

Priority for All or Security for Some? The G20 and Global Health

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Executive Summary

Prior to this year's Hamburg Summit, the relationship between the G20 and global health was characterised by its stark absence as a mainstream item on each summit's agenda. Only from 2014, and the outbreak of the Ebola virus, has the topic of health even been considered something worth deliberating. The limited discussion that has occurred has been dominated by a narrow focus on security and emerging infectious diseases that worry the West. This policy brief explores the processes that have led to global health appearing on the agenda of this year's summit, suggesting the German Presidency's "Partnerships with Africa" have unlocked the opportunity for genuine progress. It will argue that the G20's commitment to strengthening health systems worldwide reflects a firm step forward in the goal of global health

for all. It will then go on to further argue, however, that the Hamburg Summit's failure to disassociate itself from the predominant linkage of health with security will likely lead to a continued narrow focus on emerging infectious diseases that worry the West, at the expense of engagement with issues of socio-economic transformation.

Background

For the first time in the G20's history, the German Presidency has placed health at the centre of its agenda. The [Priorities of the 2017 G20 Report](#) asserted that safeguarding against health crises was of fundamental importance in securing sustainable economic growth, with functioning health systems a prerequisite for security against the spread of diseases. Two factors can be seen as aiding the long-awaited presence of health on the

G20's agenda: 1) German Chancellor Angela Merkel's long-standing interest in the topic and [emphasis](#) that "in a connected world, the issue of health has earned its place on the G20 agenda"; and 2) the G20's commitment to an intensified partnership with Africa. The G20 Presidency claims the presence of health is guided by a commitment to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and a commitment to promoting the well-being of all people of all ages. Even those otherwise critical of the Hamburg Summit have praised the presence of health in the Summit's discussions. The commitment to health for all, though, is in part a reflection of a Western desire to curb the numbers of Africans trekking through Northern Africa in search of greater security in Europe. State failure can prompt worsening health through economic instability, and the [collapse of state institutions](#), such as public health infrastructure.

Genuine steps taken towards the achievement of the UN's SDGs may be hindered, however, by a continually

narrow emphasis on the threats posed by emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases. A [G20 Health Initiative](#) prior to the summit referred to health as a "quintessential G20 issue", with the emergence of infectious diseases affecting economic growth, financial stability and development. The G20's approach has, as a result, been challenged for its equation of global health with the absence of disease, devoid of accompanying ideas oriented around social justice. [Médecins sans Frontières](#) reminded G20 leaders ahead of the Hamburg Summit that responding to health emergencies should not continue to be restricted to those infectious diseases seen as posing a threat to the most powerful and wealthy of countries. Rather, medical emergencies that primarily affect the world's most vulnerable and marginalised should be focused on as well. Until such a shift in approach to health is realised, the views of non-G20 countries in the Global South around the most fundamental challenges to their health will continue to remain strikingly different from Western countries' own evaluations.

The Summit's Priorities report promises commitment, through individual and collective action, to the swift and far-reaching implementation of the SDGs. Given the Summit's engagement with the importance of neglected tropical diseases, as well as improved access to health, such pronouncements are not purely rhetorical. The Summit's headline pursuit of a "Compact with Africa" is driven by a desire to strengthen private sector investment in resource-poor African countries, supporting infrastructure development and economic participation. A focus on strengthening health infrastructure in combatting deaths from non-communicable diseases would prove beneficial here. There is a firm need for the G20 to ensure the development of new tools that allow for a response to medical emergencies that is affordable and accessible to all people in need. Given that many developing countries lack the basic levels of infrastructure needed to respond to medical emergencies, investment in health infrastructure would help tackle the problem of migration "at

its source", to use President of the EU Council Donald Tusk's own phrase at this year's G20 Summit. Such investment would be a good start towards the SDG of "good health and well-being" for all.

