

Public Statement by Indian People's Movements, Trade Unions and Other Civil Society Groups on G20

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India's presidency of the Group of Twenty (G20) comes at a critical juncture; even as the pandemic wanes, geopolitical tensions between the US and China could spiral into a possible military confrontation. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is now entering into its second year with little signs of resolution. Economists have been warning of an imminent recession in 2023 as also a deepening of the food crisis. With the global climate talks continuing to flounder the climate and biodiversity crisis will soon cross the tipping point. Earlier trends of authoritarianism and shrinking democratic spaces continue to spread across various regions of the world. As India assumed G20 Presidency in November 2022, as a representative of the countries of the Global South, it can play a vital role in the face of extreme wealth inequality, increasing ecological devastation, pro-corporate regulatory regimes and criminalisation of dissent.

The G20 was constituted by the finance ministers of the G7 group of countries in 1999 in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis to unite finance ministers and central bankers from twenty of the world's largest economies. At a primary level, its mandate was to discuss monetary, fiscal and exchange rate policies, infrastructure investment, financial regulation, financial inclusion, international taxation etc. With time, G20's appetite to discuss more issues (beyond finance and economic policy) increased with the Sherpa track (such as issues like health, education etc.) and various engagement groups. With the Sherpa track the ensuing presidency keeps forth its priorities, while the engagement groups and the processes associated with them are supposed to be independent of the government. However, several of these engagement groups often turn into a platform for corporations (for example, kicking the can down the road with more loans and debt suspension instead of looking at debt cancellation) and their allied interest groups. Over the years, the year-long presidency becomes a popular networking event for the rich and the powerful under the pretence of saving the world, leaving very little space for groups that are critical of neoliberalism to put

forth any alternative paradigms. Over the years, the Sherpa track, Finance track, and the engagement groups have stayed in the realm of being high-end talk-shops with no representation of people's agenda.

G20 has remained as an exclusive club, a forum to save capitalism at the highest political level through the promotion of neoliberal policies. This provides an important imperative for the progressive civil society groups to raise questions around G20's accountability and more importantly its legitimacy as a forum of global economic governance.

The threat of recession is looming all over the world; climate crisis is manifesting into extreme weather calamities and along with biodiversity loss and pollution, worsening its impact on the most vulnerable communities and making it difficult for several vulnerable nations to embark on a sustainable future; poverty, hunger, malnutrition and socio-economic inequalities have risen to an alarming level; and a serious debt crisis is threatening economic sovereignty of many countries. All of these calls for an immediate intervention and restructuring of the global economic order that is democratic, just and truly sustainable. Despite this, the G20 as an economic and political forum continues to prescribe the business as usual approach and policies that advance capitalism, the root of the polycrisis in the first place. More often than not, such policy prescriptions push lower and middle income countries and peoples to the verge of collapse.

At a time when the world is facing such multifaceted problems, instead of raising important issues of the global south and vulnerable communities of the world, the government of India is using the G20 presidency as an opportunity to seek political and electoral gains before the upcoming national elections. The scale at which the G20 meetings are being organised to portray a picture perfect narrative of shining India, reeks of a vulgar display of wealth at a time when India's performance on every social barometer is abysmal; not to forget, all on tax payers' money. In the run-up to scheduled G20 meetings in different cities of India, government authorities are displacing the homeless people to far-flung areas, removing street vendors, and small shops from the roadsides to 'beautify' the cities. The party in power is forwarding India as the "centre of diversity" and "mother of democracy" while also consistently using all national institutions at its disposal to silence the dissenting voices of human rights defenders, repeatedly attacking minority communities with impunity and systematically destroying institutions and progressive civil society spaces. Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) ranks India at number 46 with "flawed democracy" label and Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-DEM) ranks India at 101 in the world with its classification as an "electoral autocracy" on par with Russia. On freedom of press, India is 11th in the "global impunity index" of Committee to Protect Journalists and in Reporters Without Borders ranks India at 150 in 2022.

