

# Roles of Think Tanks in a New Transactional World: New Horizons from the Amazon to the Himalayas

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the outcomes of expanded think tanks cooperation in the G20 during the past decade, after 2024 showcased a rise of populism and climate fatigue across the globe. The authors highlight lessons learned that may benefit the COP30. Out of their complementary background and experience, they propose original ways to revive multilateral exchanges and build people-oriented solutions interconnecting world scale ecosystems.

**Keywords:** G20; climate; COP; multilateralism; populism; Global South; think tanks; cooperation.

## **Papéis dos *think tanks* em um novo mundo transacional: novos horizontes da Amazônia ao Himalaia**

**Resumo:** O artigo discute os resultados da cooperação expandida de *think tanks* no G20 durante a última década, após 2024 ter apresentado um aumento do populismo e da fadiga climática em todo o mundo. Os autores destacam as lições aprendidas que podem beneficiar a COP30. Com base em seus antecedentes e experiências complementares, eles propõem maneiras originais de reviver as trocas multilaterais e construir soluções orientadas para as pessoas interconectando ecossistemas em escala mundial.

**Palavras-chave:** G20; clima; COP; multilateralismo; populismo; Sul Global; *think tanks*; cooperação.

Not all knowledge is perfectly codified, and transfer of non-codified knowledge requires face-to-face contact and interactive learning.

– Bode, Buenstorf & Heinisch (2020)

The year 2025 marks, among others, the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Chapultepec Conference in Mexico. On the way to the signature of the United Nations Charter later in 1945, this milestone also turned the page of the League of Nations, which so poorly benefited Latin America. As a distant echo of universal institutional innovations, the Presidents of the G20 Brasil and South Africa convened a large meeting of ministers of Foreign Affairs on the sides of the Summit of the Future in New-York in 2024, where the UN Secretary-General proposed to host “biennial summits to formalize a dialogue between the UN system, the G20, and international financial institutions” (UNSG 2024).

In fact, under the Presidencies of Indonesia, India, Brasil and now South Africa, the G20 has become a pivot aggregating the multiple components of the global system amid developed and emerging countries. It has incubated an original dialogue among think tanks which, since 2022-2023, have engaged in defining a new agenda for global cooperation. In times of a strong push for bilateral, transactional international relations, think tanks cooperation has the potential to evolve and deliver on climate and development cooperation effectively.<sup>1</sup>

## CLIMATE, SDGS AND MULTILATERALISM FATIGUE—NO ROOM FOR STATUS QUO

By 2024, people across 65 countries—nearly half of the global population—have participated in elections, making the largest exercise of democracy in history (Plackett 2024). This wave of electoral activity has fueled the rise of populism, reshaping the geopolitical landscape in ways starkly different from the early days of the G20. As multilateralism continues to wane and bilateral arrangements proliferate, it is imperative to explore innovative and effective approaches to foster cooperation on climate and development.

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1. In 2023, the authors published the article *Think Tanks, Solutions-Brokers in a New Multipolar Order?* in CEBRI-Journal (Buchoud & Sonobe 2024).

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For many, globalization has become synonymous with social or economic inequities. Governments are often perceived as ineffective in addressing widespread crises and structural transformations. Insufficient cooperation during the Covid-19 pandemic has slowed down vaccine distribution in the developing world. Meanwhile reductive narratives of a “Global North vs Global South” divide fuel skepticism, distrust, and misunderstanding of other countries’ efforts and capacities (Sonobe 2024). These tensions were on full display at COP29 in Baku, where climate negotiations were overshadowed by one-dimensional debates over “hundreds of billions” versus “trillions”—figures disconnected from the realities of ordinary citizens and, in some cases, counterproductive.

Of course, the issue of how much funding the world can mobilize for sustainable development and climate change measures is critical. However, with growing “climate fatigue” as well as declining enthusiasm for multilateral cooperation, large-scale financial contributions are becoming increasingly difficult to expect. Furthermore, in many developing countries, debt sustainability has been declining, especially since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some developed countries failed to deliver on their promises to supply vaccines to developing nations while managing to recover their own health conditions and economies earlier. This led to increasing consumer demand and inflation, prompting the central banks of these countries to raise interest rates as countermeasures, which in turn caused the depreciation of many developing countries’ currencies. The resulting interest rate hikes and inflation exacerbated the debt problems faced by developing countries while many developed nations are also struggling with narrowed fiscal space and depreciation, making it challenging for them to provide large-scale public financial support.

