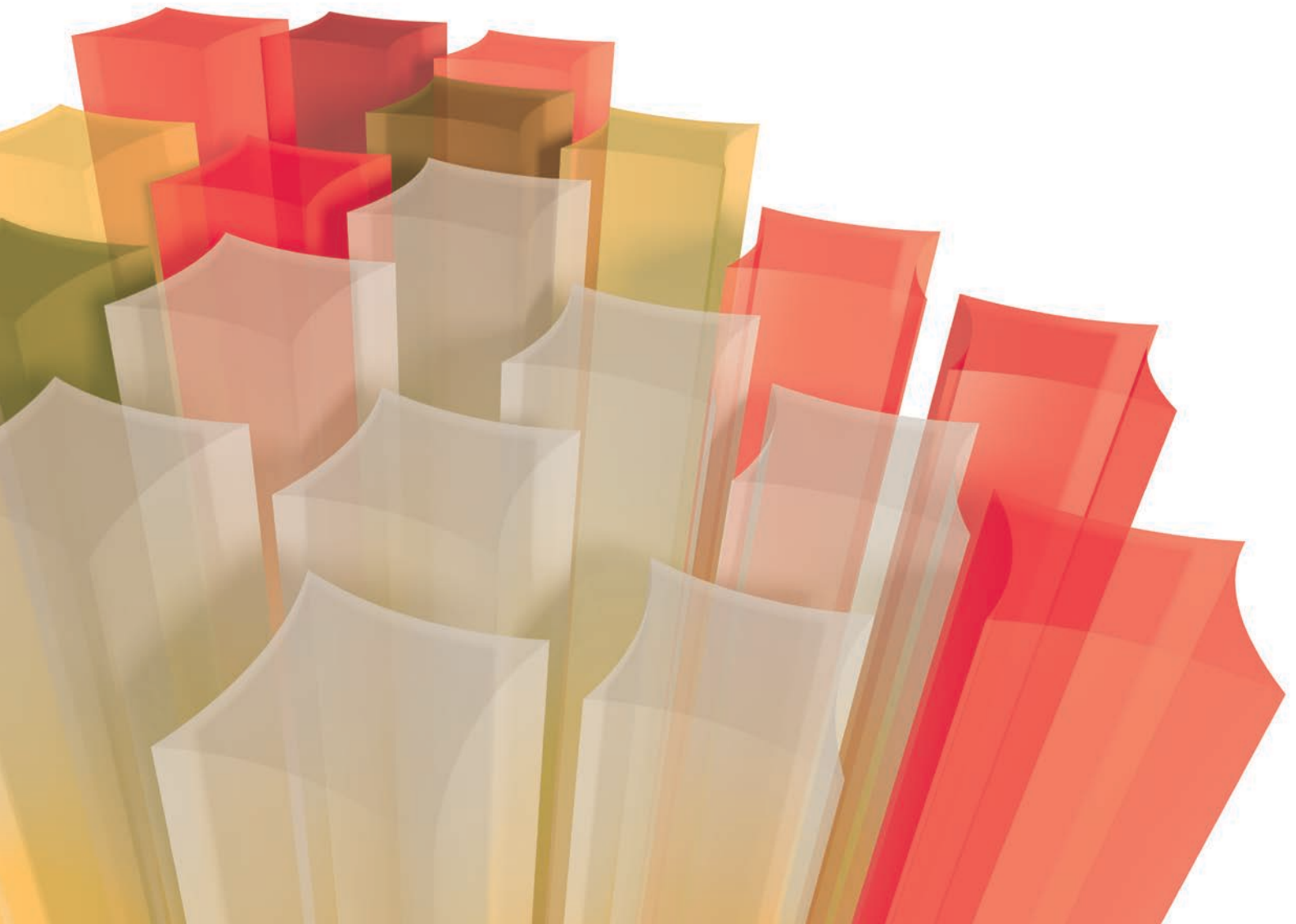




THE G20 AS A LEVER FOR PROGRESS

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SUMMARY

The measure of a multilateral process is its contribution to progress on the issues and challenges on the global agenda. As a practical matter, the crucial piece is the policy lever through which progress is achieved. The relatively loose structure of the Group of Twenty (G20), compared with traditional international organizations, makes it especially well-suited to provide injections of political impetus for policy problems. Meanwhile, the failure of many observers to recognize the varied scale of the G20's efforts — from macroeconomic rebalancing to, say, ratification of the main anticorruption treaty — has made it harder for the G20 to gain credit for the valuable role it can play. Recent commentary over the G20 cries out for a clearer understanding of how the body functions and what it has to offer.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- For any issue on its agenda, G20 involvement is justified only when its attention to that issue translates into progress that could not otherwise be attained.
- Every proposed topic must be justified by such a theory of change, and every related report, statement and communiqué must show what is being accomplished.
- The agenda of the Development Working Group must be streamlined to focus on subjects with the greatest potential, such as food security and commodity-price volatility.
- The G20 should intensify its efforts to help address the challenges of energy and climate, whether through climate change financing, the phase-out of fossil fuel subsidies or increased fuel efficiency.
- To keep the G20 from being overwhelmed by persistent agenda creep, it should devise ways to sunset its involvement with certain issues, perhaps by handing off efforts on an issue to other bodies or spinning them off into self-sustaining initiatives.

JUDGING G20 SUCCESS OR FAILURE

For all their harsh judgments of the performance and effectiveness of the G20, its detractors have offered scant basis for their critique. Negative assessments by experts and the media rarely go beyond superficial second-guessing and tedious complaints over lack of accountability — to the detriment of sober discussion. Yet outside observers and commentators should also be called to account and prodded to be as constructive as possible. Judgments about the G20's success or failure must be grounded in realism about what the group can accomplish, and at what pace.

For one thing, the traditional method for assessing the G20 is to grade it on follow-through and fulfillment of the commitments announced in summit communiqués. While it is important to keep track of the steps leaders promised to take, treating commitments as a standard unit of account ignores wide variations in the impact, degree of difficulty or political sensitivity associated with different commitments. Thus, when the G20 is urged to simply focus on implementing the assortment of past commitments rather than tackling new challenges, it reveals a serious misunderstanding of the process. Taking commitments at face value can also gloss over vital substantive debates over policy and values. Indeed, one such example — fiscal consolidation — lies at the centre of the G20's recent history. Given the controversy over austerity policies and fragility of the global economic recovery, for example, should the 2010 fiscal consolidation commitments be treated as gospel?

