

Introduction

This university course syllabus provides the resources for a conventional course or a distance education self-taught course. Each of 10 lessons includes a one paragraph abstract, a 2 page background note, a lesson plan/discussion guide, and a list of web based references to provide a comprehensive basis on which to study the topic at issue. The syllabus is pitched at a university level, but is easily adaptable to secondary school. It also contains suggestions to enrich reading and assignments to a graduate level.

Objectives

The objectives are to provide an appreciation of the international economic and political agenda setting and decision making systems:

- To inspire discussion of pragmatic ideas for enhancing effectiveness, ensuring legitimacy and breaking deadlocks;
- To promote awareness of creative ideas to help resolve difficult global problems;
- To stimulate broadened dialogue on the reform of international governance and the merit of the proposed L20 Leaders Summit.

Context

Existing mechanisms of global governance are being challenged. The UN, G8, WTO, IMF and the World Bank are among those institutions suffering from a “crisis of legitimacy”. The international system appears outdated and ill-suited to effectively address several challenges emerging from the processes of globalization. These challenges include climate change, infectious diseases and preventing nuclear proliferation and terrorism.

Some scholars and practitioners have suggested that it is time for the establishment of new multilateral forums and institutions that reflect the complexities of 21st century realities. One proposition is to create an informal summit venue for the leaders of 20 major nations, an idea that draws inspiration from the current G8 Summit process and the meetings of the G20 Finance Ministers.

The Case for Summitry

There is a vacuum in international coordination – a lack of sustained high level executive attention. Existing multilateral mechanisms suffer from illegitimacy (the G8) or ineffectiveness (United Nations Environment Program). The existing mechanisms are unlikely to resolve longstanding deadlocks on issues such as the Doha Round or the Kyoto Protocol, let alone produce a solution “Grand Bargain” across economic and social issue areas. The Security Council mandate is limited to security-related issues. The UN’s ECOSOC is a synonym for ineffectiveness. The WTO, IMF and World Bank will not reform themselves. The critical North/South divide is not being addressed.

The “peer review” context of a Leaders’ informal face-to-face process builds trust. The multilateral event provides an ability to mobilize pressure. Government ministry silos

can be breached by top-down political pressure. A smaller forum allows for discussion of sensitive issues without political posturing. At the same time, the publicity surrounding summits encourages good staff work and can generate offsets or package deals that would be difficult to craft in other fora. Visionary leaders may transcend domestic politics and adopt policies that provide global collective benefits.

Beyond their role in dealing with global issues and challenges, there are intangible benefits arising from summits. Leaders develop personal relationships and rapport among each other which can facilitate coordinated actions in crises. They develop a desire to help each other politically. They share frustrations and burdens of office, including their relations with their ministers of finance and foreign relations who prepare the summits. Summits are a slow process of social capital building. Summits can help resolve issues that (a) have become stuck at lower levels or deadlocked in other international fora, (b) cut across different sectors, ministries and institutions, and (c) issues that are out in the future but which require action now.

There is a large set of global challenges and issues where the involvement of heads of state may be required to push through final compromises, commitments and decisions. Global governance and the international institutional structure dealing with both health and the environment are fragmented, weak and inadequate to the challenges in these two critical spheres. A range of other issues from trade, development, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, energy security, development aid and the Millennium Development Goals, conflict management and weak states require summit level attention and action.

Skepticism

The reasons for skepticism about summits, legitimacy, logistics, US intransigence, lack of necessity, short time horizons, and lack of substantive analysis are detailed below.

- *Legitimacy*: The L-20 would be a self-selected club with no legal basis. Smaller, poorer countries will not be represented. Broadening geographic representativeness is fine, but “vertical” concerns of democratization and meaningful local decision-making remain unmet.
- *Logistics*: It is impossible to arrange meetings which allow leaders to “get past” protocol and set piece speeches. Not all leaders are equally well endowed intellectually, and some may find a small summit setting threatening. Twenty people are too many for a coherent conversation.
- *US intransigence*: Under current circumstances, it is difficult to imagine enticing the United States to the table, and without the United States, the effort would be pointless.
- *Lack of necessity*: L-20 should not be convened to solve problems that may solve themselves. For example, efforts to counteract the workings of OPEC must realize that OPEC’s effectiveness as a cartel is prone to over-statement, and arguably the price run up in recent years is largely unrelated to OPEC’s work.

- *Short time horizons*: Leaders are not immune from capture by current crises and short term domestic political considerations.
- *Lack of substantive analysis*: There are too many areas where the L-20 needs substantive analysis to decide, and where the pros and cons are not fully listed or apparent.

“The Perfect is the Enemy of the Good”

There is a danger that searching for a perfect forum and perfect accountability might simply perpetuate all the existing problems. Searching for the Holy Grail means no action will ever be taken. We cannot over promise. No one pretends that the formation of an L20 would in itself address many of the problems with the existing international architecture, which include

- A lack of democracy;
- A tendency to spawn a proliferation of entities, agencies and initiatives;
- Inadequate linkages into the central role of the UN;
- Failure to address the concerns of the South, or the issue of poverty.

The issue is whether the L20 would be a significant enough improvement over the existing inadequate institutions to justify the effort to create and nurture it.

The “Course Material”

The material below explores whether the creation of an L20 is a feasible possibility to enhance global governance. Through an examination of the principal global policy problems and deadlocked issues, the student will evaluate whether an L20 would be a worthwhile addition to the global governance architecture.

After a review of summitry, there are eight lessons on substantive global policy problems. The emphasis is on seeking the unique, incremental role the L20 could play in bringing about reform of existing global economic and political systems. These include the Doha Round, the Kyoto Protocol and Energy Security of Supply, the Future of ODA, Global Pandemics, UN Reform, Failing States, Safe Drinking Water & Sanitation, and Terrorism. The final lesson explores potential mechanisms for the participation of civil society in a summit dialogue.

