

INFLUENCING THE G20 AGENDA FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE: A GUIDE FOR CHANGE MAKERS



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1. Introduction

The Group of 20 (G20) plays a critical role in shaping the global economy by influencing economic policies and agendas worldwide. Its decisions—both formal and informal—can be determinative in either fighting or fueling inequalities and advancing or hampering human rights.

This guide aims to briefly capture the valuable experiences of various civil society organizations (CSOs) engaging with the G20 in diverse capacities. It highlights advocacy challenges and opportunities within the G20 and offers recommendations to maximize its potential for advancing economic justice demands.

The G20 issues a broad number of recommendations and assumes different commitments each year. Countries presiding over the G20 sometimes prioritize issues at the core of the agendas of CSOs fighting for economic justice. For example, the 2024 Brazilian G20 Presidency has led to significant efforts to promote the idea of taxing the super-rich at fair minimum rates globally and to increase public participation within the G20 innovatively. The current South African Presidency similarly pledged to take forward advances achieved under previous presidencies, such as increasing fair financing for development and “achieving fair international taxation regimes, including taxation of the super-rich”.

Yet promising advances can lose continuity, given the G20’s system of annually rotating presidencies. The lack of both accessible information about the G20 and effective engagement strategies creates additional challenges for CSOs and social movements aiming to drive change in this space.

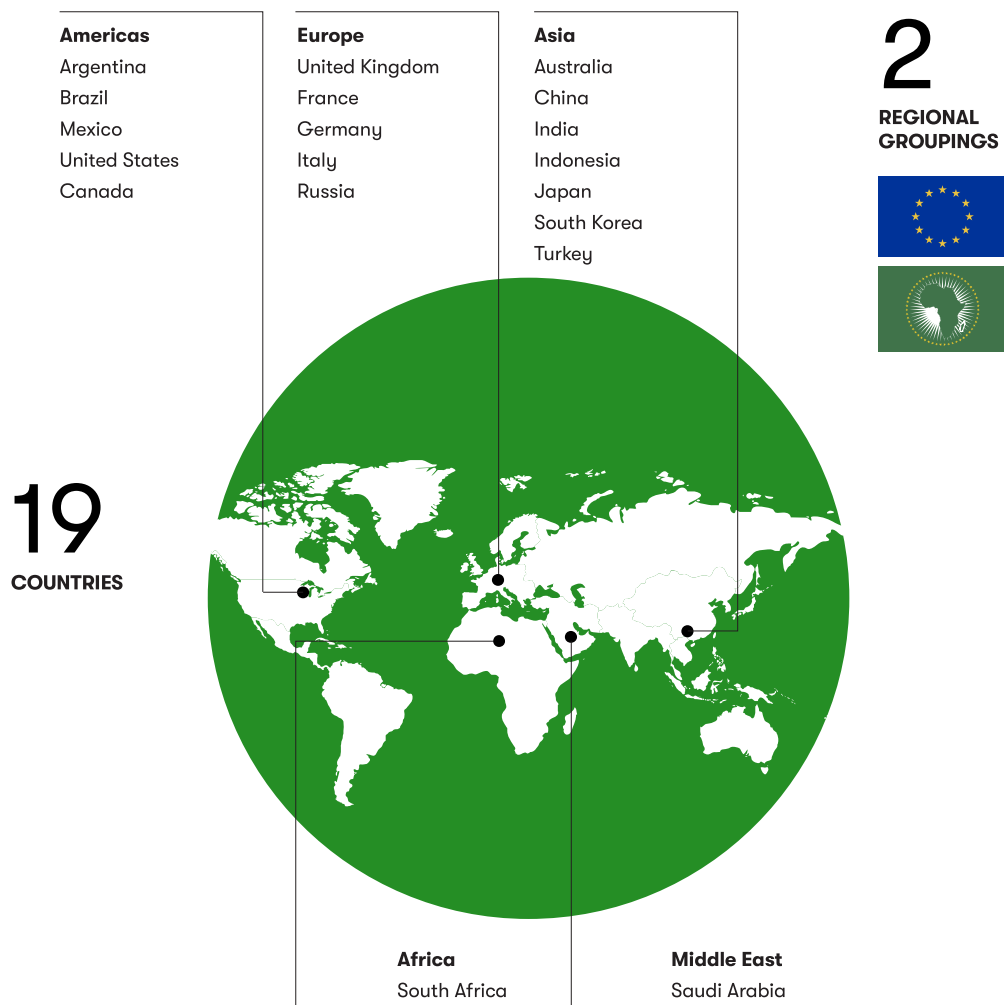
CESR developed this guide through a series of reflective conversations with partner organizations deeply engaged with the G20 on issues of economic justice and global economic governance reform, alongside insights from CESR’s own experiences. We would like to thank ABONG (Brazilian Association of Non-Governmental Organizations), AFRODAD (African Forum and Network on Debt and Development), the EU Tax Observatory, Gestos, ICRICT (Independent Commission for the Reform of International Corporate Taxation), the Institute for Economic Justice (IEJ), INESC (Institute of Socioeconomic Studies), and Oxfam South Africa for their active engagement in this process and their generosity in sharing insights and reflecting on the lessons learned from their work.

