

Report on L-20 Stocktaking Conference

Ottawa – February 19-20, 2005

Setting the Stage

Most of the G20 leaders range from very interested to persuadable on the need for an L20 meeting. Non-G8 countries have indicated considerable support, while the support from G8 members varies. Japan and the US are the most reticent, but would likely accept a one-off meeting if the topic was right. Therefore, the choice of topic is crucial. Potential promising topics include managing global energy security, limiting bioterrorism/global terrorism, UN reform, preventing pandemics and global over fishing. There is a structural link between the L20 and UN reform: the L20 could include important players who will still not be at the table in a reformed UNSC. Time is of the essence. A small window of opportunity exists to put in place the require structures, while 10 years from now potential (or inevitable) shifts in world power may complicate matters.

L20 legitimacy will come from the choice of topics and the membership. About 70% to 80% of the desired meeting results need to be set up in advance, with Leaders meeting to bridge the final gap. The process should be light, with no permanent secretariat. The USA must be at the table as well as China.

Discussion

The discussion was separated into three categories: 1) process and structure of the L20; 2) potential topics; and 3) criteria for topic selection. Pitches were made for bio-terrorism, nuclear terrorism, infectious diseases, energy security and environment, water and disaster preparedness as topics.

1) Process and structure

Timing

There was debate about a 'big bang' approach versus slow accretion. The current conjuncture B MDG+5, High Level Panel (HLP), the 'legacy effect' for Koizumi, Bush and others B argues for some sort of start in 2005. One possibility discussed was an event on the margins of the UN General Assembly 2005, such as a dinner on a specific issue, with invitations extended to key countries. Arguments were made for a 'sooner, rather than later' approach.

Course of action

Suggestions were made that a first meeting should incorporate a relatively simple 'streamlined'

course of action. Informality was stressed as being important to allow open discussion, while reducing the need for intensive preparation times. Leaders must feel that a successful outcome is possible. For future L20 meetings (2006 and beyond), there would be scope to be more creative and flexible. A key element of a new approach may be creating non-governmental and governmental networks to feed in and disseminate out from the L20. Gaining support from Foreign Ministries will be essential.

The L20 must be an improvement over other forums and not just an expansion of the G8 – thus process and legitimacy are key elements. For instance, accountability could be enhanced by reviewing progress of previous initiatives at subsequent meetings. Human dynamics will be important to consider - barriers of language and culture will need to be taken into account to ensure symmetry of developed/developing country engagement so that leaders can connect personally and have free-flowing discussions.

Membership, size and structure

There was some division between those concerned over membership, legitimacy and G8 interest, and those who felt that if you build it they will come. Many felt that concrete outcomes from an L20 event were necessary to justify membership choices, and confer legitimacy. Concrete outcomes could signal value by showing that the 'big table' was taking an issue seriously; producing declarations of broad shared principles; proposing or advancing international agreements; commissioning work by other bodies; and pursuing joint undertakings on domestic action and legislation.

There was agreement that a secretariat should not be created; however, discussion ensued over how processes would be initiated and controlled. Serious concern was raised over the ability of 20 leaders to truly engage and discuss without falling into set-pieces/speech format. While an L20 is more representative and thus more legitimate than a G8, there were concerns that protests may continue to be raised over a small group of countries making decisions that affect the entire global community

2) Potential topics

Most participants saw the process as driving the topics, not the other way around (i.e. there was no need to wait until a particular global problem became acute and then build a body to address it). At least two topics need to be identified and refined for a first meeting. If the first meeting is relatively informal, there will be a minimalist pre arranged agenda. Throughout the meeting the following topics were thoroughly discussed and debated as to their 'L20-readiness':

WMDs & Bioterrorism

- There was consensus that Iran has nuclear ambitions and is developing a uranium enrichment program. Having a common diagnosis of the problem would allow L20 members to focus on crafting joint solutions;
- Participants noted that addressing Iran and the production of WMDs is manageable, but care must be taken not to divide Europe and the US regarding methods of engagement with Iran;

- A pitch was made for a 5-year global moratorium on national programmes for uranium enrichment. If Iran complied, this significant positive outcome would appeal to the US and result in other countries ‘buying-in’ to the L20 process;
- Discussion surrounding the topic of bioterrorism focused on whether it is one the most significant threats of the 21st century. Some argued that the focus is too narrow and on the wrong issue. The counterargument was that this is the priority issue to bring the US to the table, and in any case, public health preparedness is the best defence against biological weapons.

