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The South's Role and Responsibilities in the Next Phase of Multilateralism

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The global erosion of trust in the global institutions is the direct result of non-delivery on the most crucial challenges that face humanity such as inequality, poverty, and climate change. South-South Cooperation can play a vital role in reinvigorating multilateralism. Beyond its horizontal engagements it has already begun supporting and enriching processes, institutions and norms-building at the global level. However, changing the superstructures that have discriminated against many developing countries will require a strategy that involves prioritising, coalition-building and coordination.

L'érosion de la confiance envers les institutions mondiales est le résultat direct de l'incapacité à relever les principaux défis auxquels l'humanité est confrontée, notamment les inégalités, la pauvreté et le changement climatique. La coopération Sud-Sud peut jouer un rôle essentiel dans la revitalisation du multilatéralisme. Au-delà des engagements formulés en ce qui concerne les échanges horizontaux, elle a entrepris d'apporter son soutien et sa contribution aux processus, institutions et à l'élaboration de normes à l'échelle mondiale. Modifier en profondeur des instances dont l'attitude a été discriminatoire à l'encontre de nombreux pays en développement passe toutefois par l'adoption d'une stratégie fondée sur l'établissement de priorités, la formation de coalitions et la mise en place d'actions coordonnées.

La erosión global de la confianza en las instituciones mundiales es una consecuencia directa de no superar los desafíos más cruciales que afronta la humanidad, tales como la desigualdad, la pobreza y el cambio climático. La cooperación Sur-Sur puede desempeñar un papel fundamental en la estimulación del multilateralismo. Más allá de sus compromisos horizontales, ya ha comenzado a apoyar y enriquecer los procesos, las instituciones y el establecimiento de normas a nivel mundial. Sin embargo, el cambio de las superestructuras que han discriminado a muchos países en desarrollo requerirá una estrategia que comprenda la priorización, la creación de coaliciones y la coordinación.



Introduction

Three quarters of a century after it was created, the United Nations (UN) has significantly outlasted an earlier 20th century multilateral experiment. Its predecessor, the League of Nations, failed at its first hurdles (the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia). With 193 member states, the United Nations is the most representative and legitimate body in the global governance system, even though the composition of the Security Council and the veto of the Permanent Five are woefully outdated.

The UN sits at the apex of the multilateral system. Most of its members are from the Global South. When the UN was created in 1944 many were still colonies. The relative power of many of them has grown since then. This change has accelerated the calls for reform of the UN and other global governance institutions and the rules that govern them. New normative systems for these institutions are imperative. Moreover, the slow pace of reform has elicited moves from Southern countries to create parallel structures that both complement but may also serve as substitutes to existing institutions.

The UN Secretary-General's report on 'Our Common Agenda', published in early September 2021 did not minimise the challenges the world is facing, saying that the world was experiencing its biggest shared test since the Second World War, and calling for a stronger, more networked and inclusive multilateralism.

Of course, the UN is an intergovernmental organisation that moves as quickly as its members allow, and on issues that its membership permits. If paralysis is allowed to dominate the UN system, the trajectory of multilateralism and global governance will likely accelerate fragmentation into regional systems, which will make coordination of the big transnational challenges well-nigh impossible. Developing countries that comprise the largest group both at the UN and in other institutions of global governance have a significant responsibility and role to play in transforming these institutions and the rules that govern them. But it will require a multi-level engagement – at the global, regional and cross-regional level.

This paper explores the role that the Global South and South-South Cooperation (SSC) can play in reforming and revitalising the multilateral system so that its legitimacy can be secured. Such legitimacy can only flow from the extent to which multilateralism is able to address key global challenges, especially those that have the biggest impact on the developing world and are largely developmental in nature.

In addressing this issue, the paper will briefly explore the issues of legitimacy and trust. It will then discuss three areas where SSC has shown the way or where it can play a greater role to shore up the multilateral system (governance, climate change and global health), and finally it will make a few observations and recommendations on Southern agency as a catalyst for action.

Notwithstanding the ongoing relevance of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR), the Global South has an ever-growing responsibility to both challenge existing norms and practices and to propose new norms, practices and institutions and drive them through their example. This includes the way in which SSC develops. This is crucial for the concept of legitimacy and for ensuring a more equitable and just outcome.

