

Is Classic Multilateralism Outdated? The Case of the UN

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Abstract

In 2020, the United Nations turned 75 years old amid an unprecedented pandemic of worldwide proportions, combined with explicit and hidden tensions in all regions of the globe and a growing sense of inequality and imbalances between different peoples and countries of the world. All of the above should have provided the perfect setting and justification for the work of our only truly global and multitask organization to be highlighted as useful and more important than ever.

Yet while few people, and even fewer experts, doubt the values, objectives and *raison d'être* of the UN, paradoxically, the last few years (2020 included) have seen the relevance, action and visibility of this global body (and indeed of many other multilateral organizations) severely diminished as it has been placed on the sidelines of global affairs. Some people (maybe not many, but some nonetheless) even question the very need or justification for the UN to continue to exist. While it doesn't take much to realize that the world in the 2020s is much different than in 1945, the year of its creation, and when debate and opinions are divided on whether the UN has been able to adapt and change with the times, it would seem that the UN, and multilateralism in general, are being criticized and even challenged by a number of issues and actors that go well beyond the simple criticism of a bureaucratic organization that has not kept up with the times.

This chapter attempts to argue that the challenges to multilateralism are, ironically, also multilateral, and that everyone and everybody has something to say about it. The threats can be grouped into three major categories of challenges: the changing world order and geopolitics; the newly found prominence of nonstate actors; and the misguided internal actions and functioning of the various UN system organizations themselves (beyond just classic bureaucratic issues, and encompassing policy development, human resources management and administrative flaws). Finally, an attempt is made to suggest possible ways to deal with some of these challenges.

Keywords

classical and new multilateralism – changing world order – nonstate actors – UN system – UN organizations – UNESCO – development agencies – NGOs – civil society – neoliberalism – efficiency – visibility

Introduction

In 2020, the United Nations turned 75 years old amid an unprecedented pandemic of epic proportions, combined with explicit and hidden tensions in all regions of the globe and a growing sense of economic and social inequality and imbalances between different peoples and countries of the world. All of the above should have provided the perfect setting and justification for the work of our only truly global and multitask organization to be highlighted as useful and more important than ever.

Yet while few people – and even fewer experts – doubt the values, objectives and *raison d'être* of the UN, paradoxically, the last few years (2020–2021 included) have seen the relevance, action and visibility of this global body (and indeed of many other multilateral organizations) severely diminished, and it has been placed on the sidelines of global affairs. Some people even question the very need or justification for the UN to continue to exist. While it doesn't take much to realize that the world in the 2020s is a much different place than it was in 1945, the year of its creation, and when debate and opinions are divided on whether the UN has been able to adapt and change, it would seem that the UN system, and multilateralism in general, are being criticized and, especially, challenged by a number of issues and actors that go well beyond the simple criticism of a poor bureaucratic organization that has not kept up with the times.

This chapter attempts to argue that the challenges to multilateralism are, ironically, also multilateral, and that everyone and everybody has something to say about it. In fact, we could say that the classic style of multilateralism is outdated, but it would be more accurate to say that it has been sidelined. Finally, an attempt is made to suggest possible ways to deal with some of these challenges.

To make it clear to the reader, classical multilateralism here refers to the current postwar system of international agencies and organizations that were created and are governed by internationally recognized states. The UN and its family of agencies are the most well-known of these institutions, but many others exist at the global and regional level, such as NATO, the EU, African

Union, Organization of American States (OAS), Council of Europe, OSCE and so forth. However, for simplicity and accuracy, this chapter will focus on the UN and the UN system.

In the Beginning

From the beginning, the goals of the UN system have been to achieve peace and security around the world, but also to foster social and economic development for everyone, as well as to promote and uphold human rights, equality, non-discrimination and international law. Although the peace and security aspects are the most visible and mediatized parts of its work (Security Council, Blue Helmets, etc.), it is the development/humanitarian and human rights/equality/non-discrimination aspects that have always been, and remain by a very large margin, those that represent the largest amount of its budget, staff and activities.

