




Chapter Fourteen

The G20 and the need to reform the UN System

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Abstract

The challenge we address in this chapter is how the G20 can contribute to enhance global governance mechanisms. We depart from the understanding that a deficit of legitimacy and efficiency distinguishes – the most central and institutionalized global governance mechanism – the United Nations system and the G20. We recommend that the relationship between the UN system and the G20 becomes more integrated and coordinated



thus leveraging their respective strengths and mandates. This movement can help in turning the tide on declining legitimacy and efficiency of global governance mechanisms.

Keywords: UN System; UN Reform; G20 Presidency; Multilateralism.

Introduction

The challenge we address in this chapter is how the G20 can contribute to the availability of more efficient and more legitimate global governance mechanisms. We depart from the understanding that a deficit of legitimacy and efficiency is striking the most central and institutionalized global governance mechanism – the United Nations system – and that the G20 can play a crucial role in moving the UN reform agenda forward.

Current global economic, social, and environmental challenges require a governance structure that can balance the need for quick but also effective and sustainable responses to political and economic challenges. In an interdependent and globalized world, multilateralism will continue to be a fundamental aspect of international relations (Thakur, 2011). While the core of multilateralism is still the United Nations system, it has failed to resolve global challenges and many more informal governance mechanisms have been created. The G20 emerged in this context and should now turn towards the UN system. In this chapter we make a proposition on how this can take place.

1. The Reform of the UN system

The UN system bears the marks of the dramatic moments after World War II when it was created. But the countries, distribution of power, global problems, nature of security threats to be tackled and patterns of social relations are profoundly different today. Thus, the organization finds itself amid a profound crisis of legitimacy, increasingly hamstrung by intensifying great-power rivalries. Compounding this is a severe budgetary shortfall, triggered by the suspension of U.S. funding and

significant cutbacks from other major contributors, which now threatens to bring the UN system to a standstill.

The reform of the UN system has been on the international agenda since the 1990s but the reforms that did take place did not tackle central tensions and disabilities. Several agencies have been transformed and the interconnection has been addressed in line with the “learning organization” culture. The UN needs to become more networked, as mentioned by the Secretary General¹, both in terms of its internal relations and in terms of relations with other international governance mechanisms and actors. Breaching the UN’s legitimacy and efficiency gap is crucial in order enable the organization in cooperation with other entities to produce global public goods. Tackling dire social problems, as put forward by the Brazilian proposal of a Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty, established in 2024, demands a capacity to pool resources and reach common understandings. This in turn demands legitimacy and spheres of authority.

We contend that although a review of the agencies and programs of the UN system is needed, the reform of the Security Council needs to move ahead as a crucial trigger for a meaningful reform process. The Security Council should be more inclusive, representative, transparent, and effective. The inclusion of new permanent and non-permanent members, from Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa have become crucial. In December 1992, the General Assembly created an open-ended working group to review equitable representation of the council but more than three decades later, no tangible results were offered. The G20 can help this process move forward.

1 “Secretary-General Stresses Need for More Networked, Inclusive Multilateralism, in International Day of Diplomacy Message”, United Nations, accessed May 14, 2024. Available at: <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sghm20699.doc.htm>.

2. The interaction between the G20 and the UN System

One of the prominent criticisms levelled against the G20 is its perceived deficiency in coordinating effectively with the broader UN. This criticism stems from two fundamental observations. Firstly, despite its significant influence on global economic and development policies, the G20 often operates in relative isolation from the broader multilateral framework established by the UN. This lack of coordination can lead to duplication of efforts, conflicting priorities, and missed opportunities for synergy between the G20's initiatives and those of other UN bodies.

Secondly, the G20's limited engagement with UN specialized agencies and bodies often results in underutilization of the technical expertise and resources available within the UN system. Overall, the criticism of the G20's lack of coordination with the broader UN system underscores the need for greater integration and alignment between these two pillars of global governance. Enhancing coordination mechanisms, promoting dialogue and collaboration between the G20 and relevant UN bodies, and ensuring coherence between their respective agendas are essential steps toward strengthening global governance and advancing collective efforts to address pressing global challenges.

Alongside legitimacy and representation concerns, the G20's involvement in global governance also poses challenges related to accountability. The G20 was created as a self-appointed group of major economies intended to be more effective than the G7 in coordinating macroeconomic policies. Unlike institutions such as the United Nations, the G20 lacks formal mechanisms for accountability to the broader group of international actors. Decisions made within the G20 are often informal and non-binding, making it difficult to hold member states accountable for their actions. Furthermore, the lack of transparency in G20 meetings and decision-making processes hampers public scrutiny and limits opportunities for civil society organizations and smaller nations to hold G20 members

accountable for their commitments and actions. This opacity not only undermines accountability but also contributes to feelings of powerlessness among countries not represented in the G20, further exacerbating perceptions of unequal treatment in global governance. Engagement with the UN system can also change this condition.

