

# The role of the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group in influencing the global agenda

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# The role of the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group in influencing the global agenda

The G20 is a unique global leadership organisation, spanning East-West and North-South divides. Its members account for more than 80% of world GDP, 75% of global trade and 60% of the population of the planet. An organisation with such influence could play a key role in tackling corruption, both through cooperation to counter its transnational elements and through setting an example domestically.

This Centre for the Study of Corruption Working Paper brings together a set of key stakeholders in the process. We asked them to reflect on what the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group has achieved since it was established in 2010, which ways of working have proved most successful in effecting change, and what it should do in future to maximise its impact. The pieces represent the personal views of the authors and were originally published as a series on the CSC blog. We have drawn on their insights to compile a set of recommendations for how the G20 ACWG could amplify its impact.

## Contents

1. [Recommendations](#)
2. [Authors](#)
3. [The G20 as an engine of quiet change: Reaching a summit is crucial to success, but coming back down is even more so – \*Phil Mason\*](#)
4. [Making strides in anti-corruption cooperation: the establishment of the GlobE network – \*Nasser Abaalkhail\*](#)
5. [G20 and anti-corruption: Time to follow through, rather than generate more hot air – \*Maria Emilia Berazategui\*](#)
6. [An Anti-Corruption A20: The case for an Academic Roundtable to support the G20's Anti-Corruption agenda – \*Elizabeth Dávid-Barrett\*](#)
7. [Ambitious, collaborative, accountable: to deliver change, the G20 must first empower a wide array of anticorruption actors – \*Maggie Murphy\*](#)
8. [Do we still need the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group? – \*Robert Barrington\*](#)

## Recommendations

### 1) Focus on implementation

Rather than creating more promises, dedicate attention to delivering some of those already made. The UNODC lists 99 AC commitments<sup>1</sup> made by the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group over the last decade, with the number of individual country commitments likely reaching into the many hundreds or even thousands.

*“One of the foremost problems of the ACWG has been the propensity for each incoming chair to introduce a fresh raft of plans and priorities. Perhaps one reform the ACWG could make is to pause on new commitments for a while and reflect more deeply on showing that implementation, the other side of the commitment coin, is actually happening.” (Mason)*

*“The new Action Plan should have a strong focus on implementing previous commitments. It should also include clear and detailed information on what the Group is planning to achieve and by when, to allow for meaningful monitoring and accountability. After 11 years of existence and in a year like this, when corruption continues to undermine many countries and our collective recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, it is time for the G20 ACWG to take action and focus on implementing its pledges, once and for all. And this extends to the G20 more broadly.” (Berazategui)*

### 2. Ensure a corruption-free post-pandemic recovery

The pandemic has revealed how corruption can impact on people’s daily lives and generated public support for closing down the opportunities for this abuse. This is an important moment for global leadership.

*“To tackle the pernicious impact of corruption in times of crisis, the G20 needs to prioritise the effective implementation of key high-level principles to deliver on its Call to Action. That is why Transparency International’s new position paper calls on the G20 to redouble its efforts to deliver on its promise to do its part for ensuring a swift, sustainable and corruption-free recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.” (Berazategui)*

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<sup>1</sup> UNODC, “G20 Anti-Corruption Resources. The G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group”. [last accessed 26 June 2021] <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/corruption/g20-anti-corruption-resources/by-thematic-area.html>

### 3. Set up an Academic Anti-Corruption Roundtable (A20)

Fighting corruption is both a technical and a political process: an ‘A20’ group of academics could inject much-needed evidence and learning into the work of the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group, providing technical support for this high-level political process.

*“The G20 has spawned a range of ancillary organisations since it was founded in 1999, to allow non-governmental voices to shape the debate. Business is represented by the B20, civil society by the C20 and think tanks by the T20. All of these feed in views to the various policy areas with which the G20 engages. But in the field of anti-corruption, academia can add value in five key ways”: 1) theory of change; 2) measuring corruption; 3) rigorous evaluation of AC policies; 4) policy innovation and impact evaluation; 5) impartiality - academics are not campaigners. (Dávid-Barrett)*

### 4. Quietly push for change

Reform-minded bureaucrats can use the process to lock in top-level commitment and then push for change from within the system.

