Proposals to make the T20 a more impactful, effective, and continuous think tank process

Berger, Axel; Lay, Jann; Narlikar, Amrita; Scholz, Imme; Hornidge, Anna-Katharina; Schmucker, Claudia; Akman, Sait; Martinez, Gustavo; Mildner, Stormy; Ordóñez, Andrea; Sidiropoulos, Elizabeth; Treyer, Sébastien

Proposals to Make the T20 a More Impactful, Effective, and Continuous Think Tank Process

Proposals to make the T20 a more impactful, effective, and continuous think tank process

Submitted by the German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)

Bonn, 26 April 2021

Authors

Axel Berger, Senior Researcher, German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)

Imme Scholz, Deputy Director, DIE

Anna-Katharina Hornidge, Director, DIE

Sait Akman, Director, G20 Studies Centre, The Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV)

Jann Lay, Lead Research Fellow, German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA)

Gustavo Martinez, Managing & International Affairs Director, Consejo Argentino Para Las Relaciones Internacionales (CARI)

Stormy Mildner, Executive Director, Aspen Institute Germany

Amrita Narlikar, President, GIGA

Andrea Ordóñez, Director, Southern Voice

Claudia Schmucker, Head Geo-Economics Program, German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)

Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, Chief Executive, South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA)

Sébastien Treyer, Executive Director, Institut du développement durable et des relations internationals (IDDRI)

Introduction

We welcome the initiative of the Italian T20 chair to establish a task force on reforming the T20. The T20 process has been put on a new footing during the German T20 process in 2017 by establishing issue-specific task forces as the key organisational structure. Task forces have evolved throughout the years, and other elements have been added, such as inviting think tanks from the region of the hosting nation and from Africa, and issuing calls for papers. After 4 years, we believe, it is time to reflect on the T20's achievements as well as areas for improvement. In this concept note, we focus mainly on process-related and structural issues as a prerequisite to advance specific recommendations to the G20 on pressing global challenges. As longstanding participants of the T20, we describe in the following our view on the purpose and current shortcomings of the T20 process and make suggestions on how the process could be reformed to allow the group to realise its full potential to become more impactful, effective and continuous while maintaining the T20's diversity, inclusiveness and dialogue-orientation. In particular, we propose a number of reforms of the governance of the T20.

Purpose and potential of the T20

The main mission of the T20 is to provide policy recommendations to the G20 and the participating governments and stakeholders, based on the research and policy expertise of its members and motivated by the promotion of the common good. For this purpose, the T20 sets its own analytical agenda by constituting thematic task forces and preparing policy recommendations that address actions that are specific to the G20 and its work streams. Its independent work complements the contributions of the international organisations to the G20, which take part in G20 meetings and, at times, are instructed with implementation of G20 commitments. The T20 occasionally puts forward joint initiatives with the other engagement groups of the G20. Furthermore, in our view, the T20 constitutes a unique forum for transnational policy dialogue of researchers and experts from think tanks, research institutes and universities from G20 and non-G20 countries.

In pursuing these functions, we believe the T20 should be oriented towards the following principles:

1. *Connection with the G20 process to increase impact*: To be efficacious in its policy advice, the T20 needs to maintain a close and continuous connection with the official G20 process, its different working groups and with key policy-makers in all G20 countries. This should allow to provide expertise and feed in policy proposals at different stages of the G20 policy cycle and directly approach various agents that are relevant to the process. A close connection with the G20 process is also useful to be informed about the issues that are discussed among policy makers, the schedule of the G20 working process, windows of opportunity for policy recommendations, and so on. In addition to providing policy proposals for the current G20 presidency, the T20 could potentially also engage the incoming presidency to ensure that all global challenges are sufficiently reflected on the agenda. The T20 could also improve its cooperation with international organisations which are important actors of the G20 process.

2. *Independence*: The T20 is an independent and open forum with high credibility, based on its independence from governments and international organisations as well as on its policy advice derived from the high level of expertise represented in each of the participating think tanks. Therefore, the T20 should not be directed by any of the decision-makers at the negotiation table. If governments use the T20 as an additional channel to promote the goals they want to bring forward in the G20, this compromises the nature of the T20 and decreases the credibility of the policy advice that it provides. The T20 also needs to uphold its independence from other actors that pursue narrowly defined self-interests. At the same time, the presence of G20 governments and representatives of international organisations at T20 meetings is important and appreciated for hearing their views and understanding their priorities and engaging in a debate.