Collaboration between the G20 and the United Nations (UN) holds significant potential for addressing global challenges more effectively. Firstly, the G20 can leverage its role in setting the agenda for key global issues, drawing upon its representation of major economies and significant political influence. By identifying priority areas such as climate change, economic stability, or pandemic response, the G20 can articulate comprehensive strategies and goals. Concurrently, the UN can provide the necessary institutional framework and expertise for implementing these agendas. Through its specialized agencies, programs, and partnerships, the UN possesses the infrastructure to coordinate multilateral efforts, mobilize resources, and monitor progress towards shared objectives. This collaboration allows the G20 to capitalize on its convening power and policy expertise while ensuring inclusivity and legitimacy through the UN's global mandate.

Secondly, the G20 can bolster UN initiatives by leveraging its considerable resources and capabilities. This could entail financial contributions to UN agencies and funds, as well as technical assistance and capacity-building support. By aligning their resources with UN priorities, the G20 can amplify the impact of existing initiatives and address critical gaps in funding or expertise.

Furthermore, establishing joint task forces on specific challenges offers a pragmatic approach to collaboration. These task forces could bring together experts and policymakers from both the G20 and the UN to devise targeted strategies and action plans. By fostering synergy and shared responsibility, joint task forces facilitate innovative solutions and promote collective ownership of complex issues.

In essence, effective collaboration between the G20 and the UN hinges on leveraging their respective strengths and mandates. By integrating the G20's agenda-setting prowess with the UN's implementation capacity, mobilizing resources to support UN initiatives, and establishing joint task forces, these organizations can forge a more coherent and coordinated approach to tackling global challenges.

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), as a principal organ of the UN System, possesses a wealth of expertise and institutional infrastructure that can complement the G20's efforts in addressing complex global challenges. The High-level Segment of ECOSOC, which convenes annually, provides a crucial platform for high-level political dialogue on a wide range of economic and social issues. By engaging with this segment, the G20 can leverage the expertise and insights of ECOSOC members to inform its own deliberations and policy-making processes. Additionally, fostering closer collaboration with ECOSOC's High-Level Political Forum, which reviews progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), presents an opportunity for the G20 to align its priorities with the broader global development agenda and ensure coherence in international efforts to promote sustainable development.

Collaboration between the G20 and ECOSOC could take various forms. ECOSOC could provide technical assistance and policy expertise to help the G20 formulate more precise and actionable goals. This could involve leveraging the research and analysis conducted by UN agencies and expert bodies to inform G20 deliberations and decision-making.

Moreover, ECOSOC could play a crucial role in monitoring progress and evaluating the effectiveness of G20 initiatives. By establishing joint monitoring frameworks and reporting mechanisms, the G20 and ECOSOC could ensure greater transparency and accountability in the implementation of agreed-upon measures.

Furthermore, ECOSOC could facilitate broader engagement with UN member states, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders, enhancing the inclusivity and legitimacy of

G20 initiatives. By tapping into ECOSOC's extensive network and convening power, the G20 could broaden its impact and foster greater ownership of its objectives among the international community.

Greater engagement between the G20 and the UN, should facilitate the G20's participation in the debate and deliberations on UN reform and more particularly the Security Council reform. The first step in thinking about reforming the UN system is to encourage a formal discussion on the subject in the Sherpa tracks at the summits. Since its institutionalization, the G20's agendas have been geared towards strengthening and reforming the main multilateral financial institutions: the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Commission on Global Security, Justice & Governance, 2015). Today, given the complexity and interdependence of global problems and the need to generate global public goods, the G20 needs to include an agenda on reforming the United Nations (Thakur, 2011; Weiss, 2010).

We suggest the creation of a permanent Task Force on the G20 Sherpa track aimed at UN

Reform including ECOSOC's performance in the field of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Security Council role in the field of peace and security, its composition and decision-making processes and the enhancement of the role of the General Assembly. This Task Force can become, in the long term, a space for building consensus on necessary reforms within the UN System, by establishing coalitions that include the global North and South.

We also suggest a three-country Presidency which has the potential to strengthen collaboration between the G20 and other international organizations, particularly the UN. A tripartite G20 presidency would amplify diplomatic engagements between G20 and the UN system, enabling strategic task allocation among the trio. Additionally, through joint advocacy efforts, the trio could amplify their collective voice in promoting multilateralism and the UN's role in global governance. By including representatives from both the global North and South, this approach ensures

that a broader range of perspectives and priorities are considered when shaping the G20's agenda.