*“[W]here the policy environment in the organisation is relatively benign, bureaucrats pressing for change can get their topics advanced more rapidly elevated up the policy food chain. [...] [I]t has often proved tactically advantageous to present desired actions, not as ‘adventurous’ ideas from within, but as sensible ‘responses’ to pressures from others in the negotiations”. (Mason)*

### 5. Empower developing countries

Fighting corruption requires a transnational response, but international cooperation mechanisms are only as good as their weakest link. Instruments need to be designed in such a way that both richer and poorer countries can participate, in the interests of the community as a whole. The new Global Operational Network of Anti-Corruption Law Enforcement Authorities (GlobE) aims to do this by providing a secure platform and resources to facilitate informal cooperation between anti-corruption authorities, supported by a capacity-building programme.

*“The results of the analysis demonstrate that, while progress is made by establishing regional or thematic cooperation networks (focusing on asset recovery), there is an insufficient focus on informal communication networks between anti-corruption law enforcement authorities, in particular those from developing countries. Amongst the gaps identified, it was noted that more than 100 countries are not members of any*

*network that facilitates informal cooperation between anti-corruption law enforcement authorities.” (Abaalkhail)*

## **6. Coordinate better, collaborate wider**

The AC Working Group is just a part of the G20’s work, but to achieve the most progress it should advocate for its goals with the wide range of other actors in the G20 framework.

*“The development of a new Anti-Corruption Action Plan is an opportunity for the G20 ACWG to step out of its silo and to consult with, and to be consulted by, other G20 working groups and tracks – especially Finance – to help ensure that all high-level G20 pledges meaningfully considers corruption risks and counter-measures. And while the ACWG invites civil society to their meetings, we need better and more meaningful engagement.” (Berazategui)*

*A positive legacy to build on: “The G20 ACWG was one of few working groups that routinely invited the Civil 20 (C20) and Business 20 (B20) representatives to meetings. Whilst not perfect, non-governmental stakeholders were permitted to pitch their ideas and positions, which would subsequently strengthen or weaken government positions on final official documents, hopefully raising the bar.” (Murphy)*

## **7. Open up the conversation**

For the best results and widest buy-in, the ACWG should open itself up to scrutiny and dialogue, and act on the feedback it receives.

*“Some of the ways in which this could be achieved include being more open and honest in their exchanges with civil society, sharing the agenda and outcomes of the Working Group meetings, meeting with local civil society throughout the year – both prior to and after G20 Working Group meetings – in all countries.” (Berazategui)*

*“The more open a group is to external scrutiny and analysis, the more likely new, ambitious proposals will be adopted.” (Murphy)*

## **8. Be more accountable**

While summits often lead to major commitments, real progress depends on the follow-up and implementation afterwards. The G20 ACWG should hold itself to account – and invite others to hold it to account – to ensure that goals become achievements. Some encouraging steps were taken in 2020, when the Saudi G20 presidency developed an improved Accountability Report, with the Italian presidency now following in its footsteps.

*“Above all, progress was made when there was accountability. Far too often, civil society organisations celebrated words being included in a communiqué and then moved on after the “win”. Sometimes this is a resource issue, sometimes this is due to the lack of decent strategy or longer-term vision, and sadly, sometimes this was the wilful belief that the words would be put into action by government representatives without continued pressure.” (Murphy)*

*“Accountability reporting is an immensely significant exercise for the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group (ACWG), constituting the primary mechanism through which progress against past commitments is reviewed. [...] The Saudi G20 Presidency developed a new approach, [which] provides a more detailed overview of progress made and challenges faced by G20 countries in selected areas addressed by the ACWG, rather than a broader overview of progress across all topics addressed by the group.” (2020 Accountability Report)*

## **9. Cherish meaningful (even if slow) progress**

Achieving success in this difficult area depends on making the most of every small step to prevent backsliding and pursue incremental change.