3. *Inclusivity and representativeness*: To allow voices from different backgrounds to be heard in the T20, the group should emphasise inclusivity and diversity[1] and be open to all research institutions and think tanks that have the capacity to contribute to the process, also from non-G20 countries,[2] which has grown over the last few years. As far as possible, the T20 should not replicate the power asymmetries between different countries and regions that apply in international fora and enhance the G20's capacity to look beyond itself, in line with its global responsibilities. While the G20 is an exclusive forum, the way in which some of its engagement groups, including the T20, operate enables a much more inclusive engagement on G20 issues by organisations from non-members. Continuous efforts need to be made to achieve an appropriate balance of participants with different backgrounds and tied into diverse networks on global, regional and local scale. Diversity should not be pursued for its own sake, but as an important precondition for developing policy recommendations based on diverse experiences and reaching diverse audiences. For this purpose, the T20 should build on the supporting role of think tank networks that have a special focus on the G20.[3]

There can be tensions between the goals and principles described. For instance, full independence might be hard to achieve when a close connection to the official G20 process should be maintained to increase policy impact. A high degree of inclusivity can make it more difficult to manage the process, can run the risk of adulterating quality, and come to a more limited number of policy proposals that can be effectively fed into the G20 process. It might thus not be possible to *fully* realise all goals and principles described. However, we believe that the T20 has not yet realised its full potential in achieving a satisfactory balance of the above mentioned aims.

---

1   See e.g. CARI/CIPPEC, The Think 20 (T20) process: Good Practices.

2   Previous T20 Chairs have involved think tanks from their geographical regions. Furthermore, the T20 Africa Standing Group represents think tanks from across Africa and G20 countries to focus on cooperation between Africa and the G20.

3   Examples include, among others, the T20 Africa Standing Group, the Global Solutions Initiative and the G20 Trade and Investment Research Network.

The current design of the T20 and its shortcomings

In our view the T20 in the previous years has become a vibrant network that includes an increasing number of think tanks from G20 and non-G20 countries. The diversity of the T20, both in terms of geographic as well as gender balance, has improved. The T20 has also been increasingly prolific by producing an ever larger number of policy briefs. The joint preparation of policy recommendations in the task forces is important to stimulate a lively exchange among the participating think tanks and experts from different countries. However, despite this success, the T20 suffers from three main shortcomings with respect to the described goals and principles:

- The **impact** of T20 policy briefs on the G20 process is often rather limited. Apparently, the mere publication of (a high number of) policy briefs is not sufficient to ensure that the policy recommendations come to the attention of the relevant decision-makers. While many task forces and T20 chairs have made individual efforts to disseminate policy recommendations, there is clearly room for improvement, i.e. by strategically organising dissemination processes to make T20 policy briefs more efficacious with fostering discussions with G20 policy makers involving all levels of seniority from the Sherpa and Finance Track. A closer alignment of the production process of policy briefs with the schedules of the respective G20 working groups or the cultivation of closer ties with policy makers in all G20 countries as well as international organisations are obvious next steps to improve impact. Furthermore, the T20 could enhance its level of public dialogue, which can be boosted via social media, opinion pieces and blogs.

- The T20 lacks continuity because there are no shared principles, statutes or code of conducts for running the T20 and no agreed structures for coordination and learning across presidencies. This is a disadvantage compared to other engagement groups such as B20, L20, S20 or C20. As a result, it becomes difficult to learn from past experiences, increase impact, follow-up on policy recommendations beyond the yearly cycle or pursue projects in the T20 that span several presidencies. Furthermore, the recent use of open calls for papers has the side effect that only those experts are part of the task force in a given year who actually participate in the drafting of a policy brief. Experts how have participated in previous iterations of the T20, acquired expertise on the G20, built networks to policy makers and understand the negotiation dynamics may not be able to participate because their policy brief was not selected or they did not submit one. A broader organisational structure embedding the national T20 chairs could also help to increase effectiveness, ensure diversity, organise outreach and ensure independence from unwanted interference from G20 governments (mis-)using the T20 as a means to advance their agendas and priorities or even trying to influence certain recommendations.

