

G20: Participation of Non-State Actors and Prospects for the Brazilian Presidency

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Abstract: This article focuses on the role of non-state actors in the G20 structure, through their participation in the Engagement Groups. It outlines how these groups have evolved and what to expect in 2024, concerning the degree of convergence between their agendas and the priorities of the Brazilian Presidency, and the possible improvement of government-society interaction mechanisms. The article also discusses some challenges to the consolidation and meaningful participation of Engagement Groups in the G20 processes.

Keywords: G20; Brazil; T20; social participation; non-state actors.

As Brazil gets ready to assume the G20 Presidency, a particular focus of attention is the role of non-state actors in the plurilateral group. This article briefly overviews how their participation and agendas have evolved along previous Presidencies and what to expect in 2024. To this end, it outlines the process of creation and expansion of the so-called Engagement Groups, which are the channels for society to express itself within the forum that brings together the twenty largest economies, now joined by the African Union with its 55 member countries.¹

The universe of Engagement Groups covers business, union, academic, scientific, and third sector entities with varied geographic scope and different political orientations, without overly rigid contours. A common trait among these actors is their articulation in transnational networks, such as trade union associations and coalitions of non-governmental organizations. Being such a diverse lot, participants often defend different and even contrasting views and positions. There is considerable variation in their mobilization efforts, which naturally tend to be more intense around themes of direct and specific interest.

The expansion process of Engagement Groups in the G20 was preceded by social participation mechanisms in multilateral organizations, particularly in the UN system. It can be said that the mobilization of society had its turning point at the UN Conferences in the 1990s and early 2000s, from the preparatory work for Rio-92² until the Durban Conference.³

Along this trajectory, citizen involvement gradually advanced from the organization of independent events towards progressive incorporation into official processes. Such incorporation is very much in line with the Brazilian vision following the promulgation of the 1988 Federal Constitution, which highlights the value of social participation, understood as an essential element in public policy making.

In the G20, the mobilization of civil society organizations became evident during the first Summit (Washington, November 2008). It was amplified the fol-

1. Six African Union member countries are currently suspended.

2. United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro, from June 3 to 14, 1992.

3. III World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban, from August 31 to September 8, 2001.

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lowing year in London, with a conference on human rights, development and environment. As in other multilateral forums, governments responded to this movement by gradually structuring interaction with non-state actors. To a large extent, this opening process was due to protests held in 2009 (London and Pittsburgh) and 2010 (Toronto), in a scenario of violent demonstrations and arrests of activists.

In recent years, public demonstrations and protests have diminished considerably. At times, civil society has adopted a more questioning and critical stance, as in the Saudi Presidency in 2020. That year, Amnesty International, CIVICUS and Transparency International released the joint statement “Why we are not engaging with the G20’s civil society process in 2020”, which would be endorsed by around 220 civil society organizations. During the Indonesian and Indian Presidencies—respectively, in 2021 and 2022—the G20 activities took place without any major incidents.

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BUSINESS 20

Among non-state actors, the business sector has a long history of interaction with the official G20, even before the recognition of the B20 as an Engagement Group in Toronto, in 2010. The International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and the World Economic Forum (WEC) consistently participate in its work. B20 can be considered the Engagement Group with the most significant influence on final documents, with its policy papers and reports often listed as official supporting documentation.

Well structured, B20 formulates recommendations on a broad thematic agenda, currently developing its work in eight task forces: trade and investment; employment and education; energy transition and climate; digital transformation; finance and infrastructure; integrity and compliance; sustainable food systems and agriculture; and women, diversity, and inclusion in business.

During the Brazilian Presidency, activities will be under the responsibility of the National Confederation of Industry (CNI, in the Portuguese-language acronym), which coordinates a system formed by 27 industry federations in the Brazilian states and federal district and has participated in the B20 process since 2010. The chosen motto—“Inclusive growth for a sustainable future”—unfolds into five areas that clearly illustrate the ambitious agenda: to promote inclusive growth and combat hunger, poverty, and inequality; to accelerate a fair net zero transition; to increase productivity through innovation; to foster the resilience of global value chains; and to enhance human capital.

YOUTH 20

Also in 2010, the Canadian Presidency formalized Y20. Despite being one of the earliest, this Engagement Group still needs support for its consolidation, depending heavily on official and private funding.

Y20 activities in Brazil are to be led by the National Youth Council, a consultative body responsible for coordination between government and civil society in matters of policies for young people. They will also rely on the support of the National Youth Secretariat, an executive body linked to the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic that coordinates all federal youth-related programs.

