

**“BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER – ONE STRATEGY FOR
A RENEWED MULTILATERALISM THAT SERVES THE WORLD”**

***A FOGGS online roundtable for delegates and experts
under the Chatham House Rule***

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1. Introduction

The [Declaration](#) issued by UN Member States to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the United Nations in September 2020 and the subsequent [Our Common Agenda](#) (OCA) report of the UN Secretary-General in September 2021 have set in motion a major effort to rethink and adjust/upgrade multilateralism and the UN according to the requirements of today and tomorrow. Offshoots of the OCA include the [report](#) of the UN Secretary-General’s High-level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB), which has added further recommendations to the 90 already included in the OCA. Moreover, the UN Secretary-General’s Office is in the process of issuing a series of [policy briefs](#) on diverse issues on the UN reform agenda, while international civil society has its own proposals for Member States to consider, most recently integrated into an [Interim People’s Pact for the Future](#). All this has created a major demand on member state capacities, especially of developing countries that have limited resources to digest the various proposals and participate pro-actively in the consultations, the results of which will certainly affect their interests.

The complexity that these numerous proposals introduce makes it difficult to keep the guiding principles in sight, as well as the focus on operationalizing them through an effective UN machinery, political will and the resources and capabilities required to this end. While various ambitious proposals are piled on top of each other, the UN machinery itself seems to have come to a halt in terms of its activation. This appears to be the case with efforts at peacemaking and peacekeeping, as well as with any major initiative regarding threats to human security like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, not to mention addressing inequalities and the functioning of the global financial system. **Bold rhetoric, at times, is not matched with corresponding practical initiatives. In parallel, expectations are being created that the real solutions and delivery, or deliverance, will come through voluntary multistakeholder partnerships, in which the UN and its Member States will be a few among many “nodes” in a “networked” multilateral system.** This notion weakens the responsibility that member state governments have to steer their respective countries and collectively the world in the right direction through public policy.

One cannot ignore the multiplicity of actors beyond states that are currently active at the international level. From information & communication technology (ICT) to energy, food, raw materials, consumer goods and trading companies, private for-profit actors often dominate with their resources and vision their respective fields and beyond, dwarfing the capacity of states to regulate and even tax them. Non-profit actors in the form of well-endowed philanthropic entities, as well as expert or advocacy organizations and networks also yield significant influence on developments in their fields. This is a reality one must take into account and try to harness the best of all new and old actors for the benefit of the whole.

Determining what is beneficial for the whole, though, and ensuring the objective definition and delivery of global public goods, plus the good governance of global commons, can be expected to remain the purview of the most representative and accountable of actors, namely states and the intergovernmental machinery. Their potentially reduced effectiveness, trustworthiness or legitimacy justify exerting every legitimate pressure on them, domestically and internationally, for that to change, but cannot mean their replacement by even less accountable, opaque, and self-serving alternatives.

The concept and practice of “multistakeholderism”, which is being systematically advanced, including through the OCA and related reports, speaks of guidelines and rules of conduct, not obligations and commitments. It speaks of voluntary compacts and public-private partnerships, instead of obligatory treaties and action through established intergovernmental organs. Without wanting to portray this approach as too pervasive, we are really concerned that the common theme of most proposals put forward by the UN Secretary-General, his Advisory Board and his Office is the promotion of multistakeholderism. **The concern expressed here is not about the inclusion of non-state actors in global governance, which is happening and should intensify. Bringing in the resources and the expertise of civil society, think tanks, scientific associations, indigenous peoples, local authorities, and the private sector is needed for effective action at all levels. However, this needs to be done with rules in place to ensure transparency and accountability, to clearly differentiate the rights and responsibilities of states from those of other actors, and guard against excessive influence and conflicts of interest.**

2. The value and evolving meaning of effective multilateralism

While the intrinsic value of multilateralism has been recognized since the adoption of the UN Charter in 1945, not to mention the League of Nations and earlier diplomatic conferences, **the meaning of what constitutes effective multilateralism has not been static but has been evolving with time. A key factor in this evolution has been the different challenges confronting humanity at different**

points in time. Thus, emphasis is put on certain challenges recognized as needing broader cooperation to be tackled. It is understandable that the value of multilateralism immediately after World War II would consist, first and foremost, in maintaining peace and security. In the decades since, though, and especially after the end of the Cold War, human security considerations emerged as increasingly prominent, as did the importance of ensuring justice, freedom and prosperity, along with lasting peace.

