

Think Tanks, Solutions-Brokers in a New Multipolar Order?

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Abstract: The challenge for the G20, given the multitude of issues and diverse interests, is to demonstrate collective leadership on key global economic issues and restore growth and employment. Touted as the “ideas bank” of the G20, the Think20 is entering a new decade with a sense of serving the general interest and a shared need to adapt to changing global governance conditions. Think tanks worldwide can be critical in bridging government and non-state actors, including civil society and scientific groups, across a growingly complex multipolar order needing trusted and accountable multilateral agreements and institutions.

Keywords: G20; Think20; Brazil; India; G20 Sherpas.

THE WORLD IS UPSIDE DOWN

In the fall of 2023, as India hands over the G20 Presidency to Brazil, the forecasts from international financial institutions warn of increased trade fragmentation and the resulting slowdown of economic growth across all regions. This comes as two wars in Ukraine and in Gaza broke out in barely twenty-four months, which could not be prevented by the United Nations (UN), caused hundreds of thousands of casualties and the diversion of huge amounts of funding away from sustainable development and climate finance to ammunition. After the UN Summit on the 2030 Agenda acknowledged that more than 80% of the goals are not on track, on the sides of the General Assembly in New York last September, tension also prevailed in the preparation of the climate COP28 in Dubai, as fossil fuel subsidies have reached record high levels, despite their well-assessed, cumulative detrimental environmental impacts. Even the exemplary “just energy transition partnership” that Indonesia successfully negotiated with the G20 in 2022 faces unexpected delays. In other words, the world really looks “upside down,” and current fragmentations could turn into enduring fractures, also weakening any common ability to shape a new generation of inclusive and sustainable policy frameworks (Chinoy 2023).

Note, however, that we have recently seen positive changes. One of the major examples is the G20 Leaders’ declaration adopted at their Summit in Delhi in September after an epic round of final talks. The G20 India also repositioned the 2030 Agenda as centerpiece complemented by a “green development pact” and endorsed the membership of the African Union in what is often described as a historic move towards the Global South. After weeks of uncertainties and the absence of the President of China at the G20 Delhi Summit, the U.S. Secretary of Treasury, J. Yellen, called upon both China and the U.S. to avoid the so-called “decoupling” and instead support global trade, ahead of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders’ Meeting in San Francisco. Back in 2022, the row of convenings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in Phnom Penh, the G20 Summit in Bali, and the APEC Summit in Bangkok illustrated convincingly the virtue of expanding dialogue amid crisis. Now, in the context of the COP28, Pres-

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idents Biden and Xi promised to work to avoid the U.S.-China conflict and to triple global renewable energy capacity by 2030, as agreed by the G20. Both countries' climate special envoys even announced an agreement to “accelerate the substitution for coal, oil and gas generation,” and initiated a joint working group on “energy transition, circular economy, resources efficiency, low emission cities and deforestation (Le Monde/AFP 2023).”

Most readers of the present paper would agree that expanded dialogue among global leaders helps build globally and mutually beneficial international relations and political and economic systems. Based on history and its authors' first-hand experiences, the present paper argues that think tanks from across the world can play a critical role to bridge government and non-state actors, including civil society and scientists' groups, across a growingly complex multipolar order in need of trusted and accountable multilateral agreements and institutions. Think tanks' responsibility is even higher as the Africa Union has become a new, full member of the G20.

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EXPANDING DIALOGUE IS THE G20'S DNA

The creation of the G20 in the late 1990s as a forum of Finance Ministers of major economic powers was meant to address the impacts of several world economic crises including the Asian financial crisis. Then, the G20 was upgraded into a leaders' forum to tackle the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, and its reach has expanded through annual cycles of dozens of ministerial convenings and as many meetings of civil society engagement groups, including think tanks. The very notion of “expanding dialogue” is part of the DNA of the G20 and, as challenges proliferated and became diverse and complex, this philosophy became more important.