These goals and ideals are expressed in the preamble of the UN Charter and, to this day, still guide the objectives, work and actions of the organization and its family of agencies. Hardly anyone can argue against these noble orientations and, indeed, any criticism that has been directed at the UN since its beginnings has always been of a political, administrative or operational nature and never about the values and ideals it represents. The proof of the UN's universal acceptance is that from the humble beginnings of just 51 founding member states, membership to the organization has steadily increased through waves of independence, decolonization and changes in national status to reach 193 today, which includes the quasi-totality of internationally recognized countries. Membership of the UN system organizations (UNESCO, WHO, International Labour Organization, Food and Agricultural Organization, International Civil Aviation Organization, International Atomic Energy Agency, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, etc.) is at very similar levels, with some notable exceptions in some cases.

Furthermore, in 2019 (latest figures at the time of writing), over 35,000 staff were employed at the United Nations itself, a number that jumps to 114,000 when all the agencies of the UN system are included (CEB 2020). This clearly shows the worldwide reach and importance of this multilateral system of institutions and, therefore, the major role and relevance it should have for our world.

However, despite the above-mentioned universal acceptance at the political, social, academic and individual levels of the importance and role of the UN, it would be foolish for any keen observer of international relations not

to realize that the UN standing in 2021 is very different from what it was in the 1940s–1990s period. In fact, it can be argued that a major turning point occurred around the turn of the millennium, and that, in particular, the last ten years or so have been especially difficult for the UN, for its agencies and for multilateralism in general. It could also be argued that other (non-UN) institutions (such as the EU, OAS and NATO, to name a few) are also suffering from a loss of identity and relevance, but we will only concentrate on the UN and its family here.

As mentioned earlier, the world has changed greatly in the 75 years of existence of the UN. Some would argue it was a change for the better, others for the worse, but few if any would say that the world is essentially the same as it was before. And, of course, the “easy” explanation would be to say that the UN has not “kept up with the times,” thus its decay in relevance. But, although some of it is true, this would be too simplistic and would ignore various other factors, internal and external to the UN, that have contributed to the current situation.

What Is Going On?

Being an international organization based on the political relations and cooperation among its member states through their governments, it is clear that geopolitical and political changes around the world have a direct impact on the UN's operations. And there have been many of those.

Many people have argued that the creation and existence of the UN were based on the geopolitical balance between “East” and “West.” Furthermore, some claim that the mutual deterrence and balance that was provided by the rivalry between the capitalist/liberal Western countries and the socialist bloc, with much (though not all) of the developing world on the sidelines because of colonization or exclusion, provided for the perfect conditions to reach a certain level of consensus and compromise that was the basis for the success of the UN in its early years. And, needless to say, many consider the changes in global geopolitical conditions as a factor in the UN's search for a new identity and way of doing things.

But it can be argued that this is not necessarily true. If we look at the first big change in geopolitical aspects, which occurred in the 1960s–1970s with the independence and decolonization of many parts of the developing world and the subsequent addition of almost 100 new members to the UN, we see that this did not have a major effect on the operations and role of the UN, which had been up until that point mostly successful. In fact, the UN was a pivotal force in achieving this process of decolonization/independence.

The second big geopolitical change came in 1989–1991, with the end of the socialist regimes in the Eastern European region and the demise of the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc. The ensuing hegemonic dominance of the Western, liberal style of political, social and economic organization meant that the consensus/balance of ideas and ideologies was no longer a necessity. Thus, it could be argued that the need for a discussion forum and a place for consensual and multi-view solutions to the world's main problems and developments had lost its *raison d'être*. However, while the political orientations of some countries (not least of which, one of the two original superpowers) did change, other member states, as well as experts, partners, stakeholders and others associated with the UN, still pursued the practice of maintaining a plurality of political and societal visions. In short, it might be accurate to say that the geopolitical changes in the world, though by no means minimal, cannot be considered as the main reason for the UN's diminished role.

