ABSTRACT
In 2008 the G20 met for the first time at the level of heads of state and government in the midst of the global financial crisis. In the following year the G20 coordinated collective actions that helped to contain the worst effects of the financial crisis. A decade later, the G20 is dealing with an underlying systemic crisis fuelled by challenges to rules-based international cooperation from major countries as well as criticism regarding its effectiveness and legitimacy. This article introduces a special issue that focuses on the institutional evolution and reform of the G20, its effectiveness in dealing with global challenges and the specific role of rising powers in this club governance structure. The contribution of this special issue lies in its emphasis on institutional perspectives and its discussion of the social purpose of club governance after more than ten years of G20 summitry.

Introduction
A decade on from its elevation to a global leadership forum, the Group of 20 (G20) merits nuanced, updated evaluation. The G20 met for the first time at the level of heads of state and government in Washington, DC, on 15 November 2008 in the midst of the most serious financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. What was previously an informal and technically-oriented meeting of finance ministers and central bank governors from economically significant countries, the G20 took on, under these precipitous conditions, a high-profile leader-oriented format intended to tackle a global crisis. At their subsequent summits in London (April 2009) and Pittsburgh (September 2009), the G20 exhibited an impressive degree of solidarity. Galvanised by the shocks of the global financial crisis, participants were able to agree on jointly initiating measures to calm down international financial markets, implementing large domestic fiscal stimulus packages, strengthening the crisis response of international financial institutions and setting in place a mechanism for mutual assessment of member countries’ economic policies. These steps are credited with helping to contain the financial crisis.
Despite the pivotal role the G20 played during the initial stage of the global financial crisis, however, concerns were raised about a wide number of issues regarding the nature and implications of the G20 for global governance. Unlike the established institutional pillars, the G20 operated on the basis of an informal club summit process. A self-selective body in terms of membership, the composition of the G20 and the arbitrary nature of the selection of its members came under intense scrutiny. On top of concerns regarding legitimacy, most notably with respect to a potential rivalry between the G20 and the United Nations (UN) on economic policy issues, the effectiveness of the G20 was also called into question once the first cracks appeared between the European Union (EU) and the other G20 members, and in particular the United States (US), regarding the response to the Euro crisis.

In contrast to the commonalities punctuating collective action in the early stages, the G20 ten years on is no longer dealing with an immediate (financial) crisis, but rather with an (underlying) systemic crisis. The club grouping – at least according to a variety of social forces – is expected to address structural economic and ecological problems as well as a wider set of environmental and social crises on various levels. These different crises range from the threat of dangerous global climate change to questioning the benefits of global trade flows. According to this wave of criticism, a major shortcoming of the G20 has been its lack of ability and/or will to tackle these and other systemic challenges.

There was also a backlash against the ethos of placing cooperation before the sovereignty of nation states; a political zeitgeist challenged rules-based multilateralism. Public opinion and governments in some major G20 countries, for instance, nurture a fundamental unease with economic globalisation and international solidarity, fuelled by increasing socio-economic inequalities within countries and resulting populist pressures. When attitudes as expressed by the slogan ‘my country first’ gain ground within key states of the G20, critics claim that this club does not – and cannot – work for the greater, global common good. The legitimacy of the G20 is questioned both from within, by its member countries, and also from without, by non-G20 countries, given the potential system-wide effects of G20 policy decisions. Beyond those states represented at the top table, the G20 is therefore facing a societal backlash that is questioning its basic premise of existence, potentially cutting into the incentives of governments to support cooperative activities going forward.

Standing back from this significant but increasingly unsettled record of G20 summitry, this special issue allows reflection that stands in contrast to the instant analysis that occurred amid the 2008 crisis, with various works assessing the evolving role of the G20, exploring its longer-term benefits and limitations, and probing where it is moving. Questions in need of recalibrated academic research abound: Are the mechanisms of cooperation serving the established purpose, i.e., do they enable collective action of the right kind, and by the best actors? Are the right topics adequately addressed? And have the mechanisms and topics changed over time, possibly adjusting to changes in the global context? Existing structures of global governance, not least the UN or the World Trade Organization (WTO), are in protracted discussions on how to reform in order to be more efficient and effective, while better reflecting current power structures. Are the G20 processes assisting global adjustments or, rather, are they creating diversions with inadequate value added to existing structures?

