The African Union in the G20: Navigating Interest in a Declining Multilateral System

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ABSTRACT

The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa will, for the first time, host the G20 Johannesburg Summit in November 2025 under the theme 'Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability'. This crucial meeting comes after the African Union (AU) was accepted as a full member of the G20 in 2023. Before the African Union joined, the G20 represented 85% and 75% of the world's GDP and trade respectively as well as two-thirds of the world's population. The African Union, with 55 states, has a GDP size of US$ 3.4 trillion and a population of 1.3 billion. South Africa has highlighted four critical issues to be discussed at the summit, which include, strengthening disaster resilience and response, ensuring debt sustainability for low-income countries, mobilising finance for a just energy transition, and harnessing critical minerals for inclusive growth and sustainable development. Although the G20 is an informal deliberative forum without international legal representation, will South Africa and the African Union succeed in championing these themes in a fast-changing geopolitical system with multilateralism under threat? Using a thematic analysis, this paper discusses the broad themes presented by the South African G20 presidency. It explores how the African Union can influence change in

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the international financial architecture through the Systemic Hub Model of the G20 Governance, which conceptualises the G20 as the central coordinating forum linking other multilateral institutions and diffusing global policy norms. This inclusion marks a pivotal moment for Africa's voice in global economic governance. It is essential to evaluate how this new membership can be leveraged to address systemic inequalities and promote sustainable development across the continent.

Keywords: African Union; South Africa; multilateralism; debt sustainability; energy transition; critical minerals disaster response.

La Unión Africana en el G20: navegando los intereses en un sistema multilateral en declive

RESUMEN

La Presidencia de la República de Sudáfrica acogió por primera vez la Cumbre del G20 en Johannesburgo en noviembre de 2025 bajo el lema "Solidaridad, Igualdad, Sostenibilidad". Esta reunión crucial tiene lugar después de que la Unión Africana (UA) fuera aceptada como miembro pleno del G20 en 2023. Antes de su incorporación, el G20 representaba el 85 y el 75% del producto interno bruto (PIB) y del comercio mundial, respectivamente, así como dos tercios de la población global. La Unión Africana, con 55 Estados miembros, cuenta con un PIB de 3,4 billones de dólares estadounidenses y una población de 1.300 millones de personas.

Sudáfrica señaló cuatro temas críticos por debatir en la cumbre: el fortalecimiento de la resiliencia y la respuesta ante desastres, la garantía de la sostenibilidad de la deuda en los países de bajos ingresos, la movilización de financiamiento para una transición energética justa y el aprovechamiento de minerales críticos para un crecimiento inclusivo y un desarrollo sostenible. Aunque el G20 es un foro deliberativo informal sin representación jurídica internacional, surge la pregunta de si Sudáfrica y la Unión Africana lograrán impulsar estos temas en un sistema geopolítico en rápida transformación, con el multilateralismo bajo amenaza.

Mediante un análisis temático, este artículo examina los ejes principales planteados por la Presidencia sudafricana del G20. Explora cómo la Unión Africana puede influir en el cambio de la arquitectura financiera internacional a través del Modelo de Centro Sistémico de Gobernanza del G20, que concibe a este grupo como el foro coordinador central que vincula a otras instituciones multilaterales y difunde normas de política global. Esta inclusión marca un momento decisivo para la voz de África en la gobernanza económica mundial. Es esencial evaluar cómo esta nueva membresía puede aprovecharse para abordar las desigualdades sistémicas

y promover el desarrollo sostenible en todo el continente.

Palabras clave: Unión Africana; Sudáfrica; multilateralismo; sostenibilidad de la deuda; transición energética; minerales críticos; respuesta ante desastres.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa will host the G20 Johannesburg Summit on 22-23 November 2025 for the first time on African soil, with the African Union, its regional body, attending as a permanent member for the second year. The stakes are high as South Africa addresses pressing issues that directly affect the African continent. These include strengthening disaster resilience and response, ensuring debt sustainability for low-income countries, mobilising finance for a just energy transition, and harnessing critical minerals for inclusive growth and sustainable development (G20, 2025) reflecting the African Union's position. The achievements of the G20 are well documented, beginning with foiling the Asian turned-global financial crisis that erupted in Thailand in June 1997 and the American 2008-2009 global financial crisis, as well as financial regulatory reforms (Basel III), trade liberalisation and economic cooperation, and global health initiatives (Kyumoto, 2023). This summit presents a unique opportunity for Africa to assert its priorities on a global stage.