Global challenges, legitimacy and trust

Legitimacy flows from the extent to which the global order's 'core ideas, rules, and contexts are created and shared by the widest segment of humankind'.^[1] Our current global institutions and rules have been unable to respond to the worst excesses of globalisation in a way that mitigates the impact on those who have lost out from globalisation. Inequality, which has been globalisation's most significant downside has in turn led to more polarisation within societies and across countries, spurring on nativism and chauvinism. These developments are contrasted with the aspirational 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which are the foundation for a new global social contract. The

[1] Amitav Acharya, *Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2018). Kindle edition, location 347.

pandemic has also made the gap between aspirations and the reality more apparent with developing countries at the back of the vaccine queue.

In July 2021 the Secretary-General's report on progress towards the SDGs noted that in 'truly transformative areas such as reducing inequality, lowering carbon emissions and tackling hunger, progress had either stalled or reversed' before the pandemic. Already then, the world was not on track to meet the SDGs by 2030. He continued that the pandemic 'has already had a very significant impact in a number of areas, undermining decades of development efforts'.[2]

In a world where we are increasingly interconnected, and solutions are interconnected, for the South multilateral governance must focus on development. Countries of the South are committed supporters of a rules-based order, where the rules apply to all but to make up for the imbalances and inequalities of the past, the playing field needs to be tilted not level.[3] This is critical for the recognition of historical injustices and its meaning in terms of common but differentiated responsibilities.

The principle of multilateralism clearly carries with it considerable legitimacy because it is intended to be inclusive in its processes of developing norms. It can also, if it is effective, provide for burden sharing in the context where norms and actions are accepted by all but where the responsibilities differ depending on the capacities and developmental challenges of each.

South-South Cooperation principles fit for purpose

SSC emerged in the 1950s and onwards as a manifestation of solidarity among countries that had been colonies of the North. Its principles of national sovereignty, ownership, equality, non-conditionality, non-interference, and mutual benefit were imperatives for countries that under colonialism had lacked all of these. These principles of cooperation were considered essential to reduce dependency on the North and increase self-sufficiency among the South. Together

with the push for a New International Economic Order within the UN in the 1970s, SSC has been part of the push for a fairer global economic order by strengthening the economic cooperation among Southern states. SSC has grown in size and scope as Southern countries have moved up the development ladder. Furthermore, the UN system has been a supporter of the SSC and of its principles through its development system and specifically through the UN Office for South-South Cooperation.

Over time, SSC, which started as technical cooperation between governments of the South broadened both in thematic focus and in the variety of actors that engaged in it. It is no longer only government to government but includes civil society actors too. It is also more institutionalised and has more diversified and sophisticated instruments. As a process focused on cooperation and development among developing countries, where the solutions to these developmental challenges are increasingly not only local but also transnational and global, SSC can be a powerful mechanism for reforming existing global institutions, driving norm entrepreneurship and exploring regional alternatives.

This paper will now examine three case studies of SSC to illustrate ways in which SSC can support and reinvigorate the global multilateral system.

Governance in South-South Cooperation

Non-interference has been a central tenet of SSC, as a response to Western intervention in the domestic affairs of developing countries, especially during the Cold War. This has meant that governance was traditionally avoided as an area of cooperation among developing countries. The first case study is of the **African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)**, an African initiative, which focuses on peer learning on governance among African states that have signed up to it. The APRM was born of the recognition in the early 2000s that better governance was essential for improved developmental outcomes. A country's governance shortfalls are diagnosed in an APRM Country Review Report which entails a rigorous process that includes consultations between the continental secretariat and a member state, completion of a self-assessment questionnaire by the member state, development of a

[2] United Nations Economic and Social Council, Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, Report of the Secretary-General, 30 April 2021, E/2021/58.