The special issue also offers an opportunity to re-evaluate the role of ‘developing’ countries within the G20. The fraying of the old order has made more pertinent discussions
on how to manage global issues beyond the traditional and somewhat persistent G7 establishment. How do rising powers view the G20 and what has been their impact on the development of the forum? The G20 has been successful in drawing together key members from beyond the G7 into an integrated forum. Yet, as illustrated by the emergence of the BRICS, rising powers have established other summit processes beyond the G20. Similarly, the G7 has persisted as a distinct setting when some expected this forum to wither away. This can also be read as a continued desire – notwithstanding all their own differences – to meet without the presence of rising powers. The ambivalence of established and rising powers about the broader G20 setting can be contrasted in turn with the strong level of support for the G20 provided by middle powers beyond both the G7 and BRICS.

A decade into its existence, the G20 thus faces fundamental questions about the benefits it offers to its members and the overall system, as well as limitations of its institutional set-up and the future of global club governance. Where is the G20 contributing towards improving, or providing possible fixes for, global governance? How can the G20 model of club governance offer alternative settings with less formal and yet still legitimised activities? With whom should the G20 or groupings such as the BRICS or the G7 engage – and in what manner over which issues?

Recent G20-related scholarship has taken an appreciable turn towards both a deeper issue-specific focus as well as interest beyond the core components of the state-based summit processes. With these trends in mind, it is salient that the Think 20 has emerged as a key network focused on providing empirically-based policy recommendations on pertinent issues on the G20 agenda. Complementing this issue-specific research, this special issue focuses on the shifting dynamics of the institutional aspects of the G20. In doing so, the existing literature is built on but also stretched out in a distinctive fashion. Reflective of the need not only to address the G20’s potential to widen its agenda, the special issue aims as well to bring together diverse informed perspectives from the global South and North: the aim is to allow a comprehensive analysis of not only the institutional evolution, but also the social purpose of global club governance as exhibited by more than ten years of G20 summity.

**What is the G20’s role today?**

In terms of the shifting context of the G20, the theme that stands out is the erosion of the old – if not outdated – global order. While some of the traditional supporters of multilateral cooperation are turning their back on the global order they helped to create, a number of rising powers have taken a dualistic approach; they are acting both as insiders and outsiders. That is to say, not only have they to a large degree integrated into the existing global governance system, they have at the same time moved to widen their autonomous options. Not wanting to be locked exclusively into the G20, rising states have set up new institutions that better reflect their preferences. In addition to the BRICS, this evolving architecture includes the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. At the same time, rising states have exerted leverage as G20 members. Above all, they have taken a lead position in lobbying for reforms of the governance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) focused on increasing the voting share of countries beyond the West. In 2010, their campaign produced a substantive reform that eventually became effective in 2016, after a protracted delay in the US Congress.
These global power shifts notwithstanding, the need to animate cooperation beyond national settings has appreciably increased. Not only is the global economy that faced the abyss in 2008 facing new forms of volatility, exacerbated by the return of protectionism and trade conflict; mounting challenges have also appeared due to shifts in global climate patterns, with immediate consequences particularly for often poor and fragile states as well as vulnerable populations. The need to accommodate for less predictability of international settings has been joined with the need to react more effectively and more quickly.

Can the role of the G20 adapt to these changing requisites for effective global governance? Looking back, there are numerous interrogative perspectives on the G20: ascribed roles range from global directorate to catalyst for global change to hopeless ‘talk shop’. The G20 was created at the height of a global crisis – and was instrumental in policy coordination during a critical time. The ‘crisis management rationale’ might not have withered away from the G20 and might be one reason to view it as a pivotal mechanism – a kind of international insurance club – in the case of a new round of crisis of similar magnitude, whether in the global financial system or elsewhere. In the logic of ‘realism’, the G20 would then work as an arena for power struggles, where representatives try to gain the best possible deal for their respective countries, navigating transactional arrangements and blocking other initiatives. Modifying expectations in this fashion, the G20 is viewed as a sort of international clearance board of leading economic powers, providing an occasion for regular meetings of major powers. In this setting, each of the 20 members takes responsibility and sets a (vague) agenda for the club for one year, providing some structure for international discussions, and thereby building political capital and contacts, hoping to be able to use these for support whenever need be. In other words, the G20 would be serving the national interests wherever common ground can be identified. This realist, minimalist understanding of the G20 might partially explain why no country has defected from the group yet. The incentives for staying in the club may have changed, but they remain strong.

