



Development Cooperation in the Decade of Action
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Adjusting Multilateralism to the 21st Century

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Humanity has been investing in mechanisms for solving global problems for quite some time. After the Second World War an unprecedented multilateral system was developed to face global challenges, and to ensure collective regulation of international crises. Successive waves of globalization drove increased interest in the production and supply of global public goods. Public goods have advantages but also costs. Respect for human dignity; health and control of communicable diseases; global peace and security; communications and transport systems; concerted management of natural resources for sustainable development; and effective knowledge management – all of these could be considered global public goods. However, none would be possible without regulations, agreements or financing.

Growing awareness about the interdependence of international relations led countries to realize their efforts had to go beyond the provision of national public goods alone. This was especially true in a globalized context where phenomena Even though countries have invested a great deal to improve global policy-making and decision-making mechanisms to enable synchronized management of global public goods, a retreat from commitments has been palpable in the last decade and has tested traditional views about sovereignty and independence. Globalization complexity is creating tensions and raising questions about the collective mechanisms for multilateralism.

A growing gap between intentions, proclamations (on one hand), and perceptions and measurable results (on the other), is reflecting three possible deficits: a

regulatory-legal deficit, a participation deficit and an incentive deficit.

1) The regulatory-legal deficit is characterized by the questioning of the foundational principles of international law as global processes expand into national sovereignty. This squeezes policy space and unleashes a “battle of jurisdictions”, where the mighty impose their rules unilaterally on others, imposing control in specific areas and reaching far beyond their borders;

2) The deficit of participation manifests itself through the influence of important groups of non-state actors – civil society, economic actors, cities, etc. – that challenge the current dominance of intergovernmental processes as the main vehicle to regularize decisions and agreements. In these processes, non-state actors participate only superficially, which prevents effective, coordinated action to face global crises;

3) Finally, the deficit of incentives is illustrated by the failure of the systems for international cooperation to adapt to the more ambitious expectations reflected in major compacts such as the 2030 Agenda or the Paris Agreement. The incentives remain rooted in bilateral—and in some cases, multilateral—cooperation, rather than embracing effective transnational dimensions.

As a result of these deficits, operationalizing aspects of international treaties and compacts have become contentious. Necessary follow-up to major decisions depends on goodwill; can be stopped by a handful of skeptics or vocal opponents; relies on voluntary mechanisms; and ignores more practical policy options. Examples abound, from the WTO’s Doha Round, to the Kyoto Protocol to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty -- all were processes that took significant time to translate decisions into implementation; eventually, their aims were abandoned in every aspect but words and formalities.

Time for Assessment

At the global level, the changes described in the international context have coincided with the lack of adjustment, or even the

break of influence, of the current multilateral arrangements. Multilateralism, as we know it today, is an increasingly contested system built after the Second World War. It is, obviously, a social construction, and as such, it has evolved according to political dynamics; constantly defined and redefined, on the basis of evolving international power configurations, the nature of global challenges, and the historical arcs of established international institutions.

Several challenges, especially after the turn of the 21st century, question the viability of the current forms and norms of multilateralism. For example, there have been many cases of the lack of consensus on the use of military force. In addition, for some actors, transnational problems, such as terrorism or the threat of weapons of mass destruction, have implications that go beyond the capacity of the current institutional architecture. A crisis of legitimacy in addressing the difficulties of the current system is often explained by the asymmetric distribution of power.

Performance by the United Nations (UN), the beacon of the international system, on the three pillars of its mandate – peace-keeping, human rights and development cooperation – shows mixed results. There have been some visible successes (such as Mozambique, Namibia and Timor-Leste) and several failures (such as Bosnia, Rwanda or Somalia). Today, the UN finds itself criticized for its lack of effectiveness. Prominent voices question the core of its legitimacy and representativeness, which is based on sovereign states. Some from within the UN itself urge for a relaxing of the rigid formality of some UN processes. However, resistance to change seems to predominate.

