



POLICY BRIEF
**REINVIGORATING
MULTILATERAL COOPERATION
DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS:
THE ROLE OF THE G20**



Task Force 5
**THE FUTURE OF MULTILATERALISM AND
GLOBAL GOVERNANCE**

Authors

DENNIS GÖRLICH, JULIANE STEIN-ZALAI

موجز السياسة إعادة تنشيط التعاون متعدد الأطراف أثناء أزمة كوفيد-١٩: دور مجموعة العشرين

فريق العمل الخامس
مستقبل التعددية والحوكمة العالمية



المؤلفون
دينيس جورليش، جوليان شتاين زالاي



ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear how important multilateral cooperation is in overcoming global challenges, such as this global health crisis. The COVID-19 crisis and its socioeconomic impact are likely to reinforce previous tendencies toward nationalism, protectionism, and increasing inequality, which make fruitful international cooperation even more difficult. The Group of 20 (G20) can prevent this by lending political support to existing multilateral actors and agreements, particularly to the World Health Organization and Sustainable Development Goals. It can set norms with regard to health as a global public good and initiate a task force to evaluate and improve the International Health Regulations.

أوضحت جائحة كوفيد-19 مدى أهمية التعاون متعدد الأطراف في التغلب على التحديات العالمية كهذه الأزمة الصحية العالمية. ويبدو أن أزمة كوفيد-19- وأثرها الاجتماعي-الاقتصادي تعزز ميولاً سابقة نحو الوطنية والحمائية وتزايد عدم المساواة، وهو ما يجعل التعاون الدولي المثمر أكثر صعوبة. ويمكن أن تمنع مجموعة العشرين ذلك من خلال توفير الدعم السياسي للأطراف المتعددة الحالية من فاعلين واتفاقيات، وبالأخص دعم منظمة الصحة العالمية وأهداف التنمية المستدامة. ويمكنها وضع معايير في ما يتعلق بالصحة بصفاتها منفعة عامة عالمية، وإنشاء فريق عمل لتقييم اللوائح الصحية العالمية وتحسينها.



CHALLENGE

The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear that our world is so interconnected that we can only overcome this crisis through effective international cooperation. The key elements of an effective multilateral strategy to counter the COVID-19 crisis are knowledge and information sharing; the development and provision of medical equipment, diagnostic tools, vaccines, and treatments; and solidarity with all countries worldwide to enable them to mitigate the economic and social consequences of the crisis. Once countries have gone through the emergency phase of the pandemic, they will need to manage the recovery of their economies and societies. They must shape a new world that is better prepared for future pandemics—without losing sight of the many other urgent global challenges, such as climate change, extreme poverty, migration, and inequalities of opportunity, that have been overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Just like the virus, these problems cross borders and therefore cannot be solved by nation states alone but require intergovernmental negotiation, functional multilateral institutions, and collective action.

Multilateral cooperation, however, has been facing serious headwinds since before the COVID-19 crisis (see Pisani-Ferry 2018; Gowan and Dworkin 2019), and there are several indications that the pandemic will make multilateral cooperation even more difficult. The my-country-first rhetoric is gaining ground as leaders seek to identify a culprit for the pandemic. Trade-distorting measures, like export restrictions or subsidies, are likely to increase. They are partly an (ill-directed) move to secure the livelihoods of domestic constituencies and partly a reaction to the external effects of the large-scale support policies that governments everywhere are implementing (Bown 2020). Climate change mitigation policies and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are at risk of becoming neglected as governments are trying to rebuild their economies and are primarily concerned with minimizing the socioeconomic fallout of the COVID-19 crisis (see Pisani-Ferry 2020). Furthermore, the United States has recently initiated its formal withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO), which is the central multilateral player in the fight against COVID-19. This demonstrates how the COVID-19 crisis “highlights (...) the way in which multilateral institutions have become battlegrounds” (Dworkin 2020) and how the rivalry between the U.S. and China has begun “to structure international relations” (Rudolf 2020, 9).

This policy brief addresses the question of how multilateral cooperation can be reinvigorated during the COVID-19 crisis, and focuses on the role of the G20 in particular. The following policy recommendations are based on a review of the key characteristics, past achievements, and important modes of action of the G20 process. They show how the G20 can respond to the COVID-19 crisis to strengthen international cooperation.