Diversity and complexity increased naturally as climate change, biodiversity, cyber security, and various social issues became important and included in the 2030 Agenda. Global leaders and their governments expanded their dialogues with each other to deal with these issues at G20 meetings and created new forums of discussions. For example, recent multilateral achievements such as the Kun-

ming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the UN High Seas Treaty, the initiation of a treaty addressing the issue of plastics in the oceans, show that global alignment on shared priorities remains possible, bearing huge benefits including for peace. As a more recent example, the G20 provided the ground for a reform of multilateral development banks (MDBs) to tackle climate and sustainable finance gaps. The independent experts' report pointing to concrete reform proposals was incubated within the G20 and nurtured by consultative processes with international and regional financial institutions and think tanks.

G7-BRICS RIVALRY WITHIN G20

Thus, by expanding dialogues, global leaders and the governments of the world's major economies have relatively successfully responded to the increased diversity and complexity in climate, social, public health, and environmental agenda. The same approach is less favorably functioning when it comes to issues of international politics or geopolitical conflicts. As just mentioned above, the G20 was created to cope with financial or economic crises. Even in the 2010s, it tried to focus on economic issues to function well. Gradually, however, major economic issues happened to have a greater geopolitical impact, as the five countries constituting BRICS emerged not only economically but also politically on the global stage, and the tension between China and the U.S. began mounting regarding trade, technology, and infrastructure investments.

At their spring meeting in April 2023 in Washington D.C., the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank warned that the G7 and BRICS could hamper global growth if they favored competition over cooperation in areas such as inflation and debt, climate finance, just energy, agriculture transition, and sustainable infrastructure investments. The rivalry may be aggravated by the expansion of the BRICS group announced in South Africa in August 2023. The temptation to weaponize reserve currencies, associated to the lack of multilateral agreement on international financial institutions reform poises increased national and regional security risks. The rivalry may not only hamper global trade and supply chains and cause a "lost decade of growth" (World Bank), but also desynchronize decision-making by the leaders of major countries and hence reduce their collective ability to cope with global challenges and safeguard regional stability.

If global leaders and their governments alone cannot reduce tension between countries or between groups of countries by their efforts to expand dialogues, what should be done and who should do it? We think that the so-called public-policy think tanks are close to the governments and leaders compared with other

groups, and that such think tanks, especially the think tank Engagement Group of G20 called Think20 (or T20), should try to play the role in supplementing the necessary expansion of dialogue(s) on behalf of the governments and leaders, and that they should leverage their strengths, such as their convening power, out-of-box thinking, and networks with scientists and civil societies. But the important question here is not whether they should but whether they can act likewise. In the following, we will consider how think tanks can help concretely expand dialogue, based on some historical anecdotes and experiences.

LEARNING FROM THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE THINK20

At first, the two authors should begin by introducing themselves briefly, especially their experience with Think20, before talking about the history and experience of Think20. They are affiliated with the Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI), which was established as a multilateral regional think tank around the time of the Asian Financial Crisis, when the forum of the financial ministers of the G20 members was also created. ADBI was given the mission of helping government agencies and organizations engaged in development work in Asia and the Pacific through research of development strategies and capacity building and training. In other words, the series of economic crises including the Asian Financial Crisis led to both the expansion of dialogues among the governments and the establishment of a multilateral regional think tank in a region with few strong think tanks working on public policies. ADBI served as a lead co-chair of Think20 in 2019 and the single chair of the G7 counterpart of Think20 called Think7 in 2023. In spring 2023, ADBI released a book investigating the results of a decade of the Think20 since its creation in 2012 in the aftermath of the subprime crisis in the U.S. which grew into a global economic crisis. The book was launched at a global town-hall meeting of the Think20 in Delhi at the historic Nehru Library (Sonobe, Buchoud et al. 2023).

Touted as the “ideas bank” of the G20, the Think20 is entering into a new decade of its existence with a sense of serving the general interest and a shared need to adapt to changing global governance conditions. Like the G20, the Think20 exercises chair rotation, a system in which chairmanship together with Secretariat rotates among the G20 member States every year in the same order as the G20 Presidency. The vision and design of each year’s Think20 process is left to the chair or lead co-chairs of the year. Unlike the G20, the Think20 is open to all countries; that is, it accepts spontaneous participation from any country in the world, even though the extent to which the chair or co-chairs together with the Secretariat emphasize such openness or inclusiveness may vary from year to year. Thus, unlike global con-

sultancy firms, the Think20 is a space of multilateral, open, and transparent public deliberation and it has gathered a growing interest over the years. More than 1,400 policy briefs proposals have been submitted to the Think20 India in 2023.