*“We used the slow progress at the G20 to incentivise non-G20 governments to step up, and pushed for increased visibility of beneficial ownership transparency at the Anti-Corruption Summit in London in 2016. The Summit generated 648 commitments, 17% of which were on the topic of beneficial ownership, compared to 0.01% of commitments made on anti-bribery laws and enforcement. As soon as we give in to cynicism, we lose our own sense of agency and become bystanders to a process. Far better to channel the cynicism into concrete ways to support and promote ambition, collaboration and accountability on anti-corruption goals.” (Murphy)*

## **10. Establish a trio of strong presidencies**

Leverage the investment that countries make in hosting the G20 by encouraging trios of presidencies to work together, allowing for more sustained commitment and greater influence.

*“Success is not guaranteed by a single active and productive G20 presidency, but neither are mediocrity or failure at the ACWG inevitable. Three strong presidencies in a row, with a strong common agenda and follow-through, could make it a powerhouse in cracking a major global corruption challenge like asset recovery. The power lies with the presidents.” (Barrington)*

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## The G20 as an engine of quiet change: Reaching a summit is crucial to success, but coming back down is even more so

Phil Mason

The scene has become familiar. It is the start of one of the ‘summits’ of world leaders. We see the heads settling around their conference table, we are shown them posing for the group photo. And after a day or two of deliberation, they produce a weighty ‘communiqué’, often running to 20 or 30 pages, detailing their discussions, full of grand analysis and commitments.

One can be forgiven for musing – did they really all sit there and discuss these complex matters and, moreover, compress their differences into those neatly drafted lines in just those few hours?

Of course not. Summitry is largely theatre. That’s not to say it is unimportant, but to understand where the real importance lies, you need to peer behind the stage curtain. Paradoxically, the most likely beneficiaries are not the ones we get to see.

It is not for nothing that the whole panoply of this kind of large-scale diplomatic engagement has taken on the language and metaphors of mountaineering. The objectives being aimed for are truly of the loftiest ambition, and the ‘summit’ is, indeed, the peak of the endeavour. That achievement, as in any successful climb, represents the culmination of an arduous set of careful preparations. In our world, these are carried out by lower level officials, who are, to continue the analogy, given the title of ‘sherpa’. These are the folks that guide the whole process, prepare the trail, light the way. They will have been working together tirelessly, often for a whole year in advance of the summit, devilling away to negotiate agreed positions and craft those communiqué pages, the declarations, the action plans.

The G20 is like this in its way of working. Its offshoot, the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group (ACWG), although being an officials-only process, nevertheless has similar characteristics. It has, though, a distinctive self-declared purpose that stands it apart from other conventional international processes. It set itself the objective of ‘leading by example’ – not to explicitly set rules as global standards for others to follow, but to agree actions that by their operation would illustrate their benefits and draw others alongside.

Therein, perhaps, lies the biggest challenge to its progress on anti-corruption. For looked at in the traditional way, the history so far of the G20 leadership on anti-corruption, via its Working Group, has been to produce a mountain of commitments with few compensatory signs that these are shifting collective practice.

And the formal products are copious indeed. A good service has recently been performed by UNODC in establishing a site that compiles all the G20 anti-corruption commitments in one place. It is staggering in its volume of pledges of better behaviour. The list runs to 99 documents. The number of individual commitments within them must be reaching into the many hundreds, likely thousands.

It is tempting to question the value of all this wordsmithing. But these formal products of the ACWG are only one aspect of the story.

Having myself been a frequent small cog in exercises like this, I see a benefit that rarely gets noticed. Where these occasions give opportunities for reform-minded officials to advance an issue within their bureaucracy, these processes can be powerful, if virtually invisible, engines of quiet change.

It can work in three ways. Firstly, where the policy environment in the organisation is relatively benign, bureaucrats pressing for change can get their topics advanced more rapidly elevated up the policy food chain. Secondly, where resistance has been encountered before, adept officials, responding to their ministers' urgent demands for 'deliverables', can often outmanoeuvre these barriers. (I saw these two forms work extensively in our own agenda-setting for the London Anti-Corruption Summit in 2016. Multiple concepts, previously considered 'difficult', found sudden favour in the imperative to build a respectable basket of summit outcomes.) Finally, it has often proved tactically advantageous to present desired actions, not as 'adventurous' ideas from within, but as sensible 'responses' to pressures from others in the negotiations.

