



Task Force 7
Towards Reformed Multilateralism: Transforming Global
Institutions and Frameworks

MULTILATERALISM FOR THE FUTURE: NEW CHALLENGES, NEW MODELS, NEW SOLUTIONS

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Abstract




Problems without passports have driven the evolution of networked models of multilateralism that have had significant impacts, but still cannot overcome the gap between global challenges and solutions. In pursuit of its goal of building multilateral institutions for 21st-century challenges, the G20 should use its comparative advantage as a leadership forum to make these governance innovations more effective and inclusive. This policy brief^a recommends the G20 support the establishment of an emergency platform

to respond to systemic risks, launch a G20 Acceleration Initiative for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and for climate, and increase the capacity of the international system to think, plan, and act for the future. In a period when its presidency is held by countries from the Global South (Indonesia, India, Brazil, and South Africa), the G20 should use major global moments—the SDG Summit, Global Stocktake, and Summit of the Future—to benefit young countries where the majority of future generations will be born.

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The Challenge



1




Multilateralism in an age of crisis

Since the birth of the G20 as a finance forum in 1999, and its emergence as a global leader in 2008, global challenges, described by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan as “problems without passports,”¹ have become increasingly interconnected and disruptive.

The global economy has more than doubled in size since the turn of the century, with substantial growth generating high levels of inequality, planetary damage, and other global public bads. Power is more broadly distributed, with partial multipolarity and governments losing influence relative to other actors, but remains skewed towards both state and non-state actors in the Global North. Economies have become more interconnected, but systems for fostering global cooperation have not kept up. The world’s middle classes have grown at an unprecedented rate, but a crisis of trust has undermined popular support for collective action, with limited public confidence that elites will act for the common good. Geopolitical tensions, exacerbated by polarisation and populism, have further shrunk the space to design and deliver breakthrough solutions.

During this period of turbulence, shocks and emergencies have dominated the international agenda, crowding out space for longer-term thinking and systemic renewal. Under its Indian presidency, the G20 is confronted by fallout from the cost-of-living crisis, a debt crisis in many developing countries, instability in financial markets, and a structural slowdown in growth that could persist through the 2020s. Pandemic risk is high and increasing, while climate-related extreme weather events pose a growing threat. The number and intensity of protests has also increased, while violent conflict was on the rise even before the war in Ukraine. Meanwhile, extreme, catastrophic, and existential risks are neglected, with an aggregate of multiple forecasts estimating a 1.9 percent to 14.3 percent chance of an existential shock this century.²

International cooperation remains inadequate to tackle challenges of this scale and complexity. While collective action stabilised the global economy in 2008/09, the financial crisis still caused deep and long-term economic scarring. The international response to COVID-19 has been described as “a massive global failure at multiple levels.”³ With vaccine inequity triggering a “two-



track pandemic”, India has promised to use its presidency to address a situation where “many... countries in the global South were left to fend for themselves with very little means to protect their people.”⁴

Focus on longer-term goals has wavered, with weak delivery of global goals undermining the credibility of the international system. After the relative successes of the Millennium Development Goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are in trouble, with a third of SDG indicators stalled or in reverse.⁵ There is currently “no credible pathway”⁶ to limit global warming to 1.5°C, while the window to adapt to a changing climate is also closing. Without a reversal of these trends, it is possible that the ‘global goals era’—when countries used the international system to make bold and quantifiable commitments—will draw to a close when it is time to replace the SDGs in 2030.

The rise of networked multilateralism

There is, however, another side to the balance sheet.

Globalisation’s long crisis has forced the international system to evolve rapidly.⁷

While parts of the international system remain configured for another age, the 21st century has seen a proliferation of new or remodelled institutions, processes, and coalitions. What the UN Secretary-General has termed networked multilateralism is no longer an alternative to the post-Second World War model of hierarchical, universal, and formal institutions, but an increasingly dominant approach to tackling the world’s most complex challenges.

The emergence of networked models can be seen in three domains where crisis has done most to accelerate their evolution: financial and economic stability, health security, and environmental governance.


- Global economic governance has been shaped by repeated episodes of financial contagion that have led to the development of a networked governance infrastructure that provides “something akin to global public goods in the financial area.”⁸ With the G20 at the forefront, this infrastructure performed the “necessary tasks to prevent the 2008 financial crisis from metastasizing into a prolonged depression.”⁹ It was also effective during COVID-19,

when synchronised monetary and fiscal support added 6 percent to global GDP, while financial systems proved largely resilient.¹⁰ A strengthened International Monetary Fund, the creation of the Financial Stability Board, and improved surveillance, supervision, and regulation have all played a role, but so have the broader and often informal frameworks that have enabled states and non-state actors to coordinate once unthinkable policy actions.