Still, the minimalist perspective might not be enough to justify the existence of the G20 over time. Rather than serving to establish the smallest common denominator of national self-interest, an ambition for the G20 – if not its mandate – is to contribute to the global common good, both as a forum to reach a common understanding on what constitutes the global common good as well as with regard to delivering policies that live up to a shared responsibility of the global commons. The chair of the G20 cannot pursue only its own national agenda, but needs to accommodate priority issues in other countries. In the absence of an immediate economic shock, it has become ever more difficult to reach consensus on fundamental issues such as preventing trade protectionism or the amelioration of dangerous climate change. The G20 clearly is not a ‘club of like-minded’, as the G7 has been (in the past), but rather a mechanism bringing together large economies (including established and rising global powers) to coordinate and deliberate on solutions. The protagonists are not necessarily on the same page when it comes to solutions, however, nor do they necessarily agree on the initial analysis of the problems.

In this complex and at times unproductive environment, the trend may be to revert to the appearance of a like-minded orientation. Notwithstanding a new and unanticipated lease of life, the G7 does not appear to have available the route of recalibration, especially in view of internal disagreements over fundamental questions, including the re-entry of
Russia. The preferred option therefore may be towards ad hoc initiatives, with a subset of countries belonging to the G20 participating. One signal of a shift toward this approach came with the conception by French president Emmanuel Macron of ‘vanguard countries’ with a selective inclusion of countries willing to make a commitment on an à la carte basis. Care would need to be taken under this arrangement to ensure that ad hoc coalitions, indeed, nudge the multilateral system rather than undermine it by creating alternative forums.

In contrast to the minimalist approach, the G20 has become more inclusive with respect to participation; it has evolved since 2008 in terms of the breadth of topics that are on the agenda and the number of stakeholders that are involved in the process. Inclusive settings, however, are often cumbersome to manage and notoriously slow to reach agreement and thus struggle with output legitimacy, particularly when speedy development of solutions is required. The G20 deals with this challenge by adopting an approach that can be called ‘differentiated inclusion’, outlined below.

First, the G20 has seen a broadening of the range of internal actors, mirroring the expansion of the G20’s agenda over the years beyond core economic issues such as financial stability and economic growth; the G20 agenda now incorporates issues such as climate change and sustainable development, women’s empowerment, and digitalisation and the future of work. This broadening of the agenda has led to the establishment of new working groups, study groups and task forces, further promoting the broadening and deepening of the agenda. Ministerial meetings have become a constant feature on the annual G20 calendar. That is to say, the G20 is much more than just a two days’ summit of head of state and government (supported by their sherpas, or personal representatives) and involves a broader range of governmental agencies of G20 countries.

Second, the G20 has co-opted additional actors in the international sphere to enable effective policymaking on specific issues or just to provide more legitimacy. The G20 is made up of 19 countries plus the EU – and rather than emphasising exclusivity of the club, as was the case in the early years during the financial crisis, inclusivity (or outreach) is deemed relevant for legitimacy. By now, it has become a tradition for the annual presidencies to invite additional countries as guests. Among these more or less regular guest countries are some that question the composition of the G20 itself (eg, some larger European economies, such as Spain or the Netherlands), while others, as smaller partners with no seat at the table, represent regional organisations. One large and mostly absent region is Africa. Only South Africa is a G20 member; the largest African economy – Nigeria – is not represented and the collective entity – the African Union – is rather a guest than a participant thus far. The dynamic allows for dedicated discussion rounds between members and guests. However, this differentiated status allows the retention of an inner circle within the G20, aimed at enabling targeted discussions before deliberating with ‘the wider world’.

