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# T20 Policy Brief

Task Force 06

**STRENGTHENING MULTILATERALISM AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE**

## International Security Crises: A New Role for The G20 In Humanitarian Catastrophes?

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**TF06**



## Abstract

This policy brief analyzes the urgent issue of humanitarian catastrophes (versus humanitarian emergencies) and its relationship with the mandate of the G20 and the priorities of the Brazilian Presidency. To this end, and in light of the cases of Ukraine and Gaza, the authors explore the extent to which the G20 could adopt a new role in the issue-area of international security crises, specifically linked to humanitarian catastrophes. In the midst of the persistent deadlock among member states in the United Nations system and the lack of a common foreign policy within the G20 regarding humanitarian action in these countries, they advocate the creation of a Working Group on Responses to Humanitarian Catastrophes (WG-RHC) within the G20 Sherpa Track. In this regard, the brief identifies three possible scenarios: one related to possible resistance from some G20 members to this initiative; another to do with its technical and legal operationalization that compliments the work of U.N. humanitarian bodies; and a third regarding the protection of children in the field of health and food security.

**Keywords:** G20; Humanitarian Catastrophes; Humanitarian Crises; Health Security; Food Security; Protection Of Children.



## The G20 and the problem of humanitarian catastrophes

Reminiscent of the mass human suffering that accompanied the violent wars of the twentieth century, humanity has witnessed the resurgence of humanitarian catastrophes during the past two years in Ukraine and Gaza<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, the term has been widely used by stakeholders to describe the situation in these countries, defined as “conflicts and calamities that generate both widespread human suffering and destructive events that require a wide range of emergency resources” (Iserson 2014, 231).

United Nations (U.N.) statistics paint a grim picture of the humanitarian emergencies unfolding in these two places. In two years of war in Ukraine, 6.5 million refugees have fled the country and another 3.7 million citizens are internally displaced. Medical and educational infrastructure has suffered widespread damage and more than 700,000 Ukrainians lack access to adequate housing. In 2024, 14.6 million Ukrainians require

humanitarian assistance. Since the outbreak of hostilities on October 7, 2023, in Gaza, the current Israeli-Hamas war has dislocated 1.7 million Palestinians. Housing, the electrical grid, and medical facilities have been devastated, and 2.2 million people face a serious food security crisis.

Since its creation in 1945 and as mandated by its Charter, the U.N. system has developed a comprehensive framework to address humanitarian crises. Nonetheless, the geopolitical tensions of the two abovementioned conflicts have hamstrung the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and severely impeded the ability of the U.N.’s humanitarian governance architecture and outside actors to come to the aid and rescue of

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the affected populations in these territories. In both Ukraine and Gaza, despite numerous meetings of the UNSC, various permanent members repeatedly used the veto to hold up resolutions that could have facilitated greater humanitarian action in the two countries. UNSC discord and gridlock have created enormous difficulties for the management of potential and actual conflicts in an effective and timely manner.

In other words, under these conditions, the existing U.N.-based global architecture on its own is not up to the task of providing timely, effective, and adequate humanitarian responses to potential or real catastrophic humanitarian events. This state of affairs is unacceptable and creates a moral and ethical imperative to search urgently for creative solutions that ameliorate such extensive human suffering among non-combatants, *in spite of geopolitical obstacles*.

We sustain that the G20 has a potential complimentary, cooperative and supportive role to play in these situations alongside existing U.N.-based institutions. First of all, in a manner analogous to the World Health Organization's operative distinction between public health emergencies of international concern and pandemics, as reflected during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, global humanitarian governance requires a clearer understanding of the difference between and respective thresholds between humanitarian emergencies and catastrophes. The G20 can play a pivotal role both in terms of clarifying the distinction between the two in international law and global

policy, as well as helping to prevent or overcome the humanitarian deadlocks that contribute to the latter. The main question that this policy brief addresses translates into a practical governance challenge: how to provide crucial forms of humanitarian responses, such as health and food security, in conflict situations with a high potential to become humanitarian catastrophes and in which there are significant divisions or gridlock among states with competing interests.



There is an interdependence within these conflicts: they affect not just combatants and non-combatants in the places in which they occur, but also other countries both near and far through the spillover effects that they produce. For example, as is well known, the interruptions in Ukraine's grain exports caused by the war in that country had serious repercussions for the food security of a number of states in Africa. In the present Gaza conflict, the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding there has the potential to spill over borders into neighboring Lebanon and Egypt through refugee flows and disruptions in food supplies.

