



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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Indian Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi receiving South African President Mr. Cyril Ramaphosa for the G20 Leader's Summit on September 9, 2023. Source: [X/@PresidencyZA](#)

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African Pulse:

South Africa, the G20, and the Global South

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South Africa, the G20, and the Global South

by

Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj & Arshiya Chaturvedi

Executive Summary

The G20 is an economic forum of the world's 19 advanced and emerging economies, the European Union, and now the African Union. Its core mandate is global economic stability and financial cooperation, with investment and development central to its agenda.

Since 2022, the G20 has witnessed a unique Global South moment with four consecutive presidencies — Indonesia, India, Brazil, and now South Africa. This is both symbolic and substantive: a chance to shape the global agenda around the South's concerns. For South Africa, the moment is historic, marking the first time an African country has held the G20 presidency since the forum's inception in 1999.

Across these four presidencies, the South has had a platform to push shared priorities — from AU membership in the G20, to disaster resilience, women's empowerment, reform of IFIs, and the elevation of African issues. The developing country arc has been unparalleled. Yet, has the South fully capitalized on this opportunity? Each presidency has pursued its own priorities, but continuity has been limited. The question remains whether this has generated lasting momentum for issues long pressing on the South — debt, finance, climate action, resilience, gender equity, and institutional reform.

With this much-touted moment ending as the presidency shifts back to the North in 2026, what are the key takeaways to sustain a united Southern voice? Options include: institutionalising a Global South track within the G20; forming a caucus of Southern members; leveraging the AU's presence to foreground African priorities; enhancing complementarity with BRICS, where India holds the chair next year; and pushing for concrete deliverables on issues that matter most to the South.

This brief seeks to examine the principal concerns and priorities of the Global South, while reviewing the key achievements of the G20's developing-country arc and evaluating the agenda of this year's Summit. It will also analyse the opportunities and challenges of South-South coordination, and will explore how stronger South-South coordination could inform future G20 Summits and contribute to the Global South's continued relevance within the G20 framework contributing to its greater relevance within the G20 framework.

The Emerging Agenda of the Global South

The Global South's pursuit of a common agenda began in the 1960s, via initiatives like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Group of 77 (G77) within the United Nations, and the call for a New International Economic Order (NIEO). These movements aimed to challenge the Western-led global order, foster South-South cooperation, and enhance their collective negotiating power in international forums.¹ While these efforts succeeded in raising the Global South's agenda, the movements gained significant momentum only in the 21st century. This acceleration was due to two critical geopolitical shifts: the gradual decline of Western dominance and the simultaneous rise of Global South countries, a phenomenon often described as the 'rise of the rest'².

The traditional Western-led global system seems to be fracturing, reflected in the US's 'America First' policies, its withdrawals from global institutions, and the imposition of tariffs that challenge the liberal trade order it once championed. Concurrently, Europe is struggling to remain globally competitive. Significant inconsistencies have emerged within the collective West regarding national capacity and strategic priorities, eroding the cohesion of decades-old alliances. Simultaneously, the rise of Global South powers – led first by China's exceptional growth, followed by influential players like India, Brazil, South Africa, Vietnam, and Indonesia – has secured them a stronger role in global decision-making. With this increased capacity, these nations are now articulating the broader interests and priorities of the Global South, including economic development, human empowerment, climate action, green energy, food security, industrialization, digitalization, and job creation.³

The current system, established by the Global North, has also not fully kept pace with the Global South's growing power, population, and needs. Reform is therefore critically needed to make global governance more democratic and just. A widely advocated reform is the demand for fair and effective representation in international institutions, particularly the expansion of the permanent UN Security Council (UNSC) membership to reflect contemporary global realities. Global economic institutions like the IMF and World Bank have also faced intense criticism as legacies of colonialism that reinforce hierarchical divides between developed and developing nations. In response, several alternative platforms have been developed, including the BRICS

¹ Bull, Benedicte, and Dan Banik. 2025. "The Rebirth of the Global South: Geopolitics, Imageries and Developmental Realities." *Forum for Development Studies* 52 (2): 195–214. doi:10.1080/08039410.2025.2490696.

² Zakaria, F. (2008). *The Post-American World*. W. W. Norton.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5842.2008.00993.x>

³ UNOSSC. "South-South Cooperation: An Engine for Transformational Change in Achieving the 2030 Agenda." United Nation Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), May 26, 2025.
<https://unsouthsouth.org/2025/05/26/south-south-cooperation-an-engine-for-transformational-change-in-achieving-the-2030-agenda/>.

