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Twenty people meet in a beautiful city

The G20 is mostly a talking shop, but it still has its uses

No one would envy Hamburg for the guests it's hosting at the G20 Summit on 7 and 8 July. Besides US President Trump and Russia's Vladimir Putin, the German Chancellor will greet the authoritarian Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, South African President Jacob Zuma (currently charged with 800 cases of corruption), Brazilian President Temer (under fire for obstructing justice, corruption, forming a criminal organisation among other alleged misdemeanours), and potentates from Saudi Arabia and China. The slogan of the largest anti-capitalist protest rally – 'Welcome to Hell' – seems pretty appropriate. So what can we expect from the summit?

Well, lots – starting with the conflicting demands and expectations recently voiced by those close to the G20:

- The unions in Labour 20 are demanding an "alternative economic model": Fiscal policy should stimulate demand and public investment be greatly increased. Inequality must be addressed, collective bargaining supported, and "reasonable minimum wages" and fair working conditions implemented in global supply chains.
- Civil20 wants "policy changes that make globalisation fair for everyone". The growth-centred economic model that produces losers and destroys our ecological livelihoods has had its day. Civil society is demanding that G20 policies end rising inequality between and within countries, fight the root causes of worldwide poverty and hunger, and support gender equality.
- The research institutes and think tanks of the Think20 community want a "global economic governance architecture that makes globalisation inclusive and sustainable, providing a framework with which to achieve the 2030 Agenda".
- In contrast, the employers' association "Business 20 Dialogue" is calling for an "open and inclusive trading system" and making the most of digitalisation.

It is unlikely that the club of the nineteen largest national economies plus

the European Union (EU) will manage to work through this wish list. This is partly a matter of (im)practicality: The G20 has no secretariat, each presidency determines its own priorities and heads of government would gladly forget at least some of what they pledge. The G20 has also strayed far from its founding idea of stabilising the world economy in the face of the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s.

Since heads of state and government first met in 2008, their pledges have multiplied exponentially: Not only do they want the economy to grow faster and inequality be fought more quickly, but they want to support the ambitious 2030 Agenda for sustainable development (reducing inequality, creating good jobs for everyone and protecting the planet). All this is painless – on paper. Even so, G20 leaders often make recourse to concepts from the United Nations (UN), interpret matters superficially or refer them to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which "forgets" to consult the majority of the world that doesn't belong to the OECD. Nothing changes. The awareness that something is basically wrong, that people are systematically excluded from progress and that our livelihoods are being destroyed is fine for speeches but not G20 policy.

What's the point of holding this forum when most of its commitments remain unrealised? For one thing, today it is more important than ever to talk about the winners and losers of globalisation – not just in the G20, but also in think tanks and in civic, union and employer associations. Some organisations with meaningful input – such as the International Labour Organization – will be taking part in G20 fora. As for work, the chance to talk about human rights in supply chains with China's labour minister or about women's work and the "gender pay gap" with the Saudi labour minister may not spell a breakthrough. But these initiatives are a start. Once policies have been put in writing, it's easier to demand that governments implement them.

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So, even if the G20 does not become a progressive and transformative forum in the near future, abandoning it would be a mistake. Another two reasons to stick with it are:

Firstly, the somewhat obsessive focus on the G20 as a 'central forum for

international cooperation on financial and economic issues' might finally rouse the UN from its deep sleep. If UN General-Secretary António Guterres succeeds in making his organisation less sluggish, the G20 might become less significant and we could discuss the planet's future where we should: at the United Nations.

Second, it's good that unions, think tanks and civil society are networking and articulating their demands around the G20. Much work remains to be done in building alliances, particularly seeing how the Business Lobby always has great access. We have to hope that future G20 presidencies won't be able to push aside civil society and independent unions as the Chinese presidency did.

The G20 is going to be a stress test for Hamburg. But perhaps the discussions around the G20 will spawn networks and initiatives that will advance the global socio-ecological transformations we need. It's about time.



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