The AU handled its first year at the G20 as an observation year but is poised to pursue global order changes at the multilateral level. In its second year, however, the AU cannot afford to remain a passive participant; it must leverage its collective voice of 55 member states to shape debates on debt sustainability, energy transition, and critical minerals, ensuring Africa is not merely present in the room but actively steering outcomes that affect the continent's future. Its success depends on how the G20 members cooperate on the issues in an era where diplomatic tensions are high, especially between the United States of America (USA) and South Africa. The recent tariff measures imposed by the USA also weakened multilateralism as all G20 members were affected. The AU must navigate these tensions strategically to ensure its agenda is not sidelined.

The G20's hub role in global economic governance since the global financial crisis has had the effect of concentrating and decentralising authority while diffusing new policy practices of global economic governance, as opined by Luckhurst (2019). The G20 has broadened its agenda beyond its initial emphasis on economics and finance to include development, climate change, terrorism, environmental issues, health, and gender equity among others. Unlike formal forms of global governance that are evident in multilateral International Organisations and international law with respect to specific issues which are created by formal treaties, informal global governance refers to forums or summits created by "an explicitly shared expectation—rather than a formalised agreement" by a specific group of states without any established agency or legal agreement (Vabulas & Snidal, 2013).

Scholars have researched the effectiveness of the G20 since its establishment but there is scant research on how the African Union will achieve continental objectives at the multilateral level through the G20. This paper bridges the gap in the literature by using a thematic analysis to discuss the issues presented by the South African presidency and how the African Union can pursue global order changes, especially in the global financial architecture, energy transition and debt sustainability. This paper also explores the strategic mechanisms available to the AU for influencing G20 outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a thematic analysis to comprehensively examine the major themes presented by Africa for the Summit. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that researchers use to systematically organise and analyse data. It involves the identification of themes through careful reading and re-reading of the data (King, 2004). A rigorous thematic analysis approach can produce insightful and trustworthy findings (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). The major themes of the study are the Systematic Hub Model of G20, debt sustainability, energy transition, critical minerals, and disaster response. This method allows for a nuanced understanding of Africa's strategic positioning within the G20.

ANALYSIS OF THE G20 THROUGH THE SYSTEMATIC HUB MODEL

The G20 has become the hub of a network of global governance, connecting other Plurilateral Summit Institutions (PSI) where advanced and emerging countries, from around the world, participate as equals. The G20 began with the world's major multilateral organisations - the IMF and the World Bank - as members and has added other emerging and developing countries (Kirton, 2013). The African Union has fifty-five (55) member states (including suspended countries) largely made up of developing countries. These countries are faced with the issues tabled by the South African presidency at the upcoming G20 summit. The G20 has served as a multilateral platform to solve global challenges by collaborating with legally established international organisations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Africa's foremost regional body- the African Union- is poised to use the G20 as a platform to avert the debt crisis that threatens developing countries across the world of which the majority are in Africa.

The G20 falls under global governance literature in international relations. Global governance is understood as a process of cooperative leadership that brings together national governments, multilateral public agencies, and civil society to achieve commonly accepted goals. It provides strategic direction and mobilises collective energies to address global challenges. To be effective, such governance must be inclusive, dynamic, and capable of spanning national and sectoral boundaries. It should operate through soft rather than hard power, and it should be more democratic than authoritarian, more openly political than bureaucratic, and more integrated than specialised (Boughton & Bradford, 2007). Yet, the experience of many Global South countries suggests that these ideals have not always been realised in practice. Their voices have often been marginalised within decision-making processes, raising questions about how genuinely inclusive and democratic the G20 has been in addressing development priorities beyond the interests of advanced economies. The uneven uptake of the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the slow, heavily criticised implementation of the Common Framework for Debt Treatments, illustrate how Global South priorities risk being delayed or diluted despite formal commitments. For the African Union in particular, continuity and consistency will be imperative to ensure that the policies recommended at the G20 do not remain rhetorical commitments but translate into actionable, implementable outcomes that address structural inequalities and advance long-term development objectives.

Secondly, the old formal multilateral organisations from the 1940s and the informal, plurilateral institutions created since 1975 failed to respond adequately to such shocks. The rising vulnerability of the established powers led to the success of the G20. The failure of the Bretton Woods institutions to adequately curtail the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and the global financial crisis in 2008 made the G20 assume the role of stabilising the international financial system through the establishment of the Financial Stability Board (FSB). The G20 created the FSB in its image to provide the missing international organisation with the need for stronger domestic financial regulations in the wake of the 2008 financial shock (Kirton, 2013a). The G20 has already established a Common Framework for debt treatment, but it has yet to deliver satisfactorily, as critics opine that the process has been slow (AFRODAD, 2023).