New Development Bank (NDB) and the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), which offer developing countries a platform to shape global economic governance outside of traditional Western-dominated frameworks.⁴

The Global South is actively championing a more inclusive and pluralistic multilateralism. This was reflected in India's successful 2023 G20 presidency proposal to include the African Union as a permanent member.⁵ Within the international trade framework, Global South countries have consistently pressed for a greater voice and transparency on issues like special and differential treatment, subsidies,⁶ and intellectual property rights.⁷ Their advocacy also extends to establishing fairer systems for development and climate financing to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In this context, India has recently advanced its Global Development Compact⁸, while South Africa, ahead of its 2025 G20 presidency, has just commissioned a landmark report on income inequality.⁹ These efforts underscore the Global South's determination to address both climate justice and structural economic disparities. Other pressing issues include the de-dollarization of international payment systems and the diversification of raw-material-based economies into industry-based ones.¹⁰

The overarching goal of these efforts is to strengthen South-South cooperation and secure a greater role for the Global South within the international system. In this light, four consecutive G20 presidencies hold both symbolism and substance, presenting a unique opportunity to frame the agenda and shift the balance of influence in global governance.

‘Achievements’ of the Global South Arc

Since 2022, G20 leadership has rotated through a unique arc of developing countries – Indonesia, India, Brazil, and now South Africa – providing a prolonged political

⁴ Gray, Kevin, and Barry K. Gills. 2016. "South-South Cooperation and the Rise of the Global South." *Third World Quarterly* 37 (4): 557–74. doi:10.1080/01436597.2015.1128817.

⁵ MEA. "G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration". Ministry of External Affairs, the Government of India, September 2023. <https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/G20-New-Delhi-Leaders-Declaration.pdf>

⁶ WTO. "Ministerial Conferences - MC12 Briefing Note." World Trade Organisation (WTO), n.d. https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/minist_e/mc12_e/briefing_notes_e/bfwtoreform_e.htm.

⁷ WTO. "Understanding the WTO - Intellectual Property: Protection and Enforcement." World Trade Organisation (WTO), 2015. https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/agrm7_e.htm.

⁸ Prime Minister's Office. "English Translation of Prime Minister's Closing Remarks at the Inaugural Leaders' Session of the 3rd Voice of Global South Summit." Press Information Bureau, the Government of India (PIB), August 17, 2024. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseFramePage.aspx?PRID=2046238>.

⁹ The Presidency, Pretoria. "President Cyril Ramaphosa Launches Historic G20 Experts Taskforce Led by Joseph Stiglitz to Combat Extreme Wealth Inequality." G20, South Africa 2025, August 29, 2025. <https://g20.org/g20-media/president-cyril-ramaphosa-launches-historic-g20-experts-taskforce-led-by-joseph-stiglitz-to-combat-extreme-wealth-inequality/>.

¹⁰ Supra Note 4

space to advance the concerns of the Global South. These, however, are not just regional priorities but issues of global significance.

Indonesia, in its presidency, focused on global health architecture, the sustainable energy transition, and digital transformation in a post-COVID world.¹¹ India's G20 chairmanship in 2023 was particularly significant, emphasizing green development, inclusive growth, progress on the UN SDGs, technological transformation, reform of multilateral institutions for the 21st century, and women's empowerment. India achieved notable outcomes, including political consensus on the establishment of the Global Biofuel Alliance and the creation of a new Working Group on Women's Empowerment. It also secured agreement on the inclusion of the African Union as a permanent G20 member, enhancing the forum's inclusivity and reinforcing India's standing as both a bridge builder and a strong voice of the Global South¹² – credentials it will carry forward into its 2026 BRICS Presidency.

Brazil, in its 2024 agenda, prioritized combating hunger, poverty, and inequality, while promoting sustainable development and pushing for reforms in global governance, particularly of the IFIs.¹³ Climate finance and technology, however, continued to yield underwhelming results. South Africa, in turn, has emphasized a range of issues – Agenda 2063, energy, debt, peacebuilding, and mineral beneficiation – while again placing climate finance high on the agenda.

The 'legacy' of the Global South moment

The much-discussed Global South moment in the G20 has left behind a set of legacies that are both symbolic and substantive, shaping the contours of global governance going forward.