The following themes were selected for the five Y20 working groups: combating hunger, poverty, and inequality; climate change, energy transition, and sustainable development; reform of the global governance system; inclusion and diversity; innovation and the future of work. Y20 is planning a meeting on the margins of the Youth Forum of the United Nations Economic and Social Development Council, in April 2024.

Brazilian coordinators have expressed their intention to extend the activities to the entire national territory, considering the importance of regional diversity in a country of continental dimensions. To this end, they have created a federative council, an innovation that might be of interest to the future involvement of subnational entities in the G20 engagement groups.

LABOR 20

L20 congregates trade unions from the G20 countries and international unions. It was made formal in 2011, during the French Presidency, although labor organizations had sought interlocution with the G20 leaders in previous years—already in November 2008, union leaders met with heads of State and government, among whom Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (TUAC-OECD) traditionally participate in the L20 coordination. This Engagement Group has an intense interaction with the G20 official tracks, addressing the Employment Working Group, Sherpa, Labor, and Finance Ministers meetings, and the G20 Summits.

L20's broad agenda comprehends themes such as decent work, minimum wages, collective bargaining, social protection, the care economy, women's labor market participation, the gender pay gap, adverse effects of digitalization on labor markets, just energy transition, and the future of work.

During the Indian Presidency, the Indian Workers' Union (BMS in the Hindi-language acronym), which is not an ITUC member, conducted the official L20 process. As a result, parallel meetings were convened, and ITUC released critical statements deeming the contents of the G20 Leaders' Declaration insufficient in topics such as workers' rights, the role of trade unions, climate action, and just transition.

In 2024, the articulation of Brazilian unions will be done by the ITUC-affiliated Unified Workers' Central (CUT in the Portuguese-language acronym), the country's main trade union central.

THINK 20

T20, the group that brings together think tanks and other research institutions, was an initiative of the Mexican Presidency in 2012.

A distinctive feature of T20 is its multi-thematic nature, since it is not limited to addressing a single interest area or advocating for a specific proposal. For this reason, T20 appears to be one of the Engagement Groups with the greatest potential to promote dialogue and coordination of joint proposals with its counterparts.

This broad thematic scope poses a challenge to national organizing committees. During the Brazilian Presidency, the six task forces will discuss the following themes: combating inequality, hunger, and poverty; sustainable climate action and fair and inclusive energy transition; reform of the international financial structure; trade and investment for sustainable and inclusive development; inclusive digital transformation; and strengthening multilateralism and global governance. Gender and race will be cross-cutting issues, in the understanding that T20 may not have adequately addressed them in previous years.

The national coordinators of T20 in 2024 will be the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA), the Alexandre de Gusmao Foundation (FUNAG), and

the Brazilian Center for International Relations (CEBRI), the first two being public foundations and the third an independent organization. Viewing inclusiveness and representativeness as factors of legitimacy and effectiveness, the committee has added to the T20 structure two “advisory councils”—one national and one international. This is an attempt to broaden the participation of the global think tank community, going beyond the regions that are usually better represented—Europe, North America and, more recently, Asia.

CIVIL 20

C20 gathers civil society organizations in the strict sense. Perhaps the Engagement Group with the most conflictive trajectory, it began its dialogue with the official tracks around 2009 and was formally recognized in 2013, during the Russian Presidency.

Participation in the work of the C20 is open to civil society organizations worldwide, regardless of whether they come from G20 member countries. These organizations can sign up for the working groups they wish to join. However, their meaningful participation depends largely on financial resources available and on the dialogue space each presiding country decides to offer.

Compared to B20 and L20, it is fair to say that the degree of influence of the C20 is still below its potential, in contrast with the G20 official discourse of inclusion and representation. Its impact is particularly limited in matters relating to international financial governance. Some authors (Chodor 2020) argue that the design of the C20 itself aims to manage social conflicts while limiting contestation.

A civil society organization of the host country usually chairs C20. In Brazil, this position will be fulfilled by the Brazilian Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (ABONG), which has taken part in C20 since its early days. A “Sherpa” position is to be occupied by the NGO Gestos. Representatives of both entities have referred to the expectation of international civil society that the process in Brazil might be more inclusive than in the two previous Presidencies, when participation was reportedly very concentrated on national organizations from the host countries.

The coordinators of C20 in Brazil consider that they need to establish bridges with all working groups on the Sherpa and financial tracks, emphasizing global economy and finance themes. Issues of gender and race, sexual orientation, and traditional peoples and communities have also been highlighted.