For example, security challenges are no longer caused simply by wars between states. International trade is dominated by global value chains and corporate hegemony. Macroeconomic performance assessments are influenced by credit rating agencies. Community networks are at the forefront of generating or advocating for global standards. Civil society movements are advancing coalitions to advocate and lobby at the global level, directly challenging state dominance.

How far are the state actors willing to go in terms of institutional reform and regulatory change?

Therefore, the view of multilateralism as simply a coordination of relations between states is outmoded. New actors are pushing the normative limits of state sovereignty. These actors are putting pressure on the intergovernmental agenda in diverse areas such as social inclusion, environmental protection and human security.

Sovereignty, as the exclusive norm of domestic jurisdiction, is increasingly questioned by universal norms too. This pressure for regulatory changes is particularly visible regarding the principle of non-intervention. The post-war international order was solidly founded on respect for national sovereignty, including principles such as: equality of states, territorial integrity, non-intervention and reciprocity. These norms are explicitly recognized in the Charter of the UN. Since 1945, several flaws have been detected in the international security system. Some examples of such flaws include the use and proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and other weapons of mass destruction or the persistent threats posed by failed states and the proliferation of terrorism. New types of crises such as HIV / AIDS or environmental degradation have gained prominence demonstrating the difficulties to construct multilateral responses.

Time for Adjustment

The sanitary, social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic encapsulate the complexity of the new crises and threats. The devastation it has wreaked has demonstrated more than ever that the world needs an overhaul of the international institutional architecture. The lack of coordination in some major areas has been glaring. So too has been the visibility of non-state actors in the search for solutions to weather the pandemic.

As the public goods debate demonstrates, we have entered a new era marked by an increasing number of concerns that cross national borders, as well as by the anxiety about whether we have a sufficient menu of options to face collective problems. Climate change is a relevant example in this regard.

More than the principles of multilateralism, doubts are concentrated on the values, practices and institutions of multilateralism at present. The problem of legitimacy stems from diminishing consensus and increasing polarization in many areas of common interest. Challenges to multilateralism arise from the limits of concepts that underpin the values and methods that have, in turn, established our current practices and institutions.

Reinvigorating multilateralism for a new era will be difficult. As such, reform-minded actors could consider how innovations, as well as evolving concepts and realities of cooperation, could guide the needed adaptation of multilateral practices and institutions.

First, the increasing volatility and trans-boundary nature of problems – many

with global dimensions – underline the need to reinforce commitments to upholding and strengthening international law. Some examples include human rights concerns, international criminal justice decisions, environmental and health problems. The United Nations system is playing a central role in this regard, supporting the development of international public law and treaties across an exponentially increasing number of concerns over the past four decades.

Second, negotiation methods and techniques should better reflect the complexity of modern society. Analogies from the technology sectors, such as an “open source software” mode of organization, negotiation collaboration and decision-taking might be better suited to contemporary challenges. Further, the experience of negotiation and collaboration among the scientific and technical communities could provide useful insights in addressing challenges that are not purely political and require integrating expertise from diverse, rapidly evolving fields. The use of sectorally specific approaches runs

counter to intrinsically transversal concepts such as that of sustainable development.

Third, the existing multilateral institutions should better reflect the increasing role of regionalism and the changing balance of global power. New alliances and coalitions are popping up in various international fora. Regional organizations are exercising greater agency, alongside the increasing weight of global actors such as the BRICS in international negotiation and governance processes. This points to a growing number of actors’ willingness to move ahead, rather than be stymied by overdue chances to entities and mechanisms such as the UN Security Council and international financial institutions.

With the dawn of artificial intelligence, unprecedented machine learning capabilities and commoditization of data, we cannot continue to rely on past accumulated experience alone. We must leave room for innovation and out-of-the-box thinking commensurate with the levels of disruption we are already witnessing.

- 30 November 2020