The inclusion of the African Union into the G20 was historic. While others had raised the idea, it was India that ultimately brought the ship to port, placing the AU on par with the EU. This step advanced a more inclusive model of global governance and proved that reform of multilateral institutions is possible with political will – a cause India has long championed at the United Nations through its call for a reformed Security Council.

¹¹ Mr. Liu . "Briefing by the G20 Indonesian Presidency to the General Assembly | United Nations." Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations (UN), April 1, 2022. <https://www.un.org/en/desa/briefing-g20-indonesian-presidency-general-assembly>.

¹² Supra Note 5

¹³ The Presidency, Brazil. "G20 Brazil ." Ministry of labour and Employment, Federative Republic of Brazil, April 8, 2024. <https://www.gov.br/trabalho-e-emprego/pt-br/assuntos/g20-brasil-2024/g20-english-version>.

Alongside this, development issues such as climate finance, debt relief, and the SDGs gained greater traction. These priorities remain central and have been carried forward under South Africa's G20 presidency in 2025.

Equally important was the rise of Global South coordination within G20 dynamics. India gave this real shape through its "Voice of the Global South Summit" ahead of its 2023 presidency, creating a unique platform and vehicle for Southern concerns.¹⁴

Perhaps the most significant legacy is the shift from being rule takers to agenda setters. In a multipolar world where old structures are crumbling and new voices are emerging, the Global South has moved from the margins to shaping the agenda – a change of lasting significance.

Continuity carried Forward

The Global South presidencies have carried forward strands of continuity within the G20. From Indonesia came the global pandemic fund, the digital economic transition, and a just energy transition to help the South phase out fossil fuels. From India, development-focused priorities – the SDGs, climate, disaster resilience, and digital public infrastructure – gained traction. Brazil bridged North-South agendas by putting equality, hunger, energy, and IFI reform at the centre. South Africa now inherits an expanded role, with the AU as a permanent member, giving Africa a stronger voice in shaping the global agenda.

The G20 and BRICS linkage

India's chairmanship of the G20 in 2023, followed by its BRICS presidency in 2025, creates an unusual moment of influence across two very different platforms. The G20, a global forum bringing together advanced and emerging economies, is designed to shape responses to systemic economic challenges. BRICS, by contrast, is an informal coalition of non-Western rising powers, more explicitly supportive of multipolarity and alternative options for its members. While the institutional settings of the two forums do not easily allow for direct interlinkage of agendas, the overlap in priorities is evident: reform of the United Nations Security Council, restructuring of international financial institutions, and advancing South-South solidarity. For India, stewarding both forums in quick succession offers political space to inject renewed energy into these long-standing concerns—using BRICS to build collective options, and the G20, if sufficiently empowered, to translate them into outcomes with wider impact on the global economy.

¹⁴ MEA. "Voice of Global South Summit 2023." Ministry of External Affairs, the Government of India (MEA), January 2023. <https://www.mea.gov.in/voice-of-global-summit.htm>.

South Africa's G20 Presidency¹⁵

South Africa's G20 Presidency marks an especially important and historic moment. It is the first presidency from Africa, coming directly after the admission of the African Union to the G20 in 2023, and it places Africa at the centre of the G20 table for the first time – not merely as a participant but as an agenda setter.

The 2025 G20 is anchored in the theme of Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainability, with the underlying objective of advancing the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and addressing widening global inequality. The eradication of inequality has been emphasised in particular, as it lies at the root of many global crises including underdevelopment, instability, health challenges, climate change, and unemployment. To achieve these objectives, South Africa has delineated key agenda points to foster discussion and encourage the adoption of practical courses of action among G20 members.

The first agenda point concerns climate change-induced natural disasters which, though global in scope, pose an especially severe challenge for developing countries due to their limited institutional and financial capacities. By elevating this issue to the leaders' level, South Africa seeks collective action from international stakeholders – including financial institutions, development banks, and the private sector – to strengthen disaster resilience and expand post-disaster reconstruction efforts. Closely linked to this is the agenda on climate finance. Developing nations require greater resources to pursue green transitions and sustainable economies. South Africa urges G20 members to adopt a framework that strengthens multilateral development banks (MDBs), supports country platforms such as the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), and mobilises private capital to expand both the quality and quantity of climate finance.