Thirdly, G20 members have common characteristics. They converge on their desire for recognition as satisfied top-tier powers and on the domestic principles and practices of economic, social and political openness needed to sustain their position, their acceptance as legitimate members of this top tier and their stability and growth at home (Plattner, 2011). To a greater extent, the G20 enjoys domestic political cohesion, its participants' political capital, control, continuity, financial-economic competence, personal commitment to the G20 forum and popular support for governing through the G20 (Plattner, 2011).

Luckhurst's (2019) study examines how the G20 became a hub for decentralising authority in global economic governance (Boughton & Bradford, 2007). It indicates the forum's core role in global economic governance since 2008 (Cooper, 2010; Kirton, 2013a; Narlikar, 2017). It is a "hub" in the sense that it directs the activities of other international agencies and actors to diffuse policy norms and practices in global governance (Narlikar, 2017).

Another key conceptual focus of the present analysis is decentralising authority. Luckhurst (2016) focuses on three key aspects of authority in global economic governance and specifically the G20 context. These are strategic, political and cognitive authority, and their effects on the organisation, policies and actors involved in the G20. The emphasis on these aspects of authority does not exhaust all possible forms, for example, one could discuss legal or even "moral" authority; however, focusing on these three dimensions constitutes a useful framework for analysing the G20's importance for global governance (Luckhurst, 2016).

THE LEGITIMACY OR OTHERWISE OF THE G20

The legitimacy of the G20 has been questioned by a myriad of scholars and analysts. These scholars argue on the themes of redundancy, rejection, reinforcement and replacement, and highlight the forum's tendency to lack continuity or sustained consensus on agreed policies and decisions, which undermines implementation and erodes its credibility as a stable governance mechanism.

Redundant

The first general school in this debate sees the G20 as redundant in the long term, because it is too large and diverse in its membership and too informal in its institutionalisation, or because it has inspired the G7/8, other informal plurilateral bodies, or the Bretton Woods/ United Nations organisations to revive and reform to meet the new global governance needs. Assuming a zero- sum global governance competition, this school first finds support in the G20's birth alongside the British-guided, legally entrenched International Monetary and Financial Committee (IMFC) and the German-designed Financial Stability Forum (Kirton, 2016).

A particularly strong, prescriptively oriented strain of the "redundant" school sees the G20 as a great danger to the kind of global economic governance the world needs. A leading G20 abolitionist, Anders Åslund (2009) argued after the 2009 Pittsburgh Summit that the G20 was a threat to the international architecture and had to be stopped. He questioned the legitimacy of an institution that unilaterally named itself the premier economic forum, without clear membership criteria, agreed rules of governance, or authorisation from excluded powers (Åslund, 2009). In Åslund's view, the G20 breached the principle of national sovereignty by usurping authority over global finance while expecting the 173 excluded countries to accept its decisions. As an alternative, he proposed the International Monetary Fund, which he regarded as possessing universality, a formal legal basis, and the staff capacity to carry out governance functions. Yet, this prescription is not without problems: the IMF itself has long faced criticisms over its skewed voting quotas, conditionality, and perceived bias toward advanced economies, which have undermined its legitimacy in the Global South. Thus, Åslund's argument highlights the G20's weaknesses but also illustrates the broader dilemma of global governance, whether legitimacy should derive from legal universality or from practical inclusiveness and crisis responsiveness.

Rejection

The second general school rejects preeminence but accepts the continuation and contribution of the G20 (Beeson & Bell 2009). Such rejectionists, conceding the possibility of positive-sum coexistence and cooperation among international institutions, conclude that although the G20 will endure, it has failed to perform as the primary centre of global economic governance, in part because it contains many of the flaws that have afflicted the G8. Such claims about poor G20 performance arose soon after its start and came especially from those who shared a hard law, legalisation approach (Abbott *et al*., 2000).

Other rejectionist scholars also emerged in response to the first G20 summit in Washington. They insisted that the leaders fell well short of their objectives due to a misdiagnosis of the financial crisis, denial of their culpability for it, and failure to deliver what they had promised at prior ministerial meetings (Duncan, 2008; Lander, 2008). After Pittsburgh, rejectionists still doubted the group's performance (Giles, 2009; Donovan, 2009). Some pointed to differing dominant domestic ideas and interests across key members as causes of the summit's failure to agree on key issues (Schirm, 2013). Furthermore, it is difficult for the informal G20 to transform international consensus into domestic law, which significantly constrains the group's capacity for implementation.