Fatigue is spreading beyond climate issues:

*With only six years left to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, progress towards only 17% of the SDG targets is on track, nearly half is showing minimal or moderate progress, and progress on over one third has stalled or even regressed (G20 Brasil 2024).*

*The planet is grappling with overlapping crises stemming from climate change and biodiversity loss, as well as significant setbacks in global efforts to fight poverty and hunger, and added to this are pressing challenges posed by digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) ... sluggish governance reform, and an unfair international tax system (T20 Brasil 2024).*

There is no room for *status quo*.

At a closed-door meeting held at CEBRI in Rio de Janeiro in November 2024, the U.S. based Quincy Institute presented the findings from a series of consultations held in 2023-2024, warning that, in this evolving scenario, “vague pledges among like-minded countries to defend the rules-based international order would ultimately serve to hollow out crucial universal norms, laws, and institutions and will yield an increasingly fragmented and insecure world” (CEBRI 2024).

According to the Institute for Economics and Peace in London, the world is experiencing the highest number of state-based conflicts since the end of the Second World War, alongside a sharp rise in global military expenditures. Their latest report warns that “many of the conditions that precede major conflicts are higher than they have been since the end of the Second World War” (Institute for Economics and Peace 2024).

Amid this escalating geopolitical instability, the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Japanese grassroots movement Nihon Hidankyo, which has long advocated for nuclear non-proliferation. It is not a coincidence that the 2023 SDG Summit, held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, revealed severe shortfalls in delivering the 2030 Agenda. The Summit highlighted critical gaps in financial and human resources, as well as lack of global scientific cooperation, all of which threaten the achievement of the SDGs. Likewise, in 2024, 35% of UN member states declined to endorse the UN Pact for the Future, including nations from the Caribbean, Central Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific, which are regions particularly vulnerable to environmental crises. This resistance highlights the need for more inclusive, responsive, and action-oriented multilateral frameworks.

From 2023 to 2024, the BRICS forum has emerged as a dynamic platform for knowledge sharing and scientific collaboration, with Brasil emphasizing the role of the BRICS Academic Forum, the BRICS Think Tanks Council, and the

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newly created BRICS Think Tanks Network for Finance.<sup>2</sup> The impact of the recent G20 Presidencies—Indonesia, India, Brasil and South Africa—on revitalizing and expanding BRICS cooperation warrants further research, particularly in light of how the new U.S. administration will respond to this shifting reality.

What is clear, however, is that several rising powers are actively challenging traditional models of global governance and corresponding institutional frameworks. In 2024, the leaders of India and Brasil have been invited to join G7 leaders at their Summit in Apulia, Italy, along with their counterparts from a dozen countries from the Global South and the African Union. This was a clear illustration, following the Summit of Hiroshima in 2023, that G7 alone can no longer dictate the future of multilateralism.

The emerging powers have benefited from multilateral frameworks of trade and investment and international development cooperation. As a result, some of the established powers have become reluctant to support multilateralism, perceiving it as a threat to their own position, although they have also benefited from global growth. On the eve of the inauguration of a new administration in the United States, the Federal Reserve Board announced its withdrawal from the Network of Central Banks and Supervisors for Greening the Financial System (Federal Reserve 2025), following the exit of the country's six largest private banks from the UN-sponsored "Net Zero Banking Alliance". This marks another step in a broader retreat from climate and sustainability commitments, a trend observed over the past few years in the U.S. financial sector, including major private credit ratings agencies and asset management firms.