Thirdly, motivated by considerations of the often-questioned ‘output legitimacy’, the G20 aspires to contribute to global discussions through quality of input, deliberations and agreements based on evidence. While there is no permanent secretariat or coordination structure, other than a loose troika format (of previous, current, and incoming chairs), various international organisations are asked to produce analytical input for the G20 work streams and to support the implementation of G20 decisions. As a result, however, these organisations also demand a seat at the top table.
Last, but not least, the G20 is increasingly engaging with transnational actors. It is well acknowledged that the changing politics of foreign policy require the consultation with transnational actors. The number of G20 stakeholders has been growing. The G20 universe comprises not only governmental actors and international organisations, but increasingly also several ‘engagement groups’ that represent different societal stakeholders such as business, civil society organisations, labour unions and think tanks. This effort of the G20 to be more inclusive may be a result of a need to increase input legitimacy through creating another tier of engagement. A number of ‘outreach groups’ alongside the G20 create linkages to relevant transnational actors, thereby going beyond the ‘state world’ in discussions. The aims of the B20 (business), C20 (civil society), L20 (labour), W20 (women), Y20 (the youth), T20 (think tanks) and S20 (science) groups range from lobbying the policy process and criticising the G20’s decisions to providing analytical input.

As the G20 has evolved into an increasingly wide-ranging club governance structure, critics have raised numerous concerns. One concern relates to the efficiency of the G20, a theme discussed in the wider literature on global governance and multilateralism, but one that poses particular challenges to the G20 for its own part as a global club governance structure. In its own setting, the G20 might be located between discussions on the multilateral system and those on (international) negotiations. Internal challenges are thus a natural factor even within this rather exclusive group which has aimed to build trust, nurture reputations, establish communication lines, work in fairness, and build a certain ‘esprit de corps’ (or ‘we-identity’) of those involved. In other words, the G20 summity is working with and towards elements that are identified as the cooperation hexagon. To some extent, criticism of the G20 might also resonate with debates in the EU literature, particularly on the EU’s erstwhile Common Foreign and Security Policy, pointed to as an example of the ‘capability–expectation-gap’.

In the early years, and under the impetus of acute crisis, many experts praised the G20 for its adoption of timely and effective measures in the years 2008 and 2009 that helped to cope with the global financial crisis. Since then, critics argue, the G20 has not been able to deliver outcomes that effectively address other global challenges. Initial hopes that the G20 would help to overcome gridlock in the UN by catalysing consensus in a smaller, supposedly more delivery-oriented setting proved wrong. Others argue that the G20, as a self-selected club of economically powerful countries, lacks the legitimacy and broad-based support among non-G20 governments and civil societies to act as the ‘premier forum for international economic cooperation’. Some fear that the G20 will undermine existing multilateral organisations such as the UN and its various sub-organisations. Critics aptly point to the protests – both peaceful and violent – against the G20 Hamburg Summit in July 2017 as illustrations of the club’s lack of connection to publics at large.

**Key lines of argument**

After a decade of G20 summity, how can we make sense of the institutional changes of the group during the past years, and which institutional reforms are necessary to address current societal challenges? The following section summarises the contributions included in this special issue and identifies three broad lines of argument.
The G20 as an institution in the evolving global governance architecture

First, in order to assess the G20’s performance, it is important to appreciate its changing institutional set-up and position within the broader global governance architecture.

There is a longstanding debate in the literature about the specific role the G20 has played (and should play) in the global economic governance architecture. While some scholars have argued that the G20’s strength lies in the prevention and management of immediate economic and financial crisis, others argue that the G20 should take over the role as a global steering committee that coordinates global policy-making on a broader scale. The contributions included in this special issue make clear that the discussion has moved on from dualistic views of the G20’s role. After a decade of global summitry, the G20 has become a more fragmented and decentralised global governance hub, or platform, that interacts with various international organisations, non-G20 countries and regional organisations as well as societal stakeholders including business, labour organisations, non-governmental organisations and think tanks (Cooper, Luckhurst and Larionova/Shelepov in this special issue). This evolution of the G20’s institutional set-up has been a response to the increasing unwillingness of states to cooperate internationally (Cooper in this special issue), and to increasing demands from societal actors and non-G20 governments to become part of the G20’s policy processes (Luckhurst and Mabera in this special issue).