Other critics also reject the G20 due to the absence of African representation and the missing poor of the world (Payne, 2010). After the 2009 Pittsburgh Summit, the Senegalese finance minister, Abdoulaye Diop, remarked that the leaders could not "continue to ignore hundreds of millions of Africans" (Agence France Presse, 2009). The ministers of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPCs) criticised the G20 for lacking representation from the world's poorest economies, noting that its membership was deliberately limited to the largest advanced and emerging economies with systemic influence. With the African Union joining the G20 in 2023, as a permanent member, this concern has to some extent been mitigated, as the AU provides an institutional channel for the interests of poorer states to be voiced within the forum.

Reinforcement

The third general school sees G20 governance as a valuable reinforcement of what the G8 and other similar bodies do (Kirton 2005a; Kharas & Lombardi, 2012). It argues that the G20 works well in its distinct domain of serving as a permanent, primary centre of international economic cooperation among its members, especially with the established G7/8 members, the IMF, the World Bank, and other hard law multilateral organisations operating as committed components of the new G20. It does not see, expect, or hope that the G20 will or could serve as the only centre of effective and legitimate global governance, even for its members, let alone the global "G193" as a whole. This school begins with the "distinctive mission" sub-school. It argues that the provision of financial stability, sustained growth, and globalisation that benefits all is the G20's core mission and the proper standard by which its performance should be judged. Also, this is due to the superior power or performance of the existing or reformed hard law multilateral bodies (Culpeper, 2000).

Replacement

Other scholars have argued for the replacement of the G20, though they nonetheless acknowledge certain successes. Hillman (2010) noted that the G20 had "defied its doubters in reaching consensus on specific approaches to several critical and controversial issues," even if she saw its ultimate role as serving as a "council of governors" for global economic institutions. Similarly, Russian scholar and G8 sous-sherpa Vadim Lukov (2010a, 2010b) emphasised the G20's achievements in halting the 2007–09 financial crisis through unprecedented fiscal and monetary stimulus, driving reforms in the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and initiating dialogue across diverse political and economic systems. These examples illustrate that, despite calls for its replacement, the G20 has at key moments demonstrated tangible effectiveness in crisis management and institutional reform.

The G20 is an informal forum of major economies that seeks to achieve political consensus on significant global issues. In doing so, it claims to exercise de facto governance authority over such matters. Virally (1974) notes that states have a raison-d'etre or a 'finalité intégrée'. This means they aim for the preservation or enhancement of the common good, of national security and prosperity, here as international organisations have an instrumental function or 'finalité fonctionelle'. States are ends in themselves, while international organisations are means to (specific) ends (Virally, 1974). The G20 has no foundational treaty and no legal rights or for its members; it lacks formal powers or a substantive legal structure.

The rise of the G20 in the international system can be analysed through post-colonial international relations theory. Post-colonial scholars challenge the centrality accorded to Europe as the historical source and origin of the international order. Post -colonial theories query the universality accorded to moral and legal perspectives which reflect and reproduce the power relations characteristic of the colonial encounter, and which are thus far from being universal. They question the epistemological privilege accorded to an understanding of knowledge which is blind to the constitutive role of knowledge, and not merely representational (Seth, 2011).

ISSUES TABLED BY SOUTH AFRICA'S G20 PRESIDENCY

Ensuring Debt Sustainability for Low-Income Countries

The ballooning public debt and its accompanying interest payment in low-income countries stifle revenue disbursement to critical essential sectors like education and health. This situation is dire in Sub-Saharan Africa, where public debt has tripled since 2010 to about US$1.14 trillion at the end of 2022, largely as a result of weak debt management systems, significant debt transparency issues, weak macro-fiscal management, greater reliance on costlier and riskier sources of financing (World Bank, 2023). The median public debt-to-GDP ratio in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has increased from 32% in 2010 to 63.2% by the end of 2024, while countries at high risk of external debt distress have surged (Pulse, 2025). According to the joint World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) Debt Sustainability Analysis (DSA) published in June 2023, eleven low-income countries were classified as being in debt distress. Of these, seven were located in SubSaharan Africa (SSA), with Ghana and Malawi being the latest economies to have joined the list (Were, 2024).

