

G20 Outreach during Australia's Presidency: The Significance of Civil Society and the Civil 20 Process

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In recent years the G20 has engaged various social sectors via the development of G20 outreach and engagement groups. These outreach groups include the Think 20 (think tanks), Labour 20, Business 20, Civil 20, Youth 20, and Women 20. Each group includes representatives from these sectors selected by the host government and involves various meetings to discuss issues which relate to the G20. This outreach activity developed in the wake of the formation of the G20 as a leader's forum in 2009 and outreach groups operated formally during Russia's hosting of the G20 in 2013. The key issue is whether these forms of outreach are politically significant. Are these outreach processes serious and useful forms of public engagement which can enhance the effectiveness and the legitimacy of the G20 or are they a largely symbolic and tokenistic attempt to involve society? This paper considers how the Civil 20 outreach process operated during Australia's presidency of the G20 in 2014 and draws from an examination of the key policy outputs from the outreach groups and interviews with participants of the Civil 20/C20 outreach process¹ in order to analyse whether this outreach process was significant.

This paper contends that G20 outreach processes were clearly articulated by the Australian government and cemented the ongoing importance of G20 outreach in the annual G20 process. It also contends that the civil society participants took the process seriously and thought that the Civil 20 process promoted the transparency and legitimacy of the G20. Therefore while outreach processes are still nascent, the Civil 20 processes are more than symbolic and certainly have the potential to enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of the G20. However, there are still significant concerns about the Civil 20 process. Some Civil 20 policy ideas were evident in the G20 outcomes but some were ignored. Furthermore, there were some significant political narratives relating to widespread concerns about whether the Civil 20 process were sufficiently representative and inclusive, whether the Civil 20 process was equal with respect to other outreach groups, and whether the Civil 20 process was good for the long term standing of civil society.

In addressing these considerations the paper first examines why G20 outreach processes were established and how the Australian government conducted the G20 in 2014, it then outlines what key policy and political narratives developed within the Civil 20, and

¹ Fifteen one hour interviews were conducted in November and December 2014 with organisers and participants of the 2014 Civil 20 process.

considers what political dynamics and drivers operated within this outreach process. The paper concludes by considering the significance of the Civil 20 process and the problems and promise of these outreach processes in making the G20 more transparent and legitimate.

The Formation and Operation of G20 Outreach

The central purpose of the G20 is to facilitate intergovernmental cooperation and policy coordination amongst economically significant states that responds to economic crises. Given that the G20 is an informal form of global governance, its power and influence is not clear or straightforward (Alexandroff and Brean 2015: 9). The G20's influence is largely indirect, given that the G20 doesn't create binding international law. So its influence depends upon developing and endorsing policy ideas to be enacted by member states, and in respect to directing IGOs to enact G20 agreed measures in respect their policymaking mandates. This "endorsement function" is demonstrated in the ways that the G20 provides "high profile support for the agendas and work of other specialist agencies and IOs" with respect to a range of policy issues (Eccleston, Kellow and Carroll 2013: 301–3). The G20 operates on the basis that by deliberating and acting as a collectivity it will enable agreed policy ideas to have more weight than the ideas of any one country.

G20 outreach processes seek to amplify and disperse the policy ideas developed within the G20 process. As such, these processes are an overt attempt to legitimate the G20 by making it more transparent and accessible. Indeed, it is the case that by

putting the many, ambitious decisions they make together at their summit into action depends not only on coercive command and control measures but also on the voluntary cooperation and consent of their citizens and civil society stakeholders at home and beyond. ...How well the G20 and its leaders communicate their work to their citizens is therefore central to the effectiveness and legitimacy of G20 summit governance (Koch 2016: 1).

The formation of the G20 outreach groups are a core part of this strategy. These outreach groups attempt to increase the profile and effectiveness of the G20 without expanding its membership. The development of these outreach groups points to the ways G20 summitry is now underpinned by various forms of formal and informal policy making activity.

G20 outreach groups were developed due to two political dynamics. There was an external dynamic – social interests wanted to influence the G20 since it was created as a leader's forum in 2009. While business led the way with attempting to influence the G20, clearly the large NGOs in civil society followed the operation of the G20 and wanted to have their voices included (Koch 2016: 6). There was also an internal dynamic, where the G20 needs participants (especially business) to support its policy ideas, especially after the immediate impact of the global financial crisis began to wane in 2012 onwards. This led to G20 engagements with civil society in 2010 and 2011. These dynamics were

Steven Slaughter: G20 Outreach during Australia's Presidency

evident in discussions in the G20 Cannes meeting to more formally include outside voices:

We agree that, in order to strengthen its ability to build and sustain the political consensus needed to respond to challenges, the G20 must remain efficient, transparent and accountable. To achieve this, we decide to . . . pursue consistent and effective engagement with non-members, regional and international organisations, including the United Nations, and other actors, and we welcome their contribution to our work as appropriate. We also encourage engagement with civil society (G20, 2011).