I would argue that, more than geopolitics, it is the nature of politics itself and its role in society that has changed, regardless of ideologies or orientations. Since the resurgence of neoliberal dominance in the 1980s and 1990s and its combination with the technological advances in communication and information linked to the digital revolution's triumph in the new millennium, many view "old-style" politics, where "professional" politicians and experts dominate various subjects of international and national importance, as a negative thing. In this system, critics say, the governmental and often corrupt political elites run the affairs of state in a traditional and elitist way, often aided by economic, scientific and social experts who are "part of the system." But this is precisely what much of the UN's actions and operations were always based on: the combination of political and societal expertise to develop, implement and evaluate global actions in favor of peace, development and human rights. Since the turn of the millennium, social and political currents of "rebellion" (not to be confused with classical revolutions), often based on internet and transnational social media networks, operating in a globalized and not a nationally limited setting, have created in our societies (especially in developed and emerging countries) a sentiment of "out with the old" and "in with a society that belongs to its citizens," its civil society groups, its local and citizen-based initiatives, and where direct nongovernmental approaches are much preferred to traditional ways of doing government-led politics. Traditional political parties, politicians, institutions and customs, whether associated with the left, center or right wings, have all suffered, and populism, militantism, grassroots and non-conformist currents are increasingly becoming more popular as a way of organizing the way individuals and society wish to achieve their goals. Once again, the idea in this chapter is not to pass judgment on whether "old-style

ideological/governmental” or “new-style identity/grassroots” politics is better than the other, but rather to show how a new way of thinking in political/societal organization can have a great influence on an organization such as the UN (or any other multilateral organization) that is built and based on a classical system of absolute state sovereignty.

The Example of UNESCO

To bring all this into perspective, we can provide an example from my professional experience as a civil servant of UNESCO. Whereas previously UNESCO’s role of helping to promote freedom of expression and of the press around the world meant that its work was largely (if not exclusively) done together with its main stakeholders (the governments of the member states), nowadays this has had to change in order for UNESCO to remain relevant. In the past, when a country wished to improve or democratize its media legislation, it would seek expert advice and technical assistance from UNESCO, which would then dispatch its experts to work together with the respective government officials and, ideally, also with institutionally recognized associations to draft the necessary changes to the laws that would then be likely adopted by the legislative bodies. Today, the same type of request will probably come not from a government but from a group of citizens or civil society organizations, likely at odds with its government over the issue, and which would seek for UNESCO to give it “legitimacy” in its demands. UNESCO is thus placed in a difficult position between the moral/ethical support that these citizens should receive and the fact that, as an international organization, it is based on governmental decision-making. Nothing will actually change as long as the government itself does not adopt the recommendations made by UNESCO, which is often the case if the government itself did not approach it in the first place. The main consequence is that the previously important role of UNESCO for international guidance in the promotion of freedom of expression and/or other human rights objectives is now either totally derailed or, at best, limited to the symbolic role of moral supporter of some causes, without much actual influence.

This situation could then be generalized to almost every aspect of UNESCO’s and, indeed, the entire UN family’s actions in this type of international cooperation. And then, a vicious circle develops in which less influence of the UN family translates into less funding or involvement by its member states, which leads to fewer resources for the organization. Additionally, to mitigate this situation, there is a necessary adaptation of objectives and actions of the UN to the few areas of work for which some funding can be obtained. This leads to

“à la carte” delivery of its mandate (often at the discretion of the richer or more powerful member states or contributors), further decreasing the credibility of its original mandate of assistance and cooperation on a wide array of issues and societal priorities regardless of the nature, size, power or development level of its member states. Eventually, even civil society itself starts to lose faith in the ability (not the values) of the UN to be an effective mechanism, preferring to turn toward philanthropic, private or humanitarian foundations and assistance instead.

Who Wants Its Place?