Empirical research shows that it is highly improbable for a country to run a surplus budget, and therefore the acquisition of public debt becomes inevitable. It follows that the acquisition of public debt is not a problem; nevertheless, building up public debt to unsustainable levels can stifle economic growth (Adom, 2016). Scholars such as Reinhart & Rogoff (2010) have analysed the impact of public debt on GDP growth. They opine that, if the public debt-to-GDP ratio exceeds 90%, it would have a negative impact on the country's economic growth (Reinhart & Rogoff, 2010). Salmon (2021), in a study to assess the impact of public debt on economic growth in developing countries, found that public debt has no causal relationship with GDP in the short-run, but there is unidirectional Granger causality running from public debt to GDP in the long run (Hilton, 2021).

Developing countries facing this debt crisis are seeking multilateral solutions at the G20. This is not the first-time debt developing countries are seeking debt relief. As compared to the debt crisis of the 1970s and 1980s which was characterised by debt owed to multilateral institutions, the current debt crisis is largely owed to commercial and bilateral lenders (Hilton, 2021). Historically, African countries have called for debt cancellation. The Lagos Plan of Action (1980-2000) endorsed cancellation of all debts contracted by Member States concerned, without any discrimination. Also, Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs) has siphoned billions of dollars from the continent which could have been used for development. According to the African Union and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the continent is estimated to be losing more than US$ 50 billion annually in IFFs. This is a conservative estimate because accurate data do not exist for all African countries, and these estimates often exclude some forms of IFFs that by nature are secret and cannot be properly estimated, such as proceeds of bribery and trafficking of drugs, people and firearms (UNECA, 2015).

At the Rio de Janeiro Leaders' Declaration in 2024, the leaders affirmed that,

> … we continue to support the Global Sovereign Debt Roundtable (GSDR) to further advance common understanding among key stakeholders, including the private sector, bilateral and multilateral creditors and debtor countries. We welcome the Africa-led debates on Debt, Development and Infrastructure convened by the Brazilian G20 Presidency in 2024. (G20, 2024)

The GSDR brings together debtor countries and creditors. The objective is to build greater common understanding among key stakeholders on debt sustainability and debt restructuring challenges, and ways to address them. The roundtable is co-chaired by the IMF, World Bank and G20 Presidency (currently South Africa) and comprises official bilateral creditors (both traditional creditors members of the Paris Club and new creditors), private creditors and borrowing countries (World Bank, n.d.).

South Africa has tabled this debt crisis at the 2025 G20 summit and is seeking a multilateral solution. The African Union officially took up its role as a permanent member of the G20, now in its second year of participation, marking a transition from observer status to full involvement in the forum's deliberations and agenda-setting processes. The expectation is that the African Union will be able to present workable proposals with the support of South Africa to avert the debt crisis in developing countries, many of which are members of the African Union. A coordinated AU strategy, supported by empirical data and regional consensus, is crucial for effective advocacy.

The G20 summit promulgated the 'Common Framework for Debt

Treatments in November 2020 which is the main mechanism for coordinating and implementing sovereign debt restructuring. Currently, the seventy-three (73) low-income countries that were eligible for the G20's Debt Service Suspension Initiative set up in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic can apply for treatment under the Common Framework. In Africa, Ghana, Ethiopia, Chad and Zambia have applied for debt relief through the G20 Common Framework (G20, 2020). The African Union Commission can collaborate with the four SSA countries currently undergoing the Common Framework process to distil their experiences and develop specific proposals aimed at expediting the process and improving debt restructuring outcomes (Tran, 2024).

To further resolve the debt crisis, the G20 Summit host, South Africa, has launched the 'Cost of Capital Commission' where a group of experts will work on options for low-income countries to pay less for their borrowing and address debt sustainability (McNair, n.d.). Some countries in the AU are advocating for partial debt cancellations along the lines of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative launched by the IMF and the World Bank in 1996. These debt cancellations can be discussed in the context of the current AU theme of "Justice for Africans and People of African Descent Through Reparations", as well as in international climate negotiations (i.e., debt-for- climate swaps) (Eickhoff, 2025). Together, these initiatives underscore that Africa's debt challenge cannot be resolved solely through technical restructuring mechanisms; it requires a broader normative shift that recognises historical injustices, links debt relief to climate justice, and ensures that future financing arrangements are equitable and sustainable. In this context, discussions on mobilising finance for a just energy transition become inseparable from debt negotiations, since both issues determine whether African countries can pursue low-carbon development without deepening fiscal vulnerability.

In addressing the long-term global financial architecture imbalances, the African Union in February 2024 established the Alliance of African Multilateral Financial Institutions (AAMFI). It comprises the African Central Bank, the African Monetary Fund, the African Investment Bank, and the Pan-African Stock Exchange, among others. The objective is to strengthen Africa's financial architecture and position it more strongly within the global financial framework (ACET, 2024). In that same vein, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) has proposed that the IMF's Special Drawing Rights (SDR) policies become less discretionary and more rule-based and analytical while prioritising a long-term approach to balance-of-payments challenges. Also, the UNECA proposes for the IMF to work more assiduously to address structural inequalities in the global financial architecture by giving greater representation to the problems affecting low- and lower-middle-income countries (UNECA, 2024).