Such measures were partially developed by Mexico in 2012, but were more fully developed by Russia in 2013 in the formation and operation of the outreach groups – except the Women 20 group which was created in 2015.

Outreach processes came to prominence in a context of global political uncertainty and fluidity which surrounded Australia's chairing of the G20 in 2014. The Australian government lead by Prime Minister Tony Abbott attempted to focus the G20 narrowly on economic issues from the very start of its presidency in order to promote economic growth and global financial stability (Rimmer 2015: 42). This reflected the politically conservative agenda of Tony Abbott, as well as reflecting the ongoing global economic challenges of low economic growth facing the G20. This narrow economic focus also meant the Australian government attempted to steer the G20 away from discussing the issue of climate change, despite this issue being a reoccurring topic of consideration by the G20. Furthermore, there were also intense geopolitical tensions after Russia's annexation of Crimea and subsequently removal from the G8 which threatened to undermine the cohesion of the G20. Some of the G20 members rebuked Julie Bishop when she raised the possibility of disinviting Russia to the Brisbane summit. These tensions were further fanned by Tony Abbott promising to "shirtfront" Vladimir Putin over the downing of the airplane MH 17 over Ukraine (Rimmer 2015: 47).

Despite these tensions the preparatory meetings were productive and leaders at the 2014 G20 summit did agree to some noteworthy outcomes. These outcomes included:

1. Developing a commitment to lift the G20's collective GDP by 2% above projection to promote growth in jobs and "inclusive growth".
2. The development of a Global Infrastructure Initiative and Global Infrastructure Hub to lift public and private investment in infrastructure.
3. Creating a goal to reducing the gap of participation rates of men and women in G20 countries by 25% by 2025.
4. Developing the G20/OECD Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) Action Plan to develop clearer transnational tax transparency between member states.

Steven Slaughter: G20 Outreach during Australia's Presidency

5. Furthering action with respect to corruption in the form of the 2015-6 G20 Anti-corruption Action Plan and Beneficial Ownership Transparency.
6. Developing the G20 Principles on Energy Collaboration and "phase out and rationalise" fossil fuel subsidies.
7. Endorsed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process to address climate change (G20 2014).

Despite these rhetorical outcomes there are nevertheless an array of different perspectives regarding the strength of these achievements and thus the success of the 2014 G20 process and the ongoing effectiveness and legitimacy of the G20. In this context the political significance of the Civil 20 outreach process is pertinent.

Civil Society Narratives and the Civil 20 Process

While the Civil 20 process was a formalised process to include civil society, there had been various forms of civil society involvement with the G20 and G7/8. This involvement often included various forms of protest and varying levels of G7/8 and G20 engagement with civil society at various summits (Cooper 2013: 188). Furthermore, there was a general trend of formal IGOs being more open to voices of civil society in the light of the rising profile of activism during the 1990s. It was also evident that IGOs can be a location which generates the political agendas and spaces which cultivate the dynamics of civil society. Indeed, IGOs and other official forms of global governance sometimes act as what Randall Germain (2010: 501) terms an "institutional anchor", or what Sidney Tarrow (2001: 15) refers to as a "coral reef" for civil society activity, which creates a focal point around which transnational civil society can form and operate. The Civil 20 process was a conscious effort of the G20 to create such an ecosystem of civil society.

One important note about the types of civil society actors involved in the Civil 20 process is that it was predisposed towards and mostly captured those civil society actors who are involved in pragmatically challenging and reforming the G20, not those who seek to totally reject the G20 and global capitalism. Thus there are forms of significant civil society activity outside the G20 process, which includes "people summits" operating outside the Civil 20 process and various forms of protest intent on disregarding or rejecting the G20 and global capitalism (Koch 2016: 6-7). While there is significant diversity within civil society, the activity of those participants within the Civil 20 mostly followed the pragmatic effort to reform the G20 agenda.