From the previous section it can be deduced that, for a variety of reasons, the UN and its system of agencies are not able to fulfill their role, as had been the case in the past. Yet the needs, necessities and goals for which the UN was created are still as real and present today as ever. Consequently, various other actors have been quick to step in and – willingly or unwillingly – take over much of the UN’s role in the last 25 to 30 years. This is the case in all areas of its work: peace and security, economic/social development, human rights and humanitarian assistance.

In recent years, many of the issues that were the exclusive domain of action of the United Nations and its system agencies have been dealt with in other forums, such as the G7/G20, NATO, and so forth. Some have attributed this to the disenchantment with or failure of the UN to be efficient and concrete in dealing with the world’s problems. Others, however, adopt a more cynical view and claim that Western/rich countries (those that dominate these forums) can resolve the issues among themselves, in a mostly coordinated way, without having to deal with the “global equality” that operating within a “one country – one vote” universal organization implies. The result, whatever the explanation, is the same: The UN’s function as the place for discussion and dispute settlement is diminished. Furthermore, as action in the last twenty years to deal with the increasing terrorism threat or with rogue actors shows, bilateral initiatives (or even unilateral action) outside the UN system are clearly increasing, once again reducing the UN’s role to one of a mere spectator or, at best, paying superficial lip service to multilateralism in order to “legitimize” decisions already taken by main actors at play.

In other spheres of traditional UN activity, such as economic and social development, humanitarian assistance and so forth, it is regional bodies such as the European Union, as well as global economic entities such as the World

Bank or the IMF, that are carrying out technical cooperation and humanitarian aid activities by their own experts and cooperation mechanisms. While, of course, any assistance to developing countries is always welcome, these initiatives by bodies or agencies that used to be limited to providing funding/loans/subsidies, but that now actually carry out the technical work that used to be the responsibility of the UN agencies, are also another clear example of the UN losing its prominence and being in a way sidelined from its original role. As if that wasn't enough, many countries' national development agencies (SIDA, DANIDA, USAID, to name just a few) are increasingly using their own funds and experts to directly assist countries in need of technical/development programs that bypass the UN altogether, instead of providing this support to UN funds and programs for them to carry out the work, as was the case in the past.

Other levels of political actors in the sphere of international relations that previously did not exist have also emerged. For example, municipal/local actors have stepped in to deal with some issues related to human rights, cultural diversity, social inclusion, migration and so forth by forming networks of cities/municipalities around the world, often outside the UN framework, and dealing with these proximity issues under the pretext that the UN is too far removed from the realities of the individual citizen and blocked too much at the national policy level. While this justification is far from false, what is, once again, striking is the inability or unwillingness of the UN bodies to seize the opportunity to play the leading role in these networks, rather than just be a (mostly) junior party to their concrete activities.

Finally, much has been said historically about the special interdependence of the UN with NGOs and civil society to concretely deliver programs on the ground. NGOs have historically played the role of alerting, raising awareness and bringing issues to the forefront so that the UN could then deal with them and, in turn, the UN often relied on NGOs to deliver and implement many of its activities in the field. While these partnerships continue to exist, many civil society actors (especially the major ones) no longer rely on the UN for their political, moral, institutional and other support. At best, many still approach the UN, but only in terms of receiving some financial support for their already decided activities, which is becoming less possible, considering the UN's financial difficulties. The result is that, increasingly, philanthropic institutions (sometimes to extreme levels, such as the case of the Gates Foundation, which has completely overtaken the WHO in terms of efficiency and concrete delivery of medical/health aid programs) or civil society and social media, which are now more active than the UN in pushing forward all issues related to the UN's mandates, have sometimes taken over the traditional role of the UN, which has

again been reduced to that of spectator instead of lead actor. I have even seen on several occasions top-level managers at some UN agencies rejoicing when some NGO or foundation has given the UN agency the “privilege” of being associated with its initiatives, whereas the norm should have been the other way around!

Whose Fault Is It?