PROPOSAL

According to several experts, the G20 is best placed to take a leading role in enabling a global response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic, social, and environmental consequences (see, e.g., Brown et al. 2020, Obstfeld and Posen 2020, and Subacchi 2020). Because of the G20's global economic and political relevance, it has the potential to contribute to effective multilateral responses. The G20 accounts for more than 80% of global Gross Domestic Product and has evolved into “a crucial hub for global governance networks” (Luckhurst 2016, 162). Therefore, it is widely recognized as playing an important role within the global governance system (see, e.g., Cooper 2019, 506; Slaughter 2019, 13; and Litman 2017, 21). Furthermore, with timely and concrete policy actions in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007 to 2008, the G20 has gained widespread reputation as an effective crisis management committee.

1. Defining the characteristics of the G20 process

When thinking about possible fields of action and concrete measures for the G20 to take in addressing the COVID-19 crisis, it is crucial to consider the two key features of the G20 process. First, the G20, as a global forum, involves a considerable multi-level “network of policy-making activity” (Slaughter 2020, 6) that brings together policy-makers and technical experts from the G20 countries and international organizations. The G20 facilitates regular fora at different levels, such as thematic working groups, ministerial conferences, meetings of Sherpas and finance deputies, and the leaders' summit. The G20's working structure enables member countries and their representatives to build trust and collaborative working relationships as well as share information and experience, which are much needed in international cooperation in general, and in global crises in particular.

Second, the G20's scope of action is closely linked to the group's informality. The G20 has no steady secretariat or dedicated budget; it is not based on any treaty or constitution. While the G20's informal nature results in a strong dependency on the political will and consensus of the G20 members, it also lends a considerable amount of flexibility to the G20 process. The rotating G20 presidency, for example, has a lot of leeway to define its agenda, procedures, and instruments, which makes it possible to create interconnections between issues, policies, institutions, and communities.

2. G20 fields of action in the COVID-19 crisis and beyond

A look at the past 12 years of the G20's existence and the modes of action through which the G20 operates shows how the G20 can contribute to solving global challenges in general and to containing the current COVID-19 crisis in particular.

2.1 The G20 as supplier of top-level political impetus

Both the ministerial declarations and the leaders' communiqués are potentially powerful instruments for providing political support for the emergence and persistence of global agreements, the work and reform of international institutions, and the prioritization of certain policy problems. The rapid agreement on the Basel III framework to increase financial market stability (cf., Guerrieri and Lombardi 2010) and the adoption and activation of the Paris climate agreement (cf., Luckhurst 2016, 166; Cooper 2019, 516) illustrate that “political impetus from the G20 can be highly useful for issues that are dealt with elsewhere in the multilateral system” (Carin and Shorr 2013, 11). To increase impact, the lending of political support may be underpinned by the allocation of financial resources. For example, the G20 has repeatedly increased the resources of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) since 2009. This has bolstered the IMF's lending capacity and underscored the IMF's pivotal role in promoting the stability of the International Monetary System (Rahman et al. 2014, 169). Top-level political impetus should also be given in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Recommendation 1: The G20 should better incorporate the WHO in its activities and equip it with substantial financial resources

Global health crises have massive repercussions on almost all other policy areas. Hence, the G20 would benefit from continuously evaluating the risks of such crises. To provide political impetus for global health governance, the G20 should invite the WHO's Director-General to the Leaders' Summit in November 2020, and it should reaffirm its commitment to further strengthen the WHO's mandate in coordinating the international fight against the pandemic. The G20 should also continue to encourage its members to increase the WHO's funding, most importantly by asking them to raise their voluntary financial contributions to the WHO. Furthermore, the G20 should underscore its support for the worldwide implementation of the WHO's International Health Regulations (IHR). The G20 should encourage its members to make concrete commitments regarding the provision of technical and financial assistance to poor countries, enabling them to fully implement the IHR (for further proposals, see recommendation 4 of this policy brief). This will improve pandemic preparedness around the globe. It is clear that the WHO needs substantial reform. Considering the diffi-

culties around the WHO, the G20 should discuss and present reform proposals, for example, by setting up a working group or expert commission.

Recommendation 2: The G20 should step up its efforts in achieving the SDGs

There is a risk that governments will lose sight of the sustainable development agenda when they are focused on rebuilding their economies. To prevent this, the G20 should amplify its support for achieving the SDGs and, through that, also advance global health (e.g., Boutilier et al. 2017). For example, several steps that the G20 could take to supply political impetus in support of the SDGs are outlined in Görlich et al. (2020), for instance, by increasing accountability through systematic SDG reporting in the G20 Mutual Assessment Process—through which policy measures would be reported and benchmarked against the SDGs—or by promoting the alignment of the governing mandates of financial actors with the SDGs, through which SDG considerations are considered in investment decisions.