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Shift from green and sustainable development commitments appears to be gaining further momentum as the new U.S. administration has announced its intention to terminate USAID, the United States development assistance agency, among its first decisions (Landay, Holland & Psaledakis 2025). On another note,

2. The Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA), which co-chaired the T20 Brasil, convened a seminar in November 2024 to discuss thematic priorities and the role of think tanks following the G20 Brasil and considering the BRICS Presidency of Brasil.

the world's largest meatpacking company—a Brazilian firm—announced that its emissions goal was merely an “aspiration” and not a firm commitment or a pledge, an announcement coming amid delays in launching the climate COP30 process and as other Brazilian companies in the agribusiness sector propose to organize their own international gathering (Eschenbacher, Magalhães & Jessop 2025). While the impact of these developments remains to be seen, they reflect a growing climate fatigue spreading across societies, businesses, and even governments, despite high and accumulating carbon emissions, rising temperatures, escalating frequency and intensity of severe weather events, wildfires, and the degradation of ecosystems on land, at sea, and in the air.

However, the decline of multilateralism carries a significant risk of accelerating the fragmentation of the global economy into competing blocs. If this trend continues, nations will not only face economic stagnation and hardship but also experience major setbacks in crucial areas that require international cooperation, such as climate change mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity conservation, and pandemic response. To prevent such an outcome, it is essential to go beyond merely preserving traditional and pre-existing multilateralism. Instead, efforts must be made to shape a future of innovative multilateralism—a more flexible, effective framework for international cooperation that adapts to the evolving global scenario.

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## **LEARNING FROM THE EMERGENCE OF THINK TANKS INTERACTIONS ACROSS BORDERS IN THE G20**

In the past years, global leaders have repeatedly outlined the need to reform the major international institutions and reshape the global financial architecture. Such top-down efforts have yielded results in certain cases, such as when the G20

became a meeting place of heads of governments to tackle the global financial crisis in 2008. Yet, calls to multilateralism have also become less effective as many countries have pointed out to double standards from developed countries when addressing the Covid-19 pandemic or other geopolitical issues. Multilateralism cannot—and should not—be solely the responsibility of world leaders. A broader array of actors can and must contribute to its evolution and revitalization. Among them, think tanks hold particularly strong potential for two reasons.

First, they could act as bridges between diverse stakeholders, scientists, civil societies, philanthropies, government, and the public, including the media, social media and journalists, helping to craft and amplify narratives that reinforce why multilateralism delivers tangible benefits. Second, they could serve as track-two diplomats, fostering dialogues and trust to ease tensions, reduce misunderstandings, and bridge divides between nations. The potential of think tanks to reshape multilateralism grows even stronger when they collaborate across national borders and across geopolitical spheres. Closer collaboration between think tanks from different countries can enhance their ability to benefit from insights from different angles, generate new solutions, build consensus, and adapt multilateralism to challenges of a rapidly changing world. In the following, we examine the evolution of such cooperation among think tanks engaging in G20 and its role in shaping the future of multilateralism.

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“Back in the days,” in the winter of 2012, a few think tanks gathered in Mexico to prepare an address to G20 Sherpas, aiming at greening the G20’s agenda through a Los Cabos legacy of Green Growth out of the Seoul Development Consensus for Green Growth adopted in 2010 (Lim 2013; T20 Mexico 2012a). Embedding a Global Green Growth vision in the Pittsburgh Framework for Strong, Sustainable and Balanced Growth was featured among the main priorities of the newly created group of think tanks within the G20, namely the Think-20.<sup>3</sup> According to its Mexican promoters, the very first T20 Communiqué was issued as the result of a “collaborative model” allowing “think tanks to present recommendations effectively demonstrating the value of their contributions to global policy discussions”

3. The G-20 Framework for Strong, Sustainable and Balanced Growth was launched by the G20 leaders at the G20 Summit in Pittsburgh in Sept. 2009 to strengthen coordination of national economic policies as the world emerged from the 2008–9 financial crisis (Butler 2012).

(Mendizabal & Martínez 2024). The Mexican G20 Presidency's interest to promote multilateral engagement, combined with the urgency of global economic issues and the “mobilization of networks to influence global policy discussions through international partnerships”, provided the fruitful background out of which the T20 subsequently developed (T20 Mexico 2012b).