- The strong focus of the T20 process on the production of policy briefs, often under high time pressure, neglects the potential of open dialogue and exchange among researchers within task forces and key T20 preparatory meetings such as the inception conference at the beginning of the yearly G20 cycle. These dialogues and discussions, however, are important to form joint understandings of the global challenges, the specific role of the G20 therein, different local settings and empirically-based policy solutions. Informal spaces for dialogue and discussion are also important for sharing knowledge about the G20, which is the main addressee of the T20's policy recommendations, and to bring

experts up-to-speed on the G20 process, its procedures, working groups and key debates. The T20 typically starts on the official date of the start of the G20 presidencies. This puts a lot of time pressure on the organisers of the T20 process and the experts collaborating in the process of preparing policy recommendations. By aligning the T20 process too closely to the G20 calendar (just with a two-month lead) the T20 misses the opportunity to enable dialogue and build new networks among researchers from different regions and disciplines which sometimes may be as important as the writing of policy briefs. Also, such dialogue and debate is an important basis for framing and formulating policy recommendations from the task forces for the co-chairs and their dialogue with Sherpas, and for the co-chairs of task forces and their dialogue with the chairs of the G20 working groups. Furthermore, the authors of the policy briefs themselves could engage with the delegates from their countries to the working groups to bring forward their analysis and recommendations in a horizontal and transnational manner.

Reform Proposals

To address these shortcomings, we make three proposals to reform the governance structure of the T20 and the working process of the T20 task forces. The T20 can learn from the experiences of other engagement processes that are similarly diverse.

First, the T20 should put a stronger focus on ***improving its policy impact***. There are a number of different ways to achieve this. Increasing policy impact starts with putting a stronger focus on setting the agenda. If there are important issues and global challenges that are not addressed by the G20, it is up to the T20 to insist on the relevance and urgency of these issues. This agenda setting may need to happen early on and often over the course of many presidencies to be effective. Such a strategic focus requires sound governance structures that span the yearly G20 cycle (see below).

Furthermore, in order to improve impact the T20 should focus on advising all G20 governments with a special focus on the current and, equally important, on the incoming presidency. Policy makers from G20 countries, in particular those represented in the respective working groups of the G20, should be engaged early on in the deliberative processes of the T20 task forces to better understand their strategic vision, policy proposals as well as the constraints under which they are working. The T20 has two roles to respond to what policy makers are interested in, or grappling with; and to also present issues that are over the horizon. The latter will by definition not be on the agenda of policy makers, but that's an important part of what think tanks should do. The engagement of T20 task forces with G20 policy makers is also important to enable more effective dissemination of policy proposals. In this respect not only the G20 presidency but also the governments of other G20 countries should be considered as key audiences of the T20 and its task forces. Task force participants should therefore be encouraged to have national level meetings with the relevant policy makers, perhaps facilitated by a national committee or at least an informal coordination structure among national-level think tanks which may also reach out to engagement groups at the domestic level. The T20 chair's engagement with the Sherpa or Finance Deputy of the G20 presidency and other high level decision makers is important, but the engagement of the T20 and its task forces should go beyond this and engage also

mid-level government officials represented in the G20 working groups in order to build longer term working relations with them. This kind of policy engagement may not always be possible in the large T20 conferences, but rather in smaller more intimate discussions of T20 experts and G20 policy makers. Crucially, the T20 needs more focus and it may be advisable to limit the number of policy briefs while still maintaining the desired inclusiveness and the focus on the generation of innovative policy recommendations. Instead of incentivising (e.g. by the open call for papers) the submission of an ever broader range of policy brief proposals often drafted by individual authors or small groups of authors the emphasis should be laid on joint identification of key issues and the elaboration of recommendations in larger and more diverse (both in terms of academic discipline, regions and gender) groups of experts. A way forward, could be to produce only two or three joint policy briefs, addressing a limited number of issues, for each taskforce per year, focusing on a limited number of issues. The authors of the paper should be as diverse as possible. In addition, a few more in-depth background papers could be written in each taskforce which may also form the basis of joint follow-up publications, e.g. in academic journals. But it is recommended that the overall number of papers is reduced. Furthermore, part of such a more focused approach should be the development of an institutional memory of policy recommendations developed in previous years. Some of these policy recommendations may not be relevant or topical to policy makers during a particular presidency, but they may become important at a later stage. For this particular reason, it is important to keep the experts from previous T20 cycles engaged in the task forces.

The impact of T20 policy recommendations relies not only on its substantive quality but also on political legitimacy and in particular the fact that it is not just advanced by an individual expert or by one think tank, but that it is backed by a diverse enough group of think tanks or experts. A way to ensure this is to establish guidelines on the number and diversity of background (e.g. by also taking into account experts from non-G20 countries) of the authors. For a policy recommendation to be impactful, it needs to come out of a continuous task force process, and not out of an open call for papers. A more continuous task force framework ensures that the policy recommendations match the priorities of the G20 presidency and that the policy recommendations are focused on the G20, taking into account their specific characteristics, are empirically based, reflect different views and add value. This process should start well-ahead of the official start of the G20 presidencies which calls for a stronger temporal decoupling of the T20 and G20 processes. Against this background, there is a strong argument to be made in favour of establishing task forces on a more continuous basis rather than setting them up anew each year. The writing of a policy brief should not be the only way to participate in the task force process as this may lead to the loss of many experts and expertise from one year to the next. Moreover, providing more time for the task force process, including the selection of co-chairs, well ahead of the start of the yearly G20 process is also an important prerequisite to ensure that a broad range of think tanks is not just consulted but have a real say in the elaboration of policy recommendations and the drafting of policy briefs.