Still, **the effectiveness of multilateralism remains an elusive term, as it depends on the prioritization of the various challenges according to the hierarchy of interests and concerns of individual states, groups of states and non-state actors.** Should multilateralism in our times continue to put most of its effort and resources in ending wars, or should it focus all it has on achieving sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda? Is peace the first priority or justice should be pursued at all costs? And to what lengths should multilateralism go to be effective? Is operational effectiveness vis-à-vis a specific conflict or a specific SDG enough, or should it include system change, drastically new ways things are done in the world, the latter potentially including drastic changes in areas such as finance (see recent [UNSG press statement](#) at G-7 Summit), trade, arms construction and trade, energy production, etc.?

Of course, effectiveness cannot be limited to one area of activity alone, because no such area exists that functions in isolation. As clearly indicated at the start of the UN Charter (Preamble and Article 1), saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war could only be achieved by simultaneously reaffirming faith in the dignity and rights of the human person, equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small; and establishing the conditions for justice and the rule of law, promoting social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom, practicing tolerance, and living together in peace.

These elements were reinforced over the decades, as the circumstances and conditions confronted by humanity changed, by adding new dimensions to multilateralism. For example, the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment was the first world conference to make the environment a major issue. Twenty years later, in 1992, the UN Conference on Environment and Development recognized that people's overall welfare and wellbeing were contingent on achieving balance between the three dimensions of sustainable development – (i.e. social, economic and environmental) – and was marked by the adoption of Agenda 21 and the subsequent establishment of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

More recently, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development went beyond the idea of balancing the three dimensions of sustainable development and called for their integration through the achievement of the SDGs, which are universal and indivisible in nature. The 2030 Agenda also calls

for a new approach to sustainable development, placing the eradication of poverty at its core, in all of its forms and dimensions, combating inequality within and among countries, preserving the planet, creating sustained, inclusive and economic growth and fostering social inclusion. The Agenda also recognizes that its implementation requires a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach. Has all this, however, been effectively implemented, and have the promised fruits been delivered for all countries and individuals?

The gaps and shortfalls of effective multilateralism, as had been understood and defined historically, were made plainly evident when the COVID-19 pandemic struck and countries were left to their own means to respond to the crisis, especially the poorest and most vulnerable. Increased resilience has since clearly become the top priority for societies, countries, and the world. Has the UN become any more effective in ensuring it, though? And what would be required, in terms of reforms and other changes, to achieve that?

3. Proposed meaning of effective multilateralism according to the HLAB

We are opening sort of a parenthesis here: After meeting for more than a year and holding extensive consultations within the UN system, and with Member States and relevant stakeholders, the High-level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB) issued its report [A Breakthrough for People and Planet: Effective and Inclusive Global Governance for Today and the Future](#) on 18 April 2023. The report calls for six transformational shifts:

1. Rebuilding trust in multilateralism through inclusion and accountability;
2. Regaining balance with nature;
3. Ensuring abundant and sustainable finance that delivers for all;
4. Supporting a just digital transition that unlocks the value of data and protects against digital harms;
5. Empowering effective, equitable security arrangements; and
6. Managing current and emerging transnational risks.

The HLAB identified the following principles as underpinning effective multilateralism:

1. People-centered
2. Representative
3. Transparent
4. Equitable
5. Networked
6. Resourced
7. Mission-focused
8. Flexible
9. Accountable
10. Future-oriented

Some questions that immediately arise are as follows:

1. Do the six transformational shifts effectively operationalize all the proposed principles that are to underlie effective multilateralism?
2. Do the proposed principles miss any of the issues previously reflected in UN agreements on what multilateralism historically is understood to be about?
3. Would the proposed changes to the global governance structure – including for UNEP/UNEA, the IFIs and the WTO – bring about the inclusive, equitable and transformative changes envisioned by the 2030 Agenda, reflecting the different dimensions of sustainable development in a balanced manner?
4. Could the six transformational shifts and proposed principles effectively address emerging threats such as unregulated AI, cybersecurity, outer space militarization and other global threats or crises?

Parentheses closed.