Since 2012, the T20 contribution to the G20 has grown from an initial set of about two dozens of “participant notes” (T20 Mexico 2012c) to nearly 1,000 abstract submissions and over 350 policy briefs connecting over 180 institutions from nearly 30 countries in 2024 during the T20 Brasil, which even outgrew the high level of participation and production from the T20 India in 2023.<sup>4</sup> Further research would be necessary to measure the impact of the T20 in the G20 system. The management of a rapidly growing production of content in just the past few years, and especially since the G20 Indonesia in 2022, has proven ever more demanding and time-consuming for each T20 leading organization, raising questions about the efficiency of the T20. However, the format of the T20 has managed to evolve significantly over the years, following that of international affairs and priorities and driven by a shared purpose to support “cooperation between think tanks” to influence G20 leaders' decisions (Zhang 2023).

All T20 Presidencies in the past decade have reflected on improving their impact through a combination of policy and knowledge insights, the promotion of empirical evidence and often fruitful cooperation with other engagement groups and, to a lesser extent, ministerial groups and G20 Sherpas. For instance, the Lowy Institute for International Policy and chair of the T20 Australia in 2014 commissioned nearly 30 papers in preparation of the G20 Australia and published them in a volume edited in 2013. Following the G20 Russia, it was a reservoir of arguments and ideas meant to nurture the G20 Presidency of 2014. In 2015, the Economic Policy Research Foundation from Turkey (TEPAV) initiated the system of task forces to systematize the production of recommendations, which the T20 Germany, Argentina, and Japan in 2017, 2018 and 2019 turned into genuine policy research papers (Sak 2023).

The T20 Turkey also initiated a series of regional meetings to improve think tanks participation in the process. In 2020, the T20 Saudi Arabia responded to the profound disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic by building on the think tanks community to edit numerous position papers and statements with other engagement groups, which has become a common practice since then, while also creating a dedicated working group to reflect on the role and effectiveness of the T20 itself. In

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4. Figures provided by the T20 Brasil (2024) and the T20 India (2024).



2021, the T20 Italy actively contributed to the organization of several summits with other engagement groups, notably the B20 and a group of long-term investors.

In 2022, the T20 Indonesia opened the door for expanded think tanks cooperation, both with T7, the counterpart of T20 in the G7 framework, and with the Global South. The final Summit held in Bali hosted an innovative international research forum including past and upcoming G20 Presidencies' think tanks, which the T20 India then built upon. In 2023, the T20 India marked another breakthrough by partnering with the T7 Japan to launch a “shared agenda for global cooperation” at a seminal retreat hosted by the Rockefeller Foundation in Bellagio, Italy (TRF 2023). The meeting called for the development of cooperation and institutional innovation, including through the BRICS, as “an integral part of supporting global common goods in challenging times” (ADBI/TRF 2023a). It was accompanied by the publication of a book reviewing “a decade of the T20” while looking in its future, as “intersections between man-made macroeconomic choices and the (dys)functioning of ecosystems have multiplied to the edges of our control” and “capacities to mitigate major challenges have yet to reach the required levels to generate sustainable development” (Buchoud 2023; Pambudi 2023).

In 2024, the T7 Italy Communiqué called on G7 leaders to “promote new instruments of cooperation and governance” based upon “inclusive and holistic approaches.” This recommendation was pushed jointly by the T7 task forces on energy, climate and sustainable development, science, and digitalization for a better future, which drew on the work of more than 150 experts from G7 and G20 countries and beyond. In 2025 and as the last of four years of G20 leadership from emerging countries ahead of passing the baton to the United States in 2026, the T20 South Africa aims to further “bring together the collective wisdom and recommendations generated by the T20 during the preceding Global South Presidencies” and “to ensure that the momentum generated by the previous three Global South Presidencies is not lost and that the focus on critical development challenges remains central to the G20 agenda” (T20 South Africa 2025). At a meeting in New York in September 2024 on the sides of the Summit of the Future, both the chair of the T7 Canada and of the BRICS Brasil Academic Forum emphasized the relevance of enduring think tanks cooperation.