For better or for worse, the verdict of conventional wisdom and popular perception could affect the future commitment of leaders to the G20 process. In the recent commentary surrounding the G20, it has been saddled with self-defeating expectations. Of course, it would be nice to have G20 leaders meet once or twice a year and definitively resolve the world's knottiest issues. To some degree, the G20 may be a victim of its own early successes in the heat of the 2008-2009 financial meltdown.

The debate over the G20 needs an accurate image of the group on which to judge its performance. It is important to understand the nature of this informal, loosely structured, leader-focused beast and its relationship to formal elements of the multilateral system. We start by reviewing essential characteristics of the group itself. What sort of multilateral creature is the G20? What tasks have its constituent governments assigned it? How does it operate? More to the point, precisely how does the G20 help spur progress with the challenges on the

international agenda, and how can onlookers watching the process spot those contributions?

A small sample of headlines and reactions gives a sense of the persistent sour mood encountered by the G20. Toronto's 2010 G20 summit was described as "a failure all around" (Urback, 2011). *The Guardian* trashed the 2011 Cannes meeting with the headline "G20 Summit: Slumping to the Occasion," complaining the "G20 had a chance to get a grip on the sovereign debt crisis. But they failed, and all the big questions remain on the table" (2011). Inability to resolve the euro zone debt crisis was described as "A Greek Tragedy and a Grand Failure" (Dhawan and Inamdar, 2011). The 2012 Los Cabos summit was no different: Oxfam International complained with a headline stating, "G20 Fails 1 Billion Hungry People Worldwide: Development and Food Security Sidelined" (2012). Nouriel Roubini's bumper sticker said, "Not much cooperation is going on in many areas. We are going to G-Zero, with no global economic policy governance" (Racanelli, 2011).

As Bruce Jones of the New York University Center on International Cooperation has emphasized in defence of the G20, the skeptics' cries of "failure" are strange in light of its truly historic success at the perilous moment of the 2008-2009 financial meltdown (2010). By marshalling nearly a trillion dollars to give the global economy some shock absorbers, the G20 earned an ample supply of legitimacy and effectiveness points. To appreciate the value of the G20 as a diplomatic framework for the major economies' collective response, we need only take a step back and recall the tensions and sensitivities associated with its predecessor, the Group of Eight (G8). The rising powers had started to chafe at their second-class status as mere guests, and there were clashing views within the G8 on whether to open the group to new members. The turn of the calendar to 2009 also posed a leadership problem for the G8, with Italian leader Silvio Berlusconi due to be the incoming chair.

Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) lacked the means to help avert a potential fast-spreading insolvency. Imagine the consequences in 2008 and 2009 if the G20 had never met at the leaders' level. If US President George Bush had not summoned G20 leaders to Washington in November 2008, the IMF, already on life support, could have become totally irrelevant, downsizing its workforce by nearly 400 staff. Its \$1 billion budget was funded by the small profit it makes on lending money, but IMF lending had collapsed. In 2010, the Chinese could have initiated the long-mooted Asian Monetary Fund. The US Congress might have branded China as a currency manipulator and imposed a host of punitive countervailing duties and quotas on a large

range of goods. An even more severe global depression would likely have resulted, fuelled by universal beggar-thy-neighbour policies.

More recently, the euro-zone crisis has been corrosive and a conundrum for the G20. For a multilateral body whose very purpose is to put the recovery from the Great Recession on a sound footing, having such an ominous threat hang over the global economy is a direct affront. The non-European major economies share a stake in defusing the threat from unsustainable sovereign debt, but their leverage is indirect. It is not clear how the outside powers can prod European leaders to reach a solution. In a sense, the “EZ-17” have tainted the G20 with their image of ineffectuality.

The idea of the G20 as unfocused, supposedly spread too thinly across a broad array of topics, is a double-sided coin. According to some commentators, the group should narrow the scope of its agenda and hone in on its core responsibilities for global economic growth, financial stability and reform of the international financial institutions (IFIs). This critique has a number of problems. It rests on the dubious premise that a narrower focus would have produced greater progress on the core issues — that is, that the distraction of the working groups on development and anticorruption, for instance, have prevented larger steps on macroeconomic rebalancing. Senior figures in the G20 process have, in fact, made the opposite case that ancillary topics on the G20 agenda are a useful hedge against the tough, incremental slog of rebalancing and financial regulation.¹

The other problem with the “stick to your knitting” argument is the G20’s dual identities. The global body is not only an economic policy forum but also the multilateral system’s new venue for rising and established powers to sit together as peer equals. In the group’s former guise, it is appropriate to keep sight of its core responsibilities for stewardship of the global economy. Given its unique role as a test bed for cooperation between emerging and established powers, though, it also makes sense for the G20 to supply top-level political impetus to deal with other shared challenges.

For officials and observers who want to spur the G20 to greater effectiveness, it is important to deal simultaneously with the group’s top-tier priorities as well as the more tangential items. Across the entire agenda, one key to both an appropriate assessment and to getting the most out of the G20 is to better understand its diverse modes of action, depending on the given area of policy. Critics are

quick to label peripheral topics as “distractions,” yet this critique fails to account for the widely differing demands that different issues place on G20 officials. To be sure, there is indeed a danger of the G20’s influence becoming diluted by an agenda that is simply too expansive. If the process keeps adding items, the agenda can become like the proverbial Christmas tree sagging under the weight of its ornaments. The answer, however, is not draconian narrowing of the agenda or a rigid back-to-basics focus, but, instead, disciplined agenda management. This paper offers ideas for how this might be achieved.

THE ROLE OF THE G20

The question of the G20’s essential function and comparative advantage can be approached from a number of directions: its historical roots, substantive remit, place within the multilateral system, relation to detailed technical matters, politically diverse composition and significance in a world of rapid globalization. Now, after four years and seven summit meetings, we can form a clearer picture of the global body.

The first thing to note is the contrast between the G20 and traditional intergovernmental organizations. Officials from the G20 nations do their diplomatic work without a formal charter. There are no legal mandates, designated authorities or standing committees. Strictly speaking, the group is merely an ongoing series of informal consultations of senior officials, punctuated once or twice a year by summit meetings of leaders from the world’s major economic players. The consultations themselves range from meetings of the Sherpas, who serve as personal representatives of the leaders, to cabinet ministers to specialist experts in the G20’s various working groups. Some of the agenda topics addressed in summit communiqués receive the blessings and imprimatur of the leaders without really consuming any of their time.

One way to highlight the G20’s inherent limitations is to remember an important plural pronoun in the middle of the group’s famous mission statement. When the leaders met for their third summit, in Pittsburgh in 2009, and announced their commitment to future meetings, they anointed the G20 as “the premier forum for *our* international economic cooperation.” With no pretense of representing anyone but themselves, the leaders took care to disavow any authority over nations outside the group.

So, what role does this leave for the G20? Analysts tracking the group’s early evolution have noted a distinctive multilateral style. According to Homi Kharas and Domenico Lombardi, “[I]t has organized itself as

1 A diverse portfolio of issues hedges chances of meagre success on some of them.

a process-oriented forum for first helping to build a consensus and then providing the required political momentum to ensure implementation” (2012).