4. Going beyond multistakeholderism to achieve transparent, representative, accountable and effective multilateralism

As the OCA, HLAB and other reports and policy briefs show, there is a plethora of issues of global concern, and an even greater number of recommendations made on how to address them. Discussing all this at the UN is testing the capacity of even the richest and best organized countries to absorb, process and turn into something practicable. Member States understandably want to remain focused on their core interests, which for the Global South are primarily related to finance and technology transfers for the achievement of the SDGs. **This year, therefore, the main intergovernmental event from a developing country perspective is the SDG Summit, with less attention paid to the SOTF Ministerial that is also scheduled for the coming September.**

To bring all of this together, it would make good sense to see the Summit of the Future as a useful tool to advance SDG implementation through global governance / UN reform. Thus, the SDG Summit could call for the adoption by the SOTF of some key measures of an immediate and/or medium-term nature with a transformative potential, such as the following:

a. Change the way we measure development/progress

This could be achieved by **advancing the Beyond GDP agenda**, initially with a declaration of intent, possibly as part of the SOTF Ministerial outcome, and ultimately by introducing a new composite development/progress indicator or a dashboard of indicators and aligning national accounts and the markets with that by the time of the SOTF or soon thereafter.

b. Make resilience a central organizing concept and establish a “Global Resilience Council”

Adopt the concept of resilience, [defined as](#) “the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions, in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner”. As a key enabler of that at the global level, a “Global Resilience Council” (GRC) could be established to coordinate the response to major threats to human security, including the climate crisis, pandemics, and increasing inequality, all of which undermine the attainment of the SDGs. It could be a subsidiary body of the UN General Assembly, eventually also becoming a subsidiary of all intergovernmental assemblies throughout the UN system. Around an intergovernmental core, the GRC could provide for the systematic engagement of constituencies of non-state actors like scientific associations, local authorities, parliamentarians, civil society at large, the private sector, religious authorities, etc. Such a body would satisfy all ten principles of effective multilateralism identified by the HLAB (see Annex below).

c. Secure multilateral funding for SDG implementation

Securing adequate financial flows for SDG implementation at the country level is of paramount importance. [The Addis Ababa Action Agenda](#), the Paris Agreement and other texts often agreed upon by consensus remain dead letter if they are not accompanied by action on the ground, something that requires resources and capacity beyond those that an individual developing country can muster by itself. To achieve that and advance the overall global governance reform / renewal process there has to be a significant change in the functioning of the Bretton Woods Institutions and the Multilateral Development Banks, including with SDR issuance for debt relief and climate action, along the lines presented in the HLAB report. See also in that regard the recent [press statement](#) by the UN Secretary-General at the G-7 Summit in Hiroshima.

d. UN Charter review

The SOFT provides a unique opportunity to update the UN Charter so that it stays as the cornerstone of effective multilateralism for decades to come. A Charter review conference convened under Article 109 of the Charter in parallel or soon after the Summit of the Future could include the Earth system, cyberspace and outer space as global commons under joint management, and could advance a solution to the stalemate on Security Council reform, among other things.

ANNEX

THE GRC AND THE TEN PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE MULTILATERALISM

PRINCIPLE	CORRESPONDING GRC CHARACTERISTIC
PEOPLE-CENTERED	Focused on human security
REPRESENTATIVE	Participation of state and non-state actors, bringing together the whole UN system and beyond
TRANSPARENT	Public meetings as a rule
EQUITABLE	Decision-making core consisting of states and regional organizations representing all key geographical and functional groups
NETWORKED	Systematic engagement of non-state actor constituencies
RESOURCED	Up to the UN Member States to ensure that (servicing GRC meetings and substantively supporting the Council can be done by the existing UN Secretariat machinery, with substantive support from other UN system entities, depending on the topic)
MISSION-FOCUSED	Bringing together all relevant state and non-state actors in a whole-of-government / whole-of-society approach to actually address issues and ensure a coordinated response to major challenges brought to its attention
FLEXIBLE	No UN Charter amendment required to establish it; a subsidiary body of the UN General Assembly and the intergovernmental assemblies of those UN system entities that agree to declare it their subsidiary body too
ACCOUNTABLE	Reporting to the UN General Assembly, possibly also ECOSOC/HLPF, and the intergovernmental assemblies of those UN system entities that have agreed to declare it their subsidiary body too
FUTURE-ORIENTED	Going beyond traditional peace & security, which is under the purview of the UN Security Council, open to addressing new/emerging threats to human security

