On November 12th the Bussola Institute hosted a webinar that examined the challenges and opportunities of advancing global cooperation in a pandemic during Saudi Arabia’s G20 presidency. The G20 agenda for 2020 is “Realising Opportunities of the 21st Century for All”.

This webinar discussed in detail the three themes of the Saudi G20 agenda. Empowering People: creating the conditions in which all people, especially women and youth, can live decently, work and thrive. This includes (inter alia)- unleashing access to opportunities for all; supporting employment; fostering education, expand financial inclusion, human-centred economic growth, and person-centred health care. Safeguarding the Planet: by fostering collective efforts to protect our global commons. This includes (inter alia) – sustainable development, combatting habitat loss, preserving the oceans, realising food and water security, and cleaner energy for the future. Shaping New Frontiers: by adopting long-term and bold strategies to share the benefits of innovation and technological advancement. This can be done through (inter alia) promoting space cooperation, enabling and addressing the challenges of the digital economy, developing smart cities, regulating big tech in global finance, and addressing corruption.
THE EXPERTS FOR THE WEBINAR INCLUDED:

Dr. Abdullah Al Hassan
Saudi Arabia’s G20 Sous Sherpa and Executive Director of Policy for the Saudi Arabia G20 Presidency.

Dr. Reham Al Rassi
Policy advisor at the Saudi Arabia G20 Secretariat, File Head of the Tourism Working Group, Women’s Empowerment as a cross-cutting topic, and the EMPOWER Alliance.

Dr. Peter Krois
Austrian Delegate for North Africa, the Middle East and the Gulf Region at the Austrian Permanent Representation to the EU.

Dr. Sami Mahroum
Professor at the Free University Brussels, and Director of Strategy & Research at the Dubai Future Foundation.

Mr. John Dennehy
Secretary General, Bussola Institute.

The webinar was moderated by Mr. John Dennehy, Secretary-General of the Bussola Institute and also heard welcoming remarks from HE Ambassador Saad bin Mohammed Al Arify, Head of the Saudi Arabian Mission to the European Union.
The agenda themes for the 2020 G20 Presidency have proven prescient and highly relevant to current global circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on day to day lives and will continue to hinder opportunities going forward for a number of years. The webinar speakers emphasised how the current G20 Presidency has put recovery from the pandemic at the heart of global discussions throughout 2020. This has included an emphasis on how to move forward on pandemic preparedness and response, as well as the pursuit of innovative solutions attached to the circular carbon economy. Both dimensions are essential for achieving already agreed goals on climate change and sustainable development for ensuring no one is left behind in the post-pandemic recovery.

The webinar discussion covered a key point in this regard with the statement- “Without human agency, there is no world economy.” The G20’s primary focus is the global economy and measures taken mainly address macro-economic policy. However, as the pandemic is showing, if individuals are not able to access economic activity, individuals, societies, and states suffer negative consequences. The pandemic has taught us, as the speakers made clear, that the health of humans should be central to the growth and advancement of the ongoing economic recovery.

Human health is, of course, a key area for action but as the panellists discussed technological innovation needs to be harnessed not only for advancing technology but to helping ensure everyone can be part of the local and global forces surrounding them. Inclusivity should not be seen simply as a charitable or virtuous thing to do; it is also a necessary collective good for the economy as it increases the reach, demand and supply of global products and services.

Inclusivity has been emphasised by the G20 Presidency and the webinar participants stressed that existing inequalities in our societies, as well as those furthered by the pandemic, cannot become systemic and further institutionalised. This will require effective recovery measures that benefit everyone and are designed to leave no one behind. Furthermore, there is the opportunity to continue the process of removing formal barriers to empowerment (legal systems, cultural practices) as well as supporting role models and examples of good practice for empowering women, youth, and minorities. A number of non-governmental meetings and initiatives related to the G20 have been working in this space, in particular, the EMPOWER alliance supporting women.

Inclusivity also requires harnessing the technology currently available and bringing about further innovation. As more of the day-to-day life, in particular education, has moved online, it has been made clear an unfortunate widening of the technology divide between societies and within society. The webinar speakers referred to the need for addressing tech scarcity globally as, without effective access to technology, many will be left behind. A challenge to the G20 is ensuring that innovations in technology are not limited to government officials or elite processes. Developments and innovations in technology need to be harnessed to bring about greater inclusivity as it will allow those marginalised to link into, and benefit from, the global economy. This is another area where supporting the human condition and lived experiences of all is essential to recovery.
The G20 Presidency of 2020 comes at a time when global multilateralism is highly questioned and key states are less inclined to participate effectively. The commitment to multilateralism affirmed by the G20 Presidency throughout the year has been essential in keeping the G20 agenda active. The pandemic has been disruptive, equally this disruption provides opportunities to further innovative solutions to global affairs based on cooperation rather than competition. The webinar speakers gave significant attention to the diversity of activities and stakeholders surrounding the G20 Presidency, such as the organisational groups B20 (businesses) and T20 (think tanks), which have been active in their meetings and produced numerous reports and studies. This part of the G20 process ensures civil society has a role and expands the voices involved in the process.