This is a good depiction of how G20 governments, represented at the highest levels, contribute to multilateral cooperation: hashing out differences on vexed issues and dispensing political impetus. The authors’ emphasis on *process* is apt, yet it also begs clarification. As noted above, the forum itself is quite light on the formality of process, at least in terms of reaching and issuing decisions. But it is certainly process-oriented in another sense. The true comparative advantage of the G20 is its role as a source of political will. It can spur forward movement in the appropriate multilateral settings by determining which existing processes or necessary innovations best match the challenges on its agenda. Also note that, in keeping with the G20’s character as a series of meetings, items are taken onto the agenda at the participants’ discretion.

Giovanni Grevi explains that consensus building has particular added value in a world of shifting power: “While binding rule-making is better left to established or future institutions, the G-20 seems well-positioned to support the progressive convergence of, or at least the structured dialogue on, different political and normative perspectives. In a more heterogeneous and polycentric world, the search for common ground is an important function of global governance” (2011).

To the extent that collective action problems — with diverse players — lie at the heart of the world’s most urgent challenges, ways to narrow the differences between players must be found. Narrowing differences is not a challenge that is exclusive to the global economy and financial system; the need to reach fresh understandings among new combinations of players runs across the international agenda. As noted above, the G20 can be seen as an instrument of global economics or politics, and its creation story has both strands. One plot line of the G20 narrative is about rescuing a global economy in free fall; another tells of a new diplomatic “high table” with more place settings for emerging powers.

Expectations for G20 efficacy are closely tied to this question of managing the diversity and divergence of views within the group. At the CIGI ’11 conference in October 2011, two former world leaders engaged in an illuminating debate between harsh versus patient judgments of G20 performance. Former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo played the part of skeptic, while former Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin gave a sympathetic friend’s perspective.

Zedillo saw a disconnect between the prescriptions and pronouncements of the initial G20 summits and the subsequent feeble follow-through. He expressed frustration particularly over the IMF process to identify the factors causing certain economic powers to be out of balance — that is, with either excessive export or debt levels:

And they said what had to be done. They said in London “we need to empower the IMF to exercise the authority [of] its surveillance capacity.” They launched at Pittsburgh this framework for strong, balanced, and sustainable growth and instructed their ministers to launch this mutual assessment process. But right there at Pittsburgh they killed the process, because they gave the IMF a rather ridiculous subsidiary, secondary role to play in that process. And when you see the story of what has happened after Pittsburgh and you cannot be but terribly disappointed. What is the purpose of getting together, of establishing in a very clear-cut way these commitments and then don’t honour those commitments?

Contrasted with Zedillo’s diagnosis about empowering IMF technocrats to guide G20 leaders down the macroeconomic straight and narrow, Martin saw controversial, politically sensitive issues. He also stressed that divergence over the issues is the strongest argument for the importance of the G20:

This debate that is now going on between austerity (and the need to consolidate) and stimulus is massive. And to sort of say all of a sudden to the G20, “why aren’t you giving strict instructions,” well that’s pretty hard when, in fact, among the major countries there is such a huge difference of opinion — and within those countries there is such a huge difference of opinion...If the Doha Round was working marvelously, and if all these institutions were working well, there would’ve been no need for the G20. The reason that there is a need for the G20 is that the leading economies of the world are no longer compatible, either culturally, historically, or economically. They are very different, and what they have to do is work this out. And that’s why the G20 is absolutely necessary, because I believe they are in the process of working it out.

The dialogue between the former leaders points to a number of basic issues for the G20’s role and effectiveness. To start with, Martin highlighted the deep division regarding austerity versus stimulus, which reflects differences over the G20’s central question of

how to promote economic recovery and, thus, shaped the group's options and actions. And it is the issue, of course, at the very heart of the euro-zone crisis. Second, note that the political alignments for this debate do not coincide with dividing lines for rising and established powers or current account surplus or deficit economies. These various cross-cutting differences are symptomatic of the fluid international politics of the twenty-first century, making the work of the G20 complex yet vital. Third, the interplay between high-level political players and technical experts — and similarly between the different levels of the policy questions themselves — is an important part of the G20 picture.

PROPOSED FILTERS FOR ISSUES ON THE G20 AGENDA

If the G20's overall image is undermined by some observers' simplistic judgments of failure, the impulse to cry "distraction" similarly muddies the debate over the group's substantive agenda. Ostensibly, this is a debate about the kinds of subjects that are a proper focus for deliberation in the G20. Yet it has skirted underlying questions on the discipline of maintaining focus.