So, it may be that things are quietly shifting in many bureaucracies. We cannot tell for sure that this is happening in the G20 anti-corruption space. We need to do better at finding out.

Looking to the future, there needs to be far more emphasis on tracking implementation than has been shown up to now. The balance between words and action remains vastly out of kilter with the continual piling up of commitments and the demonstration of practical achievement.

One of the foremost problems of the ACWG has been the propensity for each incoming chair to introduce a fresh raft of plans and priorities. Perhaps one reform the ACWG could make is to pause on new commitments for a while and reflect more deeply on showing that implementation, the other side of the commitment coin, is actually happening. This would restore some sense of balance to all these efforts. As a seasoned mountaineer once said, 'The summit is just a halfway point'. Coming back down, completing the journey, seems the unfinished business now to attend to.

## Making strides in anti-corruption cooperation: the establishment of the GlobE network

Dr Nassar Abaalkhail

Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis, the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group (ACWG) spared no efforts in demonstrating its leading role in the global fight against corruption. Established in 2010, the ACWG's aim is to provide "a prominent means for G20 countries to cooperate in raising the standards of transparency and accountability across the G20 and to contribute to the global fight against corruption". Amongst the many milestones achieved in 2020, one particular outcome stands out for its potentially lasting impact within G20 and beyond – the Riyadh Initiative for Enhancing International Anti-Corruption Law Enforcement Cooperation.

Driven by the G20's commitment to continuing to fight corruption, and by the importance of leading by example and exploring ways to strengthen practical international cooperation, the Saudi G20 Presidency, in collaboration with the UNODC, sought to identify the shortcomings in international cooperation between anti-corruption law enforcement authorities. It did so by conducting an analysis of cross-border anti-corruption cooperation.

The results of the analysis demonstrate that, while progress is made by establishing regional or thematic cooperation networks (focusing on asset recovery), there is an insufficient focus on informal communication networks between anti-corruption law enforcement authorities, in particular those from developing countries. Amongst the gaps identified, it was noted that more than 100 countries are not members of any network that facilitates informal cooperation between anti-corruption law enforcement authorities. Furthermore, the analysis looked at whether these authorities are enabled to engage in informal cooperation. The results suggest that many authorities, particularly in developing or less developed countries, are not empowered to engage in such cooperation.

Overall, some G20 countries are experienced in investigating and prosecuting corruption cases and in obtaining assistance needed from other jurisdictions, including through a solid network of contacts they have established or know how to access. Yet, this is not representative of the global experience, and there is a significant asymmetry between some G20 countries and many other non-G20 countries that face issues of capacity, insufficient human, financial and technical resources, and barriers to existing networks. Anti-corruption law enforcement authorities in these countries face technical and political obstacles in their work, and they have few – or no – channels through which they can receive practical guidance and assistance in their casework.

Against this backdrop, the Saudi G20 Presidency consulted with G20 and non-G20 countries, which highlighted that they would be reluctant to join a network if it was launched under a

non-UN body. As a result, the Saudi G20 Presidency concluded that a successful initiative that aims to address these identified gaps and would serve in the interest of a broad range of countries must meet all of the following criteria:

- Be under the inclusive umbrella of the UN, allowing all Member States of the Organisation to join it on an equal footing upon its establishment.
- Be based on the relevant UN treaty (in this case UN Convention against Corruption—UNCAC) and address all offences covered by UNCAC.
- Provide a secure platform and resources to facilitate informal cooperation between anti-corruption authorities.
- Be supported by a capacity-building programme.

Based on this assessment, the Saudi G20 Presidency led discussions with all G20 countries and relevant international organizations and entities, such as UNODC, INTERPOL, the Egmont Group, OECD, the World Bank Group, IMF and FATF. The outcome was the proposed Riyadh Initiative towards the creation of a Global Operational Network of Anti-Corruption Law Enforcement Authorities (GlobE), which was welcomed through consensus by the ACWG. The objective is to create a Vienna-based global network, under the auspices of UNODC, to establish and enhance direct contact between anti-corruption law enforcement authorities. This would empower a wider range of countries to engage in informal international cooperation, by establishing a secure communication platform for information sharing between anti-corruption authorities under the One-Stop Hub of GlobE. It would also focus on capacity-building within the network and complementing other existing platforms for such cooperation.