2.2 The G20 as a norm setter

The G20's capacity to induce shifts in policy norms within the G20 community and its networks is based on the consensus-building activities that occur at various levels of the G20 process. This form of influence has become apparent most notably in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. Examples of the G20 wielding influence on norms range across several domains, for instance, the departure from the one-size-fits-all solutions of the Washington consensus, or the promotion of paradigms, such as macroprudential financial regulation and sustainable development. The G20 has also stimulated policy debates on the importance of sustainable and inclusive economic growth (see Luckhurst 2016, 165; and Luckhurst 2019, 104–105). By agreeing to a standstill on protectionist measures during the global financial crisis, G20 leaders also set a norm for national reactions to the economic downturn, which has notably reduced protectionism, as several authors argue (e.g., Carin and Shorr 2013, 9 and Narlikar 2014, 63–64; for an opposing opinion, see Kirchner 2016, 491–492). In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the G20's norm-setting capacity is central to guiding countries' policy approaches. It can guide countries in building more resilient economies and societies that aim at reconciling economic, ecologic, and social needs; it can also guide countries in reforming their health systems so that they are better prepared for future pandemics. This leads to the following policy recommendation:

Recommendation 3: The G20 needs to increase the world community's awareness of health as a global issue

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the spread of infectious diseases can pose significant security risks to both global health and the global economy. Even if global health is not reduced to security aspects only, the interests of the world's major economies should be realigned around global infectious disease control because this offers a promising pathway through the gridlock within the global health regime (Brown and Held 2017). This strategy can also give a significant boost to establishing health as a priority in the G20 agenda. Apart from highlighting the need to advance emergency preparedness and response capabilities worldwide, the G20 should continue highlighting the importance of universal health coverage (UHC). Ensuring that all people receive the health services they need without suffering financial hardship would enable everyone to receive proper diagnosis and treatment for COVID-19. This would provide the basis for a strong health system that could respond effectively to health crises (Kickbusch and Gitahi 2020). To enhance the understanding of health as an important global issue, the G20 should emphasize the nexus between health governance and other policy areas. Organizing joint ministerial meetings, for example, for health and finance, as under Japan's 2019 G20 Presidency, or for health and employment, health and trade, or health and digitalization, seems to be a promising instrument for increasing the relevance of health policy within the G20 process.

2.3 The G20 as policy initiator

Even though the G20 process itself cannot implement policies, it has started several important policy initiatives in the past. These initiatives will either have to be implemented by member countries—for example, fiscal stimulus packages and the “25 by 25” goal to improve gender equity—or the G20 assigns them to international institutions, such as the “base erosion and profit shifting” (BEPS) initiative to combat tax avoidance by multinational corporations or the drafting of G20 AI principles, both of which are headed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This “delegative quality” (Cooper and Pouliot 2015, 343) has significantly enhanced the role of, for instance, the IMF and the OECD in global economic governance (Bradlow 2015, 146; and Rewizorski 2017, 39–40). To improve the world's emergency preparedness and response capabilities, the G20 should act as policy initiator in the following way.

Recommendation 4: The G20 should launch a task force to evaluate the effectiveness of the IHR and improve worldwide implementation of the IHR

The COVID-19 crisis has also put the IHR, the major legal instrument governing national responses to international public health emergencies, to the test. The G20 should launch a task force to evaluate the effectiveness of the IHR in the aftermath of the COVID crisis, identify the weaknesses of the IHR and propose concrete amendments to address them. The task force should also assess and improve the worldwide implementation of the IHR. For this purpose, the G20 members may invite an independent international expert committee, whose work would both build on and complement the IHR Monitoring and Evaluation Framework along with the evaluation of the WHO-coordinated international health response to COVID-19, which the World Health Assembly has requested from the WHO in Resolution 73.1 on COVID-19. As a follow-up to this endeavor, the G20 should mandate the Health Working Group to set up and oversee a voluntary peer learning mechanism on the implementation of the IHR. This will improve knowledge sharing and mutual learning within the G20 and thereby strengthen future cooperation in infectious disease control. To ensure that the G20 continues to actively support the implementation of the IHR—even beyond the G20—particularly by providing technical and financial assistance to the poorest countries, the Development Working Group should be involved in this process. With this policy initiative, the G20 would contribute to improving an important multilateral instrument in health crisis management.

