# : Global Governance Spotlight

## Shaping Multilateralism:
## Principles and opportunities for multilateral cooperation in the UN

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**sef:**

**International organisations, with the United Nations (UN) system at the forefront, have for decades played a key role in multilateral cooperation for global problem-solving. With major global players such as the US increasingly withholding their political and financial support, there is now a direct threat to these organisations' capacity to act.**

**Various initiatives to mark the 75th anniversary of the United Nations in 2020 aim to restore this capacity. UN2020 is one example: this civil society initiative has started a dialogue on "people-centered multilateralism" as a collective response to the challenges that lie ahead. In parallel, the UN initiated a consultation process with member states, the aim being to reaffirm the collective commitment to multilateralism at the UN General Assembly marking the 75th anniversary in September 2020.**

**Multilateralism is characterised by rules-based cooperation. But which rules and principles can serve as the basis for cooperation in a multipolar world with increasingly divided societies? The first step is to identify ways for governments and civil society to reach consensus on established principles – and new ones; second, to align existing institutions to these principles; and third, to take active countermeasures against rising populism.**

### Revitalising the multilateralism project

The "crisis" of multilateralism is a widely debated topic. The proof of the crisis lies, it is argued, in key states' dwindling support for joint problem-solving and in the international institutions' failure to mount an effective response to global challenges. Multilateralism is not simply a mechanism for political cooperation among more than three countries; it is characterised by inclusive, institutionalised and rules-based collaborative governance. However, it is not about abandoning national interests; it is about recognising others' interests as equally valid and reconciling these diverse interests in a peaceful manner.

It is this qualitative dimension of multilateralism, above all, that motivates civil society's UN2020 Initiative. Ahead of the United Nations' 75th anniversary in 2020, it offers a platform for dialogue between civil society, governments and the UN. Inspired by the Preamble of the United Nations Charter, in which "we the peoples" affirm the commitment to the UN, the initiative calls for people to be placed at the heart of multilateral cooperation, with more consideration of diverse interests and perspectives, particularly those of hitherto marginalised groups. This also offers the prospect of new participatory mechanisms, such as a parliamentary assembly at UN level. The concept of "people-centered multilateralism" should focus attention on the impacts of global challenges on especially vulner-

able individuals and groups and improve protection of their rights. The UN2020 Initiative therefore regards partnership with civil society as central to strengthening the legitimacy of the UN.

The UN's 75th anniversary generates significant momentum for revitalising multilateral principles, and this momentum is being utilised by individual member states. At this year's session of the UN General Assembly in September 2019, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and his French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian lobbied for support for an "Alliance for Multilateralism" as a counterpoint to other countries' rejection of multilateralism. The members of the alliance pledge to work together on key topics such as climate change, disarmament and digitalisation through "rules-based multilateralism".

## International institutions – (no) support for multilateralism?

International organisations (IOs) like the UN have an important role to play in developing and safeguarding compliance with these rules. In previous "crises of multilateralism", there was much talk of how international institutions were propping up the liberal world order. Nowadays, many doubt their ability to do so. There are various reasons for this:

a) In an increasingly multipolar world, a more diverse range of interests are asserted, which must be considered by the international organisations, not least because existing norms – particularly those pertaining to human rights – are being challenged and questioned to a greater extent.

b) The number of international institutions in existence has noticeably increased. In consequence, states are choosing different institutions to deal with specific problems; they can also play institutions off against each other ("forum shopping"). While this broadens the scope of multilateral cooperation, it also intensifies competition between individual organisations.

c) Some international organisations are able to exert greater influence over core areas of national sovereignty. As a result, some states feel that their sovereignty is being challenged – by the International Criminal Court or other international tribunals, for example – and attempt to limit these institutions' independence in order to gain influence over their agenda (backlashes); in extreme cases, states withdraw from institutions altogether.

d) Until now, democratically constituted states have generally been supportive of multilateral cooperation. At a time of rising populism, however, even democratic states are challenging the international institutions more frequently: the debate about the adoption of the Global Compact for Migration is a case in point.

e) The complexity of transnational cooperation has increased, for states are no longer the sole determinants: non-governmental, private and sub-state actors such as regions or cities are also influencing the global agenda.

In light of these challenges, a substantive debate is required to identify the principles that should guide multilateralism in the 21st century. While the principles underpinning the multilateral order, such as reciprocity, were seemingly accepted in the past, today the question arises: which principles are still valid, and which new ones may be required to preserve multilateralism as a norm, i.e. an ideal to which we should aspire, and as a practice that is lived and experienced? Moreover, it is necessary to map out ways for governments and civil society to reach consensus on these principles.

## Principles of multilateralism in a changing world

One often-invoked principle concerns the responsibility of rule-makers towards those affected by the implementation of rules. It is clear that relationships of responsibility in global political processes have diversified; this is evident, for example, in the debates about decent work in global supply chains. Alongside governments or international organisations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), private companies are increasingly acting as rule-makers. This is problematical in the sense that these companies have far more resources and political influence at their disposal than civil society stakeholders do. Consequently, multi-stakeholder initiatives in which the corporate sector predominates are attracting growing criticism for their lack of accountability.

The role of states requires reinterpretation as well: granted, it is still the national governments that have the authority – and thus the right – as well as the duty and responsibility to agree and implement binding international rules. However, major global challenges such as climate change do not respect national borders; governments therefore have a responsibility that extends beyond their own populations and present generations.

