

## Leaving No-One Behind? The G20 and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda

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*International Media Centre – G20 Hangzhou Summit.* ‘Development’ has been a consistent area of consideration for the G20 Leader’s Summit since its conception, with previous summits extending their original remit beyond an exclusive focus to affect crisis management after the global financial crash to extended attempts to cushion the effects of economic instability in low and middle income countries. However, with 2015 seeing the global endorsement of the UN’s 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, the global audience now turns to the first G20 summit since its adoption for guidance on the implementation of the newly ratified Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With the increased pressure that follows, the 2016 G20 agenda places ‘sustainable and inclusive growth’ at the forefront of this year’s summit. The

question that arises is whether the rhetoric of furthering global commitments to achieving the SDGs will amount to tangible, coordinated and serious efforts.

### **Previous Involvement of the G20 on Development**

Since its creation, the G20 has been concerned with minimising the impacts of global economic instability on low and middle income countries and has [stated](#) its consistent commitment to promoting ‘stable and sustainable world economic growth that benefits all’. This reflects the role the G20 has adopted in balancing the management of the global economy and stewardship of globalisation more broadly. Issues surrounding development span the range of topics the G20 is concerned with,

and as such, development has consistently been, to a certain degree, on the agenda.

Previous summits have all shown their own interpretation of global development concerns. In London in 2009 this was in terms of the [commitment](#) to meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Official Development Assistance (ODA) pledges, including debt relief for sub-Saharan Africa. In Pittsburgh in 2009 this came in the [form](#) of 'raising living standards in emerging markets and developing countries'. In 2010, the Toronto summit [reaffirmed](#) the G20's commitment to development by creating the Development Working Group (DWG) with the view to elaborate 'a development agenda and multi-year action plans consistent with the G20's focus on promoting economic growth and resilience'. The 2010 summit in Seoul marked a clear transformation in the way in which development was framed. The Seoul Development Consensus for Shared Growth [outlined](#) some overarching principles for the G20, including economic growth, global development partnerships and private sector participation.

Furthermore, the Multi Year Action Plan (MYAP) identified key areas for inclusive growth, including infrastructure, human resource development, trade, private investment and job creation, financial inclusion, growth with resilience, food security, domestic resource mobilisation and knowledge sharing. The G20's framing of development within economic terms for promoting international economic and financial cooperation is what sets this platform apart from other global governance bodies, such as the G7.

The extent to which the G20 is an appropriate and effective platform for the promotion of international development is much debated. It has previously been [argued](#) that the G20 is the 'wrong international forum for development', with criticisms stemming from the contention that the G20 should remain focused solely on international economic cooperation. It has also been [suggested](#) that the development agenda adopted by the G20 is too broad, without a central point of focus, and is thus too disconnected from the main focus of the leaders' discussions. One of the key criticisms of the

G20 in tackling development issues is the underrepresentation of the countries that development purports to assist.

### **The Sustainable Development Goals**

On 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2015 in New York, world leaders gathered at the United Nations to adopt the [SDGs](#) – an ambitious set of aims and targets intended to push forward development policy. The SDGs comprise part of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and their creation saw global collaboration and participation on an enormous scale with the view to making transformative steps towards eradicating poverty in all forms.

The SDGs were adopted to take over from the previously unsuccessful MDGs, and were thus designed to overcome many of the criticisms faced by the MDGs. The SDGs are therefore exceedingly more ambitious in their aims, expanding from the previous set of eight goals to a new series of 17 goals and 169 targets. One of the major shifts of the SDGs from the MDGs is their universality. Rather than the previous narrow focus on donor-led development,

the SDGs call upon action from all countries. The SDGs are also praised in their reflection of modern developmentalist paradigms, influenced predominantly by Amartya Sen, which prioritise human development over previously crude income-based measures of development.