Members of adivasi as also dalit-bahujan farming, fishing, livestock rearing and other forest dwelling communities, in other fragile ecosystems, are losing their lives or their freedoms in the struggle to safeguard their rights over natural resources while constantly facing threats from governments and profit-hungry private corporations. Publicly owned enterprises – importance of which was evident during the pandemic – are being handed over to few privately owned business houses through a massive push for privatisation. Policies are being changed to push the informal sector including small and micro businesses to the edge and to make space for medium and big players. Mega infrastructure projects are being implemented without any heed to their socio-economic impact on communities and environmental damage. And, a complete negligence of the working class and labour rights through withdrawal of welfare policies has resulted in high levels of inequality and social

progress indicators touching an abysmal low. The richest 98 billionaires of India own the same wealth as the bottom 40% of Indian society and top 1% percent own more than 40.5% of total wealth in India. In the face of such striking ground realities, the Indian Prime Minister's messages such as "India's national consensus is forged not by diktat, but by blending millions of free voices into one harmonious melody" and "our citizen-centric governance model takes care of even our most marginalised citizens" do not hold much ground.

Against this background, the forum of G20 needs to be questioned for its absolute silence on declining spaces of dissent, human rights abuses, shrinking space of democracies and rising fascism and authoritarianism in countries including in the G20 nations themselves; as well as for undermining the democratic multilateralism; for its inactions resulting in a global policy paralysis; for being an obstacle in democratisation of global economic governance and for its own illegitimate nature.

G7 countries are still controlling the sovereign financial policies and related regulatory mechanisms through dictats of Financial Stability Board (FSB). With no regards to concerns of countries from the global south, expansion and consolidation of global food supply chains is being promoted as the only way to meet global food security. The Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) and Common Framework for Debt Treatment (CF) have fallen short in tackling the debt crises due to lack of transparency and exclusion of loans from private sector creditors. G20's policy recommendations through its various tracks and engagement groups are not only attempting to impose the reforms in sovereign finance related policies, but also pushing the capital-driven and pro-market policies in many critical sectors. These changes and imposed reforms have taken countries away from welfare centred approach, created problems for the masses on every front along the way, and have left them struggling for basic essentials like decent healthcare, affordable housing, quality education, employment, food security, and a healthy environment to live in. One example of this influence is the extent to which the Financial Stability Board's recommendations featured in the Financial Resolution and Deposit Insurance (FRDI) Bill, which was introduced in 2017, later withdrawn in 2018, after ample scrutiny.

The mere inclusion of few developing countries from the southern hemisphere and the G20 troika being composed of the countries of the south – Indonesia, India and Brazil, does not grant it a legitimate status and makes it a representative body of the global population. In fact, it means very little, for the Global South (i.e. the most vulnerable, poor people across the world) remains excluded from the G20 decision-making process and from its priorities. The G20 forum is still being used to safeguard international monetary systems and global economic governance framework in line with the demands of global capital and to serve the interests of corporations and the political and economic elite in both industrial and industrialising nations. The continuous failure of the G20 forum in tackling multiple recurring crises, its top-down approach through token representation and absence of the voices representing concerns of the Global South must be exposed by all means. The role of the Indian government in projecting a false rosy image of India and the silence of G20 countries on rising authoritarianism at the global level should also be challenged and an alternative agenda for the working classes across the G20 nations needs to be asserted. Across the G20 countries, thousands of people's initiatives are showing what a sustainable, equitable present and future could look like, and how this would be possible to achieve with appropriate policy support. We, the undersigned, affirm our resolution to strengthen our struggles against the neoliberal policies and authoritarian governance pushed ahead by

forums such as G20, and our attempts at forging truly sustainable, democratic, equitable and just economies and societies. We appeal to all citizens, global people's movements, national and international trade unions, students and academia to not be deceived by the gimmicks of the Indian government and its false propaganda, but to work for these struggles and initiatives.

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