[3] R. Kaplinsky, *Globalization, Poverty and Inequality: Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (Cambridge and Malden, Polity Press, 2005), p. 246.

national plan of action by the government, a review mission by a team of experts and the final report with recommendations, which is tabled at a closed meeting during the African Union (AU) Summit.[4] This process involves government, private sector, academia, media and civil society. At its most effective, it can help to build trust in national institutions where remedial actions are taken based on the recommendations of the country review report. While it has not been as effective as the original aspiration in establishing it, it has helped to open up the civic space for dialogue within countries on their governance challenges. At its best, it has created a space at the peer-to-peer government level for frank conversations around some of the governance challenges that countries face, but it is not prescriptive, nor is it punitive. This initiative should be explored further in terms of building up global, regional and national accountability.

Climate change

The second case study is on **climate change**. The developing South and vulnerable economies in particular are the most impacted by its effects. The South has recognised the threat that uncontrolled climate change poses, but has always insisted that the greater responsibility lies with developed North, which has been polluting the planet since the Industrial Revolution. Nevertheless, Southern countries have embarked on a number of initiatives in their SSC and triangular cooperation efforts to help mitigate the impacts of climate change.

China has allocated many resources to climate change, which has become an important pillar of its SSC. For example, in 2015 China announced the establishment of a 20 billion yuan (about \$3 billion) SSC Climate Fund. It has also established funds via multilateral channels such as on climate-resilient agriculture, among others. [5]

India launched the International Solar Alliance with France in 2015, intended as a common platform for

cooperation among solar-resource-rich countries to create opportunities for greater cooperation in technology, research and development, and capacity building.[6] India will extend up to \$2 billion in lines of credit for solar projects in Africa, as well as setting up a \$350 million solar development fund.[7]

Both the Chinese and the Indian/French initiatives were launched in the same year of two seminal global agreements: Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement on climate change.

The Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) New Development Bank is also committed in its founding documents, to sustainable infrastructure and renewable energy, having originally earmarked 60% of its lending for renewable energy. To date, the bank has approved a total of 15 renewable energy projects worth \$3.5 billion or 14% of its portfolio.[8]

In both cases major Southern countries have created instruments and institutions to contribute to the biggest threat facing humanity. However, while the CBDR principle should continue to be the principle in allocating responsibility on climate change, there is much more that certain Southern countries can do. One source of concern is whether China's significant energy infrastructure build in Africa will pivot away from building new coal-fired power stations.[9] Another one is the importance of Southern companies, especially in the mining sector, respecting the environment, abiding by environmental impact assessments and consulting with communities. In many developing countries these principles have often been ignored in the interests of profits.[10]

[6] M. Chakrabarti and S. Chaturvedi, 'An Evolving Shared Concept of Development Cooperation: Perspectives on the 2030 Agenda', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Development Cooperation for Achieving the 2030 Agenda*, S. Chaturvedi, H. Janus, S. Klingebiel, X. Li, A. de Mello e Souza, E. Sidiropoulos and D. Wehrmann, eds. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

[7] Ibid.

[8] New Development Bank, *Annual Report 2020: Meeting Ever-Evolving Development Challenges*. Available from https://www.ndb.int/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/NDB-AR-2020_complete_v3.pdf.

[9] Gu Bin, 'China's Belt and Road Initiative should stop financing new coal power', *Financial Times*, 5 July 2021. Available from <https://www.ft.com/content/22f97b67-a1ff-477b-981c-ee54d5c895d5>.

[Editor's note: In September 2021, President Xi Jinping announced in his address at the UN General Assembly that 'China will step up support for other developing countries in developing green and low-carbon energy, and will not build new coal-fired power projects abroad', <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-58647481>].

[10] See for example, Mureithi Carlos, 'China will punish its own companies if they break laws in the Democratic Republic of Congo', *Quartz Africa*, 15 September 2021. Available from <https://qz.com/africa/2059378/china-will-punish-its-own-companies-if-they-break-laws-in-the-drc/>.

[4] New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), 'The African Peer Review Mechanism Overview', 10 June 2002. Available from <https://www.aprmtoolkit.saiia.org.za/documents/country-reports-and-exper/56-atk-aprm-overview-2002-en/file>.