We gathered these learnings through horizontal exchanges—virtual and in-person, individual and collective—enriching the guide with diverse perspectives and experiences.

2. What is the G20 and how does it work?

The G20 is a group comprising 19 countries and two regional groupings (the European Union and African Union), initially established to promote cooperation on international economic and financial issues. It brings together some of the world's largest economies, collectively accounting for 85 percent of global gross domestic product and two-thirds of the world's population.

Launched in 1999 in response to the Asian financial crisis, the G20 originally convened finance ministers and central bank governors. After the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, the group expanded to include a “Leaders’ Summit” under a new “Sherpa Track”. While this expansion broadened the G20’s focus to encompass a wider range of issues prioritized by member countries each year, its core work continues to center on economic and financial matters.



As a result, the G20 now operates through two tracks: the Finance Track (led by ministries of finance) and the Sherpa Track (led by national leaders and ministries of foreign affairs). Each track comprises various working groups, task forces, and initiatives focused on specific topics. These groups hold meetings throughout the year, culminating in an annual summit of heads of state at the end of each G20 presidency cycle.

Other parts of the G20 system

- The G20 also includes several **“engagement” groups**, self-organized interest groups formed by sector and active since 2009.
- Engagement groups include the **Civil Society Group (C20)**—referenced throughout this guide—along with others representing sectors such as **Think Tanks (T20)** and **Businesses (B20)**.
- These groups are organized into working groups, meet regularly throughout the year, and produce recommendations, briefs, and other materials to influence participating states.
- During Brazil’s G20 Presidency, engagement groups were allowed to formally present their recommendations to both G20 tracks—a **significant innovation**, as formal participation is typically limited on the Finance Track.
- The G20 also engages **advisors and guests** to provide analysis and support. These include entities such as the **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)** and the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)**. Spain remains the G20’s only permanent guest nation.

Being an **informal** space, the G20 is not a permanent institution with a secretariat, offices, or staff, nor does it have any legal status or representation. As a result, decision-making and implementation depend largely on countries’ political will and negotiations.

The G20’s leadership rotates annually, with each participating country taking turns to hold the presidency. The presiding country plays a crucial role in establishing priorities and setting the agenda for the year. To ensure continuity and a smooth transition between presidencies, there is a “troika”, comprising the current, previous, and upcoming presiding countries.

During each presidency cycle, the G20 issues an end-of-term Leaders’ Declaration addressing a broad range of topics, along with potential Ministerial Declarations on more specific issues related to the thematic areas of relevant ministries. These declarations typically feature high-level, general commitments. (Previous declarations

and outcome documents can be accessed at the University of Toronto's G20 repository at www.g20.utoronto.ca.)

Beyond declarations, G20 meetings can produce other outcome documents, such as general principles, compendiums, policy priorities,² and roadmaps. The G20 also regularly commissions reports, articles, and investigations. The G20 may also establish independent panels³ or put in place mechanisms among its members,⁴ eventually mandating a separate entity to further develop a proposal.⁵

To learn more

For an overview of the G20 and prospects for the South African Presidency, see this [explainer](#) developed by the Institute for Economic Justice.

For a compilation of important G20 documents, see University of Toronto's G20 repository at www.g20.utoronto.ca.

3. How do CSOs and social movements engage with the G20?

CSOs can carry out several advocacy actions within the G20. When engaging, they seek different goals and use various complementary tactics. Examples of what CESR and some of our partners have done around the G20 include participating formally in engagement groups, as either Sherpas of the C20 (their main points of contact), co-facilitators of working groups, or members.