To begin with, the standard injunction about "staying in one's lane" seems less applicable to a loosely structured diplomatic process led by world leaders than, say, a standing committee or "blue ribbon" panel. The main assumption regarding a tightly focused agenda also begs closer examination. Proponents of narrow focus allege a trade-off between the attention devoted to the core G20 agenda (global economic growth and financial stability) versus ancillary matters, such as infrastructure investment or combatting corruption. In other words, the pace of progress on core issues is portrayed as being a function of focus.

Followed to its logical conclusion, the contention is that the G20's sponsorship of a few working groups on anticorruption, development or climate change financing is responsible for major shortfalls such as: the fragile economic recovery; the threat posed by sovereign debt on the euro zone's periphery; reducing certain economies' overdependence on exports or leverage; governance reform of the IMF and World Bank; imposition of tougher capital requirements for banks; and regulation of derivatives markets. Do we really think that expert-level discussions of financing for infrastructure or commodity-price volatility kept the G20 from doing more in the priority areas? For all the hand-wringing over the Doha Round of trade talks, those negotiations had bogged down long before the G20 summit forum

even existed. Arguably, G20 leaders performed a service when they finally acknowledged the problem rather than keep issuing dubious injunctions for negotiators to reach agreement.

If letting the G20 agenda become cluttered has indeed kept it from acting more aggressively on behalf of growth, this would be a compelling argument for laser-like focus. On the other hand, the political, structural and technical difficulties that are involved may dictate that progress will necessarily be incremental. In the latter case, G20 consultations probably have sufficient bandwidth to deal with a wider variety of issues.

None of this argues against prioritization of core issues or for unchecked agenda creep. At either extreme lies the danger of the G20 merely spinning its wheels on an over-narrow portfolio or becoming too thinly spread across a wide-ranging agenda. To strike the right balance, the G20 should hew to a practical discipline rather than a rigid one. For instance, a few general filters for the subjects appropriate for the G20 can be identified, criteria that match the group's role in the broader multilateral system:

- **Governance gap:** The topic should be properly recognized as a vexing problem, given the wastefulness of linking a high-level, high-profile process to issues that are proceeding on their own momentum.
- **Global implications:** There are major implications for both advanced and emerging economies.
- **Need for high-level attention:** There are limited prospects for progress, or even the possibility of regression, without impetus and attention from senior political levels.
- **Complementarity:** The item is likely to reinforce the proper role of, rather than detract from, other international organizations.²
- **Clarity:** The G20 role is clear and well conceived; the forum will contribute toward the progress needed for the given issue area, thereby enhancing the credibility of the G20 and its leaders.
- **Proportionate scale:** The topic does not require protracted negotiation or follow-through that is disproportionate to its relative priority (vis-à-vis core G20 mandates) or the limited capacity of a loosely structured consultative process.

² This idea is taken from Amar Bhattacharya's presentation at the CIGI '11 conference.

A great deal of time and attention goes into the G20 process, from the officials who conduct the consultations to the journalists who cover them. The inevitable question is whether the effort has been well spent and yielded commensurate results. Therefore the best way to judge the suitability of an issue for the G20 agenda is to estimate the opportunity cost of senior officials' involvement in the issue — gauged realistically — compared to the forward movement that would be achieved via this political/policy leverage. The essence of the discipline is for proponents of an agenda item to specify the form of progress that is sought as well as the prospects for the G20 to attain it. Such “cost-benefit analysis” (or theory of change) can be applied to items already on the G20 agenda and not just proposed additions. Above all, this is the way for officials and commentators alike to foster realism about the widely varying forms of multilateral cooperation needed to deal with the various problems on the docket.

The proper response to the threat of agenda creep is careful agenda management. On closer examination, much of the creep has taken place within certain issue areas, as opposed to the expansion of the agenda as a whole. For some items, the impulse to take a comprehensive approach that deals with all facets of the problem has only made it harder to prioritize and exert leverage. In that vein, the authors see glaring needs for prioritization within two segments of the G20 agenda: development and energy/climate change. To put it bluntly, the Development Working Group's diffuse agenda has hampered its ability to contribute. The group has delved into many worthy issues but has not honed in on the challenges that really merit high-level attention. For greater effectiveness, it must separate the topics that have pulled it down into the weeds (financial inclusion) from those with potential for more significant action (food security and commodity-price volatility).