On 22 October 2020, Saudi Arabia hosted the first-ever G20 Anti-Corruption Ministerial meeting, at which the Riyadh Initiative was at the top of the meeting agenda. After securing political support from G20 leaders and ministers, Saudi Arabia contributed 10 million USD to the UNODC to implement the Riyadh Initiative over the next five years.

While the official launch of the Global Operational Network of Anti-Corruption Law Enforcement Authorities (GlobE) is scheduled for 3 June 2021 in parallel with the first-ever UN General Assembly Special Session against Corruption (UNGASS), preparatory works for the establishment of GlobE began within two months of the conclusion of the Saudi G20 Presidency. A First Expert Group Meeting was held under the auspices of UNODC from 3-4 March 2021 to discuss the architecture and operational procedures of GlobE, with the participation of more than 130 representatives from 53 States of the five Regional Groups of the United Nations, as well as 21 international organizations and entities. This meeting resulted in the establishment of three interim taskforces to provide technical guidance for the establishment and operation of the GlobE Network.

The development of the Riyadh Initiative and GlobE is not solely guided by the interests of G20 countries or of any particular organization or country, but rather by the interests of the international community as a whole. The need to address the shortcomings and challenges in international cooperation in the area of anti-corruption had already been identified in the current discussions over UNGASS' political declaration. The creation of GlobE as a truly global network between anti-corruption authorities that would serve the interest of the international community is a timely response to this need.

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## G20 and anti-corruption: Time to follow through, rather than generate more hot air

Maria Emilia Berazategui

When it comes to anti-corruption, the G20 has been making all the right noises. This is evident from the Group's statements and commitments outlined in more than 60 documents, covering areas such as asset recovery, asset disclosure, anonymous company ownership, conflicts of interest, open data, public procurement and whistle-blower protection. But should the G20 be proud of its anti-corruption record?

The truth is that the G20 members have only partially implemented various anti-corruption principles they have committed to over the years; just take a look at Transparency International's assessments [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

In 2010, the G20 set up an Anti-Corruption Working Group (ACWG) and tasked it with the preparation of "comprehensive recommendations for consideration by leaders on how the G20 could continue to make practical and valuable contributions to international efforts to combat corruption." Since its establishment, the Working Group has been working on the basis of multi-year action plans, which have been designed to identify priorities for anti-corruption action. This year, the current G20 Anti-Corruption Action Plan comes to an end.

The ACWG has a unique opportunity to reassess how its work will continue during the next three years. The new Action Plan should have a strong focus on implementing previous commitments. It should also include clear and detailed information on what the Group is planning to achieve and by when, to allow for meaningful monitoring and accountability.

After 11 years of existence and in a year like this, when corruption continues to undermine many countries and our collective recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, it is time for the G20 ACWG to take action and focus on implementing its pledges, once and for all. And this extends to the G20 more broadly.

## **Promises that we have heard before**

For many years, civil society groups, including Transparency international, have been pushing the G20 to live up to their anti-corruption promises, from position papers to public adverts. The G20 has largely continued with business as usual and the implementation of these commitments remains, at best, inconsistent.

A good example of this is the G20's own Call to Action on Corruption and COVID-19, adopted last year. The G20's recognition of the importance of transparency and accountability for ensuring a swift and sustainable recovery was a welcome step, as the burgeoning corruption related to COVID-19 calls for global, multilateral solutions.

Yet, we could not help but notice that many of the commitments were not new. They were, in fact, previously agreed by G20 members and spelled out in a series of high-level principles. Had many of these prior commitments been implemented in the past, now many more countries would have been better equipped to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. With its global reach and economic might, the G20 is one of the few international forums that has the potential to shape and implement policy to fight this crisis.