In light of all this, it is legitimate to ask ourselves how we have arrived at such a situation. There are, of course, many explanations, such as changing geopolitics, societal evolutions, technological developments and so forth. However, the point that I wish to make is that the main fault lies with the UN itself, which has not been able to defend its relevance, identity and territory in the context of our changing world.

This is largely due to several internal factors. Yes, the UN’s chronic problems of financial and administrative mismanagement have played a big role. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was well known that substantial corruption did take place inside the various UN system agencies, and when it was not corruption, it was administrative incompetence. Often it was both. But administrative problems occur in all types of large organizations, national or international, private or public, and the correlation and causation between this and the decay of an institution is not always established. Some even flourish despite mismanagement. And in the case of the UN, what is curious is that many of the problems of administration and management that were signaled were actually corrected, and a noticeable improvement has been seen since the 2000s, which, ironically, is the period in which the UN and its agencies have seen their biggest drop in relevance/importance.

This author wishes to argue that it is another internal aspect of the UN that is mostly responsible for its problems and lack/loss of relevance. Many people, even avid followers of the UN, can be forgiven for not noticing it, since this is something that is not clearly visible to anyone who is not involved in the daily internal operations of any UN system organization, either as a staff member or as a permanent representative of a member state. What seems to have been almost completely lost is its global identity, its operational mechanisms and its societal *raison d’être*, which should be truly representative of a combination of geographical, ideological, technical and intellectual approaches from various cultures and which, in the past, guaranteed its impartiality, diversity and, therefore, its respect and acceptance by all (or most). This has been destroyed

and replaced over the last 20–25 years by mostly Western-led “liberal” visions as the “guiding” way of doing things. Much of this has been attributed (and correctly so) to the fact that it is Western countries as a whole that contribute the most significant part of the budget. But others will argue that this has always been the case and, thus, no changes should have been seen. The difference lies in the fact that until the 1980s, contributions were seen (even by the biggest funders) as a normal expectation and requirement in achieving multilateralism and no special treatment was expected in return. With the triumph of neoliberal thought since the 1990s, a new attitude of entitlement is present: many countries expect that if they pay more, they should have more say in planning and activities. Because it is impossible to change the charters/constitutions of various UN organizations to reflect this new attitude (and thus to become similar to the system of the World Bank or IMF, where votes are dependent on contributions), the approach that has been taken at the UN (to the point of challenging and not complying with internal human resources and administrative rules of the various agencies) is that most recruitment to managerial and directing posts now come from Western countries, in sharp contrast to the traditional geographical distribution of staff that had characterized the UN from its beginnings. The result of this is clear to see. Western managers naturally have more Western biases and, since many (though not all) of them actually also come from private enterprise, it also shapes the managerial attitudes toward what an efficient operation of the UN should be. The introduction of efficiency-improving mechanisms, it goes without saying, is always a welcome development, but not when efficiency becomes the stated explicit and implicit goal and the new *raison d'être* of the UN agencies, at the expense of the traditional social, developmental, equality and humanitarian objectives of their programs and actions. As such, since the early 2000s, a blitz of management efficiency techniques copied from private business companies, such as results based management (RBM), change management training, SMART accounting, output efficiency reporting and many others, have come to occupy up to 80 percent of the time that had previously been used to plan, develop, implement and evaluate social, economic and humanitarian actions and programs. The result is that, with only 20 percent of the UN's time and effort dedicated to this, as compared with 80 percent dedicated to “efficiency” implementation, it is no wonder that the product quality output of the UN has suffered greatly, reducing it to superficiality and thus irrelevance, ending up with its previously coordinated/implemented programs replaced by other actors.

