



Unsustainable Development Goals at the G20: Problems, Pessimisms and Proposals

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Executive Summary

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are inescapable at the G20. In theory, they represent the accountability of corporations and governments, the achievements of Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) and charities, and the donations of philanthropists. In practice, they address various social, ecological and economic issues worldwide. However, the focus of the SDGs falls short of the mark by not addressing systemic problems, such as wealth disparity and human rights infringements. To address this challenge, this policy brief recommends that we give more power to G20 engagement groups, demand greater accountability and transparency from large corporations, and adapt the SDGs to address systemic problems.

The Sustainable Development Goals

In September 2015, the United Nations (UN) adopted [17 SDGs](#) that aim to address economic, environmental, and social imbalances. The deadline for the completion of SDGs is 2030, and it is the responsibility of governmental and non-governmental organisations to provide resources and finances to these ends.

No poverty, zero hunger, gender equality, good health and wellbeing are all seemingly noble goals. However, the implementation of the SDGs is problematic because of inherent tensions. 'Sustainable Development' is a nebulous catch-all phrase, repeatedly appearing in G20 engagement group policy statements from trade and investment to anti-corruption. However, there is no real coherence, apart from a vague desire to make the

world a better place for all. This lack of coherence is apparent at the G20 as comments have been made about the need for climate change, but according to Masaki Inaba, the Civil 20(C20) Sherpa, whom I interviewed during the G20 Osaka Summit, concrete agreements have fallen short of being realised on the ground level. The C20 aims to represent civil society as one of seven engagement groups that seek to implement sustainable change at the G20. There are plenty of interpretations of what an ideal world would look like, but without concrete policy to drive change, the G20's rhetoric falls flat.

Despite decades of international effort and [trillions of dollars](#) in investment, [one-fifth of children worldwide](#) are out of school and the world is not on track to meet climate change targets. Numerous criticisms have been levelled at the nature and maintenance of the SDGs, including addressing symptomatic issues instead of systemic causes, problematic data collection, and tensions within financing and implementation. Their effectiveness must be reconsidered, and the UN must not let the fear of

admitting failure come at the cost of making essential changes to the SDGs.

Symptomatic Treatment

Do the SDGs address issues systematically or simply treat the symptoms? When considering welfare, it is glaringly evident that human rights should be at the forefront of the goals. The fact that the term appears just once in the SDG manifesto reflects the appeasement of [authoritarian regimes](#) at fora such as the G20. Despite highlighting poverty and ecological damage, the SDGs do little to address the root causes of these issues. For instance, nothing is said about the over-accumulation of wealth and its effects on the environment and poverty. The [85 richest people](#) globally are as wealthy as the poorest half. Furthermore, the richest 10% produce half of the Earth's greenhouse gasses; in comparison, the poorest half contribute a mere 10%.

Corporate and governmental agendas prevent these issues being addressed, and the vague nature of the SDGs allows detrimental agendas to be [speciously presented](#) as sustainable

development. One example of such vagueness can be seen in the second SDG, 'zero hunger'. This SDG gives credence to companies that supply high-sugar foods under the guise of ending hunger in young children, but are in fact contributing to [obesity rates](#). This leads to three questions: 1) who designed the development goals; 2) what gives them the authority to dictate what is measured as successful; and 3) are they fit for purpose?

While previous G20 summits have had amorphous buzzwords describing wide-sweeping aims, such as '[no one gets left behind](#)', root causes are left unaddressed. The global proliferation of nationalism and separatism among many G20 members [is at odds](#) with the SDGs' concern for international human rights infringements. While G20 multilateralism is not without its problems, it is a useful platform for promoting awareness about worldwide social issues. Unfortunately, this is undermined by one of the main issues with the G20 summit: only 66% of the world's population are represented by the forum. This is surprising considering the frequency with which underrepresented countries are

mentioned by engagement groups. What is not surprising, however, is that economic and trade matters have dominated the leaders' talks at the Osaka G20, with no mention of many of the major humanitarian crises in the developing world, such as the [Myanmar Rohingya crisis](#) and Sudan crisis.