Sadly, this potential remains untapped also a year later. To tackle the pernicious impact of corruption in times of crisis, the G20 needs to prioritise the effective implementation of key high-level principles to deliver on its Call to Action. That is why Transparency International's new position paper calls on the G20 to redouble its efforts to deliver on its promise to do its part for ensuring a swift, sustainable and corruption-free recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Coordinate better, collaborate wider**

All too often, corruption remains an afterthought in G20 leaders' declarations and, more importantly, actions. But corruption is not an add-on issue that can be dealt with in isolation. There is also very little information on what countries are doing to implement these promises. This leads to a loss of trust from the wider anti-corruption community in the effectiveness and ambition of the G20.

The development of a new Anti-Corruption Action Plan is an opportunity for the G20 ACWG to step out of its silo and to consult with, and to be consulted by, other G20 working groups and tracks – especially Finance – to help ensure that all high-level G20 pledges meaningfully considers corruption risks and counter-measures.

And while the ACWG invites civil society to their meetings, we need better and more meaningful engagement. Some of the ways in which this could be achieved include being

more open and honest in their exchanges with civil society, sharing the agenda and outcomes of the Working Group meetings, meeting with local civil society throughout the year – both prior to and after G20 Working Group meetings – in all countries.

The message they will hear from the civil society following the G20 process is likely going to be simple: we don't need more empty promises. After all, why make new commitments when the previous ones are still outstanding?

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## An Anti-Corruption A20: The case for an Academic Roundtable to support the G20's Anti-Corruption agenda

Liz Dávid-Barrett

In autumn 2020, the Centre for the Study of Corruption (CSC) was asked to co-organise, with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), an academic roundtable to support the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group. This was the first ever such meeting of G20 academics, an innovation of the Saudi G20 presidency aimed at injecting independent expert views and the latest research findings into the conversation.

The G20 has spawned a range of ancillary organisations since it was founded in 1999, to allow non-governmental voices to shape the debate. Business is represented by the B20, civil society by the C20 and think tanks by the T20. All of these feed in views to the various policy areas with which the G20 engages.

But in the field of anti-corruption, academia can add value in five key ways.

First, academics build theoretical frameworks to understand relationships and mechanisms and to explain how change happens. For the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group, these underlying theories of change are a critical basis for policy innovation.

Second, academics are at the forefront of developing new methods of measuring corruption. While first- and second-generation corruption indicators were developed by international NGOs and multilateral development banks, the latest indicators, which are more targeted and objective, are emerging from rigorous academic research.

Third, academics investigate why anti-corruption policies are working – or not – and how their impact varies according to context, through rigorous empirical research, such as the Anti-Corruption Evidence programme, for example. These findings need to be fed in to policy debates, so that we do not simply transfer policy ideas to situations where they are unlikely to achieve results.

Fourth, academic research leads to policy innovation, with the latest theory and evidence underpinning the design of new ideas – as well as setting up methods to evaluate their impact.

Finally, academics are not campaigners. The feedback I received from a number of participants in the G20 meetings suggests that this is tremendously valuable to the Anti-Corruption Working Group. The independent stance of academics means that recommendations based on rigorous research are credible and trusted.

The October 2020 Academic Anti-Corruption Roundtable focused on three areas: enhancing cooperation among anti-corruption law enforcement practitioners; targeting corruption in public procurement; and assessing the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies. Academics with relevant expertise representing all of the G20 countries were invited to discuss these topics. And the discussions resulted in evidence-based recommendations that I presented to the G20 ministerial meeting later that month.

The first of these areas, cooperation among law enforcement, was one of the Saudi G20 presidency's priorities. It is critical to tackling the widely recognised implementation gap in anti-corruption: we have good laws, but implementation requires political will and institutional capacity, which are often lacking. Moreover, since corruption is a transnational problem, building capacity entails building better links across borders between anti-corruption agencies.

Academic research suggests that coordination is a critical part of anti-corruption leadership. We see this for example from the case of Brazil, which launched ENCCLA in 2003, an interagency forum which fostered coordination among public agencies in the fight against money laundering and corruption. As a major investment in capacity building over several years, it laid the foundations for the investigation into the Lava Jato case a decade later.

Other research confirms that law enforcement cooperation requires trust and the building of informal relationships among investigators. These tend only to emerge through working together on cases and building up relationships over time. For this reason, interagency task forces are very valuable for improving anti-corruption enforcement results and sharing learning.