WOMEN 20

W20 was formalized in 2015, in Türkiye. Its original purpose was to implement the “25x25” commitment to reduce the gender gap in labor force participation by 25% by 2025, adopted at the Brisbane Summit in 2014. It brings together women that are active in civil society, business, and academia. As the participation of delegates takes place on an individual and voluntary level, the issue of funding is particularly relevant to this Engagement Group. Social entrepreneur Ana Fontes, founder of the Woman Entrepreneur Network (RME), has been chosen as delegation leader in Brazil.

The group’s thematic focus is primarily economic: female entrepreneurship, capital and market access, education and training, expansion of the job market for women, including in leadership positions, and the care economy (paid or unpaid). Additional topics of interest are women in STEM careers, combating violence, and climate justice.

In the months leading up to the start of the Brazilian Presidency, national delegates have alluded to ethnic-racial issues as a cross-cutting theme. Their goal is the increased presence of women of color in the W20 discussion spaces, based on the observation that, in previous editions, participation has been predominantly white.

As in Y20, the Brazilian coordination is concerned with the geographic distribution of events. It intends to organize five national dialogues, one in each region of Brazil (South, Southeast, North, Northeast, and Center-West), in addition to the regular W20 conference calendar.

SCIENCE 20

In a line of work that bears a certain similarity to that of T20, S20 seeks to bring research, policy and practice closer together. It was formally created in 2017, during the German Presidency, although, in previous years, several national science academies had already sought to exert joint influence on the G20 in topics such as climate change, water resources, and global health.

Under the coordination of the Brazilian Academy of Sciences (ABC), the five thematic areas will be social justice, inclusion, combating poverty and inequality; artificial intelligence (in the aspects of ethics, privacy, and reliability); bioeconomy; energy transition (renewable energy, social and economic considerations); and health (quality, equity, and access). Food security, gender, and race will be cross-cutting themes.

STARTUP 20

The youngest Engagement Group is StartUp20, which was made official by the Indian Presidency in 2023. Still in the organization phase, its most natural and immediate goal is to become better known. In Brazil, coordination will be under the responsibility of the non-profit Brazilian Association of Startups (ABStartups), which has expressed a commitment to diversity. The Association intends to organize outreach activities in all Brazilian states and to attract players not usually included in the innovation ecosystem.

Assessing the impact of non-state actors on the G20 agenda-setting and policymaking is extremely complex. However, the relevance of the work carried out in the Engagement Groups should not be evaluated solely on the basis of their direct impact on the official documents. Some Engagement Groups are a suitable environment for building knowledge on topics that are not yet mature enough to become recommendations to governments. This is perhaps particularly true in the case of the T20 and S20, whose dynamics are conducive to data exchange and joint research that may lead to scientific consensus and, in due time, to concrete proposals.

The current list of eleven Engagement Groups comprises three more, which are not made up of non-state actors. The first is U20, created in 2017 on the initiative of the mayors of Buenos Aires and Paris. Bringing together municipalities, it can play an important role in several issues of a global nature that require the involvement of sub-national entities. The second is P20, made official in Argentina in 2018, which gathers the parliaments of the G20 members. The third is SAI20, which connects higher audit institutions, formalized in 2022 by the Indonesian Presidency. A twelfth Engagement Group gathering supreme courts might be created during the Brazilian Presidency.

WHAT TO WATCH DURING THE BRAZILIAN PRESIDENCY

The preparatory meetings held in the second half of 2023 indicate, in general, significant convergence between the themes proposed by the national coordinators of the Engagement Groups with the three priorities of the Brazilian Presidency as presented at the New Delhi Summit. Such priorities are social inclusion and the fight against hunger; energy transition and sustainable development in its social, economic, and environmental aspects; and reform of global governance institutions—all three under the “Building a fair world and a sustainable planet” motto.

As seen in the previous paragraphs, these major themes resonate with the work proposals of most Engagement Groups, suggesting a dynamic of collaboration rather than conflict between State and non-state actors during the Brazilian Pres-

idency. The official discourse contributes to the construction of this collaborative logic, as the presidential statement in New Delhi expressly indicated that “Brazil’s Presidency will ensure that engagement groups have the opportunity to report their conclusions and recommendations to government representatives.”

A shared interest of Brazilian organizing committees is to deepen the coordination among Engagement Groups, with the purpose of mutually reinforcing their proposals to the official tracks. Several national coordinators expect this collaborative dynamic to be a differentiator of the Brazilian Presidency. Also anticipated as a distinctive feature of the Brazilian Presidency is the intention to add to the agenda the promotion of racial equality in several aspects, such as combating structural racism, the economic empowerment of the black population, and the unequal impact of climate change on vulnerable groups.