The webinar addressed the impact and effectiveness of the G20 at a time when the global situation is not amenable to multilateral cooperation, both practically and politically. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed dramatically how all aspects of human life are undertaken including the ability to meet in person to engage in diplomacy. At the same time solutions to the pandemic and its ongoing impact require increasing cooperation between states and societies. The G20 Emergency Summit meeting in March 2020 showed strong leadership by the Presidency in moving global efforts to support the response to the pandemic.

A specific positive result of the G20 already realised is the agreement reached on debt relief as a major support factor for developing states. The Debt Service Suspension Initiative was agreed in April and has already been taken up by a number of states. This initiative gives developing states the financial leeway for directing resources away from debt repayment to the needs of their societies. The emergency Summit in March was a positive development as it set the stage for action at a time when some states were still not recognising the impact of the pandemic. The commitments expressed in March and those adopted at the November Summit will need concerted action to bring about their realisation and ensure no one is left behind in the ongoing recovery. At the same time, the G20 Presidency of 2020 has been able to maintain a strong commitment to multilateral engagement across a range of stakeholders.

A major dimension of the Saudi G20 Presidency that will need emphasis well beyond 2020 is the belief in multi-stakeholder multilateralism. The pandemic has made clear that cooperation and coordination is the most effective way to address matters of global impact, yet many states are resisting multilateralism. The G20 Summit comes at an opportune time to reinforce the power of multilateralism. Saudi Arabia, as the G20 Presidency, cannot compel the other members of the G20 to act, as the G20 relies upon political goodwill. But through a reinforcement of the value of cooperation, the G20 Presidency is able to make strong statements as to how global affairs should be pursued. The opportunity to reinforce multilateralism in all dimensions of global action is clearly apparent, albeit with great challenges to overcome.

As the G20 is an informal grouping of sovereign states there exists structural impediments to furthering agreed courses of action. At the same time, as the G20 is not bound by formal institutional structures there is a greater degree of flexibility allowing the group to be responsive to world events and to foster innovative solutions, as has been seen throughout this year’s Presidency. The decision by the Presidency to hold the emergency summit in March as the pandemic took hold illustrates the flexibility of the G20 process. This meeting began multiple processes for addressing the immediate needs of the pandemic as well as addressing long-term recovery. Of course, the G20 commitments cannot be enforced in a formal way but it the value in the political will being expressed that is key to furthering effective recovery and ongoing sustainable development.
The key challenge is ensuring that no one is left behind in the recovery from the pandemic, as well as ensuring already marginalised groups are supported in the ongoing pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals. The webinar discussed direct action for increased investment in education and technology that supports the most marginalised. As part of the 11 trillion (USD) committed by the G20 members to global recovery, if less than one-tenth of that (1 trillion USD) was committed to education there would be faster economic recovery, growth and expansion. This would also support sustainable solutions such as reaching individuals and communities in the world who currently have no access to technology or education, providing a better foundation for resilience.

The challenges the world faces in global human health are clear. In response to the pandemic, too many states are pursuing self-interested health nationalism or using the pandemic to gain political points. In 2019, the G20 Presidency placed global human health as a priority. The COVID-19 pandemic proves that solutions to health crises will be reached through cooperation rather than competition. Learning from this pandemic is a clear opportunity but the challenges in overcoming individual state self-interest, driven by political concerns, remain large. The 2020 G20 Presidency has endeavoured to reinforce collective approaches through multi-stakeholder engagement and this emphasis needs to continue.

Collective engagement is also required to ensure that there is sustainability in the recovery measures undertaken. The pandemic has been disruptive. It is imperative to use this time to focus on sustainability in all dimensions of global life. The current efforts of the 2020 G20 Presidency to further developments in the circular carbon economy and efforts to preserve Red Sea coral reefs need to be used as positive examples for scaling up and expansion. While the pandemic has disrupted daily life, existing pressing concerns upon and challenges to global welfare, such as climate change, remain with us.

At the same time, at the domestic level, all societies continue to face challenges due to exclusion and marginalisation. The webinar speakers reinforced the need to continue the pursuit of pro-active measures to ensure opportunities are realised by all, in particular, the most marginalised. Structuralised and institutionalised inequalities must be addressed through actions such as changes to legal systems, promoting diversity in all sectors of society, and ensuring support networks. This applies to women’s empowerment as well as to youth, and other marginalised groups.

Innovation and technology provide significant opportunities for furthering inclusivity at multiple levels. There is a clear need to make full use of technological advancements, such as robotics and AI, for the added economic value they bring and for the ways in which they support scientific developments to address global threats such as pandemics. At the same time, access to technology remains limited and a significant challenge in all societies. Governments and private companies need to bring about a greater focus on reach and inclusivity so that more businesses and individuals are able to benefit. Furthering technological innovations to be more inclusive will speed the economic recovery and contribute to ensuring sustainable solutions where no one is left behind.
A key challenge and clear opportunity for furthering the success of the G20 Presidency of 2020 is the promotion of the value of multilateralism for addressing global and local matters well beyond 2020.

- Furthering cooperation among states is the key to economic prosperity, political stability, and effective action in response to crises.

- Furthering cooperation among other stakeholders in relation to a wide array of social and economic issues is also important for taking on the challenges the world faces.

- The world is facing a number of disruptive events making deeper cooperation a significant challenge but also making clear there is a clear opportunity to offset disruption through cooperation.