The energy and climate agenda confronts a different problem; rather than needing to prune an overabundant set of topics, it needs to achieve greater traction on its items. The energy issue that has been on the G20's agenda for the longest is its commitment to a phase-out of all fossil fuel subsidies. Winding down such subsidies would not only help reduce emissions, but offers economic benefits as well, yet progress thus far has been quite meagre. There might also be good potential in another sphere in which the International Energy Agency has been active: boosting motor vehicle fuel economy. Meanwhile, the G20 recently established a working group on climate change financing — a very difficult subject at the centre of the United Nations (UN) climate talks since the 2009 Copenhagen conference. But whatever emerges as the most fruitful focus for this agenda, there

are signs it is viewed as exempt from the general push to be the G20 back-to-basics. Unlike other ancillary topics, sustainability and green growth were highlighted in the Russian concept papers for its G20 chairmanship.

Given the G20's main function of providing injections of political impetus for policy problems, all agenda items should represent efforts to make advances that would not happen otherwise. A broad failure to recognize the varied scale of these efforts — from macroeconomic rebalancing to, say, transparency of grain stocks — has made it harder for the G20 to gain credit for the valuable role it can play. The G20 should also find ways to keep issues from becoming permanent agenda items on the basis of inertia. It is essential to wind down or hand off efforts on an issue at an appropriate stopping point. Those who advocate for a full and wide-ranging G20 agenda, especially, should support such sunset provisions.

WHAT DOES THE G20 DO? WHAT ARE THE TOOLS IN ITS TOOLBOX?

To judge whether the G20 is achieving anything of significance, it is useful to analyze the different forms of action G20 leaders take. Ultimately, any multilateral process proves its value by contributing to progress on the issues and challenges on the global agenda. As a practical matter, then, the crucial piece is the policy lever through which progress is achieved. In other words, an issue's “needs” depend on the nature of the real-world problem itself, as well as the multilateral efforts that have been undertaken thus far. For some issues, the norms, terms and processes are well established and defined, while others are still in a stage where governments must figure out how they will be handled.

The best way to categorize the different modes of action in which the G20 operates is in relation to the issues on the agenda and what sorts of policy steps are needed to push them forward. The taxonomy should also reflect the group's hands-on relationship to core priority projects such as the Mutual Assessment Process (MAP), Financial Stability Board (FSB) and IFI governance reform. So then, what tools are in the G20 toolbox? The myriad types of outcomes that emerge from the G20 process are best grouped into six categories:

- Statements for the record — expressing a common commitment, assessment or conceptual/normative framework.

- Commitment to mobilize resources in international financial institutions — especially to deal with economic crises or threats to the global economy.
- Signature G20 initiatives — projects with which the group is most closely connected and, thus, most responsible for.
- Pledges to put domestic affairs in order.
- Preparing the ground — knowledge building, and information generation and dissemination, particularly by commissioning studies for future deliberation.
- Facilitating progress — focusing attention to help spur progress on issues whose ripeness presents opportunities.

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD

While commentators often scoff at the utterances of summit communiqués — judging them as not constituting genuine governmental action — some of the expressions of consensus issued at G20 summits carry real substantive significance. These collective declaratory stances express the G20 governments' broadly shared policy commitments, assessments of challenges at hand or overarching frameworks.

Most notable in the category of collective commitment is the G20 protectionist measure standstill, a pledge to refrain from trade restrictions. The initial commitment to a standstill, for one year, was made at the first G20 summit in 2009. It has been reaffirmed at subsequent meetings, with a decision most recently at Los Cabos to extend its duration to the end of 2014. To be sure, the standstill agreement has hardly banished protectionism; G20 governments have clearly violated the commitment — a fact acknowledged in a pledge at Los Cabos to “roll back any new protectionist measure that may have arisen.” Evaluating the effectiveness of the standstill agreement requires consideration of the counterfactual. What would have happened without the standstill commitment? As with the broader global economy, parallels with the Great Depression put the issue in a different light. Compared with the rampant beggar thy neighbour-ism of the 1930s, G20 nations have shown notable restraint.

The November 2011 Cannes summit issued a noteworthy statement on global trade negotiations, in that case expressing a (decidedly downbeat) shared assessment. In the communiqués for previous meetings, G20 leaders offered hortatory calls to reach an agreement in the Doha Round of trade talks. By late 2011, however, there was

all too stark a disconnect between those vague directives and the deadlocks that had bogged down the talks for many years. For the G20 to keep repeating them would only erode the group's credibility. In response, the leaders acknowledged the need for either a dramatically different approach within the Doha Round or a decisive shift to a reformulated multilateral trade agenda.