Since its creation in the early 2010s, the Think20 has had increasingly active participation of think tanks from emerging countries. This evolution is in part due to the current Presidencies of Indonesia (2022), India (2023), Brazil (2024) and South Africa (2025) of the G20. It is also a legacy from the Think20's uninterrupted decade enriched by occasional innovations in organizational design, such as the gradually consolidated system of task forces, selection of topics for discussions, calls for policy briefs, the selection and publication of policy briefs, and the production of final communiqués. The formation of the Global Solutions Initiative in Berlin during Germany's G20 Presidency in 2017 was accompanied by the creation of an annual Summit open to subsequent Think20 Presidencies. This regular rendezvous amid changing chairmanship has been a positive factor of accelerating knowledge transfers and sharpening know-how and capacity building from one G20 to another, despite multiple disruptions in the world global order. Such gradual consolidation and evolution of the Think20 is an asset for think tanks and governments in times of high uncertainty and it also explains why major foundations are keen to provide some support even beyond the G20.

The establishment of the Think20 as a formal Engagement Group of the G20 was driven by the demand for additional discussions among think tanks across national borders added to the discussions among the governments and leaders in the midst or aftermath of regional or global crisis. In the same vein, the Think7 became a formal Engagement Group of the G7 when the proposal by the G7 German Presidency was accepted by the other G7 members toward the end of 2021, amid the food and energy insecurity and the interest rate hikes due to tightened monetary policy by those rich countries that began recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic earlier than other countries. Other global forums of global policy dialogues began as the world entered the multi-crises era. For instance, the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) has initiated Global Policy Forums to explore “the prospects for peace and cooperation;” annual Global Dialogues were initiated by Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Indonesia “to discuss emerging global issues and their solutions;” spin-offs of the Raisina Dialogues led by the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in India were held during the Think20 India in Africa, America or the Middle East. These are only some illustrations of a strong demand for cross-sectoral, cross-regional, and regularly held cross-cutting dialogues.

Given the background of their establishment, the Think20 and other global and regular think tanks forums discussing global issues should not shy away from the

multiple challenges that lie ahead. Think tanks need to continue improving the quality and accuracy of their policy recommendations. The Think20 needs to further consolidate its structure, to stay open to newcomers, to avoid becoming an elite club while affirming its status at the crossroads of all geopolitical spheres. In short, as we need to expand dialogue among think tanks, the question is how, in which direction and what the Think20 can do. Gaining new capabilities to provide additional channels of communication to mitigate tension within the G20, overcoming the current difficulty in discussing geopolitical issues in a constructive manner, forging new abilities to address the current limitations of key multilateral agendas, maximizing the regional and global benefits from the African Union becoming a new member of the forum, are among the priorities we try to address in the following.

HOW CAN THINK TANKS FORUMS CONTRIBUTE TO SOLVE SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

The anteroom of the COP28 has seen a spike of think tanks activities, most of them involving think tanks active in the Think20 (and Think7). In just a few weeks, meetings, seminars, and summits have taken place in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, South America etc. Think tanks are certainly enriching the discussions whereas the world's pulse is accelerating. Their convenings exert synergy and multiplier effects, by responding to rising “bridging” needs and by developing new analytic and convening capabilities. Even beyond the present moment, think tanks are compelled to work across immediate and longer-term challenges, across different domains such as foreign affairs, macroeconomic policies, multilateral climate, sustainability agendas, across socioeconomic issues such as inequalities, gender equality, the future of work, or by creating trailblazing science to policy interface, geoscience, and global institutions reforms and across different geographies. We view think tanks as an expression of an active, innovative, interconnected civil society that thrives beyond mounting barriers and divides. Their reliability in the long run, their ability to create new spaces of trusted cooperation will be a key measure of their added value in the coming months, especially in Africa.