3. Conclusion

Categorizing the G20's most important modes of action not only demonstrates the general scope of what the G20 can do, but it also provides an idea of how the group can enable multilateral cooperation to support the COVID-19 response in particular. As shown above, there are several opportunities for the G20 to pull its weight and enable effective multilateral cooperation in response to the COVID-19 crisis, particularly in the fields of advancing the WHO's role in global health governance, supporting the implementation of the IHRs and UHC, and achieving progress toward SDGs. In doing so, the G20 members do not "replace global institutions, but (...) galvanise them through a display of political commitment to see these institutions exercise their mandate" (Sidiropoulos 2020). Thus, the group acts as an enabler of international cooperation. The previous analysis shows that the real power of the G20 lies in its capacity to (1) lend political support to international institutions and agreements, (2) set norms by providing shared principles for addressing global policy challenges, and (3) start policy initiatives. The G20 has flexibility in initiating task forces, working groups, and ministerial meetings to shed light on the interconnections between issues. Therefore, it is the right forum to ask how the various global challenges are connected and to push countries to seek complementarities between their policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis and other global challenges. This is exactly what is needed to navigate through the COVID-19 pandemic and to rebuild a livable post-COVID-19 world.

Disclaimer

This policy brief was developed and written by the authors and has undergone a peer review process. The views and opinions expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the authors' organizations or the T20 Secretariat.



REFERENCES

Boutillier, Zoe, Ilona Kickbusch, Ali Mehdi, Sunisha Neupane, Miriam Sangiorgio, Peter Taylor, and Michaela Told. 2017. "SDGs and health. A vision for public policy." T20 Policy Brief. Updated July 18, 2018. Accessed May 12, 2020. https://www.g20-insights.org/policy_briefs/sdgs-health-vision-public-policy.

Bown, Chad P. 2020. "COVID-19 Could Bring Down the Trading System: How to Stop Protectionism from Running Amok." *Foreign Affairs*, April 28, 2020. Accessed April 30, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-28/covid-19-could-bring-down-trading-system>.

Bradlow, Daniel D. 2015. "Lessons from the Frontlines: What I Learned from My Participation in the G20." *Global Summitry* 1 (2): 135–150. <https://doi.org/10.1093/global/guv007>.

Brown, Gordon, Erik Berglöf, and Jeremy Farrar. 2020. "Now or Never for Global Leadership on COVID-19." April 7, 2020. Accessed May 6, 2020. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/global-leadership-covid19-funding-for-developing-countries-by-erik-berglof-et-al-2020-04>.

Brown, Garrett Wallace, and David Held. 2017. "Health: New Leadership for Devastating Challenges." In *Beyond Gridlock*, edited by Thomas Hale and David Held, 162–183. Cambridge, UK, Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Carin, Barry, and David Shorr. 2013. "The G20 as a Lever for Progress." CIGI G20 Papers 7, edited by the Centre for International Governance Innovation, February 12, 2013. Accessed July 12, 2019. <https://www.cigionline.org/publications/g20-lever-progress>.

Cooper, Andrew F. 2019. "The G20 is Dead as a Crisis or Steering Committee: Long Live the G20 as Hybrid Focal Point." *South African Journal of International Affairs* 26 (4): 505–520. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2019.1699855>.

Cooper, Andrew F., and Vincent Pouliot. 2015. "How Much is Global Governance Changing? The G20 as International Practice." *Cooperation and Conflict* 50 (3): 334–350. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836715576007>.

Dworkin, Anthony. 2020. "How to Repair Multilateralism after COVID-19." European Council on Foreign Relations, May 22, 2020. Accessed June 12, 2020. https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_to_repair_multilateralism_after_covid_19.

REFERENCES

Görlich, Dennis, Homi Kharas, Wilfried Rickels, and Sebastian Strauss. 2020. "The Sustainable Development Agenda: Leveraging the G20 to Enhance Accountability and Financing." Last updated April 19, 2020. Accessed May 12, 2020. https://www.g20-insights.org/policy_briefs/sustainable-development-agenda-leveraging-g20-accountability-financing.

Gowan, Richard, and Anthony Dworkin. 2019. "Three Crises and an Opportunity: Europe's Stake in Multilateralism." European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief 299, September 5, 2019. Accessed February, 11, 2020. https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/three_crisis_and_an_opportunity_europes_stake_in_multilateralism.

Guerrieri, Paolo, and Domenico Lombardi. 2010. "U.S. Politics after Seoul: The Reality of International Cooperation." Brookings, November 23, 2010. Accessed May 12, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/u-s-politics-after-seoul-the-reality-of-international-cooperation>.