Despite their eager anticipation and the promise of progressing the global development frontier beyond the MDGs, the SDGs have already faced a great deal of criticism. This is a consequence of their sprawling nature and for consisting of arguably unquantifiable, unattainable targets, promoting near utopian development ideals with little acknowledgement of the 'how' or 'by whom'. There are four main areas of ambiguity within the SDGs: how should the concept of universality be interpreted, who is financing the goals, will they reduce poverty and inequality, and who is responsible for delivering the goals?

Interpreting Universality – the SDGs embody the praised shift away from development considered in terms of aid

from G7 members to a more inclusive agenda that promotes actions from all countries. However, arguments have been put forward from developing countries that the degree of responsibility for implementing the goals should depend on the capacity of each country. The issue of how to apply the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) is contested. The EU, UK and USA contend that CBDR only applies to climate change negotiations. Alternatively, developing countries highlight the need for developed countries to carry out their ODA assistance.

Who is Financing the SDGs? – a major area of controversy since endorsement of the SDGs has been where the responsibility lies for funding the goals. The financing needs for sustainable development are enormous, with estimates varying from \$3tr to \$17tr. Again a debate appears to have surfaced between developed and developing countries, with developed countries advocating for domestic resource mobilisation and developing countries pushing for a continuation of aid alongside reducing illicit financial flows. The UN's Addis Ababa Action Agenda

(AAAA) set out to answer this question, however it was strongly criticised by civil society groups for lacking clear commitment to issues such as international tax reform and shunting of responsibility from traditional donors.

Tackling Inequality – the SDG target for inequality reduction is the first ever global target to decrease national income inequality. However, the goal focuses exclusively on income growth for the bottom 40% of the population. Not considering the top end of wealth distribution appears to directly contradict the objective of this goal by arguably ignoring many key drivers of inequality. This sidelines the responsibility of the rich and powerful by refraining from discussing issues of wealth and redistribution, and reads more like a measure for pro-poor national development than as a measure for reducing inequality.

Deliverability – another area open for interpretation within the agenda is where the responsibility lies for delivering the goals. There is lack of consideration of who is responsible in following through on

commitments to the SDGs, be this the G7, the G20, or UN agencies. Lack of governance coordination was one of the reasons the MDGs were not successfully met, yet it is still unclear what institutional architecture will be utilised to implement the new agenda. Goal 16 in particular is concerned with this, however only refers to governance once, and further still does not define what it is. Target 16.7 argues the need to ‘ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels’, yet these terms are also undefined and left open to interpretation, begging the question what is ‘good governance’ and how is this measured on a global scale? As Hulme [points out](#), there are conceptual and methodological issues surrounding the 16<sup>th</sup> goal, and fear of cultural imperialism through the imposition of Western conceptualisations of ‘good governance’ on low-income countries, alongside other political barriers such as different interpretations of governance, will all impede the realisation of this highly problematic goal.

### **The Role of the G20 in Implementing the SDGs**

With their targets even more ambitious than the previously failed MDGs, it is clear that high-level political consideration and action will be essential if the SDGs are to succeed. This is where the G20 has the potential to cement global commitment to these goals.

The potential power the G20 has in pushing forward the implementation of the SDGs in terms of governance is realised in that it combines advanced and emerging economies, represents the majority of the global sources of ODA, the largest contributors to CO2 emissions, and claims authority over half of the world’s poor population. The G20 [therefore](#) has the ‘convening power, the legitimacy and the responsibility to assume a leadership role in achieving the SDGs’.

In terms of reaffirming global commitment to the SDGs, adopting national implementation plans within the G20 member states will send a clear message about the sustainable development

agenda's universality. This would reaffirm the serious commitment of the G20 members to the goals.

Implementation of the SDGs requires collective international action, due to the international nature of many of the goals. Goal 17 specifically highlights the need to 'revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development'. The G20 is a significant platform for global economic cooperation for developed and developing countries alike, and is in a unique position to strengthen collective action towards implementation of the goals. One area in which this could be realised is in building institutional relationships with development financing bodies and or with underwriting new bodies like the New Development Bank.

