The G20 and its outreach: new measures of accountability, legitimacy and success

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Introduction

The world economy is changing rapidly. In August 2013, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reported that for the first time in recorded history, the combined gross domestic product of emerging and developing markets, adjusted for purchasing price parity, has eclipsed the combined measure of advanced economies. The global economy is still fragile. The rise of China and the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) is leading international relations scholars to debate whether a new international order is emerging.

The effectiveness/efficiency claims of the G20 have been built on the idea of a small, compact and self-selected membership which can move relatively quickly to make decisions. However, the legitimacy of a global governance actor usually rests on broad claims of representation, or a universal mandate (an example is the United Nations). The solution for the G20 is to keep its current membership, but improve its outreach to a greater number and wider array of state, private sector and civil society actors, and increase accountability measures at the leader level.

The G20 leaders’ summit is a new entity in international relations, only five years old. The G20 itself can be seen as the product of outreach by the Group of 8, facing challenges to its own legitimacy during the global financial crisis. In the last five years the G20 has become an important new global governance actor, dealing with crises, and urging coordination to promote sustainable and balanced growth. But it has faced serious questions about whether or not it is an effective actor, accountable to its own agreements, or even a legitimate entity. This paper seeks to understand and make suggestions for the improvement of what is known as the ‘outreach strategy’ of the G20, and thereby expand our understanding of global governance processes in a time of seismic power shifts.

The aim of my wider research is to seek answers to the following questions:
• Can the G20 be judged as a global governance actor on how it manages its outreach activities? (Should outreach be a factor in how outsiders measure the success of a leaders’ summit? What types of outreach has the G20 conducted since forming in 2008, noting its ‘troika’ format? What does previous outreach tell us about the notions of accountability and legitimacy in the G20? What are the current perceptions of G20 outreach by influential individuals outside the membership, and do these perceptions affect overall judgments of the G20 in terms of success, effectiveness, legitimacy or accountability?)

• Do the ‘systematically significant’ countries (or pivotal or middle powers) of the G20, such as Australia, Mexico, Turkey, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Canada and South Korea, have a strategic advantage when it comes to outreach in comparison to non-G20 countries, and citizens in G20 countries?

• What aspects of the outreach process are most difficult? Which issues on the G20 agenda are most difficult to communicate to non-members, and what are the risks/opportunities of reaching out on these issues? Does better outreach lead to fewer violent protests?

• What does the G20 as a case study tell us about global shifts from club diplomacy to network diplomacy?

Preliminary ideas

As the G20 operates on a ‘troika’ system where the immediate past host, present host and future host work together to ensure continuity, this poses challenges for consistent outreach. The G20 has evolved rapidly, and large sections of the agenda are led by central bank governors and finance officials (whom Anne-Marie Slaughter would call regulators) rather than diplomats. The governance systems of each G20 member are diverse, with more diversity of views about democratic governance principles and the inclusion of civil society.

The G20’s membership is contested – but its importance is not. The G20 economies provide over 84 per cent of the world’s output, 80 per cent of global trade and two-thirds of the world’s population. Serious strategic and coordinated attempts at outreach, even if minimalist in nature, are likely to have impact.

Now is the time to invest in outreach. The Russian presidency had a public outreach strategy, which is now being evaluated. The Australian summit in Brisbane 2014 has the potential to be an excellent comparative case study. Only five years since the first leaders’
meeting, the G20 is suffering a loss of confidence in its ability to successfully promote policy coordination between its members and achieve global economic stability and sustainable balanced growth; to design financial regulation that will prevent the next crisis; and to progress financial architecture reform.

The organisation is constantly being analysed as a global governance actor in terms of effectiveness and legitimacy. Kharas and Lombardi speak of the G20 as a whole having made ‘mixed’ and ‘uneven’ progress, as do other well-placed commentators. Hugo Dobson identifies three key criticisms of the G8 which are now being levelled at the G20: low legitimacy, overlap with the work of other actors, and questionable effectiveness and value for money in terms of progress on its own agenda. Ian Bremmer writes of a ‘G-Zero world’ without clear leadership.

Some see the G20 as ‘a lever for progress’ on many issues facing global leaders, because the correct actors are at the table to break these deadlocks. In this sense, at this historical juncture, the G20 can be seen as a critical platform for the future of global governance, as a forum with deliberately shared membership between emerging and dominant powers which is nimble enough to move quickly. This is not to dismiss the serious legitimacy issues the G20 has regarding membership and outreach, but to see them as intimately linked. The advantages of nimbleness must be clear and well communicated.

Serious analysis of the G20 outreach program – to member countries, to non-G20 countries, to citizens of the G20 members and beyond – is timely and important. The aim of my wider research is to create a methodology to evaluate summits across time and troikas, called the G20 Outreach Index.

This paper identifies the following examples of outreach, using a diplomacy framework.
**First track and 1.5 track diplomacy**

(between state officials)

- In-reach within current G20 architecture – building relations between the troika, finance stream, leaders stream, central bank governors (‘troika diplomacy’).

- Outreach to non-G20 countries, with a special focus on the Global Governance Group (3G) led by Singapore, as well as critics such as Norway.

- Outreach to international organisations, including the United Nations, multilateral development banks and regional actors such as the African Union and Asia–Pacific actors (ASEAN, APEC).