The SDGs have been mentioned consistently in programs and promotion for the Osaka G20, but Masaki Inaba believes that engagement groups lack the power needed to enact policy at grassroots level. Civil groups must be given a bigger platform to discuss social and environmental issues in order to meaningfully address them. Multinational corporations outsourcing labour from developing countries face very [little accountability for treatment of labourers](#). Developing countries contribute to the accumulation of wealth of companies from developed companies by underpaying staff and avoiding taxes. This stunts the growth of developing countries, and exploits the workers there. There must be a call for transparency and accountability on the part of the multinational companies that are dictating the shape of

international trade and the global economy. Furthermore, the SDGs should be adjusted appropriately to directly address this issue, instead of addressing the second-hand issues caused by these companies.

Problematic Data Collection

Another issue under fire is the complex process of data collection. Developing countries are often [inaccessible](#) for the collection of data and there is a lack of sufficient funding. Granular data about individuals is difficult to collect, which leaves vital gaps in information and leads to inaccurate estimated figures. Feedback from data is imperative to future development and investment since collected data serves as a guiding tool for effective further action.

Another major roadblock for reliable data collection is trust. Recent global [surveillance disclosures](#) have shown that mistrust of government data collection is justified. According to Inaba, the fear that data will be used to persecute minorities causes issues with its reliability as people either withhold or provide incorrect information. This presents major

issues for SDG implementation, which is particularly problematic as they are intended to help minorities. A method of addressing data collection issues is the institutionalisation of data capturing. Independent bodies would not only track issues, but also track the compliance of G20 states, leading to greater accountability and more efficient and targeted methods.

Frustrated by insufficient funds and workforce, G20 task forces designed to discuss the implementation of the SDGs have not focused on [accurate data collection](#). There has been a list of concrete and collective actions made each year, which enable the G20 Development Working Group to [highlight change](#) and guide future work on what needs to be done. However, this does not suggest meaningful reform to problems with data collection, or protection of whistleblowers who target corruption and contribute to data reliability. This year's C20 focused on giving a platform to those who do not have a voice, and called for an increased commitment from the G20 to protect whistleblowers. Maria Berazategui, of Berlin based NGO Transparency International, stated that the G20 and

associated groups have been making too many new commitments on human rights and anti-corruption, whilst failing to implement previous ones.

The general consensus of many officials at the C20 and UN press briefings at the G20 demonstrate a sense of pessimism, and even anger, at the lack of progress made with the SDGs. For example, those related to climate action, reduced inequality have been insufficient. During the UN press conference on the first day of the summit, issues with implementation were raised with the G20. Secretary General António Guterres stated that the grouping were 'lagging behind' the adoption of the 2030 climate change agenda, and political will is failing to address this issue.

Implementations and Financing Tensions

Friction exists between the push for economic growth and vital environmental protection. The implementation of the goals needs [trillions of dollars](#) annually, a demand unlikely to be achieved from governmental funding alone.

Investment from NGOs, large corporations and philanthropy, though essential, comes with its own issues. Progress is hindered by the competing interests of stakeholders and governments. The obsession with [increasing economic growth](#) should be reconsidered in light of environmental and social issues. Furthermore, the involvement of NGOs in areas of development and aid such as healthcare causes fragmentation of local healthcare infrastructure and [undermines local workers](#).

The way in which the drive for economic growth has eclipsed other issues, such as climate change and sustainable development, has been evident in the absence of these topics in leaders' discussions at the Osaka G20. Guterres described a lack of international cohesion in pursuing the SDGs, which paints a gloomy picture if governments cannot agree on concrete affirmative action on climate change. Even if climate change was at the forefront of the leaders' minds, this would not guarantee affirmative action due to the informal and non-regulatory nature of the G20. There should be greater sanctions on countries who fail to honour agreements on social and

environmental issues other than awkwardness at the subsequent year's summit.

Conclusion

The SDGs are intrinsically linked to the G20 agenda. However, according to the UN Secretary General and C20 Sherpa, they are void of any tangible outcomes. The general pessimism among civil society organisations and UN officials towards achieving the SDGs by 2030 must be acknowledged and addressed accordingly. A lack of power means that task forces are struggling to implement change on a meaningful grassroots level. If the purpose of the G20 is to discuss worldwide policy then

there should be a greater consideration of social and environmental issues by the leaders instead of passing these off to task forces, which are unable to implement substantive change. Considering the significant pessimism of those working towards realisation of the SDGs, these issues must be addressed in order to accelerate positive progress. It is imperative to empower task forces, enhance the transparency and accountability of multinational corporations, and focus more on systemic issues.

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