How Recent Summits Have Failed to Adequately Address Global Health

The 2017 G20 Hamburg Summit has been the first to consistently engage with the issue of global health, and afford it a prominent place on the agenda. In contrast to the G7/8 summits, health has never played a significant role in deliberations. By 2014 the issue had, however, gained increasing traction and was included in discussions. The spread of endemic infections, namely the Ebola virus, from the developing world have heightened concerns within security communities in the West over the increased health risk to their own citizens. The Ebola outbreak prompted [various recommendations](#) on changing structures, processes and instruments in responding to disease outbreaks, some of which have been implemented. The crisis has been seen by some to illustrate that the G20 is

driven by a desire to ensure diseases do not cross borders and threaten the West, as opposed to a strategy oriented around disease prevention. German civil society organisations have used the occasion of the Hamburg Summit to [remind](#) G20 leaders that health should not predominantly be referred to as a security issue, but rather that of an opportunity and a human right, and a precondition of prosperity.

The [Obama administration](#) announced during the 2015 Antalya Summit that the US would work together with thirty partner countries to achieve the targets of the “global health security agenda”, as part of a wider call for international action to strengthen the capacity to detect and respond to infectious disease outbreaks. The [construction](#) of the link between health and security in this way at the G20 has contributed to a skewering of the agenda of global health away from those in most need of support, particularly in impoverished African nations. By the 2016 Hangzhou Summit, though, progress had been made in the form of a commitment

to implement the 2030 SDGs, with health denoted as a “sustainable development sector” to be prioritised. While any mention of global health was omitted from the document outlining plans for the Hangzhou Summit, its communiqué did refer to the serious threat posed by anti-microbial resistance to public health, growth, and economic stability.

Progress at the Hamburg G20 Summit?

On the subject of global health, the G20 Hamburg Summit unquestionably marks a solid step forward. Merkel declared in her press conference at the conclusion of the Summit that partner countries “felt better equipped to show a united front should further pandemics occur”. She also announced that further “progress on microbial resistance” had been secured. A key component surrounding the current urgent need to adequately address anti-microbial resistance stems from the fact that pharmaceutical companies have [failed](#) to support Research and Development (R&D) on new antibiotics. Here, the commitment to foster R&D

outlined in the [Hamburg Summit Leaders' Declaration](#), notably for priority pathogens identified by the World Health Organisation (WHO), reflects significant progress on the limited rhetoric of the Hangzhou Summit. Resilient local and national health infrastructure, oriented around the achievement of universal health coverage, is key to the successful implementation of the SDG of global health for all. The Declaration's pledge to build cooperation on strengthening health systems worldwide reflects the start of what may prove an eventual transcendence of the discursive linking of health and security in safeguarding the health concerns of the Global South.

Predictably, the G20 Hamburg Summit has not, however, liberated itself from the national security concerns that have plagued much of the previous discussion on health at preceding G20 summits. The continued compliance with the WHO's [International Health Regulations](#) (IHR) has been identified as critical in responding to infectious disease outbreaks. The IHR, though, are explicitly concerned with

those infectious disease outbreaks that have relatively high levels of mortality, are acute in their impacts, and have the capacity to swiftly cross borders. Such continued focus on international disease outbreaks undermines the Summit's commitment to the [Millennium Development Goal](#) of "reaching those furthest behind first". Furthermore, while the Declaration commits itself to "fully eradicating polio", the Director of the [AIDS Healthcare Foundation](#) lamented the complete absence of any mention of HIV/AIDS in the agenda, and the failure of some G20 countries to increase financial support.

Conclusion

In and of itself, establishing the presence of global health at this year's Hamburg Summit for the first time in the G20's short history reflects a step forward in the fight for global health for all. The Summit, however, while committing itself to strengthening health systems worldwide, has failed to fully disassociate itself from the linkage of health and security that has

dominated the limited discussion of global health at previous summits. Viewed through the lens of security, discussion of health is restricted to a narrow focus on emerging infectious diseases that worry the West.

This G20 Summit has committed itself to an intensified partnership with African countries, with Merkel claiming that G20 leaders have recognised the key to development in Africa is a mixture of rapidly increased private sector investment and good governance. If

increased funding, oriented around infrastructure, is the legacy of the Hamburg Summit, global health could be a key beneficiary, with many African nations lacking the basic infrastructure necessary to respond to even day-to-day medical problems. The result would be a significant step forward towards the G20's commitment to global health for all at the first summit to make the issue a priority.

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