

G20 Leads the Way on Plastic Pollution

By THOMAS S. AXWORTHY

THE Group of Twenty, or G20, is an international forum made up of leaders from nations and international organizations that is now the epicenter of world governance. As its name implies, the G20 is formally composed of 19 nations plus the European Union, but it also includes “permanent” invitees such as the heads of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, plus the chairs of organizations like the African Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The countries that make up the G20 account for 90 percent of the world GDP, 80 percent of world trade, and, with countries like China and India as members, two thirds of the world’s population. Along with the annual fall session at the United Nations, the annual meeting of the G20 is the most important gathering of leaders in the world. This year’s G20 meeting was held for the first time in Osaka, Japan, from June 28 to 29, 2019.

With 193 countries as member states, the United Nations (UN) is the most representative institution of world governance. However, with that many countries and leaders, it is very difficult to reach consensus. Decision-making at the UN is, therefore, painfully slow. The UN is universal, but it moves at a glacial pace. In the mid-70s, this contributed to German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s creation of a new body for more streamlined



A shark-shaped piece of art made from used plastic bottles debuts in Rizhao Ocean Park of Shandong Province, calling on the public to protect the marine environment.

decision-making, the Group of Seven (G7).

The G7 consisted of Japan and major Western powers, and, as Schmidt (a founder of the InterAction Council after his retirement as chancellor) once explained at an IAC meeting on why the G7 was necessary, the leaders could meet informally to discuss issues, coordinate actions, and get to know one another rather than listening to set speeches at the UN General Assembly. At the time it was formed, China was closed to the world because of the “cultural revolution” and India was just emerging economically. The G7 functioned reasonably well as a coordinator of the world economy, though right from the start there were critiques that it was a closed Western shop.

By the mid 1990s, with China and India remaking the world economy, it became clear that the limited membership of the G7 was hobbling its effectiveness as a coordinator of World economic policy, and a new institution. As a result, the G20, was formed in 1999. The G20 expanded the representative imperative of a world economic body by including countries like China, India, Turkey, and South Africa while keeping the decision-making focus of the G7, and not expanding so much that



it would resemble the United Nations. The G20 seeks to balance the twin needs of representativeness and effectiveness.

Initially, the G20 was composed of finance ministers from the 20 countries, which made for an enlarged decision-making circle, but heads of state and government were not as involved as they had been in the G7. Leaders, however, began to attend the summit in 2008. This proved so effective that the leaders decided the G20 would replace the G7 as the main economic council of member states. President Xi Jinping defined the traditional role of the G20 well at the 2016 Summit in Hangzhou when he said, “G20 members should strengthen their coordination in macroeconomic policies, jointly promote growth, and safeguard financial stability.”

The responsibility of hosting the annual summit is rotated among the member states with the leader of the host nation becoming the President of the G20 for the year to follow. The host leader can invite states from the region as guests to the annual summit and the heads of

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major international institutions like the United Nations are permanent invitees. In addition to the heads of state and government, finance ministers, foreign ministers, heads of central banks and invited guests who attend the annual summit, functional meetings of ministers from the member states also meet to discuss in detail issues like climate change or human migration, and their conclusions are brought to the leaders at the summit.

Given that the host of the G20 changes annually, there is no international secretariat – each host country is expected to handle organizational details. Some believe this lack of continuity is a weakness of the G20 framework. And although the G20 was formed to be more representative than the G7, nations who are not members complain about the fairness of the selection. Poland, for example, has campaigned to become a member in its own right, though its interests are not forgotten because the European Union, which includes Poland, is a member of the G20. Singapore has also formed the Global Governance Group of 30 non-G20 countries to aggregate views and take them to the G20.

Another major change in the G20 was the decision in 2015 to move beyond the original global financial and economic coordination mission of the organization

(best exemplified by the 2008 decision of the G20 members to pour trillions of dollars into the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to stave off economic collapse) to discuss “issues of global significance.” One example of this new activism was the recent meeting of G20 environment ministers in Karuizawa, Japan, prior to the June summit in Osaka. The ministers called for an action plan to be implemented to counter marine plastic waste.

The InterAction Council applauds the G20 for moving on this critical priority. At the 2018 InterAction Council plenary meeting in Beijing, the Council called on the world to reduce plastic consumption and to eradicate the vast amount of plastic already in our oceans. Every year, more than eight million tonnes of plastic waste are dumped into the world’s oceans. It is estimated that there are 5.25 trillion pieces of ocean plastic debris, which kills more than a million sea birds and thousands of other marine animals a year.

China has taken one critical step in getting the world to take the problem of plastic pollution seriously. In 2017, China banned the importation of plastic waste:

rich countries like the United States and Canada had been exporting plastic waste to be cleaned and turned into new products by other countries. But this only encouraged individual consumers to continue buying more and more plastic bags and plastic water bottles knowing that the waste was being shipped away far from home. About 25-40 percent of the plastic waste was not suitable for recycling due to contamination, and therefore much of the waste was instead diverted to landfills. The Philippines, for example, recently demanded that Canada pick up the contaminated waste that was sent years ago and now containers full of trash are returning to Vancouver. Vietnam, Thailand and other nations have now followed China's lead and banned the importation of plastic waste. China is working on domestic conservation, too: it recently announced a pilot plan for 10 zero waste cities.

One hundred and eighty-six countries and the European Union have signed a treaty – the Basel Convention – giving countries the right to ban imports of contaminated or hard to recycle plastic waste. It also requires shippers to obtain prior consent before they ship any of such product. The United States is one of the few countries that has not ratified the Basel Convention. With China closing its waste market, the United States is now sending plastic waste to Bangladesh, Laos, and Ethiopia (the top three exporters of plastic waste are Japan, the United States, and Germany, according to UN Comtrade database). The *Guardian* newspaper reports that in the United States there are 68,000 containers of plastic waste ready to be shipped to any underdeveloped country willing to take the mess. With the United States generating 34.5 million tonnes of plastic waste annually, enough to fill a football stadium a thousand times over, the *Guardian* calls it “the United States of Plastic.”

The G20 is right to call for an action plan on plastic. There is so much to be done: China, for example, now bans the import of foreign plastic, but plastic bags and bottles remain everywhere in China, making it still responsible for roughly 29 percent of the world's plastic pollution. And the rest of the world is no better. But a good place for the G20 nations to start implementing its action plan is to adhere to two basic principles – the oceans are no one's dump and take responsibility for your own waste. ■

THOMAS S. AXWORTHY is Secretary-General of the InterAction Council.

Globalization: The Inevitable Route for Human Development

By XU JIN

GLOBALIZATION is one of the most noticeable ongoing international phenomena with the longest duration in recent decades. It is recognized to be the most striking feature marking the current era, exerting significant influence on international relations. On the one hand, the international community has demonstrated a state of “phenomenal flourishing trade, great investment facilitation, personnel mobility, and enormous technological leaps,” which as a result has progressively forged a community of a shared future interlinking individuals. On the other hand, with the increasing degree of interdependence, the threats and challenges facing all countries worldwide are becoming more common. In particular, issues such as climate change, financial crises, large-scale outbreak of infectious diseases, and cyberattacks, have become globalized, and need to be addressed through global governance. Regardless of the positive and negative effects, globalization, as the trend of our times, has become the overriding rule and inevitable route for the international community.

Roots and Sustainability of Globalization

The history of human development is the history of human beings expanding their scope of activities based on the requirements of the development of productive forces and the level of scientific and technological progress. As a result, human beings in one place gradually move from their respective places of origin and