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The Think20 will become more impactful if the existing and new participants, including chairs or co-chairs and Secretariats, do not forget one important principle that has sustained the Think20 even though it is not an established institution. While the Think20 has been gradually consolidated by a system of task forces, it remains largely a matter of voluntary commitment and affiliations. Trust has become a key component for think tanks to cooperate from one G20/G7 cycle to the other, while only a few initiatives have been taken to consolidate the work of think tanks globally, such as the G20 Research Group at the Trinity College of the University of Toronto, also home of the G7 Research Group. The most remarkable initiative has taken the form of the ambitious Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) initiated by the late James McGann at the University of Pennsylvania, an attempt to consolidate a mapping and a ranking of think tanks even beyond the G20.

Now, the global think tanks community needs to build on the trust created over the years in the context of the Think20 (and lately by bridging the Think20 and Think7) to come up with a plan, as the next two years will be pivotal. In 2025, the G20 will be chaired by an African country for the first time in its nearly thirty-year long history, notwithstanding the new membership of the African Union. That same year, Brazil will be chairing the COP30, along with the BRICS+ group and it intends to organize a World Social Forum, all such rendezvous coming up immediately after the G20 Brazil Presidency and the UN Future Summit of 2024. Besides, multilateral negotiations regarding the review of the 2015 Addis Ababa “Action Plan” for development finance have started.¹

Cooperation among think tanks can be supplemented by solution-solving and policy making expertise coming from exchanges with science groups, youth groups, and other groups from the civil society, and provided different perspectives can be accommodated. Designated “youth” or “women” groups are quite keen to activate renewed policy solutions and push for creative thinking. During the G7 Japan, the

1. In 2025, Brazil will host Climate COP30, which should include a new, post 2025 collective finance goal, and this will mark the 10th anniversary of the Paris Agreement. Similarly, it is likely that the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development or Addis Ababa+10 will be organized, hosted by Spain (Avaaz 2023).

Think7 interacted with other Engagement Groups, such as the civil society, women, youth, and science groups in various occasions, such as their Summits, joint press conferences at the foreign correspondents' club and the G7 Hiroshima Summit, and the G7 digital and tech ministers' meeting. The same happened in the context of the G20 India and we welcome that the leading think tanks of the Think20 Brazil have decided to move forward with such an agenda.

For think tanks to be credible and effective solutions-brokers in a new multipolar order, cross-sectoral, cross-border cooperation is even more indispensable as we are collectively confronted with cognitive challenges and compelled to create policy and investment frameworks that can account for “meta” transformations of our livelihoods and habitats. Consequently, think tanks should improve their cooperation with networked scientific organizations, especially multidisciplinary research labs from universities, international institutions such as the UN University, and from the private sector. As part of the Think7 Japan Communiqué, we have thus highlighted the role of large-scale research infrastructure to provide quality datasets and to create new ways for the academia to interact with policymaking.

By joining forces across the G7 and G20, think tanks have realized that the impacts of the G7 and G20's respective decisions are often difficult to assess, particularly when new priorities impact existing agendas. Such a deficit of accountability is no longer an option, and we have proposed to invest in the prototype of a G7/G20 open-source dashboard, aiming to facilitate the development of policies under rotating G7 and G20 Presidencies and improve their continuity. Both the G20 and G7 should more proactively lead the promotion of public research and development that favor evidence-based, science-based policies and help realize new measurements of economic, social, and environmental prosperity.

Because the current state of global affairs is not just about the addition of “crises” but about managing fragile balances, cooperation among think tanks and

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with other State and non-government players is essential to act on structures and systems, to address the root causes of problems, instead of limiting ourselves to describe the symptoms of the crises.

PROMOTING GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT AND THE EXAMPLE OF THE THINK ASIA PLATFORM

The global think tank community empowered by regular and interconnected forums may be able to further contribute to expanded dialogue by encouraging countries that have not yet actively engaged in existing dialogues to participate. Such countries may be classified in two categories.