The so-called Seoul Consensus spotlighted at the November 2010 summit can, from a certain vantage, also be taken as a statement for the record. As a road map for G20 involvement in development issues, the Seoul Consensus has shortcomings and has led to the problems noted above. In the judgment of the present authors, it does not give G20 leaders a clear sense of priorities or leverage over the problem. Some analysts and officials, though, consider the Seoul Consensus quite valuable in shifting the overall paradigm to growth-led development.³ One interesting test of its impact will be to compare it with the forthcoming successor to the Millennium Development Goals.

SUFFICIENT RESOURCES FOR THE IFIS

The G20's signal achievement was to mobilize resources and reassure rattled financial markets in the heat of the 2008-2009 meltdown. At the April 2009 London summit, G20 leaders collaborated on marshalling increased resources for the IMF, more flexible New Arrangements to Borrow, consideration of market borrowing by the IMF and a doubling of the Fund's concessional lending capacity for low-income countries. They also initiated a general allocation of Special Drawing Rights equivalent to \$250 billion to increase global liquidity.

With the protracted euro-zone crisis posing the gravest recent threat to the global recovery, the G20 returned to its resource-mobilization role. At Los Cabos, major emerging economies committed to provide \$65 billion to beef up the IMF's emergency fund and build a bigger bulwark against escalation of the euro zone's problems.

SIGNATURE INITIATIVES

This paper has offered a conception of the G20 as an outlet for high-level officials, unencumbered by the usual fixed multilateral structures, to generate and deploy political will. To judge the body on its own terms, we have to account for the way it tailors its efforts to fit the needs of diverse problems and issues — many of them falling within the purview of other multilateral forums. Still, the G20 has clear authorship responsibility for a few

³ The Kharas and Lombardi article (2011) offers an excellent discussion of this norm- and paradigm-setting process.

key global economic governance projects. When it comes to the FSB, the MAP and changes to the governance of the Bretton Woods Institutions, the G20's job entails more typical tasks of multilateral mechanics, innovation and reform. In 2009, for instance, the G20 upgraded the existing Financial Stability Forum into the FSB, enhancing its capacity to drive the process of regulatory reform. Its focus has been on tightening capital requirements for banks (together with the Basel Committee) and drawing up special provisions for the largest banks ("systemically important financial institutions," or SIFIs). Among its items of unfinished business, the FSB consistently highlights derivatives market regulation as one of the most urgent.

The Framework for Strong, Sustainable, and Balanced Growth, unveiled at the Pittsburgh summit, launched the G20's most ambitious project. Looking beyond the challenges of recovery from the Great Recession, the world's economic powers turned their attention to underlying conditions that could build to become a source of instability: the imbalances between export- and consumption-oriented economies. This agenda represented a new frontier in international economic cooperation; not only was there no relevant mechanism, but China had for years resisted any discussion of the issue. As devised by the G20 and the IMF, the MAP now requires all participants to subject their domestic economic performance and policy to the scrutiny of the group, with the aim of highlighting how they may be hindering a strong global economy and, conversely, where opportunities exist to reap greater gains. At Los Cabos, the G20's Growth and Jobs Action Plan called for China to slow its accumulation of hard currency reserves and move toward market determination of exchange rates, Brazil and major oil exporters to boost investment, Turkey to raise its savings rate, and Korea, Germany and Japan to liberalize services.

IFI governance reform is the third core mandate of the G20, along with aggregate global growth, and financial stability. Beyond its practical significance for contributions to the IMF and the Fund's decision making, governance reform is an important test for the integration of rising powers as stakeholders — in this case, literally — in the multilateral system. The emerging economies are underrepresented in the current IFI governance structure. Agreement was reached in 2010 on reforms that were seen as merely an initial round, yet these have not been implemented pending ratification of key countries, including the United States. This has put the process far behind, since it is meant to have proceeded with further reforms by now. Despite the admittedly slow pace of IFI reform, it is difficult to imagine any progress without G20 prodding.

PUTTING DOMESTIC AFFAIRS IN ORDER

Eliciting national governments' commitments to get their own macroeconomic houses in order is an essential operating mode for the G20's stewardship of the global economy. Aside from the steps to rectify current account imbalances as part of global rebalancing, the G20 has identified specific needs for structural adjustment and policy shifts in the areas of labour markets, social safety nets, the housing sector (with the United States singled out), work incentives through tax and benefit reforms, unilateral tariff elimination, investment bottlenecks and green growth.

The G20 has also evinced collective commitments, prodding governments to comply with a single standard — most notably budget-deficit reduction and the phase-out of subsidies for fossil fuels. Of course, there have been problems with both of these efforts. As mentioned above, most economists view the fiscal consolidation mandated by the 2010 Toronto summit as wrong-headed in the current weak recovery, likely even to prompt renewed recession. Just prior to Toronto, President Obama sent his counterparts a letter urging against a premature withdrawal of fiscal stimulus; he was outvoted.