The Civil 20 sought to provide "a platform for dialogue between the political leaders of G20 countries and representatives of civil society organisations" (C20 2014b). The 2014 Civil 20 process began in the preceding November once Australia took over hosting duties at the conclusion of the 2013 summit in St Petersburg. This involved the Australian government forming the Civil 20 Steering Committee chaired by the Reverend Tim

Costello and the Civil 20 Sherpa Joanne Yates. This also involved the four initial working groups focusing on the themes of “inclusive growth and employment”; “infrastructure”; “climate and sustainability”, and “governance” (C20 2014b). The steering committee first engaged discussion with leading groups in transnational civil society and then used an online crowdsourcing website called “C20 Conversations” to gain public inputs from interested people to help shape policy recommendations and position papers around the key themes. These themes were discussed at the Civil 20 summit held in Melbourne on the 20th and 21st of June which involved over 400 members of the civil society sector from Australia and abroad being included in various panel sessions and plenary debates. The resulting discussions were feed into a communique drafting committee which created a Civil 20 communique which was approved at the end of summit and presented to the host government.

There were multiple reoccurring narratives involved in the Civil 20 process. Narratives in the context of the G20 are drawn from policy documents, observations of the Civil 20 summit and online activity, as well as interviews with participants of the Civil 20 outreach process. The examination of narratives with respect to the G20 process include two interwoven forms of account. On one hand there are *policy narratives*, which are reoccurring policy ideas about the substance of the G20 policy agenda. On the other hand there are *political narratives*, which are reoccurring impressions regarding the official processes of inclusion, representation and deliberation in the policy making process of the G20. There were also some political narratives that related more to the internal politics of civil society activity with respect to Australian civil society and transnational civil society.

Policy and Political Narratives within the Civil 20 Process

There was a wide variety of policy narratives involved in the Civil 20 process, as various civil society groups advanced their specific causes to be taken seriously by the Civil 20 Steering Committee. Looking at the Civil 20 communique developed in June and the final G20 communique developed at the conclusion of the G20 summit in November, it was clear that a few policy narratives developed by the Civil 20 were apparent within the G20 process and resonated with G20 outcomes. Most notably the idea of inclusive growth was championed by Civil 20 in 2013 and 2014, and has appeared to join the standard nomenclature in G20 communiqués. The Civil 20 Summit Communique’ in 2014 made seven references to inclusive growth and the term appeared in G20 outcomes.

Furthermore, the 2014 Civil 20 process saw some other policy ideas which appeared in G20 outcomes, including: G20 support for developing transnational tax transparency to address tax avoidance, the inclusion of climate change as a topic of debate, the commitment to rationalise fossil fuel subsidies, support for anti-corruption measures, and commitments to reduce the gap of participation rates of men and women in G20 countries. While no one in the Civil 20 process thought that the Civil 20 group had an

independent role in ensuring that these policy narratives were sustained, they certainly believed the process played a supporting role in promoting these policy ideas.

There were some civil society groups whose positions were not supported by the Civil 20 process. Most notably civil society activists who advanced the idea of a “steady state economy” and zero economic growth were not supported by the majority at the Civil 20 Summit and therefore did not appear in the Civil 20 Communique. There were also some policy narratives articulated by the Civil 20 process which were ignored by G20 processes or where the Civil 20 discussed a policy area in a fundamentally more demanding way than the G20. In particular there was a far more sustained support within the Civil 20 process for: increasing public funding of social and health infrastructure rather than physical infrastructure, more debate about developing social protections and addressing food security. Also while the G20 committed to “phase out and rationalise” fossil fuel subsidies, the Civil 20 communique wanted a more definite commitment to “immediately end” fossil fuel subsidies (C20 2014a: 3).

While the Civil 20 process developed a range of policy narratives which fed into the G20 process, there were a wide range of political debates surrounding the legitimacy of the G20 process and the utility and legitimacy of the Civil 20 process as well. These reoccurring political narratives relating to Civil 20 process were evident in the practice of the Civil 20 online processes and public events, as well as in the interviews conducted with people involved in the Civil 20 process. There were eight important reoccurring political narratives regarding the Civil 20 process and its relationship with the G20:

1. **The valuable role of the Civil 20 process in supporting the G20 was a repeated political narrative.** As one of the interviewees said: “the G20 needs champions in the real world”. This supports the views circulating in and around the G20 that the G20 needs to broaden the policy discussions beyond officials and diplomats. This means that G20 leaders need help to engage with their publics, explain G20 decisions and effectively “sell” global governance. This view was evident in the Civil 20 communique when it stated that “civil society has an important role to play in translating the G20’s language and architecture into a meaningful narrative by giving a voice to citizens affected by its decisions. Strong civil society input improves the quality of policy settings in the G20’s overall inclusive economic growth narrative ... We welcome civil society’s inclusion as a permanent engagement group within the G20 believing that the inclusion of civil society input adds legitimacy to the G20” (C20 2014a: 5).