Another priority is the unsustainable level of debt, which severely constrains the inclusive growth of developing economies, including those in Africa, by limiting governments' capacity to invest in critical areas such as infrastructure, healthcare, and education. Through the G20, South Africa intends to push for reforms to ensure fair and transparent sovereign credit ratings and to address the high-risk premiums that developing countries continue to pay. In this context, South Africa has proposed the establishment of a Cost of Capital Commission, a proposal that will be considered at the Summit in November.

¹⁵ The Presidency. "G20 Presidency." G20, South Africa 2025, n.d. <https://g20.org/g20-south-africa/g20-presidency/>.

South Africa's agenda also highlights the challenge of critical minerals and the need for mineral beneficiation. Africa has historically suffered from the "resource curse," and with the rising global demand for critical minerals in today's technological era, South Africa intends to call on G20 members to cooperate in harnessing these resources in ways that promote inclusive and sustainable growth. In addition, South Africa has proposed establishing task forces to advance cooperation in key areas such as Inclusive Economic Growth; Industrialisation, Employment, and Reduced Inequality; Food Security; and Artificial Intelligence, Data Governance, and Innovation for Sustainable Development. It has also suggested a review of the G20's work over the last 20 years as a deliverable under the Sherpa Track Initiative.

Altogether, it is an ambitious agenda – firmly centred on Africa and its priorities, while situating them within the wider framework of global governance.

The US and Its Strategic 'Absence'

The South African agenda broadly incorporates major global issues with particular attention to the needs of developing countries, highlighting the G20's potential to address challenges more inclusively. However, President Trump's suggested boycott of the G20 conference over South Africa's land policies – which he termed the 'Land Confiscation Law' while alleging 'white genocide' – has raised concerns about the group's effectiveness. The absence of the United States has already been felt across multiple levels of leadership consultations: Secretary of State Marco Rubio did not attend the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting, citing South Africa's 'anti-American' agenda and its stance on DEI and climate policies, while Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent skipped South Africa's first G20 finance meeting to join President Trump's inaugural cabinet session in Washington.¹⁶

None of this is insignificant. As one of the world's major powers, the US plays a critical strategic role in advancing policy initiatives. Its absence is especially concerning given that the G20 presidency is set to transition from Africa to the United States next year. Such disengagement not only weakens the G20's ability to deliver on pressing global issues but also exposes internal fractures within the grouping.

This situation places South Africa in a particularly delicate position: managing a troika composed of Brazil, South Africa, and the United States – a challenge in itself. It highlights the tension between Global South activism and the influence of the G7, underlining the complex balance that the G20 must now navigate.

¹⁶ Farouk Chothia. "G20 Foreign Ministers in South Africa but US Snubs Meeting." *BBC*, February 20, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy9d4dzprz3o>.

South-South Cooperation within the G20: Challenges and Policy Options

The successive presidencies of Global South countries within the G20 have, to some degree, strengthened the collective voice of developing nations by championing their causes and generating political momentum for action. Yet serious gaps remain, raising doubts about the long-term sustainability of these efforts. A case in point is the Working Group on the Empowerment of Women—an initiative launched under India's G20 presidency, with its first meeting convened in January 2024 under Brazil. Questions linger about its continuity and effectiveness. Similarly, in 2014 under Australia's presidency, members had committed to narrowing the labour force participation gap between men and women by 25 percent by 2025. However, a recent study suggests that as of 2024, only 9 out of 19 G20 countries are on track to meet the Brisbane target.¹⁷

Similar uncertainties surround the African Union's recent inclusion in the G20. While this represents a symbolic expansion of Global South representation, the tangible impact of incorporating African concerns into the forum's agenda can only be assessed over time. Much will depend on the AU's institutional capacity to deliver on its mandate—a question that ultimately the Union itself must answer.

Part of the difficulty in sustaining Global South priorities stems from the vast disparities among its member states in how they perceive themselves and define their national interests. The very term "Global South" suffers from conceptual ambiguity, with no universally agreed definition. Some interpret it geographically, others through shared colonial histories, and still others in terms of developmental levels. As a result, each presidency tends to foreground its own priorities, which often fail to carry over into the next cycle, producing fragmentation and a lack of continuity. This undermines coherence and weakens the long-term effectiveness of the Global South in advancing its political and strategic interests.