In addition, it is crucial to better adapt the working process of the task forces to the timeline of the official G20 process. If policy briefs are made available only shortly before the G20 summit, and all at once, when the G20 working groups have already concluded their work (and it's typically the first or second working group meeting that allows for the absorption of new policy recommendations), they will hardly have any impact. In addition, it can make

sense to target incoming presidencies with policy recommendations to engage in the agenda-setting process of the G20.

Last but not the least, better coordination and outreach activities with other engagement groups can be important to advance joint recommendations that are supported by a broad range of societal stakeholders. Joint statements of the G20 engagement groups have proved to be especially effective on policy issues where there is disagreement among G20 countries.

Second, the T20 could ***establish a steering committee*** to ensure and increase inclusivity, independence, policy impact and outreach to the G20 governments and engagement groups. The steering committee supports the T20 co-chairs in their organisation of the working process and ensures institutional learning and promotes continuity across T20 presidencies. Such a steering committee could include the current T20 co-chairs, the T20 co-chairs of the previous and key think tanks of the subsequent presidency (troika system, two seats per country, six in total).[4] In addition, a similar number of representatives of other think tanks could be invited by the current T20 co-chairs based on two major criteria: experience of working at T20/G20 level, and geographic and thematic representation. In addition, it might make sense that members of the steering committee have experience in chairing a T20 task force. In total, membership should be regionally balanced (also including non-G20 think tanks) and reflect a broad range of issue-specific expertise. Think tanks that are part of the troika and those who are invited need to ensure such balance when appointing their representatives to the steering committee. Steering committee members are appointed for three years to ensure a good balance between continuity and renewal. Every year, one third of steering committee members are to be newly appointed.[5]

One of the key functions of the steering committee besides structuring the process (e.g. by deciding on the number or focus of task forces) is to prepare and effectively disseminate a communique that would be based on the key recommendations of the task forces and priority issues that are deemed important by the steering committee in close collaboration with the task forces' co-chairs. While the steering committee would stay in close contact with the Sherpa as well as the Finance Deputy, it would also support and encourage task forces to keep close connections with the G20 work streams to improve impact of policy recommendations. Furthermore, the steering committee would also explore options to collaborate with other engagement groups to promote specific issues (e.g. through joint statements).

---

4   In most years, the incoming T20 chairs are mandated or appointed only shortly before the start of the next G20 presidency. To avoid a situation where the seats of the subsequent T20 Chairs remain vacant, the steering committee should invite the relevant think tanks, i.e. those that have already been active in the T20 process in previous years, to participate informally but with all rights and obligations in the steering committee until the T20 chairs are mandated or appointed.

5   To establish the steering committee on a rotating basis, the current (Italy), second last (Saudi Arabia) and third last (Japan) T20 presidency will appoint two members each respecting the criteria of diversity and expertise. The two members appointed by the current T20 presidency serve for three years, the members appointed by the second last T20 presidency serve for two years and the two members of the third last T20 presidency serve for one year. Starting with the 2022 T20 presidency (Indonesia), the two members appointed by Japan will be replaced by those appointed by Indonesia for three years, and in 2023 the members appointed by Saudi-Arabia will be replaced by those appointed by India and so on.

German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)

Third, the T20 should provide space in the task forces as well as key events such as the inception conference and the T20 summit for actual ***dialogue and discussions***, as well as sufficient space for informal exchange. The T20 conferences should be much more inclusive and exchange-oriented rather than focussing on "celebrities". It could also make sense to have regular (online) task force discussions on relevant issues to deepen the T20 expert network. The above proposed new governance structure may also support a more continuous dialogue process within and among the task forces outside of the peak times of the G20 process to connect interested researchers and keep them engaged in the task forces from one year to the next (even if they are not writing a policy brief each year). This would enable the T20 to fulfill another key function, namely to inform its members of what is happening within the G20. In other words, it should share information not only on its policy advice efforts but also on the state of the G20 negotiations which is an important prerequisite to draft relevant and effective policy recommendations. The support of think tank networks could also be leveraged to enable more dialogue and discussions.