Mobilising Finance for a Just Energy Transition

Countries across the world are shifting from fossil fuel use to cleaner sources of energy in line with the 2015 Paris Climate Change Accord. Fossil fuel production and consumption account for 86% of global carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions, with 37% coming from coal, 29% from oil, and 20% from gas (Boucetta, 2024). The term energy transition refers to a paradigm shift in the energy system from one model to another, often intricate and encompassing more than simply switching from one fuel source to another. Energy transitions evolve gradually over time, defined by technologies, market incentives, policy shifts, and consumer behaviour.

To address the negative effects of climate change, energy transition is an essential transformative process aimed at reducing carbon emissions. This includes shifting from fossil fuels to renewable energy, enhancing energy efficiency, and reducing energy demand by altering consumption patterns (Fattouh *et al*., 2018).

Crude oil-producing countries are faced with a conundrum of depleting fossil fuels for development and meeting climate goals at the same time. In a study by Nakanwagi, (2021) to analyse how new oil-producing countries- Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Uganda will navigate meeting development goals while meeting Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), she recommended firstly the decarbonisation of oil and gas activities. She further recommends intermediate development of natural gas energy and systematic investment in renewables (Nakanwagi, 2021).

Africa is endowed with abundant potential for bioenergy, geothermal, hydropower, ocean, solar and wind energy, resources estimated to be 1,000 times larger than the continent's projected electricity demand in 2040 (IRENA & AfDB, 2022). With 30% of the world's known mineral reserves and 60% of the best solar potential on earth, Africa holds a uniquely strategic position in the global energy transition. These endowments are not only geographically well distributed but also directly aligned with the requirements of a low-carbon future. The continent's mineral wealth including manganese, copper, lithium, cobalt, chromium and platinum, is critical for manufacturing renewable energy technologies such as electric batteries, wind turbines, and solar panels, while its solar potential positions it as a future hub for clean, affordable power generation. Yet, despite this vast potential, Africa continues to attract only a small fraction of global climate finance and suffers from some of the world's lowest rates of energy access, underscoring the urgency of converting resource endowment into tangible development outcomes. Energy transition will be a main driver of demand for several critical materials, many of which are abundant across the African continent. Notably, lithium, widely used in Electric Vehicle (EV) batteries, is plentiful in countries including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo), Ghana, Mali, Namibia and Zimbabwe. Together, these nations hold approximately five (5) million tonnes of lithium resources, nearly 30 times more than the global lithium production in 2023 (USGS, 2024). Moreover, the African continent hosts nearly 25% of the world's natural graphite reserves, over 35% of global manganese reserves, 50% of global cobalt reserves and 75% of phosphate rock reserves (USGS, 2024).

Despite the enormous potential for just transition, financing remains a big challenge to achieving climate goals. Financing just transition in Africa has been remarkedly low. Africa accounted for only 4.5% (U$29.5 billion) of global climate finance flows in 2019/2020. Africa requires U$2.6 trillion -U$2.8 trillion cumulatively between 2020 and 2030, an average of US$242.2 billion annually to finance Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris accord (Nakanwagi, 2021).

The African Union remains committed to just transition. In line with that, the Nairobi Declaration stresses the importance of climate-positive growth, green industrialisation and local value creation (African Development Bank, 2023). The declaration also acknowledges that the energy transition will be unique in Africa, as the circumstances in which it will take place are singular. In Africa, about 570 million people still lack access to electricity, and almost 960 million people lack access to clean cooking (IEA *et al*., 2023). The energy consumption of the African population remains low, at one-third of the global average. The African Union contends that member countries will pursue their transition paths considering their unique growth needs and resources. The AU must also prioritise capacity building and technology transfer to ensure equitable participation in the energy transition.

HARNESSING CRITICAL MINERALS FOR INCLUSIVE GROWTH AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The demand for critical minerals is at an all-time high as countries across the world and industries are transitioning to cleaner energy sources and low-carbon technologies (Calderon *et al*., 2024). Critical minerals are types of 'green minerals' with two main defined characteristics: (1) they are essential for the functioning of modern technologies, economies, or national security; and (2) there is a risk that their supply chains could be disrupted (Hine *et al*., 2023). Thus, not all green metals are classified as critical minerals unless they meet these two criteria. Examples of 'green metals' include cobalt, copper, bauxite, chromium, high-purity iron ore, platinum group metals, lithium, and rare earth metals, among others (Boafo *et al*., 2024).