Activities of non-state actors during the Brazilian term will be closely followed by the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic, a body with ministerial status responsible for assisting the President in the government-civil society dialogue. The Secretariat has encouraged interaction between Engagement Groups and has announced a new concept under the “G20 Social” title, which will be further elaborated in the coming months.

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This concept would encompass some Engagement Group activities; joint initiatives of Engagement Groups with the Sherpa and finance tracks, self-organized NGO activities, and a Social Summit immediately preceding the G20 Summit in November.

Besides the themes that are already well established in the Engagement Group agendas, several other topics seek to expand their own space. One of them is ocean conservation and sustainability, which was the object of special meetings during the Indonesian and Indian Presidencies. It might be further explored in the broader context of the United Nations Decade for the Oceans and of Sustainable Development Goal n. 14 of the 2030 Agenda.

On a related topic, water security could merit attention, perhaps within S20—while potentially attracting other stakeholders within T20 and even Y20—given the troubling water scarcity situation in many regions of the globe, its negative impact on sustainable development and on geopolitical stability.

The evolution of issues related to indigenous peoples is also to be observed. Historically, these groups have not been among the most visible stakeholders in the G20 processes. However, this situation might change, given their increased mobilization in Brazil—where a new federal Ministry for Indigenous Peoples was created in early 2023—and their direct involvement with environmental matters and climate justice.

This non-exhaustive list also includes the often-present theme of philanthropy, usually promoted by the Foundations Platform, a network of around 80 organizations which currently focuses on climate change, biodiversity conservation, and just energy transition. There have been no indications on the part of the upcoming Brazilian Presidency in the sense of establishing a new Engagement Group in this area, but nothing prevents the interested players from advancing the philanthropy agenda in collaboration with existing Engagement Groups or under the umbrella of the already announced G20 Social.

OLD AND NEW CHALLENGES

The interplay between governments, civil society, and the private sector in the G20 keeps finding new pathways, in a cooperation-conflict dynamic that is not necessarily mutually exclusive. For the continuous improvement of this interaction, the following aspects warrant attention:

Participation Without Real Influence

The process within the Engagement Groups and in dialogue mechanisms with official tracks must not be perceived as ineffective, that is, as an instrument intended to create an appearance of social participation without its proposals being taken into account by governments or having any actual influence on policy making.

In the months prior to the Brazilian Presidency, national coordinators of the official tracks have reiterated their willingness to increase the interaction with Engagement Groups and to invite them “into the room.” Concerning the financial track, historically seen as closed and little permeable to dialogue with society, government representatives have expressed their intention to inaugurate direct conversations with national and international civil society on topics such as fair taxation;

development financing; external debt; reform of the international financial governance; gender and racial considerations.

As for the Sherpa Track, Engagement Groups are being encouraged to move up the delivery of their recommendations and proposals to coincide with the mid-2024 meeting so that they can be considered in a timely manner for possible use in the leaders' final documents. Rules of procedure for Sherpa-Engagement Group interaction are under elaboration.

Official representatives have also expressed sensitivity to the need for greater interaction between the financial and Sherpa tracks, an aspect seen by non-governmental actors as inadequate in previous Presidencies.

Excessive Predominance of Countries or Groups of Countries in Agenda-Setting and Policy Proposals

Efforts are necessary to avoid disproportionate participation, real or perceived, of organizations and social movements of the country that holds the Presidency. This also applies to countries with a longer record of involvement and more resources to finance the participation of their non-governmental actors, especially when their positions converge with the official agendas that governments wish to advance. The challenge is, therefore, to re-balance the role of non-state actors from the G20 as a whole.

This balance has been a particular point of concern for T20. The national organizing committee is striving to reduce the historic underrepresentation of Latin American think tanks. Since Brazil is the only one of the eight Amazonian countries to be part of the G20, it would be of particular interest to include research centers from the other seven⁴ in the debates and the drafting of policy briefs—provided that the rules of procedure admit the participation of institutions based in non-G20 member countries. The expanded participation of Amazonian think tanks could promote the exchange of ideas and possibly lead to regional coordination with a view to the 30th Conference of the Parties to the Climate Convention, which Brazil will host in the year following the G20 Presidency.

In the context of the recent entry of the African Union in the G20, the T20 national coordinators also seek to attract the equally underrepresented think tanks from that continent. At the end of the Brazilian presidency, it will be necessary to assess the degree of receptivity to these dissemination and mobilization efforts.

