



Centre for  
**Global  
Cooperation  
Research**

Report of the 8<sup>th</sup> Käte Hamburger Lecture

# The Rise of Informal Summitry with special reference to the G20 and the BRICS: Implications for Global Governance

with Professor Andrew Cooper

15 April 2014, Duisburg



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*In the 8th Käte Hamburger Lecture, Andrew Cooper, Professor of Political Science at the University of Waterloo and Senior Fellow at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research (KHK/GCR21), addressed the rise of informal organizations and implications of this phenomenon for global governance.*

*The lecture was followed by comments from the discussants Stefan Schirm, Professor of Political Science and Chair of International Politics at the Ruhr University of Bochum, and Silke Weinlich, Head of Research Unit 1 'The (Im)Possibility of Cooperation' at the KHK/GCR21. The event was moderated by Dirk Messner, Director of the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik and Co-Director of the KHK/GCR21.*

## Lecture



At the onset of the lecture, **Andrew Cooper** outlined the three main features of institutional formality post 1945. The first classic character of formal institutions is the presence of a charter or a constitution, which is, as Andrew Cooper stressed, important for the perceived legitimacy. The second character is a sense of universalism or at least the willingness to strive for universalism, because all organizations aspire to incorporate as many partners as possible. The last character is the existence of a permanent bureaucracy, which is a physical sign of formality.

Andrew Cooper continued that in the last twenty years a bending of formality arose in different ways. He distinguishes between four different components of the evolving forms of formality. Firstly, there is informality within the UN system for instance in cases of contact groups (e.g. the Piracy Contact Group). The second component of informal UN participation can be observed in countries' engagement in the informality with the UN as the centre piece (e.g. Quartet on the Middle East). The third component, which is widespread in the international system, is like-mindedness or caucus groups e.g. the Geneva Group. The last component is the use of celebrities as ambassadors for different UN bodies. Without formal education in the working field, this component contributes significantly to the visibility of the organizations at international level.

According to Andrew Cooper, these elements are neither a huge challenge to the UN system nor a huge challenge to formality. The contradiction to the UN formality, instead, lies in another type of informality that could be recently observed namely the coalitions of the willing. Andrew Cooper compared two approaches of the coalition of the willing: top-down and bottom-up. While the top-down is more influential as well as controversial (e.g. the 2003 Iraq invasion), ac-



tivities from the bottom-up approach is more comprehensive, more intense and entails higher level of patience.

Then Andrew Cooper turned to the informality at the core of the system, which he thinks indicates a trend. He pointed out, since the outbreak of the global financial crisis the informality at the global summitry level has been dominating the political actors. During the lecture, he concentrated on the G20 and the BRICS summit, which both elevated to the leaders level. Outlining the common characteristics of informal aspects of global politics, Andrew Cooper said he deemed it as a mirror image of formality. Informality has none of the characteristics that the general literature sees as the most important components of formality. Instead the informal organizations have a self-selective nature, he explained.

Andrew Cooper stated that although informality is not a new phenomenon (e.g. the development of G7 and G8 in the past years), its global reach has recently drawn global attention. He specified two elements - often overlooked by the literature - that determine the different relevance. One is the role of the countries known as the BRICS or the big emerging countries, which are engaged in the G20 as well as the BRICS summit processes. This development, he argued, is interesting, given their previous resistance to every other forums of informality. Describing this prior behaviour as a resistance to big elements of global politics, Andrew Cooper emphasized the change he sees, while those big countries embraced informality in a different way than they had the last ten or twenty years. The second element is the space for other actors such as non-big countries who were not considered to be summit players before.

In terms of global governance, Andrew Cooper continued, the dominant debate regarding the basic contrast between formality and informality focuses on legitimacy vs. efficiency. Emphasizing the unclear results of what the informality has implemented, he expressed his concern over the more ascending character of informality.

Andrew Cooper continued the lecture with his two main critics towards the informal organizations: first the **arbitrary** nature of informality and second the **relative equality** among members - albeit not non-members.

The first feature - the classic case of informality - is its arbitrary nature. He stressed that all episodes of informality entail the same sort of arbitrariness. There is a lack of apparent logics in the operation of the informality e.g. the selection logic for member countries or the frequency and venue of the meetings.



The selection of the member countries, he criticized, is based on allies and arbitrary inclusion of the problem countries, which were in danger of contagion for financial or other crises.

In addition, the same sort of arbitrariness is seen in the constellation of the BRICS, Andrew Cooper remarked. Initially the selection of the members was influenced by Goldman Sachs's concept of 'rising' big emerging countries (big markets, big growth). After a closer look, however, it becomes clear how arbitrary the membership of the BRICS is. Comparing the membership of Russia and the Global South, he argued, the definition of rising power is applied differently to different countries in order to legitimize their inclusion.