Green minerals or metals are vital for decarbonisation and climate goals, especially in the transport and industrial economy sectors. These minerals are necessary for the manufacturing of green or clean energy technologies such as solar panels, wind turbines, electric vehicles, battery storage, hydrogen electrolysers, and fuel cells (Hammond & Brady, 2022). Africa has a significant stock of these critical minerals. According to the 2023 statistics from the United States Geological Survey (USGS), Congo-Kinshasa, Madagascar, and Morocco have about 50% of global reserves and produce about 70% of cobalt—a critical mineral essential to produce battery storage and electric vehicles (USGS, 2023).

Bauxite is a key mineral used in the production of Solar Photovoltaic (PV) components of which Guinea has about 24% of global reserves and produces about 23% of global production. Platinum Group of Metals (PGM) is key for abating carbon-intensive and root sectors and important for green hydrogen. For PGM, Africa (South Africa - 90% and Zimbabwe - 2%) holds about 92% of global reserves with both countries producing about 82% of platinum globally in 2022. Chromium is considered a key mineral to produce low-carbon technologies such as geothermal, solar, and wind. South Africa holds about 36% of global reserves and accounted for about 44% of global production in 2022 (USGS, 2023).

Africa has been exporting traditional minerals such as gold and diamonds in their raw form for decades. To change the narrative, the continent has promulgated the Africa Mining Vision (AMV) to develop "a transparent, equitable and optimal exploitation of mineral resources to underpin broad-based sustainable growth and socio-economic development". Linked to the AMV, the African Union's Africa Minerals Development Centre (AMDC) has developed the Africa Green Minerals Strategy (AGMS). The overarching objective is to "harness green mineral value-chains for equitable resource-based industrialisation and electrification, creating green technologies and sustainable development to enhance the quality of life of its people" (African Union, 2024).

Strengthening Disaster Resilience and Response

Disasters, both natural and man-made, pose significant threats to the world. Africa faces numerous disasters including droughts, conflicts, population displacement, floods, and famine. Ensuring emergency preparedness and building resilient systems for disaster risk reduction is critical (Olu *et al.*, 2016). The continent's disaster response has been lacklustre. For instance, the slow and late emergency response to the 2014-2016 West Africa Ebola outbreak crisis in the most affected countries (Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia) caused immense public health and socioeconomic havoc. The outbreak led to more than 11,325 deaths and 28,600 cases, as well as intense cross-border travel bans and trade restrictions in these impoverished West African countries (Olu *et al*., 2016).

Africa is home to several islands and landlocked states that face perennial challenges that need special attention and support to augment domestic resources and capabilities through bilateral and multilateral channels. One such multilateral response is the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030), which was adopted at the Third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai-Japan. It presents an opportunity for countries to adopt a concise, focused, forward-looking and action-oriented framework towards disaster risk reduction (United Nations, 2015).

The continent has not been able to adequately respond to disasters because of factors such as the inadequacy of finance and logistics, limited inter-sectorial collaboration and coordination, inadequate surveillance, lack of early detection/reporting, lack of commitment, and weak capabilities (performance, roles and experiences). Also, weak health systems, a lack of personnel at operational levels, inadequate veterinary public health services, poor resources, and the lack of coherent risk assessment and emergency response plans have weakened Africa's resilience and response to disasters. The African Union developed the Africa Risk Reduction for Sustainable

Development in 2004 to contribute to the attainment of sustainable development and poverty eradication by facilitating the integration of disaster risk reduction into development. New disasters have emerged, which have been exacerbated by climate change (African Union, 2004). A multilateral approach to risk reduction and disaster response is eminent at the G20. Despite the achievements, the G20 has challenges which include divergent national interests; geopolitical tensions; implementation gaps and accountability (Kyumoto, 2023).

How can the African Union Achieve its Priorities at the G20?

The African Union is the second regional body to join the G20 after the European Union. Lesson drawing from the EU can help Africa achieve its priorities. In international negotiations, arguing and bargaining represent two distinct typologies of decision-making (Risse, 2000; Kotzian, 2007; Susskind, 2008). While presented as distinct, in practice, bargaining and arguing frequently operate in tandem. Bargaining provides the strategic leverage necessary to protect core interests, while arguing creates the normative and cognitive space to build legitimacy and shared understanding. Their combined influence can thus shape outcomes more effectively than either approach alone: bargaining ensures that powerful actors remain engaged, while arguing allows weaker or newer members, such as the African Union, to persuade through evidence and normative claims. For Africa, this dual strategy offers a meaningful opportunity at the G20. Through bargaining, the AU can push for tangible concessions on debt relief, climate finance, and critical mineral value chains, while through arguing it can reframe the discourse around equity, justice, and historical responsibility. By deliberately balancing these approaches, the AU increases its chances not only of securing immediate policy gains but also of reshaping longer-term norms in global economic governance.