## **BUILDING ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THINK TANKS COOPERATION AS A PUBLIC GOOD**

Nations worldwide are grappling with an increasing number of global policy challenges, from pandemics and climate change to geoeconomic and geopolitical tensions. In response, think tanks are recognizing the growing need for cross-border

collaboration to support more informed policy design. Over the past few years, three types of cooperation have emerged.

The first is global or regional large-scale convening platforms where both well-established and emerging think tanks gather in-person or virtually to exchange insights. The Global Solutions Summit in Berlin and T20 Summit are prototypes. ADBI has recently relaunched ThinkAsia<sup>5</sup> as a digital platform for big and smaller think tanks across the globe, while also initiating a competition to promote research-oriented and evidence-based journalism (DAJA). In Italy, the Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) has launched the NEXT Forum to nurture young talent and future leaders. Following the G20 India, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), one of the co-chairs of the T20 India, has engaged into a wide investigation of think tanks from across the Global South through the newly created Dakshin Center of Excellence. Meanwhile Observer Research Foundation (ORF), the lead chair organization of the T20 India, has created new convening formats in the form of regional dialogues such as the Cape Town Conversation or the Budapest Global Dialogue out of their flagship Raisina Dialogues. In China, the Center for China and Globalization held in 2024 its 8th Global Think Tanks Innovation Forum in Beijing, while the Imperial Springs International Forum from Guangzhou held its annual gathering in Madrid, Spain, for the first time, in November 2024—to name a few. In the African context, think tanks are flourishing in all economic regions. The gatherings from the Africa Capacity Building Foundation or the African Union Development Agency “bridge tank” attract a new audience of young and dynamic domestic and regional organizations, which the G20/T20 of South Africa could help nurture.

The second type of cooperation involves closed-door, recurrent dialogues among relatively established institutions. As mentioned earlier, T20 think tanks, including the past, current, and upcoming chairs of T20 and T7, convened a strategic retreat at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Bellagio Center in March 2023. Their objective was to revitalize efforts toward achieving the SDGs and address other pressing global challenges. This group has since continued its dialogue, reconvening at some large-scale think tank summits and the UN General Assembly in New York. Their last gathering took place in September 2024 at the Rockefeller Foundation headquarters. While this informal coalition has yet to codify its mission and structure, its 2023 Ten-Points Agenda may soon require updates to reflect evolving priorities (ADBI/TRF 2023b). Nevertheless, participants noted the value of sustained collaboration, emphasizing accelerated mutual learning and deeper alignment across multiple G20 and G7 cycles.

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5. See <https://think-asia.org/>.

Through consistent dialogue and shared analysis, these think tanks are gradually building trust. This trust-based engagement could serve as a foundation for effective track-two global dialogue, including track-two diplomacy in moments when official diplomatic channels face gridlock or breakdown. As geopolitical tensions rise, such alternative avenues for cooperation are becoming increasingly critical global public goods.

The third type of cooperation is a bit different and less public. Large foundations such as the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung from Germany have also brought support to some T20 Presidencies of the last years and helped finance some research work. In the context of the T20 of South Africa in 2025, this has resulted in the preparation of a few joint background notes. In Brasil, the Munich Security Conference has also worked with the G20 Presidency to prepare a gathering on the sides of the Leaders' Summit. Other platforms such as the Club of Madrid have also recently emphasized their cooperation with think tanks, such as during the G20 Brasil.

We argue that strengthening cooperation across rotating T20 (and T7 or BRICS) offers two additional advantages. First, it enables think tanks to adapt to shifting policy priorities while maintaining focus on broader systemic challenges. This, in turn, enhances their ability to engage effectively with governments and international institutions. For instance, when the G20 Brazilian and South African Presidencies prioritized greater coordination between the United Nations and international financial institutions to shape a “new international financial architecture,” it marked a significant step forward following earlier calls for action, such as the Bridgetown Initiative of 2022 (Bridgetown Initiative 2025). In response, think tanks played a proactive role, organizing side events and convenings, including with platforms such as the Club of Madrid. Second, operating in the context of the T20/G20 means operating in an open, public

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environment, which is important to limit the risks of exclusive club approach that sometimes prevails and to promote transparency and accountability.