Some organizations have taken on an “outsider” role, contributing to efforts to organize and mobilize around the G20. For instance, some of our partners have supported the organization of the “Peoples’ Summit” in Brazil and have actively promoted campaigns and broader advocacy efforts. Others have provided technical support to governments, either formally or informally, by developing technical proposals and producing evidence-based materials for use by policymakers.

Additional activities include crafting media strategies, drafting recommendations for participating governments, creating resources to make the G20 more accessible to the public, and organizing events and workshops, among other initiatives.

Overall, tactics and opportunities to engage with the G20 are diverse, often combining both insider and outsider approaches sometimes within the same organization. When determining goals and strategies for engaging with the G20, it is essential to clearly assess the organization’s positionality to define its role and the scope of advocacy opportunities effectively.

4. What did we learn from our advocacy with the G20? Challenges and opportunities to advance economic justice

The G20's characteristics—such as its informality, rotating presidencies, and the broad range of engaged actors—present challenges and opportunities for CSOs to advance economic justice through advocacy. Reflecting on past efforts, we have identified factors that facilitate effective advocacy alongside persistent challenges, though promising tools and strategies exist to address these obstacles.

Main challenges

I. Lack of continuity

The G20's system of rotating presidencies and lack of formal institutional rules create a significant risk of losing continuity on topics and agendas prioritized under a given presidency. Each presiding country tends to focus on its “signature” issues, driven by its political preferences. As a result, issues championed by one presidency are unlikely to receive the same level of attention or support under the next, as each country prioritizes its own agendas.

As a result, issues that initially appear promising may lose momentum over time due to shifting priorities and the absence of formal structures to maintain the forum's institutional memory. For example, discussions around financial transaction taxes have seemingly lost traction at the G20 in recent years.

For organizations engaging with the G20, it is crucial to recognize the risk of topics losing continuity. One key lesson from this challenge is the importance of building on the legacy of previous C20 and G20 efforts rather than starting anew each year. Additionally, while the G20 serves as a valuable platform for fostering discussions, it is essential to ensure that topics are also pursued in other relevant forums to maintain momentum and broaden impact.

II. Political tensions and watered-down outcomes

While the G20 brings together “the biggest economies in the world”, it includes both developed and emerging economies, regardless of their political regimes. This distinguishes it from spaces like the G7, which comprises exclusively “liberal democracies”. As a result, political tensions are more likely to arise within the G20 than in other more politically aligned multilateral forums. The diversity within the

group also reflects significant differences in priorities and conditions among member countries. For instance, G20 economies derive their wealth from varying sources—some rely heavily on services, while others depend on natural resource extraction—shaping their distinct policy stances.

The absence of formal decision-making mechanisms, combined with the need for political compromises in such a diverse group, often leads to diluted commitments to achieve consensus. Consequently, G20 outcomes tend to lack ambition and are often broad rather than detailed or technically specific.

While the G20, often through partnerships, can theoretically contribute to developing principles, blueprints for action, and certain mechanisms, it is crucial for CSOs to plan strategically how to sequence their demands across the G20 and other forums. Although the G20 can raise the profile of an issue, organizations aiming for greater ambition or specificity should align their G20 advocacy with efforts in other spaces where more detailed and impactful outcomes can be achieved.

III. Changes in national politics

The G20's lack of formal structures and institutional practices means that political changes at the national level in participating countries can significantly influence the group. This is particularly evident on the Finance Track, where finance ministers may be relatively “volatile” and susceptible to political pressure, amplifying the impact of shifting national contexts.

For CSOs advocating around the G20, tracking political developments across all member countries can be overwhelming, especially with limited capacity. This challenge is compounded by the fact that some countries adopt contradictory stances—pushing for progressive reforms internationally while acting conservatively at home.

Adding to the complexity, internal disagreements within governments can affect G20 negotiations. For instance, in discussions on international tax reforms, conflicting positions may arise among tax authorities, ministries of finance, and ministries of foreign affairs. In such cases, CSOs' advocacy for progressive positions can play a vital role in resolving these internal tensions and driving forward a unified agenda.

CSOs actively engaging with the G20 should invest time in exploring and understanding the political contexts of participating countries. By doing so, organizations can design strategies that anticipate potential changes and are resilient enough to withstand shifting political dynamics.

