly twice the number of Iraqi refugees taken by the United States (Sassoon, 2009: 102). In 2020, Sweden reported 12,991 registered asylum-seekers. In 2022, South Africa hosts a quarter of a million refugees and asylum-seekers from seven other African states (UN Refugee Agency, 2022). Despite Sweden's self-identifying as a multicultural, antiracist

and post-racial society, examples of racism and xenophobia have been reported (Hübinette, 2013). The Government of Sweden has developed national plans to combat racism. In 2001, at the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, hosted by South Africa, Swedish Minister of Industry, Employment and Communications at the time, Mona Sahlin, (2001) argued that:

Governments have the primary responsibility for fighting racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. But the shared responsibility of the international community must also be emphasised. If we cannot create a world in which everyone is respected and treated equally, we will endanger the future of every individual.

Sweden does make use of global platforms to fight the scourge of racism. South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu referred to democratic South Africa as a rainbow nation and the Republic has been lauded for its relatively peaceful transition to a democracy and its overcoming of its racist past (Everding, 2004). However, racism and xenophobia persist in this society too. Nevertheless, the South African government has, since 1994, repeatedly and publicly declared its international commitment to combat xenophobia, racism, sexism and other related intolerances by using the UN system and related international conferences.

Another global issue that is a concern for all states and their people is climate change. Sweden ranks highly in the Climate Change Performance Index in 2022 at number 5 out of a pool of 64 states. South Africa is ranked at number 39 and categorised as low performing. However, in the overall climate policy table, South Africa moves up to the 27<sup>th</sup> position and reflects a score of 'medium' in its International Climate Policy Performance. Once again, Sweden ranks highly in this table (Burck et al., 2021). South Africa has different energy needs and capabilities compared to Sweden and as South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa stated in February 2022: 'A one-size-fits-all approach to complex issues, such as a transition from fossil fuels that disregard the realities on the ground in Africa, will simply not work, and is neither just nor equitable' (quoted in Gerber, 2022). This underscores the point that different levels of development require different

policy responses depending on different needs. Just because one country finds itself in a position to do something positive, and another cannot perform at a similar level, does not and should not mean that they are not committed to change but simply that they are confronted by different realities at that moment in history. Ultimately, all states can make a contribution to 'building a better world'.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

This article employed a case study methodology approach in its research design and briefly interrogated the extent to which South Africa and Sweden qualify as good international citizens according to four characteristics, drawn from the literature. The article finds that both Sweden and democratic South Africa demonstrate elements of good international citizenship. As good international citizens, together, both countries have committed themselves to advancing women's human rights in international relations forums, as well as in improving the working methods of the UN Security Council, and these are two areas in which the two countries could collaborate more on in future. Despite varied economic status, histories and points of reference, both have positioned themselves as states wanting to play positive roles in international relations in multiple platforms and in multiple ways. Admittedly, it is impossible for states to be absolute 'saints' in world affairs. The international system of states operates in a far more complex and nuanced fashion for this to be a realistic goal. However, states, by way of their government's foreign policymaking; global initiatives and consistent efforts to better the world through democratic principles, can be role models for other states. If we factor in that national interest will always be a given, as states have a duty to their citizens, by demonstrating that it is in the national interest to operate internationally through goodwill and cooperation, good international citizens can make a positive difference in global humanitarian affairs.

## Notes

1. The phrase GIC had not been well recorded publicly until Evans spoke of it in the late 1980s, 'although it is sometimes attributed to the great Liberal Canadian Prime Minister of the 1960s, Lester Pearson' (Evans, 2015). However, the former Governor General of

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Canada Daniel Michener had publicly adopted this expression for the first time in a speech he made in 1967 (see Michener, 1967).

2. Middle powers are often referred to in four ways: geographically, normatively; positionally and behaviourally (Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal, 1993 cited in Abbondanza, 2021). Later scholars take into account the impact of a state's foreign policy (Carr, 2014), as well as states' self-identifying as middle powers when attributing power to states (Teo, 2018).
3. Although Spies (2022) refers to South Africa as having more 'awkward' power than any other kind of power, Spies contends that 'South Africa is often included in analyses of middle power on account of its international reputation and foreign policy behaviour. The country's norm entrepreneurship is evident in matters such as nuclear non-proliferation, conflict resolution, the provision of development assistance and diplomatic leadership in multilateral forums. However, in quantitative terms, South Africa's material capabilities fall short of the conventional middle power range. In qualitative terms, its international behaviour is atypical as well and riddled with contradictions. These anomalies reflect the complex domestic identity of 'the world in one country'. It straddles the Global North-South divide, and this microcosmic symbolism contributes significantly to the country's ideational power.'

4. This refers to democratic South Africa (since 1994).
5. It is difficult to measure wealth, as all countries have impoverished people and wealthy people, but gross domestic product (GDP) is a useful indicator of the financial health of a state. In 2022, South Africa's per capita GDP was \$4,932,724 compared with Sweden's \$48,768,503 (World Population Review, 2022).
6. '[...][A]nalysis of potential middle-power partnerships offers some insight by drawing on the Global Powers Index (GPI), part of the International Futures (IFs) forecasting system. GPI is unique as it attempts to include aspects of soft power in its calculations and forecasts of state power capacity, such as the number of embassies and treaties a state is party to. Other components in GPI include the contribution of demographics, technology, size of the economy and military capacity' (Cilliers, 2018).
7. Bearing in mind that arguments do exist around the utility of this organisation and some of its outdated, immovable structures; it remains the only universal organisation offering members states, down to the smallest state, the equal opportunity to have a voice in global affairs.
8. Democratic South Africa does have a history of resorting to ping-pong politics at the UN (Graham, 2016: 104).
9. Currently, other states advancing a feminist foreign policy agenda are Canada (since 2017); Luxembourg (2018); France (2018); Mexico (2020); Spain (2021), and Libya (2021) (Thompson, Ahmed and Khokhar, 2021: 1).
10. This phrase, and the intent behind it, features in many of South Africa's foreign policy documents.

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