However, if think tanks cooperation should be envisioned as a public good, translating these discussions into concrete institutional outputs will require far deeper collaboration. This includes bridging expertise across disciplines, particularly between economists and non-economists, to develop innovative, actionable proposals for systemic financial reform. This also entails connecting generalists with specialists.

One last question remains—that is the level of interaction between think tanks focusing on development issues and think tanks focusing on foreign affairs. During the G20 Italy in 2021, the Italian Institute for International Affairs (IAI), one of the T20 Italy co-chairs, organized a meeting to discuss key outcomes of the T20/G20, especially on international financial cooperation, together with the Council of Councils, a group of foreign affairs institutes. During the G20 India, a chair was appointed to the T20 in addition to the lead organizations from India, originated from the Indian Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. During the G20 Brasil, T20 lead organizations convened several meetings including foreign affairs think tanks from the U.S. and various other countries, including with China.

As we portray a variety of policy-options for think tanks and we have experienced the benefits of cooperating across geopolitical spheres and amid rotating leaderships, we propose to explore more specifically how it can contribute to reducing the above-mentioned fatigues related to climate issues, the SDGs, and multilateralism.

## **RECALIBRATING THINK TANKS COOPERATION TO ADDRESS THE CLIMATE-DEBT GRIDLOCK**

Let us briefly review the three important reports that were published in recent years to address global mobilization or the climate-development-debt financing problem. The first report is *The Triple Agenda: Better, Bolder and Bigger MDBs*, released in the fall of 2023 by the Independent Expert Group of the G20 India Presidency. It argues that given their unique position, multilateral development banks (MDBs) should play a more active role as catalysts for mobilizing both public and private sector investments. The second report is *Defaulting on Development and Climate: Debt Sustainability and the Race for the 2030 Agenda and Paris Agreement*, released in April 2024 by Boston University's GDP Center, the Centre for Sustainable Development at SOAS University of London, and the Heinrich Böll Foundation. It finds that among 66 economically vulnerable Emerging Markets and

Developing Economies (EMDEs), 47 countries face a risk of sovereign default within the next five years. It emphasizes that urgent debt relief is necessary to enable these financially vulnerable nations to invest in both climate adaptation and development goals. The third example comes from G20 Brasil. For the Task Force on a Global Mobilization against Climate Change (TF-CLIMA), its Expert Group submitted a report titled “A Green and Just Planet” in October 2024. It urges nations to adopt a new development pathway incorporating green industrial strategies that balance economic growth with urgent climate action.

The publication of these reports does not mean that the climate-development-debt gridlock has been resolved. However, the reports present promising financial solutions to the issue. By doing so, they serve as evidence that think tanks play a significant role in supporting multilateral cooperation. That said, the reports were produced by small teams of elite experts from major think tanks. This raises an important question: How can many other think tanks contribute to solving major global challenges we all face? This is a genuine and pressing question, particularly for the co-authors of this paper, who are not specialists but generalists.

We would like to consider the issue of climate and SDGs fatigue as a challenge that requires the participation and engagement of many think tanks. These are crucial issues because ordinary citizens are voters, and hence ultimate decision-makers who determine how much financial and other resources should be mobilized for the provision of global public goods. Since politicians are

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often reluctant to engage with the issues that ordinary citizens feel fatigued with, governments could be tempted to cut budgets allocated to address such issues. In fact, climate fatigue and SDGs fatigue are likely to obstruct climate and development financing and debt relief, and they represent one of the fundamental root causes of the challenges discussed in the three reports mentioned earlier.

While considering the causes of climate fatigue, we visited the COP29 held in Baku, Azerbaijan, in November 2024. Amidst the energy of approximately 70,000 participants, we observed two contradictions. The first contradiction is that while the conference was filled with innovative and creative solutions, ideas, and the passion of those involved, they are hardly known to people outside the venue. As a result, the true significance of COP remained largely invisible to the outside world. Instead, what made it to the media were images of thousands of participants moving around the venue, captured by the cameras held by the numerous journalists as nothing more than eccentric elites traveling by plane, emitting carbon dioxide, and gathering for a grand festival. This kind of perception only deepens climate fatigue.