PREPARING THE GROUND

For some issues, the G20 is engaged in early stage agenda setting. This mode of operation is mainly diagnostic: defining a problem and identifying potential points of leverage before working to solve it. Often this is done by commissioning studies and reports. At the Seoul summit, for instance, G20 leaders set up a High-Level Panel on Infrastructure Investment to prepare recommendations for their consideration. The G20 has used the method of requesting one leader to prepare a report on contentious questions. To prepare for Cannes, the G20 asked UK Prime Minister David Cameron to report on broad challenges of global governance, with proposals for improving the G20 and multilateral system more generally.

The newer Climate Change Financing Working Group is also working in this mode: examining the options, frameworks and potential mechanisms to fulfill the ambitious resource commitments made at the 2009 Copenhagen meeting of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. As mentioned above, there are G20 agenda items that should be counted as preparatory efforts even though they are usually portrayed as full-scale commitments.

FACILITATING PROGRESS

Even if the Russian and Australian chairs of the G20 hold firm on a return to basics, they will likely preserve the existing working groups on non-core agenda items such as development, anticorruption or climate financing — a tacit admission that such working-level groups make minimal demands of the top officials. And adoption of disciplined agenda management that is less draconian, as recommended in this paper, would open room for issues tangential to the core G20 mandate.

Provided that a topic comes with a clear theory of change showing the opportunity for meaningful progress, the G20 should continue leaving space on its agenda to work opportunistically. As a category, these matters lie at the periphery of the G20's purview — compared with, say, financial regulation — but political impetus from the G20 can be highly useful for issues that are dealt with elsewhere in the multilateral system. The group's work on anticorruption is a prime example of how it can lend a hand. For all the anxiety about a supposed G20 usurpation of the United Nations, a main focus of the G20 anticorruption working group has been to push for ratification of the UN Convention Against Corruption. Most important, though, this effort has had great clarity regarding the levers being used and has dealt with politically salient (not merely technical issues) questions worthy of a push from the top. It has also been kept in reasonable proportion, offering meaningful progress for a modicum of time and energy.

REVITALIZING THE G20

With almost four years of experience with the G20, how have our expectations evolved? What have we learned about the challenge of appealing to shared interests among rising and established powers, or inducing governments to take difficult steps? Certainly, that healthy doses of patience and persistence are required. Also that it can be all too easy to lose track of progress that has indeed been achieved, or political controversies underlying issues that have deadlocked — which can hardly be blamed on “the G20” as some sort of monolith.

A classic infusion of fiscal and monetary stimulus was central to the G20's triumphal response to the 2008-2009 meltdown, yet its wind-down was hotly contested. Premature austerity appears to have hampered the economic recovery, and euro-zone authorities have taken an apparently pro-cyclical stance in resisting use of the European Central Bank as a lender of last resort. These disputes lie at the heart of the G20 mandate for a strong

global economy, but again, should they be laid at the group's feet collectively?

While the legitimacy of the G20, with its exclusive membership, is not as controversial among the G173 (non-G20 countries) as it was, the question has not been settled. The multilateral forum built for greater inclusiveness still confronts complaints of exclusivity. Yet, in any substantive international negotiation, decisions are never arrived at in full plenary session. Realistically, there is always an inner group — in essence an executive committee — that seeks to find common ground and positive sum solutions. Even in organizations where all members are equal, some members are more equal than others. In the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, there was the Green Room, later the invisible committee. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's committees have “bureaus.” In every negotiation, so-called friends of the chair step forward and try to fashion workable compromise.

Still, membership of the G20 is not ideal in terms of comprising the world's actual largest economies or geographic representation. The invited guests from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Organization of African Unity and the New Partnership for Africa's Development offer an interim solution, but ultimately there should be a process for refreshing the makeup of the G20 to preserve legitimacy. We have all seen the consequences of failure to do so in the UN Security Council. Additionally, whatever the membership of the group, there tends to be more people in the room for G20 deliberations than need be.

Most of all, the recent debate over the G20 cries out for greater clarity and understanding of how the body functions and precisely what it has to offer. The group can surely do better at contributing toward progress on the world's urgent challenges, but the critique emphasizing distraction from its main business is neither a correct diagnosis nor a basis for constructive reform. The real key to effectiveness, whether an issue is central or peripheral to the G20 mandate, is to focus all effort on the avenues that best rectify the given problem.

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