IV. Complexity of the forum and capacity constraints

The launch of the Sherpa Track, coupled with the introduction of new agendas and priorities with each rotating presidency, has transformed the G20 into a complex mechanism with limited information accessible to the public.

This complexity poses significant challenges for CSOs with limited capacity to engage with and navigate such a multifaceted mechanism. Even organizations playing key roles in G20 processes often lack dedicated resources to fully commit to a year-long, labor-intensive engagement.

The experiences of organizations taking leadership roles within the C20 highlight the extensive challenges and capacity constraints CSOs often face. Managing working groups with numerous members, navigating language and time zone differences, traveling across a host country, attending frequent meetings, supporting governments, and addressing financial limitations all demand significant work, time, and personal commitment.

Furthermore, the more open and inclusive a group aims to be, the greater these challenges can become, especially since convening bodies or “secretariats” are typically small and under-resourced. Ultimately, these high demands on effort, time, and capacity tend to favor the involvement of more “professionalized” CSOs, potentially limiting broader participation.

Building and maintaining robust networks and partnerships are essential to navigate the challenges of complexity and ensure smooth transitions for civil society across G20 presidencies. Active engagement with the G20 requires a well-structured timeline and effective communication tools to facilitate the exchange of information. Incorporating these elements into CSOs’ tactics and strategies is crucial for ensuring the efficient functioning of their work within the G20 and C20 frameworks.

Additionally, participating organizations may benefit from identifying alternative spaces to collaborate with partner organizations outside the rigid timeline of a G20 presidency. It is also advisable to establish mechanisms to manage and resolve contestation among engaged CSOs, given the multifaceted nature of the C20 and its diverse participants.

V. Connecting the national and the international

The G20 primarily focuses on international issues, but the country holding the presidency often includes agenda items that align with its national priorities. CSOs engaging with the G20 are frequently national organizations that either support or challenge these priorities while working to bring their own demands to the discussions. Ultimately, national organizations are best positioned to represent

the people whom G20 commitments aim to benefit and should therefore have a meaningful voice in the process.

However, mobilizing national organizations from the host country around G20 issues can be challenging, especially when these topics seem disconnected from their tangible, grounded agendas and concrete struggles. A broader challenge lies in making the G20 process resonate with citizens, as it often appears too abstract and overly political. Despite this, the issues discussed “at the top” are deeply linked to real problems faced on the ground.

Limited opportunities for participation in everyday policymaking further encourage the use of platforms like the G20 to advance local demands. This can be particularly difficult early in the process when there is often a lack of full understanding of the G20 cycle and its implications.

Translating technical discussions into tangible issues—and vice versa—is essential for meaningful engagement. Working with federations of national movements, rather than engaging with individual members separately, can help bridge the gap between local and international concerns. Federations and networks are often better positioned to “translate” broad G20 discussions into actionable realities on the ground. Additionally, identifying common threads in demands, rather than seeking identical demands, has proven to be an effective approach.

Main opportunities

I. Agenda-setting and influencing high-level authorities

Since G20 priorities and agendas are largely shaped by the preferences of the presiding country, influencing its agenda may be more feasible than in other forums. National organizations with “access” to their own ministries are particularly well positioned to exert influence.⁶ Moreover, the G20 has proven to be especially effective for agenda-setting and generating momentum and political support around specific economic issues.

As a result, CSOs—particularly those involved in the C20—can play a crucial role in shaping the host government’s positions, especially on issues where key public officials may initially be unconvinced at the start of the presidency cycle.

CSOs aiming to build political support and influence agendas should first identify which government office will take the lead on a particular issue. Early engagement with relevant officials is crucial, along with advance planning for a series of events and meetings to ensure sustained advocacy efforts.

II. Increasing visibility and media engagement

The G20 offers significant potential to amplify visibility for key issues, spark new conversations, and normalize discussions on important topics. When “the biggest economies” address a subject, it often reduces the political cost of engaging with proposals related to economic justice, making them more acceptable globally. Leveraging media—both national and international—is crucial to capitalize on this opportunity, as it not only influences public opinion but also shapes the perspectives of decision-makers.

CSOs should strategically plan to engage with both international and national media as a core component of their advocacy efforts, leveraging the G20’s platform to maximize attention and support for their agendas.