4. The other members of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) are Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname, and Venezuela.

Need for Institutional Improvement Given the Rotating Nature of Presidencies

There is frequent criticism from non-state actors regarding the degree of transparency and the need for more consistency in the interaction mechanisms between government and social players. This interaction still depends largely on the disposition of each Presidency, and there may even be setbacks from one rotating Presidency to another. Based on the criterion of rules of procedure that are formal, predictable and public, it is possible to assess that the level of institutionalization in government-society interaction within G20 is still low. There is, therefore, a certain tension between this expectation of greater institutionalization and the desirability of preserving, at least at the current stage of the group's evolution, some space for innovation and flexibility on the part of each rotating Presidency.

Financing of Civil Society Participation

This issue is linked to the challenge of institutionalization, since it affects the regular and effective participation of less financially endowed actors. In this aspect, B20 and L20 seem to be in a more advantageous position than the other Engagement Groups. As a general rule, non-state actors want to participate not only in G20 discussions, but also in G7 and other multilateral conferences, which requires selection and prioritization. The scarcity of resources has repercussions on the underrepresentation of non-state actors from the so-called Global South. Although the hybrid format of meetings made possible by new communication technologies partially alleviates this difficulty, the limitations imposed by remote participation are widely known.

Performance Assessment

Another demand frequently presented by non-state actors is the creation of minimally formal processes for monitoring the implementation of the commitments agreed upon by the governments. Initiatives aimed at independent monitoring of results have already been attempted, such as the G20 Business Scorecard, with a specific focus on business recommendations, which the G20 Business Advisory Group of the International Chamber of Commerce published for some time. Other non-state actors have created their own assessment tools.

There are indeed practical difficulties, such as methodological variation and dependence on self-reporting, and limitations that arise from the G20 governance structure itself, such as the lack of a permanent Secretariat and the Troika-based

model. Nonetheless, the weight of political factors in the G20's accountability cannot be ignored, given that members would not wish to expose performance or measurement shortcomings, whether their own or those of other members. The G20 has recognized, in Summit and lower-level documents, the importance of evaluating results for its accountability and, consequently, its legitimacy, but progress in this area has been, for now, gradual and limited at most.

Consistency Between the G20 Agenda and that of Other Multilateral Forums, Especially in the UN System

It is necessary to avoid the same legitimacy-related criticism directed, for instance, at the G7. This requires communication between the G20 and what has been dubbed the “G173”—that is, the other UN member States, bearing in mind that the decisions and recommendations of the G20, which represents 85% of the world's GDP, 60% of its population and over 75% of global trade, have a profound impact on countries outside the group as well.

Knowledge Management

Non-state actors often point out the need for the G20 memory and the content generated over successive Presidencies to be brought together and become more easily accessible to the public. Reports, communiqués, contact lists, and best practices, systematized and translated into several languages whenever possible, would be a valuable resource for society and subnational entities in the vast and heterogeneous G20 universe, thus contributing to implementation assessment and accountability. A familiar difficulty faced by the academic community and other interested parties has been the temporary nature of several official websites, which negatively impacts transparency.

In the absence of a permanent G20 Secretariat, independent initiatives have been taken to compile the accumulated knowledge. Perhaps the best known of such initiatives is the G20 Information Centre, coordinated at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, which offers, in nine languages, content produced by a global network of researchers and participants. Another useful source of information is the extensive survey carried out by Hajnal (2019), which systematizes official documents, studies, and policy papers produced by think tanks, universities, business, and third sector entities, memoirs by government authorities, theses, dissertations, and dedicated websites that collectively attempt to preserve the history of G20.

Public Safety and Cybersecurity

Finally, as Brazil gears up to host the global society in a rich, yearlong series of activities, it must be mindful of the legitimate concerns of non-state actors about the appropriate preparation, by rotating Presidencies, of security plans for event infrastructures and the physical integrity of their participants. Society also expects the necessary awareness and training of law enforcement agents about cultural differences and issues related to race, gender, and sexual orientation that might surface and lead to miscommunications in public spaces. Still in the security area, governments and all organizations that operate in the digital environment need to be careful in protecting the personal data of activists and other non-state actors.

Based on recent official statements and interactions, civil society, the business sector, and the academic community have justifiable expectations for their participation and influence to take deeper roots in the months ahead. If this scenario proves true, a more democratic, development-centered G20 will be closer to the vision expressed at the 2009 Pittsburgh Summit, when it was designated as the premier forum for international economic cooperation. ■

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