Furthermore there was also the politically astute recognition among Civil 20 participants that the G20 needs to include business to be effective with its agenda. But Civil 20 participants claimed that if business is included in the G20 process, then civil society must also be included for the G20 to be regarded as legitimate and fair.

2. **The political significance of civil society being “at the table” of the G20 process was a reoccurring story.** At a minimum, some participants noted that the Civil 20 process was seen to be “better than nothing”. Nearly every Civil 20 participant interviewed clearly identified that the Civil 20 process is a work in progress and better than no forum for civil society engagement. In a more assertive sense many participants noted the practical importance of the Civil 20 process giving a voice to the poor and ensuring that the G20 works for the benefit of those outside the G20 membership. Tim Costello (2014: 18), the Civil 20 Chairperson in 2014, claimed that “we are consulting with civil society globally and channelling the concerns of our diverse constituency into a formal policy development process, which will see achievable policy solutions presented to the G20 for consideration. We bring to this process our deep engagement with those on whose behalf we advocate – in particular, those without a strong voice on their own”.
3. There were repeated claims that the development of the Civil 20 and the routine inclusion of civil society in the **G20 process meant that a wider range of views were involved in the lead up to the G20 summit.** There were reoccurring references to the tension between doing justice to this diversity and presenting a “united front” in trying to develop a coherent and practically useful response to the G20. However, most participants noted that not all civil society actors and views were included. There are certainly the dynamics of NGO inclusion and exclusion with respect to the G20, with most NGOs and activists involved in the Civil 20 being “insiders” and some being “outsiders” to the G20 process.
4. **There was the reoccurring story of civil society needing to “find a way into the G20 agenda” and purposely engage with the priorities and language of G20.** This often required engaging old political concepts and reworking them to adapt to civil society concerns and objectives. One repeated example noted by Civil 20 participants was the way that the Civil 20 process took the idea of economic growth and adapted it towards the idea of inclusive growth by including civil society concerns about inequality. This activity was conducted within the Civil 20 process in both 2013 and 2014, illustrating that this purposeful refashioning of political lexicon was most effective when conducted over multiple G20 summits.
5. **Many Civil 20 participants noted that the Civil 20 process had “differential access” to the G20 compared with other engagement groups, especially the B20 and that there were tensions between civil society and the Australian government.** Over the course of the G20 process and summit, the Civil 20 sought more access to G20 leaders and equal access to the access the B20 had. Related to this narrative was the often repeated refrain that “the Civil 20 was under resourced”. While the B20 was self-funded

and the T20 was heavily funded by the government, the civil society funding was significantly less. Some civil society participants noted that the Civil 20 needed more resources to invite more disadvantaged representatives from civil society in Less Developed Countries.

As such, Susan Harris Rimmer (2015: 52) contends that “the Abbott team also may have paid too much attention to the B20 at the expense of other engagement groups with broader social concerns”. As a result Civil 20 participants noted and the Civil 20 had important dialogue and influence within G20 working groups and behind the scenes – not at the “big sexy summit” of world leaders or with especially strong connections to the host government.

One interviewee characterised the Civil 20 process as one where civil society was “swimming against the tide” on quite a few important issues. This included issues such as inclusive growth and including climate change in G20 deliberation, where there was initially strong Australian government resistance to both these policy issues. More generally, outside observers of the 2014 G20 processes noted that “it is not clear that the Abbott government is prepared to seize opportunities to engage constructively with civil society” (Dalton and Butcher 2014).

6. **There was the repeated refrain that the Australian Civil 20 process overrepresented Australian civil society and underrepresented civil society groups from other countries.** While overseas civil society groups and people were certainly present and active at the Civil 20 summit, some civil society participants noted that there were questions about the breadth of representation and consultation in Civil 20 process because the online process were weakly supported, were only in English which created a language barrier, and the high costs for traveling to Australian made attending the Civil 20 summit a difficult prospect for some civil society groups.
7. **There was a well-developed narrative that the Civil 20 process better represented the large NGOs, rather than smaller NGOs.** Some civil society activists noted that the big NGOs were involved in “engagement by default” with the G20. Big NGOs automatically engage with government and global governance (Oxfam saw the G20 to be a “critical vehicle” for its agenda), whereas smaller NGOs (such as Friends of the Earth) saw legitimating the G20 to be a dangerous and problematic activity which can reinforce the status quo. This can readily affect the policy narratives that the Civil 20 process will endorse.

Observers of the 2014 G20 processes noted that “gains in both “voice” and policy influence have been greatest for large, national, highly professionalised and more “corporate” social service organisations – what we might call “Big Charity”. Big Charity also understands that its capacity to exert influence on policy is

proportionate to its willingness to be “civil” in its dealings with government” (Dalton and Butcher 2014).