This transformation of the G20 towards a global governance hub, though, does not mean that its effectiveness has vanished. It is increasingly important to evaluate the G20 not (only) on the basis of its actual policy output in the form of specific commitments and their implementation, but also in terms of its contribution to maintaining global governance in an era of increasingly contested multilateralism (Cooper in this special issue). In that respect, the G20 has played a role to stabilise international cooperation in some areas.

Furthermore, the expansion of the G20 universe by including societal actors favourable of international cooperation also has the potential to stabilise, if not transform, multilateral cooperation beyond the interactions of nation states (Luckhurst in this special issue). However, in light of mounting systemic challenges ranging from climate change, societal inequalities and the onset of the fourth industrial revolution, the mere stabilisation of international cooperation will not be enough. The question, therefore, remains as to how the G20 can contribute to multilateral cooperation that helps to tackle such meta-challenges.

G20 strategies for greater effectiveness

Second, the effectiveness of the G20 depends on its ability to build political coalitions, gather support from international organisations and to improve its underlying working group structure. Views, however, diverge on the question of whether this requires the G20 to become a more formalised international institution.

An evaluation of past experiences shows that the G20 has been most effective when the annually rotating presidency has been able to build a broad coalition within the G20 and gather the technical support of key international organisations (He in this special issue). This constellation is not only necessary to adopt joint policy initiatives but also helps to sustain their implementation during subsequent presidencies. The
green finance agenda, adopted during the Chinese G20 presidency in 2016, is a case in point. Another ingredient for effectiveness that is often overlooked is the role of the G20’s working groups (Villanueva Ulfgard/Vega in this special issue). Both in the Sherpa Track as well as in the Finance Track a number of working groups have been established during the past decade. These groups often comprise mid-level officials and meet regularly during the year leading up to a G20 summit. It is often in these groups that policy initiatives and commitments are drafted to be adopted by the leaders. Another important aspect of these working groups is that they allow for a dense interaction between G20 government officials and representatives of international organisations. There are also first steps, in particular in the context of the Development Working Group, to open the discussions of G20 working groups for regular exchanges with G20 engagement groups.

Nonetheless, whether current approaches are sufficient to accelerate policy development and implementation needed to support the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and the Paris Climate Agreement is up for discussion. A key criticism relates to the focus of the G20 on policy deliberation and not on policy implementation. One way to increase the effectiveness of the G20 is to increase its outcome orientation by assuming a role of a lead investor in a select set of strategic projects. One key reform that may be necessary in this respect may be the informalisation of G20 processes enabling ‘fireside chats’ among leaders (Kaul in this special issue). An opposite approach to increase the G20’s effectiveness could lie in the formalisation of the G20. In contrast to the mainstream view in the literature that the G20’s strength lies in its informality, the recent inability of the G20 to tackle urgent global challenges, and the increasing delegitimisation that comes with it, may necessitate an institutionalisation of the G20. Such an institutionalisation may include decision-making procedures beyond consensus, transparency guidelines and more formalised consultation processes for societal stakeholders (Benson/Zürn in this special issue).

The G20 and rising powers

Third, the specific role attributed to rising powers in this structure – at times organised in distinct groupings such as MIKTA or BRICS – merits specific attention in particular in view of their distinct status-seeking approaches.

The dynamics of integrating rising powers in the international system have attracted considerable attention in the literature. One aspect that is often underappreciated is the set of perceptions and expectations among the societies of rising powers. An investigation of the dynamics of legitimation with regard to club governance from the perspective of rising powers in comparison to old powers reveals interesting patterns (Brandi in this special issue). A key argument is that there are no substantial differences between old and new powers with regard to output legitimacy; they both put a stronger emphasis on indicators of output legitimacy such as effectiveness. However, when focusing on input legitimacy criteria it becomes clear that issues like participation are slightly more important for societal actors from rising powers than for those of old powers. Furthermore, this research indicates that speakers from rising power refer more frequently to the problems of poorer countries and their challenges than do speakers from old powers (Brandi in this special issue).
Beyond the categories of established powers and rising powers, the G20 also includes a number of countries that may be labelled as middle powers. The MIKTA countries (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Australia) are a sub-grouping of the G20 that has, so far, received little attention in the literature.²⁵ It is therefore necessary to understand how middle powers relate to club governance formats such as the G20 by analysing their priorities, conflicting interests and status-seeking policies. While all rising powers in the G20 focus on South-South development cooperation (SSDC) to underline their distinctiveness vis-à-vis traditional donors, interesting variations in their strategies can be observed (Parlar Dal/Dipama in this special issue). While countries like Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa and Mexico prioritise certain types of multilateral aid channels, others such as China, India, Russia and Turkey are more likely to adopt other types of multilateral aid and bilateral channels in their social creativity strategies through SSDC.