III. Using G20 discussions for advocacy in other fora

The G20 provides valuable opportunities to galvanize CSO action on economic justice across various spaces, serving as a “stepping stone” to advance work in other forums. It can also help reframe and elevate national-level debates, particularly where specific issues face resistance from domestic actors. For example, some Latin American countries outside the G20 have endorsed Brazil’s efforts under its G20 Presidency through the Regional Platform for Tax Cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean (PT-LAC)⁷ to promote an international approach to taxing the super-rich.

The G20’s discussions on progressive taxation can help catalyze related debates at the national level, particularly in contexts where such topics are often deemed too politically sensitive or are outright obstructed.

At the international level, while the G20 is effective at elevating topics to the public agenda, CSOs should also seek additional forums to “land” ideas and complement G20 discussions. This approach can be particularly beneficial for advancing new agendas. For example, in areas like economic justice and taxation, CSOs could replicate their demands in spaces such as the Financing for Development process or negotiations for a United Nations Convention on Tax Cooperation.⁸

IV. Coordination among engagement groups and building cross-sector collaboration

The work of engagement groups and the wide range of issues the G20 now addresses create opportunities to build global, cross-sector coalitions of CSOs. For instance, CSOs can collaborate with politically aligned research institutions under the T20 or with research centers working alongside the G20’s official tracks. The extent to which engagement groups provide collaboration opportunities for CSOs may vary from year to year, depending on factors such as alignment with the presiding government, prevailing political positions, and internal decisions regarding how “open” the space is for cross-sector collaboration.

The G20 Presidency of Brazil gathered the different engagement groups often, as an important legacy of its effort to build a “G20 social”. Engagement groups were therefore able to share recommendations, debate, and understand that even when their *positions* on certain issues were different, the *issues of relevance* themselves were the same. Brazil’s decision to allow engagement groups to formally present the recommendations on the two official tracks was also relevant and should be maintained in the future. The South African Presidency of the G20 is committed to continuing the G20 social initiative⁹.

The G20 also provides opportunities to expand and disseminate CSOs’ work, and a useful platform for utilizing research and bringing work into the public domain.

V. Expanding the G20’s “strategic advisors”

The G20 typically engages a range of strategic advisors. Some intergovernmental entities, such as the OECD and the IMF, are routinely engaged as technical partners. CSOs engaging with the G20 can explore opportunities to provide technical assistance and advice to G20 members, particularly the host country.

Issues to handle with care

I. Social participation

The G20 can create opportunities for broader mobilization and campaigning around economic justice issues. For example, Brazil’s G20 Presidency committed to enhancing social participation on the formal tracks and beyond engagement groups, including on the Finance Track. South Africa has initially signaled its intention to increase participation efforts under its 2025 G20 Presidency.

Yet broader social participation and engagement around the G20 call for a careful balance between the “insider” and “outsider” approach to advocacy. For some organizations, it can be challenging to engage formally with the G20 while at the same time not fully legitimizing the group, often questioned for its lack of inclusivity. Efforts to organize peoples’ summits or counter-summits around the G20 can also meet resistance from the hosting government (particularly in the context of increased international media coverage), creating further tensions. At the same time, governments advancing progressive agendas on economic justice can benefit from receiving more vocal and radical demands from the “outside”.

II. The pace of decision-making

Since no formal decision-making procedures exist, G20 members can broadly agree on issues based on their political will. This flexibility allows for fast decision-making, as

the G20 was created in response to crises and is often seen as particularly effective at reacting quickly to problems.

While agile conversations give opportunities to bring new issues to the table and launch new agendas, fast processes can be challenging for CSOs regarding capacities and planning “where next” in their strategies.

Learning by example: Brazil’s legacy on taxation of the super-rich and tactics to advance the agenda

In their November 18, 2024, Leaders’ Declaration, G20 leaders made important commitments regarding taxation, inequality, and sustainable development.¹⁰ Notably, G20 members recognized that progressive taxation is critical to reduce inequalities. In addition to celebrating domestic progressive tax reforms and emphasizing the importance of domestic resource mobilization for sustainable development, the declaration marked significant progress in international cooperation on progressive taxation.