8. **Many of the activists emphasised that the Civil 20 is a “bolt on” for civil society, it is not a replacement for the normal processes of civil society activity.** The Civil 20 is a structured and a “top down” process established by the government hosting the G20, it is not wholly an organic process established by civil society networks. While the people involved in Civil 20 committee were well regarded within Australian civil society, it was clear that they had significant agenda setting power when the Civil 20 Summit was determining the communique and the leadership of the summit had to balance doing justice to the diversity of the summit with developing a relevant and focused communique to present to the government.

Two consequences of the government appointed nature of Civil 20 process were noted by civil society activists. First, the Civil 20 process was more palatable for governments than the normal activism of civil society or of the big NGOs. But the big NGOs have various avenues of influence outside of the Civil 20 and G20 process. Second, even those participants supportive of the way the Civil 20 process was conducted, indicated that Civil 20 process should move to not being only “handpicked” by the host government. Many civil society participants pointed to the possibility of using pre-existing civil society networks.

While the Civil 20 process involved a range of political narratives regarding the utility and legitimacy of the Civil 20 process for the ongoing operation of the G20, there were also narratives regarding what the Civil 20 process means for the civil society sector. There were two important reoccurring political narratives relating the future operation of the civil society sector:

1. **There was a political narrative in reference to whether the Civil 20 process was a genuine political space for civil society values to influence global governance.** This was divided political narrative founded on widely debated question. For some civil society participants in the G20, legitimating the G20 is problematic. For them the G20 outreach is a heavily “managed process” which has limits on the capacity for civil society to dramatically alter the direction of global policy making. As one activist noted you can get “caught in the frame of the dominant discourse” and questioned whether can you really challenge or change the frame. For other civil society participants the Civil 20 process offers a promising way to influence the ideas circulating in global governance. While most civil society people were worried about the possibility of civil society being socialised by G20 priorities, most civil society actors involved were pragmatic and claimed that good work can be done by engaging the G20 in particular policy areas and advancing global action with respect to issues like climate change, inequality and tax transparency.

2. **There was a distinct political narrative the civil society needs further forms of institutionalisation to better influence policy making.** Numerous participants identified that the Civil 20 process as being a rare chance for related civil society groups to work and network together. As such, there were repeated calls that Australian civil society needs further institutionalisation beyond existing Australian civil society networking for developing stronger engagement with global governance and transnational civil society. Some also claimed that there also a need for more institutionalisation at a global level, as they is no real equivalent to the business sector's International Chamber of Commerce.

Conclusion

The Civil 20 process generated a range of perspectives and narratives. While it is difficult to establish the political significance of the G20 outreach processes on the basis of one year, there are strong grounds to contend that the Civil 20 process in 2014 was a politically significant process and not just a symbolic exercise. Despite this, there remain concerns about the Civil 20 process. There are three concluding points that can be made about the significance of the 2014 outreach processes. First, the outreach processes clearly demonstrate that G20 is more than an international forum as it now has transnational networks routinely involved in its operation as well. The involvement of the Civil 20 group and the other outreach groups is crucial to enabling the G20 to be able to disseminate its policy influence and legitimate its existence by developing "champions in the real world".

Second, the outreach processes have some degree of policy influence, because wider sets of ideas were included and some policy ideas in the outreach forums resonated with G20 outcomes. While civil society did not have any autonomous influence in sustaining these policy ideas, there was certainly the belief that the Civil 20 process can play a role in supporting ideas that correspond with the values and priorities of the civil society sector. It is also clear that this Civil 20 influence was most pronounced when civil society influence was sustained over various G20 summits. While the overall impact of the Civil 20 and civil society influence in the G20 is a work in progress, but it certainly appears that G20 outreach processes offer much more transparency and offers the potential to make the G20 more publicly accountable for its summit declarations and the determinations of policy makers working in the lead up meetings.

Third, it is unclear what the Civil 20 process means for the civil society sector. There is the danger of civil society being co-opted and managed in this process and significant differentials in influence of the outreach groups remain because the host country has the power to determine outreach processes. A crucial issue going forward for the effectiveness of G20 outreach processes is whether civil society is able to independently establish enduring networks able to represent the diversity of civil society interests in the

G20 process. While there needs to be some focus on the agenda of the G20, there is space to make the outreach groups more autonomous from the vagaries of letting the host of the G20 determine the nature of civil society engagement. The future of the G20 will depend on ensuring that the narratives and networks informing the G20 process are open to a variety of voices from the civil society sector.

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