One is the category of superpowers, namely, the United States and China. Since both countries can make the world colder—as in a new version of the Cold War—the global think tank community wants them and their think tanks, such as the Center for China and Globalization (CCG), which organized in November its 8th international Summit, to come back to expanded dialogues. But this is difficult because the U.S. and China’s large global economies can produce anything that they want to consume to make them less economically dependent on other countries, even though there is a possibility of success because they need political and military allies.

The other category is that of smaller countries, which are more dependent on foreign trade and investment, and on political and military allies. For the global think tank community, drawing the participation of these countries and their think tanks into expanded dialogues will be a low-hanging fruit. Their greater participation will empower the global think tank community. If these smaller countries, together with emerging-market-economy and advanced-economy middle-powers, can transform themselves into a group of smart swing States, it may contribute to drawing the superpowers into the expanded dialogue.

In smaller and or lower- and middle-income countries in general, think tanks focusing on public policy tend to be few and lack adequate capabilities, which seems a major reason why their participation in the global arena has been limited, if not missing. Among such countries, we view small island States, such as the Pacific islands States, as critical. Developing new think tanks capabilities both locally, in given countries and through regional or global networks, such as the newly created Archipelagic and Island States (AIS) Forum, would ensure that participation in problem-solving would value more accurately diverse sources of knowledge.

To help such think tanks in Asia and the Pacific, ADBI has recently initiated the digital platform *Think Asia*, which should be accessible through an app on a smartphone and other devices. In the past, small think tanks in small countries could not attract many viewers if they held a webinar, because only a small number of people saw their homepages and social networking services. The *Think Asia* platform will provide users with a consolidated event calendar on which all registered think tanks can put their events. In the future, it will also provide the titles and abstracts of and links to working or discussion papers and books of all registered think tanks, enhancing dialogue and interconnection possibilities. Of course, this digital platform can be accessed by users outside the region. If the number of users outside the Asia-Pacific region increase, especially from Africa, the platform may be renamed *Think Global*. This is just a small example, but assisting small think tanks in small countries is a major step toward truly expanded dialogues.

THE “BELLAGIO FORMAT” AND THE AFFIRMATION OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Expanding the space for dialogue is timely and relevant but more think tanks meetings across the globe do not account for more coordination and interoperability and problem-solving. To structure the expansion of dialogue across the G20 (and the G7) and to create additional channels of communication among experts and governments, we have initiated in 2022-2023 the “Bellagio format” of convenings, gathering current, past and upcoming Think20 and Think7 lead think-tanks, alongside G20 and G7 Sherpas and representatives of the respective finance tracks, together with the Rockefeller Foundation (RF 2023). The potential of such dialogue in the Think7 Japan Communiqué was handed over to the Prime Minister of Japan ahead of the G7 leaders’ Summit in Hiroshima and at the Think20 Summit in Mysuru in India during a discussion with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of India. We have also organized a day of convenings in New York in September 2023 on the sides of the UN General Assembly and UN SDGs Summit on the theme *Reigniting the 2030 Agenda: from Dialogue into Action*, together with pan-African think tanks networks, development finance institutions, foundations, and others.

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As the world is exposed to both immediate and long-term threats, we need new proposals for progress, which can come from bridging the G7 and G20, alongside a greater recognition of the role of civil society. Since the Think20 was first created in the aftermath of the subprime crisis in the United States, think tanks from emerging countries have become more active and well structured nationally, regionally, and globally. This evolution is in part a legacy from an uninterrupted decade of the Think20, enriched by occasional policy innovations. Such gradual consolidation and evolution of the Think20 is an asset for think tanks and governments in times of high uncertainty and it also explains why major foundations are keen to provide some support.

Both G20 and G7 countries' high innovation and scientific capabilities should be mobilized to support evidence-based policymaking and develop a new generation of holistic social and human science programs connected to inclusive and greener monetary and investment policies. The "Bellagio Format" approach of bridging the G20 and G7 could therefore be expanded to other forums such as the BRICS and now the BRICS+, using think tanks as drivers and guarantors of quality dialogue. In such a perspective, the G20 Brazil is even more important as it is the first G20 cycle including the African Union and its institutions fully, ahead of the South African G20 Presidency. This is a historic turn that think tanks need to grasp.