[5] M. Weigel and A. Demissie, 'Achieving the SDGs in Africa through South-South Cooperation in Climate Change with China', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Development Cooperation for Achieving the 2030 Agenda*, S. Chaturvedi, H. Janus, S. Klingebiel, X. Li, A. de Mello e Souza, E. Sidiropoulos and D. Wehrmann, eds. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

The South's leadership in norms development, adherence to rules that protect people and environment, and in technology support, can be an example for a more equitable and ethical cooperation in tackling climate change. It is not about the volume of financial support as it is about the way in which the cause of climate change is supported and advanced across the developing world and beyond.

Global health and SSC

The third case study is on **global health** drawn from the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. Secretary-General António Guterres argued during a briefing to the UN Security Council in September 2020 that, "The pandemic is a clear test of international cooperation, a test we have essentially failed."^[1]

Two dimensions are worth discussing here. The first highlights the importance of regionalism; the second norm development.

As the pandemic broke out in early 2020, African countries very quickly came together to coordinate their responses to the pandemic. They called on the international community for assistance in areas such as debt service and access to medical equipment. The existence of the Africa Centres for Disease Control (CDC) was crucial in ensuring an effective public health response. The AU and its member states pooled resources and coordinated external action. It demonstrated two aspects that are relevant for the debate about the future of multilateralism; first, that regional institutions will become more important as complements to global ones; and second that not all problems can be solved at the regional level effectively (e.g. vaccines). In other words, global institutions are indispensable.

Norm development is the second dimension in the case of global health that illustrates the role that SSC can play in reforming multilateralism. In October 2020 South Africa and India proposed that all patents, trade secrets, industrial design and copyright on COVID-19-related drugs, vaccines, diagnostics and other medical

technologies be temporarily waived during the pandemic. This proposal at the World Trade Organization (WTO) has been supported both by the AU and its member countries and the low-income country group in the WTO.

However, the pandemic has also shown the limits of SSC in times of crisis. While the BRICS nations have come out in support of multilateralism, championing global governance reform since inception, several opportunities were missed to embody some of the norms and changes they advocate. This has been seen largely through the slow uptake in supporting the WTO proposal by Brazil, China and Russia. BRICS foreign ministers did not collectively support this proposal until June 2021, eight months after it was first submitted. The 2021 BRICS Summit Declaration further failed to reflect a strong support for the waiver indicating a divergence of position at heads of state level. How developing countries line up in the negotiations over the WTO waiver may have consequences for the perceptions of solidarity among the South in a post-COVID era: will narrow self-interest trump the imperative of creating a new set of rules and norms for dealing with global pandemics?

Increasing agency and becoming a catalyst for action

Southern countries are increasingly moving from protesting against existing rules to active shapers in the global governance debates. These three case studies display both the opportunities that SSC presents for reviving and reforming multilateralism but also areas where the spirit of cooperation is failing, and which in turn can erode the role of SSC in building trust and legitimacy in the global institutions.

SSC is now more than about helping fellow developing countries bilaterally in technical and economic areas; it is about helping to shape the norms of a new world that is more equitable and developmentally focused. This means making concerted efforts to address the global structural inequities that are prevalent in global trade rules (such as intellectual property rights), the global financial system and the responses to pandemics and climate change.

[1] United Nations, 'Secretary General Highlights Essential Failure of International Cooperation, in Address to Security Council Meeting on Post-Coronavirus Global Governance', Press Release, 24 September 2020. Available from <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14312.doc.htm>.

Clearly these are all big challenges and they do not just depend on what the UN system does but on what all member states do, and particularly how the South and Southern groupings step up to the plate to overcome the gridlock. With the exception of certain powerful Southern states, developing countries do not always have the heft to be heard, but effective agency comes from coordination and joint action, where weakness can be used as a strength. However, in reinvigorating both the spirit and the practice of multilateralism it may also be necessary from time to time to work outside of formal structures. The South will also need to prioritise the areas of action, all the time focusing on an agenda that goes beyond the regional and focuses on global.

COVID has presented a unique possibility of transformation. But although crises are fairly common, fundamental transformations are not. They require planning and they require power. These are points that the South has to consider as it charts a strategy for reinvigorating multilateralism and the UN and making multilateralism deliver on the key priorities of the developing world.

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