Accordingly, one key issue is how to ensure health and food security in humanitarian crises, both within the immediate conflict countries and those affected globally. Addressing humanitarian catastrophes with timely and effective international humanitarian responses that encompass health and food security is a priority of the G20 Presidency of Brazil in 2024, especially insofar as they are related both to preventing and combating inequalities and hunger, as well as reforming global governance institutions.

Among the aforementioned humanitarian crises, it is also crucial to address the potential catastrophic situation confronted by children. These crises are becoming increasingly protracted and are often characterized by the growing non-compliance with international humanitarian law, human rights and humanitarian principles, especially as they pertain to children. Children are seriously affected by violence of all kinds and are vulnerable to various traumas.

The G20 has a moral and ethical responsibility to take action on the humanitarian front at this moment of global governance gridlock and immobilism. It has an obligation to act in the face of these potential or real humanitarian catastrophes. That responsibility must be converted into a mandate for both its members and presidency.

As we underscore in the recommendations below, the G20 has great potential with

respect to humanitarian responses, especially in relation to public health and food security. It benefits from the inclusivity and global reach among its key players. Through its membership, it can foster a greater democratization of global governance institutions, another Brazilian priority. Its dual institutional flexibility and strength provide it with unexplored possibilities and advantages for tackling humanitarian catastrophes.



## Recommendations

### **A new working group (Sherpa track) on responses to humanitarian catastrophes**

In what follows, we offer three recommendations for the G20 under the 2024 Brazilian presidency: one general and two specific ones:

**1. The G20 must develop and expand its mandate in relation to international security crises in the specific area of responses to humanitarian catastrophes. This entails the adoption of a complimentary, cooperative and supportive role vis-à-vis the existing U.N. humanitarian governance architecture and avoiding competition with the latter.**

There are at least five reasons why an expansion of the G20's mandate to include responses to humanitarian catastrophes is warranted and has significant potential. First, unlike the U.N. system, the G20 is a space in which Russian participation is not impeded. Since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022, the Russia Federation has been suspended from some of the U.N. System bodies, like the U.N. Human Rights Council. The Russia president, Vladimir Putin, and other Russian authorities have also been targeted with arrest orders issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC). These developments are potential obstacles for the management of international crises inside the U.N. system. In this sense, the G20 is not hampered by these constraints on Russian participation and remains an important permanent space for dialogue and negotiation that could lead to improved humanitarian responses.

Second, the G20 has evident advantages for addressing humanitarian crises due to its inclusive, pluralistic and global membership. This contrasts with the more restricted



membership of other international political and/or security organizations or groups, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (now expanded to Nordic countries) or the BRICS (which is expanding to include other emerging powers). As a grouping whose members give it global reach, the G20 also is well suited to explore international policy measures that address the global linkages and repercussions of humanitarian catastrophes. The question of international legitimacy is a *leitmotiv* of the G20.

Third, the definition of a new international security role for the G20 in the area of responses to humanitarian catastrophes is the logical outgrowth of the gradual expansion of its mandates to include non-traditional security issues. From its origins as the principle global forum for international economic cooperation, over successive presidencies it has added climate change, health security, and disaster risk reduction to its agenda.

Fourth, the institutional design of the G20 as an informal intergovernmental organization provides it with both the flexibility and strength to respond to humanitarian emergencies as they arise (Vabulas 2013, 2019). Unlike more formal intergovernmental organizations, it is a malleable shape shifter that is able to switch from a more intergovernmental and state-centric institution to a complex transnational network for multistakeholder coordination, and back. Its membership provides it with convening power and the authority to offer instructions to a host of international organizations.

Accordingly, the G20 is simultaneously a focal point, a concert, a steering committee, a crisis committee, a sounding board and a bridge connecting the global North and South (Cooper 2010, 2019a, 2019b; Wallensten 2023).

Fifth, historically, and thanks to its evolving institutionality, the G20 has already accumulated significant crisis management credentials, including the 1998 Asian crisis, the 2008-9 global financial crisis and the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, these examples underscore the ability of the organization's membership to manage differences





and the lack of a common foreign policy.

**2. To anchor this new mandate, the G20 should create a new working group under the Sherpa Track on Responses to Humanitarian Catastrophes (WG-RHC) and President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva could appoint a personal emissary to coordinate its work and proceedings.**

Consistent with the prerogatives vested in the G20 Presidency, it is recommended that President Lula and the Brazilian government form a new working group under the Sherpa Track on Responses to Humanitarian Catastrophes and invest it with a specially appointed personal emissary to coordinate its actions. In addition to extending invitations to other member states and pertinent international organizations to join this working group, the Brazilian G20 Presidency should contemplate a pluralistic multistakeholder participation that includes leading and veteran governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental experts and practitioners from the fields of humanitarian assistance and humanitarian catastrophes.