Health

- Health was recognized as still being a critical issue that may be very suitable as an L20 topic. It was recognized that other networks have been instrumental in advancing global health issues, but a push by Leaders would help produce tangible outcomes;
- The suggested front-runner to promote health as an L20 issue was pandemic influenza/avian flu. The probability of an outbreak is almost 100%. Possible outcomes included: Agreement for timely reporting and for incentives to prevent cover-ups; cooperative scientific work (e.g. on vaccine development); coordination to speed vaccine approval; and incentives to cooperate through international health regulations. Another “low hanging fruit” topic raised included the eradication of polio; however, consensus was not achieved on this being an “L20-ready” issue;
- Concerns were raised whether a topic such as avian flu would attract Leaders’ interest or be considered worthy of Leaders’ attention by the public; however it was pointed out that this issue has the advantage of being “humans vs. microbe”, compared to other topics that are more focused on intra-governmental relations and resource disputes. However one observation was that the “war” metaphor creates the illusion that we could one day eradicate all major infectious diseases, noting the increasing resistance of microbes to therapeutics, and called for a more holistic approach focusing beneficial relationships between hosts and microbes;
- Some concerns were expressed about coordinating efforts with UN MDG+5 initiatives.

Energy security

- Two separate but related topics exist: energy and environment and energy security. The former would have to be pitched in terms of research and development, and North-South cooperation, rather than the Kyoto Accord per se. The latter could focus on coordination of reserves, but not access to supply, where governments have few levers.
- Reticence was evident on these issues because of their complexity and because discussions could end up pitting consumers against producers in unhelpful ways.
- ‘Sticking points’ may include differences between national views and approaches to this issue.

Disaster mitigation/water

- Arguments were made that a concentrated effort to make people less vulnerable to natural disasters, especially in the tsunami context, is a potential L20 topic;

- It was stressed that early warning systems and improvements to infrastructure are proven to save lives and limit damage from disasters; there is general acceptance that these issues need addressing, and no agency or international organization is directing international efforts;
- Specific issues include: the choice coastal communities make between environmental protection and economic gains; technology, it doesn't need high tech upgrades, but a simple phone can save an entire village and the benefit of introducing tech allows for that community to take the knowledge into a new direction particular to that area; prevention in an area of civil war such as Sri Lanka touches on shattered states
- Discussions on the provision of safe drinking water and sanitation (SDS) were dynamic, and it was agreed that addressing this topic could resolve many easily preventable deaths and increase the resilience of a community. However as currently structured, it is a long-term issue and may not yield an immediate L20 success. The point was made that the L20 may be instrumental in helping broker problems associated with this issued in third or forth round meetings.

Other topics

There was discussion of a wide range of other topics B some already considered by the CIGI/CFGS project, some not B that could be next on the list for L20 consideration. These included: trade and the Doha round, disaster assistance/preparedness, migration, illegal drugs, over-fishing, food safety, aid coordination/harmonisations and coherence between aid and non-aid policies. Some noted that most of the proposed issues were inherently worthy, but there had to be some basis to choose. The creation of a decision matrix (topics against criteria) was recommended.

3) Criteria for topic selection

The selected agenda items for a potential L20 meeting must be attractive, both symbolically and politically, so that they invoke excitement among Leaders (and their peoples).

Key criteria include:

- The topic can only be addressed by Leaders. It is a value-added initiative that can be agreed on in a way that is not possible through other for a or organizations;
- The process has legitimacy through adequate representation, particularly by the United States and the major developing countries;
- There is a workable solution and a high probability of reaching consensus (e.g ~80-90% already solved), but it requires Leaders support and a cross sectoral approach
- A forward looking, focussed suite of evidence based actions and promises that can be generated that would offer win-win-win outcomes for L20 countries and beyond;
- There must be tangible, actionable, and verifiable results that have broad-based benefits (MDG friendly), realistic and acceptable financing mechanisms, and organizational feasibility;
- Initiatives must have political appeal
- Initiatives must have symbolic attractiveness

There were differing views on how much the choice of topics should reflect public concerns

(including through opinion polling). It was argued that the L20 should avoid development topics per se; however one of the main points of an L20 is that with emerging countries included, development issues themselves may be reframed and formulated as global issues. A distinction was made between issues of common humanity/global commons (e.g. global infectious diseases) and issues where countries had differing interests (e.g. producers and consumers on energy supply). The former issues are more appealing.

Conclusion

The picture of an L20 that seems to be emerging is of an informal low-key launch (possibly without the L20 designation) at a dinner or lunch in September on the margins of UNGA. One scenario is discussions on UN reform, plus one other topic (possibly disaster prevention and response or health), with opportunities to take up 'breaking issues'. Canada and China could co-host, or Canada could do so alone, and come to the dinner with two future topics in mind. If all went well, the dinner would end with a proposal to meet again in 2006 on these future topics.

The exact structure of a 2006 L20 event would evolve in response to the views of members and the nature of the topics. The guiding principles would be a light process, taking up issues that are already under consideration but need a high-level push forwards. This would lead to an informal meeting in the spirit of the original G-7 (participants make undertakings on an issue of shared concern, not act as a World directorate@), networked to other governments and non-governmental players.