Julia Tops, researcher for the G20 Research Group, assesses what makes Japanese infrastructure so effective, and examines the G20’s progress on developing key projects that will last generations.

Infrastructure for development is one of the top priorities for the 2019 G20 Osaka Summit, as outlined by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for Japan’s presidency. Japan has shown the world its ability to achieve a high level of modernisation within a short time. Infrastructure is foundational for such growth. Japanese infrastructure has four main strengths: technologies for local needs, co-creation, long-term commitment and economic efficiency over the lifecycle.

Co-creation is the process where products, services and experiences are developed jointly by companies, their partners and the final consumer, so that the value created would be shared. Long-term commitment is transforming how a society deals with conflict, which can be a complicated process that requires multi-year timetables and long-term initiatives.

Japan’s priority of quality infrastructure is carried over from Argentina’s presidency in 2018, where infrastructure was one of the top priorities. The emphasis for 2019 is on forging local partnerships to build quality infrastructure abroad for sustainable development.

Conclusions
Since the first G20 summit in Washington in 2008, the G20’s attention to infrastructure has fluctuated, as measured by the size of the summit’s communiqué conclusions on infrastructure. At Washington, the G20 included only 30 words on infrastructure. This rose to 113 words at London in 2009 and then decreased until Seoul in 2010 where 919 words appeared. It decreased again to 424 words at Cannes in 2011, and then rose to 566 at Los Cabos in 2012. At St Petersburg in 2013 it increased to 1,150 words. Then Brisbane in 2014 spiked to a historic high of 2,245 words, with one document dedicated to infrastructure alone. Antalya in 2015 had only 1,200 words. There was another drop to 740 words at Hangzhou in 2016 and then a rise again to 1,349 at Hamburg in 2017. At Buenos Aires in 2018 there were 718 words.

Commitments
The G20 has made comparatively few collective, politically binding, future-oriented commitments on infrastructure, with only 43 commitments and a 16th place ranking across all issue areas. The first time the G20 made any infrastructure commitments was at the 2014 Brisbane Summit, with a high of 28. At the 2016 Hangzhou Summit, the total dropped significantly to eight commitments. At the 2017 Hamburg Summit, it dropped again to six commitments, and at the 2018 Buenos Aires Summit, the total dropped yet again to just one commitment.
Compliance

The G20 Research Group has assessed only one of these 43 commitments for compliance. It was a commitment on mobilising financing for infrastructure projects made at the 2014 Brisbane Summit.

At the halfway point between that summit and the 2015 Antalya Summit, compliance was 93%, reaching an even higher 98% by the start of the Antalya Summit. It thus surpassed the G20’s average compliance across all issue areas of 71%.

By member, 17 achieved 100% compliance, on both the interim and final reports: Japan, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, India, Indonesia, Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union. Italy and South Africa had partial compliance on the interim report, but rose to full compliance for the final report. France had partial compliance of 50% on both the interim and final report.

Corrections

With 43 infrastructure commitments and 98% compliance on the one assessed commitment, there is little evidence to suggest how compliance can be improved, although some inferences can be made.

First, the language used in many of the G20’s infrastructure commitments is general. This general language can act as a catch-all that could make compliance easier, while not increasing the targeted effectiveness in meeting specific priority infrastructure needs. Targeted policy measures and more carefully chosen, specific compliance catalysts – which are embedded in the commitment text and provide direction for implementation – could improve the G20’s effectiveness and compliance.

These catalysts could include money mobilised, as compliance with the one assessed commitment with this catalyst is high. The G20 Research Group has also found that on other subjects, a reference to the core international organisation improves compliance. Thus, at Osaka, G20 leaders might usefully make commitments that refer to the World Bank, which is the core international organisation for infrastructure. Additionally, advancing innovative solutions that define priorities and coordinate projects, with the help of engagement groups such as the B20, could help too.
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