- Health shocks have also driven multilateral innovation. In the 1990s, the International Health Regulations covered just three diseases, surveillance was fragmented, vaccine systems were “badly fractured and disarticulated,”¹¹ and the first generation of global partnerships were struggling to overcome interagency rivalry and distrust between public and private actors. By the time COVID-19 struck, the International Health Regulations had been significantly strengthened, the World Health Organization had created a “unified... platform for outbreaks and emergencies,”¹² and a complex ecosystem of

partnerships and alliances had emerged to tackle the design and delivery of health responses. While levels of preparedness were far from commensurate with the scale of the threat, COVID-19 “triggered the fastest and most wide-reaching response to a global health emergency in human history.”¹³

- Climate change has prompted significant institutional innovations since the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change connected science to policy making. This innovation accelerated after the failure of the “global deal strategy” at Conference of the Parties (COP) 15 in Copenhagen, with the net zero movement bringing together an increasingly diverse ecosystem of alliances that are the primary driver of international climate action. While the impacts of climate damage are irreversible and worsening, expected warming by 2100 has been reduced from 4.4°C to 2.7°C, through “unprecedented cooperation to build the scientific evidence, agree a global goal, design governance systems that can ratchet up ambition in line with the science, and drive the



technological advances we now need to deploy at scale.”¹⁴

Across these and other domains, networked multilateralism has delivered returns in orders of magnitude greater than their costs, but *partial* successes are not enough in a world that faces a “surplus of multilateral challenges and


a deficit of multilateral solutions.” They leave the trajectory for international cooperation finely poised. Will recent governance innovations provide a platform for increasing effectiveness? Or will the perception of failure fuel a cycle of neglect, underfunding, and subsequent underperformance?



The G20's Role

2





The G20 has set a goal of building international institutions that are fit for the 21st century.¹⁵

As a forum for political leadership that is itself a creation of the networked multilateral age, it has the potential to drive effectiveness across immediate, medium-term, and more far-sighted priorities. And amid a potentially ground-breaking era when it is led by four countries from the Global South (Indonesia, India, Brazil, and South Africa), it can significantly increase the inclusivity of a new generation of networked multilateral models.

Political leadership for preventing and responding to emergencies

During the 2008 financial crisis, the G20's centrality as global crisis responder was unquestioned, but in future emergencies such pre-eminence will usually be the exception rather than the rule. As a result, the G20 is likely to be most effective if it provides the political leadership needed to create a robust and coherent architecture for crisis prevention and response.

Strengthening global health security after COVID-19 is already a G20 priority,

with its High Level Independent Panel calling for a Global Health Threats Board for health and finance ministers,¹⁶ while endorsing the proposal for a leader-level Global Health Threats Council. The G20 has also expressed support for a pandemic accord and for the newly established Pandemic Fund. During its presidency, India has also said it will build consensus around proposals to transform the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-Accelerator) into a permanent global health accelerator, with more formal governance and a stronger voice for governments from the global South.¹⁷

But the international system must be configured to tackle the full range of systemic risks. Global mechanisms can no longer be created each time an emergency hits (with the UN Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy and Finance the latest example), but neither will a one-size-fits-all approach suffice. Instead, the world needs a platform that can prepare for and respond to multiple threats. For the G20, this is an opportunity to provide political leadership for the launch of such an emergency platform and to argue for a design that fully leverages its convening power in its operation.

A platform for delivery of the global goals

The world has already agreed far-reaching and integrated goals to tackle the most pressing global challenges. The question is now whether it can drive the “intensive global engagement” that global leaders promised would deliver them.¹⁸


The SDGs have been on the G20’s agenda since their birth and are now a priority for India’s presidency. But with the SDGs in “deep trouble,”¹⁹ the Secretary-General has called for a rescue plan ahead of the second SDG Summit, and asked the G20 to adopt an SDG stimulus to tackle debt and increase concessional and non-concessional SDG financing by US\$500 billion per year. Climate change is also a G20 priority. In 2021, the G20 acted as a “pace-maker” for the United Nations climate change conference (COP 26), as Italy and the UK held the G20 and G7 presidencies, and the two countries were partners in hosting the COP. It should return to this role as the first Global Stocktake confirms that “the emissions gap is fundamentally an implementation gap” at COP 28.²⁰ By promoting the highest impact opportunities to accelerate mitigation and adaptation, the G20 can provide a

platform for the high-ambition coalitions that have the greatest potential to make net zero universal, credible, and inevitable.