One legacy of the Saudi G20 presidency is a new organisation, a Global Operational Network of Anti-Corruption Law Enforcement Authorities (or GlobE Network, for short), which promises to make transnational anti-corruption cooperation a reality. Its design seeks to ensure that the connection with academia – and the ability to learn from emerging evidence – is baked in.



Fighting corruption is both a political and a technical process. The G20 is mainly cut out for the political side. It has the potential to build transnational political alliances and show leadership in key areas. But leadership needs to be underpinned by clear ideas about the technical side of reform too, and that is where academic research can help, so that policies are evidence-based and learning is systematised. The Academic Anti-Corruption Roundtable needs to become a permanent partner for the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group.

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## Ambitious, collaborative, accountable: to deliver change, the G20 must first empower a wide array of anticorruption actors

Maggie Murphy

People love to be sceptical about inter-governmental forums. Having worked for more than 5 years as Transparency International's lead representative to the G20 (2013-2018), I am all too familiar with the scepticism that comes from being assigned 10 short minutes to present ambitious recommendations to a conference room of glazed eyes – whether the result of a big lunch or a late night arguing over commas and conjunctions that very few people around the world will ultimately read.

The G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group meets three times a year, sets biennial action plans, adopts Principles on a range of key issues from anti-bribery to open data to asset recovery, issues individual country guides, topic toolkits and more. I count more than 80 individual documents that the Anti-Corruption Working Group (ACWG) has created since 2010 on this hidden German Ministry webpage (kudos to the Germans for their efforts here in trying to share the documents with those who know where to go). But the sceptics ask, who reads them? Are these documents doing anything? What good has come from them?

It is too easy to sigh that “more must be done”. If you are looking for a group of governmental representatives to make progress on anything alone, you will be disappointed. The point of the G20 ACWG is to create inches of space for other actors to enter and expand. When the following parameters are met, it is possible to generate change.

**Ambition:** The G20 Summits are consensus-based. This is good for pushing some countries to be more ambitious, but terrible if the lowest common denominator prevails. The more open a group is to external scrutiny and analysis, the more likely new, ambitious proposals will be adopted.

**Collaboration.** The G20 ACWG was one of few working groups that routinely invited the Civil 20 (C20) and Business 20 (B20) representatives to meetings. Whilst not perfect, non-governmental stakeholders were permitted to pitch their ideas and positions, which would subsequently strengthen or weaken government positions on final official documents, hopefully raising the bar.

**Accountability.** Above all, progress was made when there was accountability. Far too often, civil society organisations celebrated words being included in a communiqué and then moved on after the “win”. Sometimes this is a resource issue, sometimes this is due to the lack of decent strategy or longer-term vision, and sadly, sometimes this was the wilful belief that the words would be put into action by government representatives without continued pressure.

### **A turning point on Beneficial Ownership transparency**

In 2014, Transparency International was instrumental in pushing the adoption of G20 Beneficial Ownership Principles at the Brisbane Summit. The Principles were far from perfect and other civil society organisations immediately disowned them as weak and ineffective.

For us at Transparency International, we knew how hard it had been to get even that weakened language on the table. Rather than walk away, we bedded down and spent one whole year breaking down each of the ten principles into individual components, and developing a detailed methodology to assess and monitor each country’s implementation. We found that 15 of the G20 members had weak or average legal frameworks in place. We persisted, developing individual country profiles identifying concrete areas for improvement.

We caused some government annoyance for being laser-focused on the Principles where they were keen to work on new areas. We were criticised by civil society organisations for being too lenient – they preferred the all or nothing approach, but it was important to us to hold those governments accountable to their own words, not ours. Two years later, nine countries had moved up a category. Now, several years on, the US, Canada and a number of Overseas Territories have moved forward towards our ultimate goal of requiring clear, open, public beneficial ownership registers. This was unthinkable back in 2014.