A more inclusive G20, representing both northern and southern nations, may find it easier to align its priorities with those of the UN and coordinate efforts to address pressing global challenges. By distributing the Presidency responsibilities among three countries, the workload is spread more evenly, allowing for a more consistent and coherent approach to setting the G20's agenda. Unlike the current system, where priorities may shift dramatically with each new President, a three-country model enables the development of a longer-term vision, fostering continuity, stability and predictability in the G20's strategic direction. This stability not only enhances the group's credibility but also provides a conducive environment for fostering sustainable solutions to complex global challenges.

Moreover, the smoother transitions between successive leaders, minimizing disruptions and ensuring continuity in ongoing projects and initiatives could be achieved. With three countries involved in the leadership rotation, the handover process becomes more seamless, allowing for a more efficient transfer of responsibilities and institutional memory. This continuity is essential for maintaining momentum on critical issues and avoiding delays or setbacks due to administrative transitions.

Another compelling advantage of a three-country Presidency is the potential for enhanced expertise and knowledge-sharing. Each participating country brings its unique strengths and experiences to the table, enriching the G20's discussions and policy deliberations.

3. Engaging with Global South Regions

While their insights are invaluable, the G20 would benefit from deeper engagement with regional counterparts such as ECLAC or the African Union, injecting greater complexity and diverse perspectives into global deliberations, bridging the gap between Western and Southern viewpoints. In this sense, ECOSOC's extensive network of subsidiary bodies, including specialized

agencies, regional commissions, and functional commissions, offers valuable channels for the G20 to engage with a diverse array of stakeholders and tap into specialized knowledge and resources.

The G20 should actively seek to diversify the range of organizations invited to participate in its summits and working groups, with a particular focus on including institutions from the Global South. This could involve expanding the G20's outreach efforts, establishing formal mechanisms for engaging with regional development banks and other relevant organizations, and providing financial and logistical support to facilitate their participation. Also, the G20 should prioritize collaboration and knowledge sharing between Northern and Southern institutions, leveraging their respective expertise and perspectives to inform G20 discussions and policy-making processes. This could include organizing joint research projects, hosting capacity-building workshops, and establishing platforms for dialogue and exchange between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners from different regions. Finally, the G20 should provide financial and technical support to strengthen the institutional capacity of organizations from the Global South, enabling them to actively contribute to G20 deliberations and initiatives.

Conclusion

Amid the deepening crisis of multilateralism and the serious funding challenges currently facing the United Nations, the G20 must assume a central role in shaping the future of global governance. No other forum brings together such a broad and diverse range of interests and perspectives. Its convening power makes it the most suitable space to initiate an urgent discussion on how to redesign a UN system that is both more effective and more legitimate.

We understand a change in the relationship between the UN System and the G20 can contribute to move global governance mechanisms forward and the suggestions in this chapter can produce a scenario of UN reform and greater

legitimacy and efficiency of the governance mechanisms in focus here.

The G20 could become a space for building consensus on the necessary reforms within the United Nations System, based on its articulations that include the global North and South and the greater promotion of collective efforts between these two pillars of global governance could take place to tackle pressing global challenges. Greater reciprocity between the G20 and other international forums with flows of ideas, proposals, and knowledge in multiple directions will enhance the possibilities of the production of global public goods.

It is essential to face the challenges associated with consensus building, logistical complexity and the power dynamics between states. Geopolitical fragmentation is currently a major threat to the G20's reform agenda and to its very continuity as a key player in the global order. The effort therefore lies in the need for a differentiated and multifaceted approach, which seeks to promote cooperation and facilitate negotiations between member countries.

The history of attempts to reform the multilateral system highlights a consistent pattern: initiatives facing the greatest resistance often entail redistributing power. In this chapter we have deliberately steered clear of advocating for measures in this sphere. Instead, our focus lies on fostering a collaborative approach. By avoiding the imposition of specific contents that might polarize opinions, we aim to sidestep potential divisions within the international system. Contrary to the notion of introducing entirely new structures, our proposed initiatives are geared towards refining the existing framework of multilateralism. We assert that progress lies in enhancing the coherence and effectiveness of coordination mechanisms across the spectrum of multilateral institutions building consensus when possible. We shift the focus away from contentious geopolitical issues towards areas where shared interest and agreed upon mutual benefit can be found. By prioritizing synergy over power struggles, we advocate for a more streamlined and inclusive approach to global governance.

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