Furthermore, as part of this “new” United Nations, another issue that has become predominant within the UN is that of trying to reach maximum

visibility at all costs. No one will argue that being visible is not a good thing and, of course, the more the world is aware of the UN, the more relevance it will have. However, the type of visibility that is produced (and at what expense) seems to be a problem. In the era of 24-hour news channels, of the internet and of social media, the public information mandates of all UN agencies have radically shifted their focus from quality-based visibility to quantity-based. As a result, hundreds of positions have been created (replacing non-renewed program-related posts) to hire marketing, publicity, social media and information technology experts. These new recruits have done an excellent job in putting these agencies and their directors/managers on every possible social media network, on many current affairs programs and so forth, which in principle is good, but given the nature of the target audiences (general public, short attention span), much of the message presented is overly superficial and general, rather than technical and intellectual. For example, a Director-General's message may indeed appear on the organization's own social media accounts (though hardly picked up by any other accounts or news outlets), such as "... the organization expressed great concern at this latest outbreak of conflict ..." or "... worried about the increasing inequalities ...", but it is almost never complemented with any technical details or in-depth explanation of the organization's programs/actions, as was the case in the past. In fact, previously, many technical assistance programs and activities would often go completely unnoticed/unreported in the media, except by the stakeholders involved (government authorities, UN staff, ambassadors), and despite this, the success and reputation of the UN initiatives were much higher than they are today. In brief, the debate between large and extensive media coverage of superficial messages versus low or no coverage of much more technical and in-depth information is one that is very much in place at the UN, with more superficial visibility definitely coming out on top recently.

The irony of the whole thing is that, despite these important initiatives in favor of "visibility at all costs," the concrete visibility of the UN and its agencies is at an all-time low! When is the last time anyone saw the current UN Secretary-General (SG) appear on any news program? Not to mention any other UN officials. And the rare times we do see António Guterres (or anyone else) in the news, it is only to hear him say he is "deeply concerned about ..." This is in sharp contrast to the past in terms of both the quantity of appearances and the quality/nature of the message sent by UN officials (SG or others). Some studies have been done (outside the UN) that have explained this absence from the news by the fact that most media outlets feel that nowadays the UN "has nothing to say ..."

What Can Be Done?

In conclusion, is classical multilateralism challenged? Definitely! The above paragraphs attempted to demonstrate this. Is it outdated? Definitely not! On the contrary, there can and should be a move to bring the UN back to its former glory. It will, of course, depend on context (politics and geopolitics, civil society, new actors, etc.) but also greatly on the UN (and other organizations) searching for, finding and seizing its original identity, *modus operandi* and personality.

In a nutshell, the easiest way to put it is that the UN, its system agencies and most (if not all) other multilateral organizations need to get “back to the basics,” back to the past (seen with a positive connotation). And, of course, the first question that pops up is: Which past? It would be unrealistic to return to a UN of the 1940s–1970s; the world has changed too much for that to be possible (or desirable). But perhaps a UN of the 1980s or 1990s, acting simultaneously as a factor and as a consequence of a world of that period, which was characterized by combining “classical” and “new” politics, human and technical intelligence, local and global issues, tradition and modernity. Is this possible in today’s world? It’s hard to say. There is still definitely a place and a need for the UN and multilateralism in general in our world, now more than ever, a need for a UN that aims to achieve peace and security and, even more importantly, to achieve development, human rights, dignity and equality for all. The UN is, and has always been, a mirror of our world and of our society. Hence, a return to the style of the recent past would imply, by logical deduction, that our world would as well have “gone back” to a type of society that would allow the UN to do so.

But that is, of course, another debate altogether.

Note on the Text

This chapter is not meant to be an academic or methodological research effort but is rather an individual account and analysis of how I consider the current place and role of the UN and its system agencies. It also aims to comment on how, for a variety of reasons, the standard functioning of multilateralism may be seen as outdated by some, but not by others. This chapter is based on personal experience and observation after twenty years as a civil servant of the UN system, discussions and views shared with colleagues and partners and, even after having formally left the UN, a continuing observation of trends,

actions and other elements within these organizations. The views expressed here are therefore only the personal views of the author and by no means do they pretend to be the absolute truth, or exclusive of other opinions. The reader is free to agree or disagree with them and is even encouraged to reflect on and to challenge them.

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