Conclusion

This special issue underscores the club nature of the G20 in global governance. Operating outside of the traditional pillars of formal institutional architecture, the G20 has always struggled with the question of legitimacy. Compounding the challenges confronting the forum, ten years on from the financial crisis of 2008, is the grinding down of group adhesion, exacerbated by the lack of binding rules within the forum.

That said, if operational flexibility and organisational fluidity have proved to be weaknesses, these characteristics are also sources of strength. As the group has evolved, although the instrumental capacity of the club culture has eroded, the network attributes of the G20 have been accentuated. This ‘stretching out’, in the form of its expanded membership, magnifies a fundamental question about the trajectory of the G20. If there is a strong image of the G20 moving towards the minimalist scenario, with the G20 becoming a forum associated with one-on-one meetings (and transactional arrangements) of leaders, there is the countervailing image of the G20 consolidating its position as an expanded summit process. The demand for the G20 to take the lead in terms of a broadening and deepening of the agenda clearly exists. Participants in and beyond the inner circle have remained engaged, with no sign of an unwillingness to take part.

Even as the intensity of the initial stage of the G20 activities has been lost, an appreciation of the hub status of the G20 has been extended. The paradox, however, is that under current conditions the framing of this hub status is diverging in a way that is completely at odds with the initial dyanmics of the G20. The US and the UK – the original instigators of the G20 – have withdrawn into an insular and transactional operational mode. Alternatively, some rising states that took the most low-profile – or even reluctant – stance at the outset have moved into the spotlight. Most notably, after backing away from the opportunity to take on the G20 presidency, India has embraced the host role for the 2022 summit. Akshay Mathur of Gateway House, an Indian think tank, made a compelling case as to why the G20 should be viewed positively by a ‘rising’ India, in line with a more inclusionary global system: ‘The G20 is unique. Here, developing countries can display their political, economic and intellectual leadership on a par with the most powerful countries. The G20’s rotating presidency ensures that no one country dominates the agenda’.²⁶
A similar emphasis is evident among various non-state engagement groups, and a central argument of this special issue is that this form of activity should be further institutionalised (Luckhurst, Benson/Zürn in this special issue). To make progress, however, the engagement groups are advised to focus on increasing their policy impact (Mabera in this special issue), on improved public diplomacy (Villanueva Ulfgard/Vega in this special issue) and on transparency (Benson/Zürn in this special issue).

Such activities will benefit the overall summit process; these include moves to counteract the attempt by chairs to shape agendas according to domestic purposes only, instead emphasising coalition building and seeking support from IOs (He in this special issue) and collaborating with engagement groups (Luckhurst in this special issue) to ensure more continuity.

The incentive for greater formalisation of the network dimension of the G20 is accentuated by the return of great power politics, especially in view of current posturing by Russia, China and the United States, including the disruption ethos of US President Donald Trump. In such an environment, the G20 will struggle to reach consensus beyond a lowered bar of expectations, as illustrated vividly by the Leaders’ Declaration at the 2019 Osaka Summit. This environment adversely affects the smaller and supposedly like-minded club of the G7, as well, as seen at the Canadian Summit in 2018 and the French Summit of 2019, although the dynamic was more contained at the latter.

For the G20, challenges such as the Osaka Summit’s 19 + 1 constellation on climate change shows that the group needs to think seriously about how to deal with the lack of cohesion in the summit process (and how to bring the US back in on climate issues). Maintaining bonds built over years of group dynamics in the face of these challenges, never mind pressing ahead with the implementation of policy decisions, will pose a greater test – in additional to those burdens already in place – for the G20’s pivotal position in global governance.

Notes

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