One particularly exciting aspect of the summit in Hangzhou is the opportunity it presents China to discuss its own experiences of urbanisation and development. As a platform bringing together countries with different experiences of international development cooperation, from traditional donor led aid

and North-South cooperation to South-South cooperation, the G20 can facilitate understanding regarding these approaches. China has demonstrated impressive growth to become arguably the world's most dynamic economy, and has reduced domestic poverty levels through agricultural development, industrialisation, urbanisation and infrastructure development. However, China also displays many of the issues concomitant with rapid urbanisation, such as rising inequality and sprawling informal development. At a pivotal moment in China's development, the country is also making financial resources available for developing countries. Many countries have therefore indicated their eagerness to hear China share its experiences of development.

While the G20 arguably has the potential for furthering commitment to implementing the SDGs, there are structural and ideological constraints that somewhat limit the capacity for this to extend beyond the rhetoric. While the G20 provides the opportunity for countries with different political and economic

values to share experiences, the lack of ideological consensus regarding the relevance of specific goals to different contexts undermines the ability for collective action during the implementation of the sustainable development agenda.

Furthermore, the disappointingly lacklustre commitment of the AAAA regarding financing the SDGs has not addressed persistent challenges caused by the diverging priorities of different countries. The attempts of countries such as the EU, USA, UK and Japan to shift the discourse away from North-South relationships have been seen by many in the 'Global South' as evading the historic responsibility of these countries to commit to their development contributions. The domestic and international environments are, however, not as disparate as these arguments suggest. For example, domestic resource mobilisation will only prove effective if international cooperation can adequately monitor and reduce illicit financial flows.

The structural constraints of the G20 still act as a barrier, preventing development from being considered as an integral issue of the summit. The Development Working Group (DWG) is attended by development cooperation department officials, whereas issues such as finance, agriculture and employment are handled by separate departments. This differentiation undermines the multisectoral cooperation needed between different departments in order to coordinate efforts to realise the SDGs. Mainstreaming development across the G20 agenda and encouraging coordination between the different sectors is critical if the G20 is to make any concrete contributions to the SDGs.

### **Outcomes of the G20 for Sustainable Development – Leaving No-One Behind?**

President Xi's B20 opening speech was positive in setting the tone for the 2016 G20 Leaders' Summit by reaffirming development as the key focal point. Xi situated discussions of sustainable development firmly within the Chinese context, drawing on his personal experiences of witnessing development

alongside referencing China's investment and development policy more broadly. Xi suggested that this year's G20 Summit would result in a specific implementation plan for the 2030 Agenda. The importance of this outcome was reiterated in the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon's G20 press conference on the 4<sup>th</sup> September, when the UNSG praised China for prioritising the SDGs and called for renewed commitment to the goals from all members. Ban Ki-Moon reflected on the new role of the G20 in the transition away from crisis management towards setting the agenda for long term sustainable growth. While the UNSG's speech potentially over-played the role of China in contributing to the successful achievement of MDG1: halving global poverty (a result [arguably](#) caused by China's bias and not a fair representative on global poverty reduction) and reaffirmed the arguably out dated and dangerously simplistic definition of poverty as those living on less than \$1.25 a day, the pressure he placed on this year's summit to make substantial commitments to both the UNFCC Climate Change Agreement and the 2030 Sustainable

Development Agenda ensured that issues surrounding sustainable development were prioritised during this year's summit.

This was [realised](#) in the creation of the G20 Action Plan on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – a 48-page document outlining commitments to implementing both the SDGs and the AAAA. Broadly speaking, 'inclusive and interconnected development' consisted of four thematic areas. Firstly, support for industrialisation in Africa through voluntary policy options is discussed, including investment and trade in infrastructure and other industries. The second area of consideration is in infrastructure development through private investment. Thirdly, generating quality employment in order to increase sustainable wage growth is outlined. And finally, concerns are articulated surrounding food security, which saw prioritisation of investment from scientific and private sectors.