The declaration commits countries to cooperate “to ensure that ultra-high-net-worth individuals”—the so-called “super-rich”—are effectively taxed. This cooperation could involve sharing best practices, advancing discussions on tax principles, and developing anti-tax-avoidance mechanisms. Leaders also endorsed the Rio de Janeiro G20 Ministerial Declaration on International Tax Cooperation.¹¹

Both declarations are unprecedented and reflect the potential that advocacy around the G20 can have in pursuing economic justice. Moving forward on this agenda, key lessons from working under the Brazilian G20 Presidency include:



- The importance of connecting the dots in CSO demands and joining forces. For instance, issues like taxation are relevant to tax advocates and to organizations focused on climate, debt, social rights, and policies urgently needing funding, such as social protection, education, and development. Building broad coalitions to sustain momentum and advance change is crucial.



- Narratives, messaging, and framing should be integral to all strategies and adapted as G20 presidencies change and new ideas are championed. Tailoring strategies are important even when advocating on similar issues, as each country wants to leave a “personal trademark” on the G20. For example, the connection between taxes and inequalities may be central for

one country, while the link between taxes and development may be more relevant for others.



- Advocacy priorities should be seen not solely as “G20 priorities” but as priorities across relevant processes, such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change’s Conferences of the Parties (COPs), the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development, and the UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation negotiations.



- It is crucial to sustain and build on the efforts made during the Brazilian G20 Presidency, such as allowing formal participation of engagement groups on the Finance Track and framing the G20’s work on economic issues as “Fair, Inclusive, and Anti-Racist Economies”.¹² This approach gave the group enough flexibility to encompass demands from a wide range of actors, including those addressing the legacies of colonialism.



- Debates on tax at the G20 should align with other discussions on mobilizing resources within the group. This is crucial, given the focus on private finance and “innovative financial tools”, which promote the narrative that the private sector, rather than the state through taxes, should mobilize the resources needed to address public challenges.

5. Notes

- 1 See G20 South Africa 2025 Presidency, “Concept Note and Calendar”, at <https://g20.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/20241205-FINAL-G20-CONCEPT-NOTE-SOUTH-AFRICA1.pdf>
- 2 See Carnegie India, “The Indian G20 Presidency: Taking Stock of Key Outcomes”, November 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/11/the-indian-g20-presidency-taking-stock-of-key-outcomes>.
- 3 See e.g. G20 Italia 2021, “G20 Panel for Multilateral Development Banks’ Capital Adequacy Frameworks”, October 2021, <http://www.g20italy.org/g20-panel-for-multilateral-development-banks-capital-adequacy-frameworks.html>.
- 4 Such as G20 Saudi Arabia 2020 and Club de Paris, “Common Framework for Debt Treatments beyond the DSSI”, https://clubdeparis.org/sites/default/files/annex_common_framework_for_debt_treatments_beyond_the_dssi.pdf.
- 5 Such as the OECD and G20 Inclusive Framework on Base Erosion and Profit Shifting, <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/policy-issues/base-erosion-and-profit-shifting-beps.html>.
- 6 See INESC, “Recomendações da Sociedade Civil sobre Tributação Internacional para os Ministros das Finanças do G20”, May 2024, <https://inesc.org.br/recomendacoes-da-sociedade-civil-sobre-tributacao-internacional-para-os-ministros-das-financas-do-g20..>
- 7 Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC/CEPAL), Regional Platform for Tax Cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean, <https://www.cepal.org/en/ptlac>.
- 8 See CESR, “FAQs: International Taxation, Human Rights and the United Nations Tax Convention (UNTC)”, <https://www.cesr.org/faqs-international-taxation-human-rights-and-the-united-nations-tax-convention-untc>.
- 9 See G20 South Africa 2025 Presidency, “Concept Note and Calendar”, at <https://g20.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/20241205-FINAL-G20-CONCEPT-NOTE-SOUTH-AFRICA1.pdf>
- 10 G20 Information Centre, “G20 Rio de Janeiro Leaders’ Declaration”, November 2024, <https://www.g20.utoronto.ca/2024/241118-declaration.html>.
- 11 G20 Brazil 2024, “The Rio de Janeiro G20 Ministerial Declaration on International Tax Cooperation”, <https://www.gov.br/fazenda/pt-br/assuntos/g20/declaracoes/1-g20-ministerial-declaration-international-taxation-cooperation.pdf>.
- 12 See C20 Brasil 2024, “Event at the UN Discusses Fair, Inclusive, and Anti-Racist Economies”, September 2024, <https://c20brasil.org/event-at-the-un-discusses-fair-inclusive-and-anti-racist-economies>.



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