The G20 New Delhi summit takes place just days before the SDG Summit and the Climate Action Summit, which precedes COP 28 (and the culmination of the Global Stocktake). For both goal frameworks, the G20 could announce that it will use the Brazilian presidency in 2024 to develop and implement a programme to accelerate implementation and scale up finance, in recognition of the agreement of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 and of the need for action-oriented SDGs at the follow-up summit 20 years later. This programme could also seek to resolve tensions between growth and planetary boundaries by exploring economic pathways that reduce inequality within and among countries (in line with SDG 10).²¹

Multilateralism to think, plan, and act for the future

In 2022, India led a UN Security Council debate that explored how to reform multilateralism so that it “not only responds effectively to current challenges but also stays fit for purpose



by preparing for and responding promptly to challenges that may arise in the future.”²²

The Summit of the Future will be held at leader level in September 2024, with the aim of delivering an action-oriented Pact for the Future. Priorities include new frameworks and mechanisms for creating an integrated understanding of future trends and risks, valuing and financing intergenerational global public goods, and future proofing the international policy making process.²³ Multilateralism for the future is most likely to gain support if it builds bridges between immediate and longer-term priorities, identifying ‘smart buys for the future’ from the SDGs in areas such as women’s empowerment, infrastructure, and governance that will benefit both living and future generations. This will build a bridge


from the SDG Summit to the Summit of the Future.

The focus on future generations has an underappreciated geopolitical dimension. As the UN Secretary-General has highlighted, of the 10.9 billion people who are projected to be born in the rest of the 21st century, 85 percent will be born in Africa and Asia. With the interests of young people also poorly represented by the international system, the failure to tackle long-term challenges compounds existing global inequalities by damaging the interests of young countries where the majority of future generations will be born.²⁴ This is an opportunity for the G20 to make a commitment to building the capacity of the international system to think, plan, and act for the future, and to increase intergenerational equity in ways that benefit countries where the majority of future generations will be born.



Recommendations to the G20

3



Establish an emergency platform at the Summit of the Future

In *Our Common Agenda*, the Secretary-General asked the General Assembly to establish an Emergency Platform that would be “triggered automatically in crises of sufficient scale and magnitude, regardless of the type or nature of the crisis involved... [and which] would bring together leaders from Member States, the United Nations system, key country groupings, international financial institutions, regional bodies, civil society, the private sector, subject-specific industries or research bodies and other experts.”²⁵ The platform would “not be a standing body or entity but a set of protocols that could be activated when needed.”

The G20 should:

- Signal its willingness to explore this proposal during the Indian presidency, with the Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group in the lead and engaging with the Summit of the Future’s ministerial preparatory meeting in September 2023.
 - Engage in the design of the platform during the Brazilian presidency, with
- the aim of ensuring that the G20’s comparative advantage as a forum for political leadership is effectively harnessed.
- Champion agreement of the Emergency Platform at the Summit of the Future in September 2024, and commit to work with the UN and broader international system on modalities that clarify the G20’s role in triggering and implementing the platform at the G20 Rio de Janeiro summit that follows in November.

Launch a G20 Acceleration Initiative for the SDGs and for climate

For the global goals, the G20 has an opportunity to build a multiyear effort to increase ambition and accelerate implementation.

With negotiation of the SDGs initiated at Rio+20 in 2012, the G20 could consider announcing a G20 SDG Acceleration Initiative at the SDG Summit, with implementation as a central priority for the Brazilian G20 in 2024. This could have three elements:

- An updated G20 SDG Action Plan that identifies a set of

acceleration opportunities with the greatest potential to demonstrate measurable progress ahead of the third SDG Summit in 2027.

- A framework for scaling up financing of the SDGs building on the Sustainable Finance Roadmap and responding to the Secretary-General's call for an SDG Stimulus.
- A platform to bring together the 20-40 high-ambition global coalitions that have the political support, delivery strategies, networks, and finance needed to support national SDG implementation.


For climate, the G20's priority should be to provide a platform for taking "opportunities for enhanced action" that are identified in the first Global Stocktake. At the Climate Ambition Summit, it could announce a G20 high-level panel to build on the Stocktake's findings and to develop an acceleration strategy for net zero. This would set the stage for submission of the next round of nationally determined contributions in 2025, during the South African presidency.

Build a platform for the future

The G20 should signal early support for the Summit of the Future and its determination to use the Summit to increase the capacity of the international system to think, plan, and act for the future. This work should be a focus of its cooperation with young people and young countries.

The G20 could:

- Work with the UN and other parts of the international system on the proposed Strategic Foresight and Global Risk Report, building on the proposal that it should develop its own Global Risk Report.
- Invite the newly established UN Futures Lab to work with it to aggregate understanding of risks across multiple scientific disciplines, develop new frameworks for futures analysis and foresight, and run tabletop exercises on a range of future scenarios.
- Invite a group of young countries to the G20 summit in 2024 and work with them to shape the



Declaration on Future Generations which will be agreed at the Summit of the Future.²⁶

Strengthen the role of young people in the G20 by upgrading the Y20 to give a youth delegation access to the sherpa track so that it can act as a proxy for

the interests of future generations and advocate for a longer-term perspective.


Consider exploring the future of Africa as a priority for the South African G20 in 2025, working with the African Union as it becomes a G20 member.

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Endnotes

These are abbreviated references. A full list of references can be found on the UN Foundation website.

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