Kickbusch, Ilona, and Githinji Gitahi. 2020. "COVID-19 (coronavirus): Universal Health Coverage in Times of Crisis." Last updated April 29, 2020. Accessed May 12, 2020. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/health/covid-19-coronavirus-universal-health-coverage-times-crisis>.

Kirchner, Stephen. 2016. "The G20 and Global Governance." *Cato Journal* 36 (3): 485–506. Accessed April 2, 2020. <https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/serials/files/cato-journal/2016/9/cj-v36n3-2.pdf>.

Litman, Gary. 2017. "Is G20-led Multilateralism Reaching Its Limits?" Background Paper. In Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.) (2017). *Salzburger Trilog 2017: 20–31*. Accessed April 6, 2020. https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Faktencheck/Leaders_Dialogues/Salzburger_Trilog_2017/3_Is_G20-led_Multilateralism_Reaching_Its_Limits.pdf.

Luckhurst, Jonathan. 2016. "The G20's Growing Political and Economic Challenges." *Global Summitry* 2 (2): 161–179.

Luckhurst, Jonathan. 2019. "A Constructivist Approach to the G20." In *The G20 and International Relations Theory: Perspectives on Global Summitry*, edited by Steven Slaughter, 95–115. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

REFERENCES

Narlikar, Amrita. 2014. "Unintended Consequences: The G20 and Global Governance." *Caribbean Journal of International Relations & Diplomacy* 2(3): 61–71.

Obstfeld, Maurice, and Adam S. Posen. 2020. "Introduction: The G20 Not Only Should But Can Be Meaningfully Useful to Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic." In *How the G20 Can Hasten Recovery from COVID-19*, edited by Maurice Obstfeld and Adam S. Posen, 3–10. *PIIE Briefing 20-1*, April 2020, Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics. Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.piie.com/publications/piie-briefings/how-g20-can-hasten-recovery-covid-19>.

OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). 2020. "Women at the Core of the Fight Against COVID-19 Crisis." *OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (Covid-19)*. Accessed May 13, 2020. <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/women-at-the-core-of-the-fight-against-covid-19-crisis-553a8269>.

Pisani-Ferry, Jean. 2018. "Should We Give Up on Global Governance?" *Bruegel (Policy Contribution, 17)*, October 23, 2018. Accessed May 6, 2020. <https://www.bruegel.org/2018/10/should-we-give-up-on-global-governance>.

Pisani-Ferry, Jean. 2020. "Building a Post-Pandemic World Will Not Be Easy." *Project Syndicate*, April 30, 2020. Accessed May 12, 2020. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/environmental-and-economic-tradeoffs-in-covid19-recovery-by-jean-pisani-ferry-2020-04>.

Rahman, Jyoti., Ewa Orzechowska-Fischer, and Redom Syed. 2014. "Reforming the International Monetary System: An Institutional Perspective." In *Global Cooperation Among G20 Countries: Responding to the Crisis and Restoring Growth*, edited by Michael C. O'Callaghan, Chetan Ghate, Stephen Pickford, and Francis Xavier Rathinam, 161–177. New Delhi: Springer India.

Rewizorski, Marek. 2017. "G20 and the Development of a New Global Governance Mechanism." *International Organisations Research Journal* 12 (3): 32–52.

Rudolf, Peter. 2020. "The Sino-American World Conflict." In *Strategic Rivalry between United States and China: Causes, Trajectories, and Implications for Europe*. SWP Research Paper 4, April 2020, edited by Barbara Lippert and Volker Perthes, 9–11., Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2020RP04_China_USA.pdf.

REFERENCES

Sidiropoulos, E. 2020. "Are States Ready to Commit to Providing Global Public Goods?" Institut Montaigne, April 10, 2020. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/are-states-ready-commit-providing-global-public-goods>.

Slaughter, Steven. 2019. "Introduction: Theorizing the G20." In *The G20 and International Relations Theory: Perspectives on Global Summitry*, edited by Steven Slaughter, 1-15. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Slaughter, Steven. 2020. *The Power of the G20: The Politics of Legitimacy in Global Governance*. Abingdon, Oxon, New York: Routledge (Global governance).

Subacchi, Paola. 2020. "What the G20 Must Do." Project Syndicate, March 22, 2020. Accessed May 12, 2020. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/g20-covid19-global-response-by-paola-subacchi-2020-03>.



AUTHORS

Dennis Görlich

Kiel Institute for the World Economy

Juliane Stein-Zalai

Kiel Institute for the World Economy