Yet, as stated earlier, whether commitments to implement the 2030 Agenda extend beyond the rhetoric to

tangible and substantial actions from G20 members remains a key question. This is particularly pressing in the face of the four remaining SDG ambiguities outlined in the previous section.

Interpreting Universality – reflecting the so-called ‘Hangzhou Consensus’, this year saw discussions of the G20’s transition from crisis management to managing long term macroeconomic policies. The challenge that this presents is promoting agreed upon, universal values aimed towards a long-term vision that applies to all countries globally. While, broadly speaking, ‘sustainable development’ might be argued to be the universal long-term aim, in terms of the SDGs, the question of which goals and targets different countries ought to prioritise was largely ignored. Outcomes of the Hangzhou Summit included commitment to ‘contributing to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda by setting an example through bold, transformative collective and intended national actions in a wide range of areas’. In this regard, efforts towards adopting national implementation plans could be

seen as taking priority over collective action.

Financing the SDGs – financing sustainable development was discussed in terms of a continuation of the AAAA, and prioritised domestic resource mobilisation. There was some reflection on the potential negative impacts of illicit financial flows, resulting in a proposal to ‘support the principles of the Addis Tax Initiative’. This discussion was limited to the impact of illicit activities on mobilising domestic resources that can be utilised for development. However, the main focus was on the potential of private investment. The role of the private sector for financing infrastructure, supporting industrialisation in Africa, generating employment and addressing food security was explicitly stated. Overall, the outcome of the G20 Summit prioritised the importance of developing countries to ‘further their own development’, arguably downplaying the responsibilities of developed countries to meet the SDGs. The G20 members stated they would reaffirm their ODA commitments, which consists of a 46-year-old measure of 0.7% of the countries’ GNI, which so far only 6

countries have managed to meet. Concerns over the [suitability](#) of this measure therefore continued to be ignored by G20 members in Hangzhou.

Tackling Inequality – the outcomes of the G20 Summit reflect concerns over international tax cooperation and advancing considerations of Base Erosion and Profits Shifting (BEPS). However, these concerns were only briefly discussed in relation to development, reflecting the structural barriers still apparent within the G20 in that discussions of economic governance and sustainable development are still very much carried out in separate streams. To further demonstrate this, increasing sustainable wage growth was discussed as a priority for reducing inequality, arguably reflecting concerns that inequality is being considered solely in terms of the bottom end of wealth distribution and not in consideration of macro drivers of inequality. As long as sustainable development is not mainstreamed in the G20 agenda, and redistribution is not directly related to poverty reduction and inequality, then a

significant potential resource for financing development remains to be ignored.

Deliverability – rather than utilising the convening power the G20 has as a collective, while some lip service was paid to aligning the work of the G20 with the 2030 Agenda, it was subsequently stated that the ‘global follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda is a UN-led process’. This arguably shifts responsibility away from the G20 members and undermines subsequent discussions of commitment to implementing the SDGs. The effect of this erodes the accountability of the G20 members in implementing the 2030 Agenda. It is hard to see the following discussions of sustainable development as serious following this statement, which further demonstrated the lack of firm commitments and actionable plans that make up the G20’s consideration of the 2030 Agenda.

China had the potential to discuss development in its own terms, and the opening discussions of the 2016 Leaders’ Summit showed promise in terms of prioritising development and making

sustainable development the focal point for this year's summit. However, reflecting the struggle of the G20 to shift its role beyond crisis management to long-term economic reform, the G20 Summit in Hangzhou again gave little in the way of concrete and measurable actions.

Whilst the much-anticipated G20 Action Plan on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was successful in outlining the priority areas within the 2030 Agenda for G20 members and confirmed

commitments to achieving the SDGs and the AAAA, the lack of substantially outlined action means that this year's G20 summit did little in extending engagement with sustainable development beyond mere rhetoric.

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