The recent gains in mutual learning will be key to maximize the local, regional, and global benefits of the ratification of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) and the convergence between the 2030 Agenda and the African 2063 Agenda. New initiatives such as the Global Alliance for Life Economy Research and Innovation (GALERI) started in the context of the T20 India, or the Global South research platform launched at the second Global South Voices Summit a few days ahead of the closing G20 India virtual leaders' Summit, could also help address complex issues of systems transformation and the economy. Other approaches, such as the "lab" project of the German Cooperation Agency targeting inequalities and global governance, could be complementary. Finally, renewing mutual understanding is also essential for growth and infrastructure investment initiatives to support just transitions across existing bilateral and multilateral frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) led by China or the Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investments (PGII), initiated in the G7 and recently expanded across the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East, and Europe at the G20 Summit of Delhi (UNSDG 2023). New possibilities arise to study the long-term socio-economic impacts of different frameworks, including China's Global Development Initiative (GDI), in view of their respective abilities to leverage public and private funding for climate and development finance at scale.

NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CLIMATE TALKS

In support of expanded dialogue capabilities in the G20 amid needs for new knowledge—and skills—to nurture major multilateral convenings, we view the consolidation of think tanks cooperation as a priority. Such cooperation could focus on six priorities: 1) debt, climate-energy, and social justice; 2) agriculture, food, and ecosystems; 3) health, prosperity and well-being; 4) gender equality and growth; 5) financing the SDGs Stimulus plan proposed by the UN Secretary General; and 6) Africa and the convergence between the plan Africa 2063, the implementation of the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) and the G20.

Based on these six priorities, we would like to share some final thoughts about leveraging a multiplier effect from think tanks to reignite the 2030 Agenda and reinforce the impact of global climate talks.

The current deficit of more than US\$ 3 trillion of financing annually of the 2030 Agenda cannot be solved through existing bilateral and even multilateral cooperation mechanisms. In the past two years, a growing momentum has emerged in the Think20 and the Think7, and across them, to address the issue. The main countries providing development assistance, especially in Africa and many of the most vulnerable countries, happen to be also the very ones who brought a large part to Ukraine since the beginning of the conflict with Russia in 2022, including by diverging official development assistance (ODA) resources. Yet, that only accounts for a fraction of the 2030 Agenda's deeper and more ancient problems.

The 2030 Agenda suffers both from financing gaps and from the siloed architecture of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) itself. The future of sustainable development depends on addressing the debt crisis not only “in” the Global South but also “with” it, which supposes a better coordination of monetary and macroeconomic policies, and many think tanks are well positioned to provide relevant recommendations. The proposals

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of the G20 Development Working Group in June 2023 and the ensuing “Varanasi Principles” have opened a new space for think tanks. It looks even more promising and realistic as more exchanges between the Think20 and the G20 Development Working Group should take place during the G20 Brazil, which has put forward the cooperation with the Global South as well as addressing poverty and inequality across and within countries among its overarching priorities. In parallel, the G7/T7 Japan have also emphasized cooperation with the Global South, which is also a priority of the upcoming G7/T7 Italy (Chinoy & Sonobe 2023).

Another illustration of the innovation potential of Track Two Diplomacy through expanded think tanks dialogue emerged this year as the United Arab Emirates, which host the climate COP28, introduced the format of a “Think28” at a discussion with the Think20 mid-November. This echoes a proposal introduced in 2022 at the Think20 Indonesia Summit in Bali after Italy chaired both the G20 and co-chair the COP26 in 2021 and created the Sustainable Finance working group in the G20. At a meeting a few days before the start of the COP28 with representatives of the Think20 India and Brazil, the co-chair of UNEP resource panel, former Minister of the Environment of Brazil and lead negotiator for Brazil of the Paris Agreement in 2015, raised the idea of a more structured “Think30”, embodying a global, holistic think tanks mobilization process to prepare the Brazilian COP30. Whatever the outcomes of the COP28, the proposal of “Think30” is yet another illustration of rising expectations regarding the role of think tanks not only as providers of good ideas and evidence-based policy proposals but also as reliable and legitimate cross-cultural, cross-border solutions-brokers ■

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