



A Seat at the Table: South Africa's G20 Presidency and the Potential of African Agency

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Despite the growing discourse and acknowledgment of African agency as a theory in international relations, its practical relevance and recognition on the global stage remain limited. African agency is a powerful concept gaining significant traction in international relations. It advocates for African countries to be granted the opportunity to be decision-makers in global affairs, without being influenced by external powers, but based on their interests.

With South Africa's preparations for the G20 Summit, the concept has been gaining renewed relevance. The summit provides South Africa with a crucial opportunity to assert and advocate for a distinctively African perspective in global matters. As the President, host, and the only African nation in the G20, South Africa could be more than just a participant. It could play a significant role in influencing discussions and prioritizing issues. This summit is not just a diplomatic achievement. It serves as a platform for leadership that enables Africa to transition from the periphery of global decision-making to having a seat at the table, where it can express shared priorities and claim its rightful influence in shaping the international agenda.

African agency in international relations refers to the capacity of African individuals and groups to engage in negotiations and discussions with external entities in ways that ultimately benefit Africans.ⁱ This is a significant repositioning of the continent into a proactive and strategic actor. It signifies the beginning of a new era in which African nations are not merely passive participants in the global arena, but rather active decision-makers in international matters. They now contribute to decisions that impact their futures, presenting perspectives rooted in their interests and insights, rather than being solely swayed by external influences.

It is not that African actors lacked the will to be decision-makers before, but rather that they were limited by their circumstances. It is essential to recognize that although the structural vulnerabilities of numerous African nations have been apparent throughout history, it is vital to dismiss the idea that these limitations rendered them inactive and merely subjected them to external influences. As Christopher Clapham correctly noted, these limitations frequently acted as a trigger for deliberate strategies aimed at survival or, at the very least, enhancing the odds for survival.ⁱⁱ This shows that even before African nations established their status as sovereign players on the global stage, they actively sought to navigate their marginalisation. With the formal

establishment of independence and sovereignty across Africa between the 1950s to the 1990s, the idea of African Agency has gained new significance, positioning the continent not just as a participant in global matters but as a key designer of its future. South Africa's presidency of the G20 serves as an important and symbolic opportunity to reinforce this perspective.

Despite the relevance of the African agency concept, it has been discussed insignificantly in the lead-up to the Summit. It has been briefly mentioned in articles and speeches, without a clear emphasis on how South Africa plans to advocate for it in the G20. Its significance in the context of the upcoming Summit has not been emphasized. The Department of International Relations and Cooperation Deputy Minister, Alvin Botes, mentioned it in passing at the G20 High-level African Dialogue of the Think 20 (T20), stating that as the only African member of the G20 and the current host of its presidency, South Africa plays a vital role in enhancing and promoting African influence within the T20 forum.ⁱⁱⁱ Ambassador Xolisa Mabhongo, South Africa's G20 Sous-Sherpa, has stated that South Africa aims to develop an improved partnership with the rest of Africa and, during the G20 presidency, explore ways to expand this partnership and increase its effectiveness and impact.^{iv} It is also noted that this will mark the first G20 Summit to be hosted in Africa, offering a chance for the continent to showcase its ability to drive global growth.^v

The question that arises is: To what extent is South Africa aware of its role to advocate for African agency in the G20 summit discussions? Is it aware of the importance of discussing this concept and prioritising it in the context of the Summit?

It is significant for South Africa to recognise its role in hosting the G20 Summit, not just as a facilitator but as a key representative of Africa. By doing so, it can enhance its commitment to promoting African agency. This occasion demands a bold and forward-thinking representation of African interests, rooted in the continent's priorities and developmental trajectory, rather than being subordinate to the priorities of global powers. South Africa should participate in the G20 as an equal member, confidently advocating for African concerns and actively contributing to global discussions as a capable and independent player. This would serve as a tangible demonstration of African agency. As such, discussing the concept of African agency in the context of South Africa hosting the G20 Summit is important due to the following reasons:

- African countries' sovereignty has been undermined, and their inputs have no significant impact; instead, they are expected to respond to external pressures. Therefore, this is an opportunity for South Africa to assert the importance and significant impact African countries could have in global affairs.
- It is an opportunity for South Africa and African countries to showcase their ability to lead and make their own informed decisions.
- It is an opportunity to voice and amplify African interests and with a focus on how the continent aims to engage in global affairs.
- South Africa could advocate for more African countries to be involved in global engagements, not just as witnesses and receivers but as leaders and decision-makers.
- As the host and leader, South Africa could shape the G20 Summit in a way that reflects African interests, policies, and solutions for African issues from an African perspective.
- South Africa could highlight the importance of not using financial aid to influence the decisions of African countries in global affairs.
- South Africa could assert the importance of engaging with Africa not as a singular unified actor in global affairs, but to acknowledge the different countries, their importance, their inputs, and their ability to engage in global affairs individually. This is because, in international relations, there is a shift from country-to-continent relations analysis to country-to-country relations.

For South Africa to successfully promote African agency, especially during its G20 presidency, two important actions can be undertaken:

- South Africa could have a segment during its meetings or conferences, such as the Think 20 (T20) or Youth 20 (Y20) conferences, that focuses solely on African Agency in-depth.
- It could also have an Africa 20 (A20) group, where scholars and leaders from other African countries will be provided the opportunity to share their ideas on how to mobilise and advance the concept on global platforms.

Involving diverse actors in promoting African agency will ensure its effectiveness. It is emphasized that African agency should not only belong to the state elites; instead, it should include non-state actors to realize its full vision.ⁱ

In conclusion, the Summit is an opportunity for South Africa not just to articulate issues but also to act as a leader and host of the G20, showcasing its capabilities and those of Africa as a driver and decision-maker in international relations. If successful, this would be a new wave for Africa where its inputs are valued, decisions made in global affairs benefit the continent, and are made based on its interests. It means influencing global discourses rather than being influenced by external powers. South Africa has a chance to move the African agency from theory to practice. South Africa's G20 summit is only a start; it will take greater cooperation between African countries to shift away from external global dependence for this concept to work and be sustained.

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ⁱ Chipaike, R., & Knowledge, M. H. (2018). The question of African agency in international relations. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2018.1487257>.

ⁱⁱ Clapham, C. (2009). *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Department of International Relations and Cooperation. (2025, April 29). *Deputy Minister Alvin Botes: G20 High-Level African Dialogue of the Think 20 (T20)*. South African Government. <https://www.gov.za/news/speeches/deputy-minister-alvin-botes-g20-high-level-african-dialogue-think-20-t20-29-apr-2025>.

^{iv} South African Government News Agency. (2025, February 19). *South Africa to host a "fruitful" first G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting*. SAnews. <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/south-africa-host-fruitful-first-g20-foreign-ministers-meeting>.

^v Lebuso, S. (2025, January 21). *Ramaphosa sets bold agenda for South Africa's G20 presidency*. News24. <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/ramaphosa-sets-bold-agenda-for-south-africas-g20-presidency-20250121>.