This working group could adopt technical and legal approaches with the potential to reduce or transcend the political and geopolitical barriers that obstruct the generation of timely, concrete and productive forms of assistance to address humanitarian catastrophes. In keeping with the priorities of the Brazilian Presidency, it should include the discussion and identification of specific and tangible ways to promote health and food security as well as emergency support and protection for affected children.

With respect to the latter, protecting children must be a priority for the G20 in its actions aimed at humanitarian catastrophes. Placing the rights of children and adolescents at the center of the political and economic debate has been a request of the United Nations

Children's Fund (UNICEF) to the G20, mainly through the Development Working Group and the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty (Theirworld 2024).

**3. To underpin and formally launch the new working group, the Brazilian Presidency could organize a special session of the G20 2024 agenda on responses to humanitarian catastrophes.**

Given the urgency to address the humanitarian catastrophes unfolding in such places as Gaza, Haiti, and the Ukraine, it is recommended that this special session be held as soon as possible within the G20's 2024 agenda. An important objective of this meeting would be to inform and influence the deliberations of the G20 Summit to be held on November 18-19, 2024. As suggested beforehand, the special session should enjoy both high-level governmental attendance as well as multistakeholder participation.

In light of the previous discussion, we suggest that the following issues be addressed during this special session:

- The construction of health and food security in humanitarian catastrophes;
- The protection of children in humanitarian catastrophes;
- G20 diplomacy and humanitarian catastrophes: How to use the good offices of the G20 Presidency;
- How to build safe and effective humanitarian corridors – land, air, sea; · Emerging international law of humanitarian catastrophes (Guerra, Silva, and da Silva 2023);
- Establishing thresholds: humanitarian emergencies versus humanitarian catastrophes;
- The characteristics of interstate versus intra-state humanitarian catastrophes.

## Scenario of outcomes:

### **Resistance, a technical and legal focus, and the protection of children**

#### **1. The possible resistance of some member states to this new mandate**

Humanitarian responses by countries and/or international organizations must always contend with tensions between two dimensions: humanitarianism and solidarity, based on international law (Papaux and Wyler 1997), versus the vested interests of international powers (Bass 2008). For example, the case of the R2P intervention in Libya in 2011, authorized by the UNSC, failed to be accountable in its implementation and strayed from its mandate (Zenko 2016). Hence, there could be resistance from some G20 member states to support humanitarian initiatives as part of the group's mandate. Nevertheless, humanitarian catastrophes, as much more dangerous situations for human security, should also be understood as a credible international security threat to entire regions or even globally. The tension between those in favor and against initiatives to address humanitarian catastrophes is an inevitable part of the negotiation and decision making process of the Group but should not deter it from carving out this crucial new role.

#### **2. Emphasizing the technical and legal aspects of responses to humanitarian catastrophes**

The G20 could be an important tool to support logistical and operational mechanisms already present – as well as others to be tested – in the U.N.'s specialized humanitarian agencies, in a complementary way. Once it has been created, the Working Group on Responses to Humanitarian Catastrophes (WG-RHC) would assume a strategic and catalytic role as the conduit for innovative and cooperative avenues to design and facilitate the implementation of humanitarian responses as well as to empower U.N.



initiatives (complementary role). Concerning medicines and food supply to prevent the spread of diseases and famine, the WG-RHC would benefit from the authority of the G20 and its Presidency to engage the parties in conflict in order to broker fast and sustainable solutions to deliver the respective humanitarian assistance.

### **3. Protecting children from diseases, epidemics and famine in humanitarian catastrophes**

In humanitarian responses related to the protection of children's rights, such as in the case of Gaza, it is essential that Brazil's presidency of the G20 seek partnerships with other important actors, such as UNICEF, which has already been carrying out extraordinary advocacy and ground work in this conflict and can be a relevant and necessary channel for dialogue. These partnerships can draw on what is established in international humanitarian, refugee and human rights law, especially the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. In this scenario, the G20 should aim for: 1) safe and unrestricted humanitarian access to the Gaza Strip, to reach affected populations wherever they are; 2) building dialogue to prevent serious violations of rights against all children, including the killing and maiming of children; 3) engaging parties for the protection of civilian infrastructures, especially those fundamental to the lives of children, such as educational spaces and health facilities, electricity, water, sanitation and telecommunications, to avoid the loss of civilian lives and those of children; and 4) guaranteeing humanitarian access for the care of wounded or sick children and dialogue for the withdrawal of children accompanied by family members so that they can receive essential health services.

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