Another striking contradiction was that despite long hours of negotiations, developed countries reluctantly agreed to increase their annual financial contributions from US\$ 100 billion to US\$ 300 billion, yet developing countries immediately expressed strong dissatisfaction, and the media ultimately framed COP29 as a failure with little progress. In the coverage of large conferences, many important discussions and innovative policy proposals are often ignored, while only a few high-stakes, dramatic decisions receive attention. Moreover, conference organizers often structure their agendas as if such headline-making decisions represent the climax of the event. In the case of COP, the final agreement on financial contributions is presented as the most critical outcome.

This extremely reductive approach creates a major problem. If financial contributions are treated as the sole metric of success, the negotiations turn into a zero-sum game—or even worse than that. One side questions: “Why are they contributing so little?” while the other side asks: “Why do we have to contribute so much?” Both feel dissatisfied, and, in the end, everyone walks away feeling like a loser. Some people who read such media coverage become deeply pessimistic about the future of the planet. Some others may not take the news at face value, because they understand that pledges of financial contributions are merely political commitments with no legal binding force. To them, COP may appear as nothing more than a political spectacle, a farce, or even outright deception. Others might recognize that the size of financing is not the only factor that determines the success or failure of climate action—how efficiently those funds are used is just as critical. However, since media reports rarely discuss how these funds are allocated and

managed, even these informed individuals tend to feel pessimistic about the actual impact of COP outcomes.

Fundamentally, people in every country tend to have a relatively good understanding of their own country's situation, such as the political challenges of low-carbon transition and the difficulties of fiscal balance, but they are often unaware of the circumstances in other countries. As a result, they may believe that other countries could make greater efforts but are simply unwilling to do so. This leads to frustration, with people questioning: "Why must our country bear such a heavy burden while others free ride?" or "Why aren't we receiving more support?" In developed countries, there seems a widespread assumption that corruption and mismanagement are rampant in developing countries, leading people to believe that any financial aid would simply be wasted. Conversely, many in developing countries do not seem to fully understand the domestic political constraints that developed nations face, and they seem to perceive that wealthier countries contribute far less than they should, given their economic power.

If ordinary people have a better understanding of the other countries' constraints and efforts to break them, donor-country governments could do more for international cooperation, and recipient-country governments would appreciate those contributions more. Greater awareness and mutual understanding might reduce distrust and lead to more constructive cooperation between developed and developing nations.

## **THINK TANKS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC, NEW HORIZONS FROM THE AMAZON TO THE HIMALAYAS**

As noted earlier, the SDG achievement rate remains alarmingly low at just 17 percent. In recent years, various initiatives aimed at revitalizing the 2030 Agenda have emerged. In 2023, under India's G20 Presidency, the Varanasi principles were introduced to reinvigorate the SDGs. Around the same time, China launched its Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), advocating for a comprehensive, equitable and sustainable modernization approach. In 2024, during its G20 Presidency, Brasil introduced the G20 Social, integrating social development discussions into the G20 Leaders' Summit in Rio and laying the groundwork for the COP30 and the BRICS Summit it will host in 2025. Meanwhile, in September 2024, the United States launched its Feed the Future agenda and called for strengthening the Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment. In addition, 2025 will see two key international gatherings: the Second World Summit for Social Development, marking three decades since its first summit and providing an opportunity to reinforce global

commitments to social equity and inclusion, and the 4th Conference on Financing for Development, which will address global financial reforms to better support sustainable development.

From these observations and our experience, we believe that think tanks have both the ability and the responsibility to help ease climate fatigue and SDG fatigue, not by taking sides but by creating a trusted common space for dialogue at the crossroads.

First, think tanks cannot act in isolation from other institutional, private sector or civic counterparts. Instead, they should act as translators, converting the technical language used by scientists and engineers into a form accessible and meaningful to the general public. While it is true that most people do not have time or patience for lengthy explanations, simply telling them that a particular solution is “excellent” is not enough to convince anyone serious. One key task is to develop compelling narratives that can resonate with ordinary people. To achieve this, think tanks should not only learn from scientists and engineers but also collaborate with both domestic and international counterparts to refine ways of explaining solutions. By doing so, they can help disseminate these narratives more effectively, ensuring that people understand the true value of climate and SDG-related solutions.