Regarding the discussion of finance at the G20, EU countries seek to maximise their preferences during negotiations on financial regulatory measures, often by using threats. For example, Former French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, publicly threatened to walk out of the G20 meeting if his demands for tighter global financial regulation were not met (Chrisafis *et al.*, 2009). Bargaining dominates the G20 discussions on financial and economic affairs and the EU's diplomatic role in this area should be seen against this background. Indeed, France, Germany, Italy and the UK (henceforth 'EU4') use the EU and their EU membership as a key instrument to weigh on G20 finance outcomes (Debaere, 2015). South Africa is the only G20 member from Africa and might not possess the collective bargaining strength like EU member states marshalled by the European Union. The African Union's approach should be to argue on valid claims-based facts on the four thematic areas presented by the South African presidency.

In particular, the discussions on development in the G20 context, is characterised by an arguing logic. Since the G20 gathers countries with different levels of development as well as different economic positions and development challenges, it is seen as a platform to exchange experiences and debate on the approaches that truly work. For example, advanced economies such as Germany or Japan may emphasise technological innovation and high-value manufacturing as pathways to growth, while emerging economies like India, Brazil, or South Africa prioritise poverty reduction, infrastructure expansion, and inclusive industrialisation. Similarly, the European Union often stresses fiscal stability and green innovation as development priorities, whereas many Global South members place greater emphasis on access to climate finance, debt relief, and affordable energy to sustain growth. According to Lim (2011, p. 59), the G20 cannot only serve "as the premier forum for international cooperation" but also as a "premier marketplace for development approaches and practical case studies based on the actual experiences of its member countries (Lim, 2011).

The AU must collaborate closely with South Africa to ensure that Africa's key issues are effectively articulated, placed on the G20 agenda, and supported through coalition-building aligned with Africa's objectives. Furthermore, it is crucial for the AU and

South Africa to strengthen mechanisms for monitoring and promoting the full implementation of agreed measures, particularly those designed to support Africa's development programmes and ensure an equitable allocation of international available assistance funds. The Development Working Group of the G20 presents a platform for the Africa Union to champion implementation of the agreed development agenda. Successfully achieving these objectives would not only advance Africa's development but also cement the continent's role as a catalyst for change, helping to drive its broader agenda on the global stage (Lim, 2011).This collaboration should be institutionalised through regular consultations and joint policy frameworks.

CONCLUSION

South Africa's G20 presidency in 2025 places Africa at the centre of global economic governance at a time of profound structural challenges. The four priority issues it has tabled, strengthening disaster resilience and response, ensuring debt sustainability for low-income countries, mobilising finance for a just energy transition, and harnessing critical minerals for inclusive growth, directly reflect the continent's most pressing development needs. Africa's position is reinforced by its endowments, with 30% of the world's mineral reserves and 60% of the best solar potential on earth, the continent holds a uniquely strategic role in shaping the global transition to low-carbon growth. Yet, this potential remains constrained by limited access to affordable finance, low levels of energy access, and persistent debt distress.

The G20 has historically demonstrated its value as a systemic hub of global governance, most notably in responding to the Asian financial crisis and the 2008–09 global financial crisis, when traditional multilateral institutions fell short. However, its legitimacy continues to be questioned due to its informal structure, exclusionary membership design, and the frequent lack of continuity or follow-through on agreed policies. The African Union's permanent membership presents an opportunity to narrow this gap, but its influence will depend on more than symbolic inclusion. The AU must balance bargaining, to secure concessions on debt and climate finance, with arguing, to shift global norms toward equity, justice, and sustainable development.

The success of Africa's engagement will hinge on continuity, coalition-building, and the ability to link technical policy proposals to broader normative agendas such as reparative justice and climate responsibility. If the AU and South Africa can leverage their role strategically, the 2025 G20 summit may mark not only Africa's deeper integration into global governance but also a redefinition of the G20's relevance in an era of declining multilateralism. Future research should not only examine how the AU's strategies compare with the European Union's experience, but also evaluate how regional blocs can transform influence into tangible governance outcomes.

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