

Adapting to a poly-centric world: The UN at 75

Klaus Dingwerth

In fall 1944, in midst of World War II, the governments of US, the UK, the Soviet Union and China met in Washington to design what became the United Nations system. 75 years later, the UN is at a crossroads. Multilateralism has essentially come to a halt. Multi-stakeholder initiatives can offer a way through gridlock, but the UN needs to define clear rules of engagement.

When the UN was founded, the international system consisted of states. Our current system of global governance includes not only many more states, but also multinational corporations, transnational civil governmental organizations, transboundary media conglomerates and a host of other actors that network across borders. How can the UN adapt to this poly-centric world of the 21st century?

This question has haunted international organizations like the UN for quite some time, but the slow-down or breakdown of multilateral cooperation in many issue areas has added further urgency. If multilateralism is failing “where we need it most”, as the authors of an influential book on *Gridlock* have held, how can the UN regain its capacity to address the global challenges we face?

One answer is, of course, that the UN has been adapting for at least two decades. Following the organization’s tradition as a major incubator of ideas in world politics, Kofi Annan launched the UN Global Compact in 1999. Multinational corporations that signed up committed themselves to ten broad principles and reported annually on their progress in relation to at least one of those principles. That is not much. But it helped to put the corporations’ performance in relation to other goals in the spotlight, too. Around the same time, Annan also launched the UN Vision Project on Global Public Policy Networks to build a knowledge base for and promote multi-stakeholder initiatives that address transnational challenges.

In times of gridlock, this strategy of building coalitions beyond the state-centric world should sound attractive. For if we imagine cooperation to be positive-sum – and that seems to be one of the defining features of “liberal international order” – some cooperation will usually be better than none, notably when the number of transboundary challenges is high. In times of democratic backsliding, moreover, the promise of inclusiveness that is often attached to the idea of multi-stakeholder governance might appeal, too. But on which principled ideas may the UN build its efforts to orchestrate global regulation rather than devised and monitor regulations itself? Here are five propositions.

First and importantly, much of what UN organizations do in their *operational work* prepares the ground on which multi-stakeholder governance may be inclusive and transparent in the first place. This is because many investments in development are, in fact, also investments in global democracy. The link holds specifically for investments that help to lift people out of extreme poverty, expand national health and education systems, strengthen local and national civil society structures, or contribute to peace. Why? Because while international decisions shape the future life chances of many people, exclusion from decision-making is not always due to institutional design. In fact, it often results from the lack of resources that individuals would need to make use of the opportunities that transparency and participatory instrument offer them at various scales.

Second, creating multi-stakeholder initiatives is the strength of a very dynamic civil society, not of the UN. Nonetheless, the UN can support those that spring up elsewhere and contribute to UN goals and principles. Making its own goals, priorities and principles transparent thus helps a great deal. This is also why the Sustainable Development Goals are a powerful instrument for an organization that seeks to “orchestrate” rather than regulate. And providing knowledge, convening power, contacts and resources can help to get multi-stakeholder initiatives off the ground. The Global Reporting Initiative, a multi-stakeholder organization that develops transnational guidelines for sustainability reporting, thus benefited from its early collaboration with UNEP’s Division of Technology, Industry and Economics as well as from money it received from the UN Foundation. Similarly, the Principles for Responsible Investment emerged in collaboration with the UNEP Finance Initiative and are now a growing independent scheme.

Third, what principles could guide the UN? The Universal Declaration of Human Rights will need to be the substantive backbone: if the UN does not stand up for human rights, who will? Moreover, when it comes to procedures, civil society actors have developed templates that can also help to keep the UN’s principles for multi-stakeholder governance simple but credible. The ISEAL Alliance, an umbrella organization of transnational social and environmental labelling initiatives including Fairtrade Labelling International, the Forest Stewardship Council and many others, is widely regarded as the gold standard in this regard. It requires its member organizations to follow three codes of conduct. The ISEAL Code of Good Practice for Setting Social and Environmental Standards asks members to ensure that their decision-making processes are inclusive, transparent and accountable. The Assurance Code responds to the challenge that self-reporting poses to credibility of labelling and certification schemes. The Impacts Code demands that member organizations regularly evaluate the intended as well as non-intended effects their rules have on a variety of stakeholders, and that these stakeholders can part in such evaluations. All three codes are regularly reviewed and updated.

Fourth, the UN can use its networking and convening power to bring multi-stakeholder organizations together and allow them to learn from each other. Instead of rigorously evaluating the initiatives the UN supports – an accounting effort that would take time, eat up resources and could easily end up in a bureaucratic nightmare – such exchanges would be directed at supporting “experimental governance”. It would allow those in charge of and participating in multi-stakeholder initiatives to find out what works or does not work and under which scope conditions. This aligns with the UN’s important role as an incubator of ideas.

Finally, the world has become not only more poly-centric but also more multi-polar. A least where the underlying cooperation challenge is a truly global one, the multi-stakeholder initiatives the UN supports will therefore need to acknowledge the increasing role and power of emerging markets. They will find this a lot easier than their multilateral counterparts. After all, that the formal international institutions of the post-war period have found it particularly hard to adapt to global power shifts is a major reason that got us into the search for alternative forms of global governance.

Klaus Dingwerth is Professor of Political Science at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland and a Non-Resident Fellow of the Global Public Policy Network in Berlin, Germany. This note was initially prepared for the SEF Expert Workshop “The UN at 75” that took place in Duisburg on 3-4 September 2019.