With the venue and the frequency of the meetings fail to evoke around a strict rotation and the presidency, Andrew Cooper expressed his concerns, that the BRICS are moving toward a parallel fuzziness. While sense of arbitrariness is consequently intensified, motivation of leaders is placed at the centre of the critics.

Elaborating on his second critics concerning **relative equality** amongst members, Andrew Cooper pointed out a paradox. One of the major complaints about the G20, and indeed to some extent the BRICS, is their exclusivity towards the non-member countries and the insured indulgence of relative equality among members. Against the early assumption over US's dominant role, 'the freewheeling system', as he put it, in the informal organization, is effective ample preventing particular influential countries to impose policies through G20 without consensus.

Acknowledging that the academic literature has picked up the trend toward informality, Andrew Cooper criticized that it continues to assume short-term rationality and still fails to capture the 'stickiness' of informal processes. Hence, it too fails to give the deserved attention to two areas: The **technocratic elements**, he defined as a new class of technocrats within the G20 and to some extent even within the BRICS, who become very dominant. The other area is the **hybrid form between club and network**, as in some ways the G20 has provided space even for non-state actors.

He concluded that the world is moving into a **fragmented era** of international organizations. For all of their evident signs of fragility, the G20 and BRICS have shown a capacity for accommodating **pluralism** in the global system. Furthermore, they signify a **flattening of power structure**. And with a decline of hegemony it is far from **the command and control image**.

Moreover, the trajectory of global informalism as exhibited through the G20 and BRICS cannot be viewed in isolation. Thus Andrew Cooper asked whether there could be a reflection of the same trend at the regional level. Is the EU becoming



more informal? Is there going to be a surge of informality in other parts of the world? He sees possibilities for both developments: the first within the EU more in the ad hoc response and the second in the development of the ASEAN. 'Whatever the imperfections of informality are, they point not to a 19th or 20th but a 21st century world,' Andrew Cooper concluded.

## Comments



Largely agreeing with Andrew Cooper, **Stefan Schirm** added three complementary hypotheses instead of controversial points. First, he reminded that there always was informal summitry and the rise was a reaction of the perceived inappropriateness of formal international organizations in terms of legitimacy and efficiency. Without a clear sign of meaningful reform, informal groups will continue to shape the international relations and global governance. Second, he commented on the question of the actual drivers of informal summitry, with focus on the G20. Researches show that it is not power play but domestic politics and domestic lobby groups. His last comment was based on his observation that global politics are domestic politics. Informal summitry, especially the G20, is not ruled by the previous alliances (e.g. industrialized countries vs. emerging markets). Despite many controversies about the big topics, all camps - both industrialized countries and emerging countries - were included on both sides. In his opinion, this is the first time the international community sees empirically true multilateralism, the end of unilateralism, and the end of North-South cleavages. He concluded: 'What drives international relations are not so much alliances but domestic interests and ideas, which bring industrial countries and emerging countries together and don't separate them necessarily.'

Subsequently, **Silke Weinlich** annotated her thoughts to the topic of informal summitry. She shared Andrew Cooper's assessment, especially his stressing of the importance of stickiness of informal processes. Furthermore, she remarked that the most important effect of informal groups working together may not be the created alliances but the intensive exchanges in the meetings. She said, they may start to understand each other better, start to trust each other, and maybe this would help to build a basis for cooperation.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Silke Weinlich asked Andrew Cooper whether it makes a difference that the people of the G8 knew each other and have been working together, whereas the bureaucratic apparatus of the G20 is not so well attuned. She criticized Andrew Cooper's argument

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<sup>1</sup> Read more: Messner, Dirk/Guarín, Alejandro/Haun, Daniel (2013). The Behavioural Dimensions of International Cooperation, Global Cooperation Research Papers 1, Duisburg: Käte Hamburger Kolleg/Centre for Global Cooperation Research, [www.gcr21.org/fileadmin/website/daten/pdf/Publications/Messner-Guarin-Haun\\_Behavioural-dimensions\\_GCRP-1-WEB.pdf](http://www.gcr21.org/fileadmin/website/daten/pdf/Publications/Messner-Guarin-Haun_Behavioural-dimensions_GCRP-1-WEB.pdf).



of a flattening of power and claimed that he needs to stress the exclusive character of these clubs further. Finally she asked for the perspective of informal structures in terms of a possible formalization in the future.

The pursuing discussion with the audience, evolved around the issues of the domestic influence on the summits, the actual influence of informal summitry on global governance, and whether there is a change of the logic of global governance.

Report written by Fentje Jacobsen