Another principle that appears to be gaining fresh significance in the context of climate change and widening global inequalities is solidarity: mutual support and commitment between individuals or groups. In the context of the UN's Sustainable De-

velopment Goals (SDGs), governments and international organisations often invoke the concept of global or economic solidarity. China is now promoting the idea of a "community of shared future for all humankind". Even if China is utilising this concept as a means of legitimising its own power-political claims, it does offer a starting point for solidarity, based on the notion that humankind, notwithstanding all its differences, is united in the desire for a shared future worth living. Other principles can be derived from this, such as respect and fairness in mutual relations. All these principles can potentially serve as the basis for constructive multilateralism.

## Shaping multilateralism – but how?

Potential solutions to "revitalise" the multilateralist project as norm and practice must take into account the challenges outlined above. A series of options can then be identified for a more active role for governments and civil society.

### 1) Flexible coalition-building

The division of roles among states is in flux. Countries that are supportive of multilateralism should take on a new leadership role. In the current global political climate, however, they must accept that, as with the "Alliance for Multilateralism" initiated by Germany and France, they will be perceived to be in opposition to the more nationalist approach propagated by the current US government under President Trump. Alliance participants therefore present themselves as a club of like-minded states striving for common goals. However, multilateralism can be best promoted through thematically focused initiatives aimed at effective problem-solving.

The rules-based nature of such initiatives varies considerably: in some fields, such as the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace, the initial focus is on a joint declaration of intent to agree on new rules, whereas in other areas – like the Information and Democracy Partnership and the Humanitarian Call for Action – specific measures are proposed to improve implementation of existing principles. However, as the research on compliance shows, the extent to which rules are respected depends in part on the clarity and precision with which they are formulated. At the same time, the more precise the rules, the more difficult it becomes to persuade states to sign up. Nevertheless, this dilemma should not be resolved at the expense of precision in rule-making.

Overcoming the continuing dichotomy between the Global South and the Global North would be a major step towards productive new alliances. It is high time the Global North recognised countries of the Global South as norm-makers and strengthened their capacities accordingly. The initiation of new norms by countries of the Global South should not be seen as targeted against the Global North, especially since these initiatives are often supported by global civil society. If a community of multilaterally oriented states is to be successful, this same community must be the frame of reference for norm development.

And finally, the international community should become more open. "Like-minded coalitions", also in the sense of strategic partnerships with civil society, play an important role not only in developing but also in monitoring and implementing new principles. Through their transparency initiatives or "shadow reports", civil society groups hold states accountable when the latter fail to honour their commitments adequately or at all. Access to these various coalitions must remain open, allowing all stakeholders to participate. Every stakeholder must be heard and respected by all the others, particularly in configurations with strong power disparities. Otherwise, the credibility of the entire coalition is at risk.

### 2) Institutional reforms

In order to strengthen the role of international organisations in preserving multilateralism, major institutional reforms are required. These reforms should cluster the capacities of international organisations and strengthen their autonomy. Independent bodies such as international courts or ombuds institutions should, in parallel, ensure that IOs fulfil their mandates and respect core principles, such as protection of human rights.

The crisis of legitimacy affecting international organisations can be attributed in part to overly high expectations. International organisations have neither the capacity nor the legitimacy to take action in all cases, for they are dependent on their member states for funding and internal decision-making. The pressure of public expectation must be managed, and member states must be held accountable. The international organisations' field of activity must therefore be scaled back to their core mandates; at the same time, their autonomy in their respective fields must be strengthened so that they can take on clear leadership roles, especially in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). If various international organisations then engage in strategic networking, this may lead to more effective problem-solving. For example, 12 multilateral organisations are currently working together under the leadership of the World Health Organization (WHO) to expedite the implementation of the health-related SDGs, backed by a joint Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-being for All.

Multilaterally oriented member states can make strategic use of funding to strengthen IOs. Additional voluntary contributions from member states are also helpful, as the example of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) shows: the US government's cuts to the UNFPA budget were made good by other members. Member states and civil society can then demand more transparency from international organisations in the use of these funds. By contrast, the current trend towards deploying earmarked funds merely worsens dependency on the interests of individual member states. Without an increase in the international organisations' core funding, their autonomy and hence their role as catalysts for multilateralism will be very limited in future, as the current warnings from UN Secretary-General António Guterres on the UN's financial situation make clear.

And finally, IOs must be reformed in order to facilitate the systematic involvement of civil society, also from the Global South. Civil society should not only have a role in policy implementation or monitoring; it must be involved at an earlier stage in identifying problems and in decision-making. As UN2020 makes clear, civil society engagement is essential if multilateralism is to be sustainable and future-fit.

### 3) Winning people over

Ultimately, strengthening multilateral cooperation is possible only if societies are convinced of the need for a collaborative approach to problem-solving. This requires parliaments and civil societies to take proactive steps to counter populist instrumentalisation of multilateral foreign policy by government members or social actors. Various measures are needed: firstly, simplistic populist messages should be countered with efforts to explain global complexities that involve national stakeholders and educational institutions. Secondly, governments and civil society should robustly defend the principles of multilateralism in political discourse instead of laying the blame for ineffective problem-solving at the international institutions' door. Civil society and academia should provide critical but constructive support for IOs in this context. The aim of all measures should be to show that multilateralism serves the interests of every state and all citizens, because global public goods such as protection from climate change or epidemics cannot be provided or guaranteed at the national level alone. A key prerequisite for the success of winning people for multilateralism is credibility, however: only stakeholders whose own actions visibly demonstrate a firm commitment to multilateral principles will be successful in shaping the new multilateralism.

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This text is based on the findings of the DGVN workshop on "Shaping multilateralism! Chances and challenges for Germany in the United Nations" (27.6.2019 in Berlin) and the International sef: Expert Workshop "The Essential World Organisation. Reinvigorating the UN at 75" (3./4.9.2019 in Duisburg).

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