Second, think tanks should deliver evidence that solutions work “at scale.” The general public knows that even if a solution works in a laboratory, it may fail in real-world conditions. It also recognizes the need to verify whether a solution can effectively be implemented and scaled at the national, if not global, level. This entails the importance of adapting solutions to local conditions using local knowledge, as well as incorporating insights from social sciences. This goes with rigorous impact evaluations and strong evidence obtained through randomized controlled trials to ensure reliability and effectiveness. Convincing the public is not a simple task. Complexity is redoubled by the growing understanding that in many cases “scaling-up,” a mantra of international cooperation, does not work and that, instead, working “at scale” is demanded. This requires adequate policy frameworks, equitable public-private cooperation, and genuine interdisciplinary collaboration to bring together researchers from different fields as well as rigorous, cross-disciplinary studies that can provide the level of credibility and proof needed to gain widespread acceptance.

Third, think tanks must undergo upskilling. Interdisciplinary and collaborative research is challenging, both in terms of matching the right researchers but also in managing the progress of the research itself. When conducted as an international joint project, these difficulties become even greater. The only entities truly capable of facilitating such research, ensuring its successful execution, and communicating



its findings in a way that is accessible to both policymakers and the general public, may likely be think tanks.

However, for think tanks to effectively play this role, they must undergo significant upskilling. International collaboration among think tanks is essential, as part of upskilling comes from the ability to cross the lines between policy and research spheres from various regions. We tried to test such an approach at the occasion of the COP29, by working with several local universities, think tanks and policy institutes from Azerbaijan as the host country. This included a meeting of the global think tanks cooperation format, which was prepared well ahead together with the partners from the T20, T7 and BRICS leadership.

The results were interesting. The convenings raised interest from students and professors, who, for most of them, did not have an accreditation to participate in the COP. It raised similar interest from the international partners who met an audience different from their usual counterparts and eager to learn. Furthermore, we have built on the G20 Brasil and the preparation of the COP30 to interconnect comprehensive research about very large-scale ecosystems, starting with the Amazon rainforest and the glaciers and river basins systems in Himalayas, with the global think tanks cooperation trying to address the climate-debt gridlock. This included a dedicated think tanks convening during the COP29, also aiming at addressing the future of the Caspian Sea, and another meeting in Bangkok in the spring of 2025, on the road to the IMF and World Bank fall meeting there, in the fall of 2026, and the COP31 likely to take place in the Asia Pacific. Global think tanks cooperation can create more viable policy space to translate the research on planetary boundaries into a world with borderless challenges.

Fourth and lastly, the future of think tank cooperation should not be about working “despite everything” but rather because of the growing diversity of perspectives shaping global and regional policies. Embracing this complexity presents a new frontier for think tank cooperation and innovation. In this spirit, we support the launch of the T30 project, as a platform designed to synergize efforts to increase climate and development finance, with a particular focus on addressing the immediate needs of the world’s most vulnerable countries. We value the idea to “break through current and expected additional deadlocks in climate action” by fostering “new forms of collaboration between the private sector, governments, and civil society”, and by assuming that “sustainable climate transitions will only succeed when they create tangible economic opportunities and improve people’s lives” (Teixeira et al. 2024). It is particularly crucial in emerging economies, where the success of green transitions is inextricably linked to pressing questions of economic development.

To conclude, it is crucial to explain in simple terms to the general public how other countries are struggling with their own challenges and how these difficulties limit their ability to mobilize resources for global public goods provision. If countries begin to use the lack of cooperation from others as an excuse to reduce their own contributions, free riding will spread globally, and multilateralism will collapse. To truly understand the constraints faced by other nations, the most reliable approach is to rely on information from trusted think tanks in those countries. This underscores the importance of cross-border information exchange among think tanks.

Thus, we seem to be approaching an era in which many think tanks without outstanding experts could play a vital role in contributing to the provision of global public goods through global think tank cooperation. ■

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