To address this, the Global South needs to harmonise its agenda by institutionalising a collective voice within the G20. One option is the creation of an informal coordination platform for Global South members within the G20 process—a means of giving greater continuity and weight to Southern concerns as the presidency shifts. Such a platform, operating through sherpa-level consultations, ministerial huddles, and leaders' side-meetings, could help ensure that issues like debt, climate finance, and inequality retain traction beyond any single chairship. India's consultations with

¹⁷ Harris, Kelsey. "Closing Gaps, Opening Opportunities: The G20's Progress on Women's Economic Empowerment—and What Comes Next." Center For Global Development, July 31, 2025. <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/closing-gaps-opening-opportunities-g20s-progress-womens-economic-empowerment-and-what>.

the Global South ahead of its 2023 chairship could serve as a model for a permanent track within the G20, ensuring consistency, coherence, and stronger advocacy.

The challenge is compounded by the fact that while developed members of the G20 bring strategic resources, expertise, and influence, these very attributes often dilute or sideline Global South priorities. Complicating matters further, the G20's financial clout is relatively limited when compared to the G7, despite the former representing a much larger share of the world's population and global GDP. The G7's strength lies in its cohesion: a small group of homogenous, advanced economies with aligned systems and fiscal priorities. The G20, by contrast, comprises highly diverse economies with divergent financial and market structures, making consensus on issues such as debt relief, concessional financing, and climate finance difficult to achieve.

To strengthen financial credibility and ensure sustainable resources for Global South concerns, the G20 should consider coordinated measures such as resource pooling, common financial standards, mobilisation of private finance, reform of international financial institutions, and the creation of issue-specific working groups. Another promising step would be closer coordination between the BRICS and the G20, to avoid competing agendas. With India assuming the BRICS presidency in 2025 after having chaired the G20 in 2023, the moment is ripe for such synergies.

The Global South must also take advantage of the final stretch of four consecutive developing-country presidencies before the baton passes to the United States in 2026. This is a crucial window to push for tangible outcomes on urgent issues: debt relief frameworks, climate resilience, digital infrastructure partnerships, and inclusive growth through critical minerals. On debt reform, members should press for G20-backed mechanisms that provide disaster and climate-resilient financing, especially for Low-Income Countries (LICs). Potential reforms include scaling up contingent credit lines or catastrophe bonds via Multilateral Development Banks, creating a risk-pool fund, investing in resilient infrastructure and early warning systems, linking post-disaster aid to resilient design standards, and establishing a G20 open repository for climate data and technology.

On critical minerals – essential to the global green transition but concentrated in many developing countries – the Global South should advocate a coordinated policy framework. Such a framework should mandate local value addition, environmentally responsible mining, minimum governance standards, and stability guarantees to ensure that resource-rich developing nations are not reduced to mere suppliers but secure meaningful economic gains from their assets.

South Africa, the current G20 chair, has already shown commitment by commissioning a report on income inequality, providing a valuable basis for mapping the broader developmental landscape at a time when the SDGs are faltering. Leveraging this momentum, and with harmonisation, institutionalisation, and financial reforms, the Global South can strengthen its influence within the G20 and secure more sustainable outcomes for its members.

Conclusion

The world today is multipolar, marked by the growing influence and strategic importance of developing countries on the international stage. These nations have moved from being rule-takers—merely following global norms set by powerful states—to becoming rule-makers, actively shaping international agendas. With South Africa presiding over this year's G20, Africa has the opportunity to bring both national and broader developing-world concerns to the table of the world's leading economies, much as Indonesia, India, and Brazil have done in their recent presidencies.

However, the Global South is a highly diverse grouping, encompassing countries with different national priorities, capacities, and policy frameworks. To effectively advance their interests in multilateral forums such as the G20, it is essential to harmonise these varying interests into a set of common priorities. Establishing an informal Global South platform within the G20, as recommended, would help build consensus on major concerns that can then be presented collectively and more forcefully. Such institutionalisation would ensure greater cohesion and consistency, while also preventing Global South agendas from being diluted by more powerful nations.

At the same time, it is important to note that divergence is not limited to the Global South bloc alone. The G20 itself, like many other international organisations, faces deep internal differences that affect its capacity to reach consensus and take coordinated action on complex global issues. Diversity of membership inevitably produces a diversity of views, which, while enriching the discourse, also complicates collective decision-making. Overcoming this challenge requires the promotion of coordinated economic and policy frameworks through measures such as issue-based working groups, standardised guidelines, and joint action plans. These mechanisms, when embedded within the G20 and mirrored across other multilateral platforms, can provide continuity and structure, enabling diverse members to find common ground and move from rhetoric to tangible outcomes.



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