**Track two diplomacy**

(conducted by non-state actors, outcomes communicated to state officials)

- Outreach to organised civil society, domestic and international
  - The formal outreach activities pre-Summit – Business (B20), Think20, Labor20, Youth20, Girls20, Civil20
  - Government consultations with stakeholders

**Public diplomacy**

(from state officials directly to citizens in foreign countries)

- Outreach to general public through international and national and non-traditional media, including gender and demographic analysis
  - G20 citizenry
  - Non-G20 citizenry
  - Protest movements
Controversies

Relationship with civil society

Assessment of the relationship of organised and unorganised civil society to the G20’s processes and decisions has not been attempted before in a systematic manner. Business and labour groups have been seen as policy stakeholders and implementing partners of the G20 to varying degrees, but international NGOs have not had the same level of access, and local civil society actors have generally been ignored. Brisbane will be an excellent opportunity to assess how easy it is for civil society actors to access and participate in G20 processes and discover G20 priorities and outcomes relevant to their lives. Civil society actors are often trusted by citizens as interlocutors, and could be excellent outreach partners, as they have been for the UN around the Millennium Development Goals, for example. Civil society often takes a monitoring role, which improves the accountability of global actors to the citizens they affect.

The role of civil society in modern diplomacy is an emerging area of research, and there is extensive literature about the UN as a comparator. The G20 is not the UN, and its outreach strategy must be fit for its purposes, but it can learn from the experience of other international actors like the World Bank about dealing with civil society as a partner.

Accountability

Analysis of outreach entails a systematic examination of the G20’s multiple accountabilities, and the link between accountabilities, questions of legitimacy, and measures of success. David Skilling has argued that ‘[t]he fundamental problem is that trading off inclusiveness for effectiveness only works if the G20 is in fact effective’. 11

Accountability to the current G20 agenda/promises may be important, as Skilling suggests. Accountability in other senses to the citizens of G20 countries, including women; to non-G20 countries; to regional actors; and to the world’s poorest people may be just as important. G20 outreach to least-developed countries (LDCs) and transnational civil society could improve perceptions of the G20 as well as add a counterpoint to current ‘failure’ narratives about the forum.

The G20 does not communicate well to external actors outside limited economic and finance circles, even when it has significant achievements to communicate. For example, the G20 made progress this year in dealing with corporate tax evasion, but failed to make explicit to developing countries or citizens of G20 countries how the new agenda might benefit them.
The leaders’ summit focused on Syria and the communiqué failed to hold the attention of the international media. The London summit mobilised huge resources to combat the global financial crisis, but most ordinary citizens will only associate the meeting with violent protest.

**Time to hypothesise and test**

Scholars should be systematically examining G20 outreach, and building hypotheses about the impact of improved strategies on the effectiveness and responsiveness of a new global governance actor. The quality and substance of the outreach of each host/troika combination has not yet been analysed in a rigorous manner, in order to design effective strategies. Note that outreach strategies will be different when the G20 is operating in crisis mode as opposed to steering committee mode.

The most successful outreach may be that which is directed at social media, and which combines public diplomacy messages about the host nation with an emphasis on the G20’s comparative advantage as a forum in which political leadership can deal with the human consequences of globalisation. As yet, we have no agreed way to test such a hypothesis. Some relevant questions:

- Most outreach activities have focused on nation branding by the host, rather than selling the G20 as an actor. Would investing in a troika outreach strategy improve the G20 brand, rather than having the host simply promoting their nation brand (or the BRICS)?
- Should foreign ministries assume responsibility for outreach, rather than finance officials? Does it matter which government department is responsible for outreach? Should foreign ministers be more involved?
- Should the G20 focus its invitations on regional representatives who may or may not be able to use the opportunity to the fullest? Alternatively, should it choose invitees based on economic importance or relevance to the chosen summit priorities?
- How much time, money and energy should leaders/Sherpas dedicate to public communication and interaction with the Think20, Business20, Civil20, and so on?
- How transparent should G20 meetings be? Should the G20 invest in one central website, hosted by the IMF, for example?
**Recommendations**

1. The current G20 troika (Russia, Australia, Turkey) should produce a comprehensive outreach strategy, building on the current Russian outreach strategy, to consolidate messages and target engagement around priority issues for Brisbane (for example, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) on climate change, LDCs on corporate tax evasion). This strategy should have a sophisticated e-diplomacy component and focus on leaders. It should be led by foreign ministries. Strategies should be evaluated by external bodies and an Outreach Index created.

2. G20 countries should invest in their citizens’ participation in second track processes such as Think20, Business20, Civil20, Youth20, Labor20, Girls20, and consolidate the status of these groups in policy development, but also task them with dissemination of summit outcomes and general outreach about what the G20 is and does.

3. The G20 should have different outreach strategies for when it is operating in crisis mode to when it is in steering committee mode. When in steering committee mode, the troika should communicate agenda priorities earlier, and with more impact. The troika should use public diplomacy strategies, especially around those issues with wider public appeal and less technical detail, such as the development agenda, jobs and employment, corporate tax evasion and financial stability. In crisis mode, the G20 should focus on messages about how and why it is handling the crisis (for example, Syria discussions in St Petersburg).

**Conclusion**

It is important to analyse the G20 through a political and diplomatic lens as a global governance actor, as a complement to the technical focus on the G20 agenda which dominates most policy papers. As Ramesh Thakur has noted in relation to the UN, the G20 could be both a site of global governance and an actor in its own right. Outreach by the G20 about its achievements, ability to manage crises and sell its ‘coordinated growth’ message to various segments of influence may be critical to the G20’s ability to survive and thrive as the ‘premier forum of international economic cooperation’.
Notes

1. Director of Studies, Asia Pacific College of Diplomacy, Australian National University.
2. David Yanofsky, ‘For the First Time, the Combined GDP of Poor Nations Is Greater Than the Rich Ones,’ Quartz, 28 August 2013 (using IMF data).