This takes me to my final point. The G20 and their working groups are one component in one single global process. Civil society actors (and others) are fully able to put in hard yards and not just shout from the sidelines. And the G20 process interacts with, but is not dependent on, other global processes. We used the slow progress at the G20 to incentivise non-G20 governments to step up, and pushed for increased visibility of beneficial ownership

transparency at the Anti-Corruption Summit in London in 2016. The Summit generated 648 commitments from 43 countries, 17% of which were on the topic of beneficial ownership, compared to 0.01% of commitments made on anti-bribery laws and enforcement.

As soon as we give in to cynicism, we lose our own sense of agency and become bystanders to a process. Far better to channel the cynicism into concrete ways to support and promote ambition, collaboration and accountability on anti-corruption goals.

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## Do we still need the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group?

Robert Barrington

You might be forgiven for wondering what is the point of the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group (ACWG)? At a glance, it might look like one of those international initiatives which some country sets up and then carries on and on because nobody cares enough to stop it. Yet the blogs in our G20 series have been surprisingly favourable – much more than I had expected. Let's look at some of the positives:

- The ACWG gives ownership of the anti-corruption issue to countries which have traditionally not wanted, or been able, to take a lead on international corruption. Some countries really take up the challenge – most notably Argentina in 2018. Others see a chance to fill a gap or create a legacy – like Saudi Arabia in 2020, with its Global Operational Network of Anti-Corruption Law Enforcement Authorities (GlobE Network).
- Hiding is also harder. The small numbers and rotating presidency make it harder for those countries that really don't want progress to disguise this. The ACWG includes countries which are notorious 'blockers' of progress in UNCAC. When they do this at the G20, it's fairly obvious – like China's exclusion of civil society in 2016.
- Ministers can make progress. The G20 is sufficiently important to governments that they still field senior people. Ultimately, with political decision makers in the room, that means, in theory, more progress can be made. The 2014 breakthrough declaration on beneficial ownership transparency in Australia illustrates this.
- Plugging the gaps. Some important issues have come on the world agenda since UNCAC and other international conventions were signed – but such issues have no natural home. The ACWG can provide this. This year's Italian presidency, for example, has put on the agenda the themes of measurement and sport.
- In the words of the veteran UK anti-corruption strategist and negotiator Phil Mason, the ACWG can promote 'powerful, if virtually invisible, engines of quiet change'. While Maggie Murphy, who has an enviable reputation as one of the most effective

international campaigners, sees the ACWG as a forum ‘to create inches of space for other actors to enter and expand.’

Add to this that a good part of the impact of corruption, and benefit of tackling it, is economic, and the world’s twenty largest economies should therefore have a common interest in preventing corruption; and that the annual ministerial meeting keeps the issue of corruption bubbling along in the international limelight. So what’s not to like?

The hot air is what the critics don’t like. As Transparency International advocate Emilia Berazatageui points out, the ACWG is more notable for what it says than what it does. Progress like the areas outlined above seem to happen more by accident than design, and happens despite some of the member governments not because of them. There are some structural flaws to offset those positives:

- Unfulfilled commitments are inevitable. Each new presidency wants to make its mark and so there is an incentive to announce something new, but not to deliver on someone else’s old announcement.
- The fig leaf is fully on display. Some G20 members are amongst the most repressive and corrupt governments in the world but can use the G20 and the ACWG to burnish their credentials.
- The niche is not evident. Even the ACWG’s supporters might struggle to articulate how and why it fills gaps left by UNCAC, the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention, and other international instruments.
- What of the future? Perhaps what the ACWG most needs is a presidency with the courage to stop it. But even better would be a presidency that gains consensus on a new process for making the ACWG more effective. The key to this is working out how to make fewer commitments, on really key areas, that are actually delivered. Liz Dávid-Barrett shows how with a stronger technical foundation, the ACWG could help drive the global agenda.

Success is not guaranteed by a single active and productive G20 presidency, but neither are mediocrity or failure at the ACWG inevitable. Three strong presidencies in a row, with a strong common agenda and follow-through, could make it a powerhouse in cracking a major global corruption challenge like asset recovery. The power lies with the presidents.

## CSC's research activities are based around four themes:

- Corruption in politics
- Corruption in international business
- Corruption in sport
- Corruption in geographical context – with particular strengths in the UK, Germany & Eastern Europe, China and Africa.

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