Minimum Criteria for Sustainable Global Governance

By Nayef Al-Rodhan

The globe. Image: geralt/Pixabay

Strong statist positions and a fixation on state sovereignty once inhibited progress toward more just and effective models of global governance. However, there can be no denying that globalization has not only led to the unprecedented transformation of our societies, but also the role that states play in the international system. Yet, even as states gradually share more responsibilities with corporations, sub-national entities and international organizations, their structural significance still remains indisputable – particularly when it comes to finding near-term solutions for better modes of global governance. This should result in a more equitable and representative international state system to which global governing structures will remain accountable.

The Existing Structure and Its Limitations

Traditional paradigms typically reserved almost unequivocal attention to the narrow interests of states, even around issues that were global in nature. This understanding gradually grew obsolete and many of the post-war multilateral institutions were formed to address those challenges which cannot be solved by unilateral state decisions. With its numerous funds and programs, the United Nations is the best known and furthest reaching of these institutions – even though important work is increasingly being undertaken by a variety of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that are not directly influenced by national interests. Yet, such developments have by no means guaranteed a significant improvement in global governance as it is currently practiced. UN Resolutions continue to be violated and international laws are regularly breached. To take the most straightforward example, the UN Security Council (UNSC) remains structurally tethered to the interests of its five permanent members. And because these five states retain formidable veto powers, the threat of unilateral decision making remains very much in place.

Accordingly, the veto system in its current form is a major impediment to more effective forms of global governance and is ill-suited for the economic and political realities of our times. Moreover, international failure to reform the system is solidifying global governance around a paradigm that better reflects the power balances of the mid-20th century rather than the present day. Without immediate and profound reform, the credibility of the international community continues to be severely hamstrung. In order to overcome this, the effectiveness and influence of the UNSC can be enhanced in several ways, and states will have to reach a consensus over how it should be amended. Options include shifting to gaining the majority consensus of the five permanent members, extending veto powers to additional states and regional blocs, and abolishing the veto altogether.

Without meaningful reform, the present veto system will continue to impede timely prevention and/or intervention against large-scale human rights violations and war crimes. However, evidence has shown that making such changes will occur slowly over an indeterminate length of time[DA1] , despite intense political

pressure. The call for reform of the UNSC was subtly initiated in the '90s and hit its stride in the last decade. It has concentrated around the efforts of groups like "Uniting for Consensus", the G4 or the African Union's Ezulwini Consensus which consecutively put forward proposals for a more representative UNSC. The process of reform remains to date "painfully slow" and a decisive structural change has yet to materialize. Consequently, it might be more realistic to push for changes within the existing system, such as those recently suggested by France. Earlier this year, Paris urged its fellow permanent Security Council members to refrain from using their veto powers in situations involving mass atrocities. In doing so, France has merely reconfirmed that the status quo might not only be harmful to the UN's standing and legitimacy, but for humanity as well.

Creating the Right Conditions

A further challenge involves ensuring and enhancing the accountability of existing global governance institutions. Entities such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) continue to implement policies with far-reaching effects, whereas those most adversely affected by them quite often have little means of recourse. As Thomas Pogge has argued, WTO policies have systematically reinforced global inequality and thus exacerbated global poverty rather than ameliorating it. Poverty, marginalization, and huge gaps in socio-economic development all raise barriers to good global governance. Financial institutions and mechanisms have an important role to play in addressing these issues, but only greater levels of accountability and increased respect for human rights will overcome them. Quite often even NGOs, while not under the direct control of states, do an inadequate job of representing the most vulnerable members of society and instead take directives from its most favorably positioned members.

These considerations beg for the creation of two principal amendments to the current system. The first involves the creation of a universal citizens' charter that guarantees human dignity regardless of ethnic, religious or national affiliations. The second is that states' internal representational structures will have to be improved so that the fundamental rights of all sections of society are better protected. Because radical economic disparity within a nation compromises the capacity for representation and hence good internal governance, global governance will also subsequently be debilitated. Accordingly, improved internal governance within states will result in less economic disparity, and be a *sine qua non* for improved global governance and the upholding of human rights.

Setting Minimum Criteria

While attempts to promote human rights beyond the nation-state predate it, the 1948 UN Charter has led the way in formal efforts to recognize and protect them. Yet, it is only in more recent times that crises occurring outside of the spectre of warfare have been recognized as a fundamental challenge to global human rights. However, economic policies that systematically reinforce global disparities and actions that threaten global economic stability (like those leading up to the financial crisis of 2008) have always compromised human dignity and should be constrained by the aforementioned universal citizens' charter. Cultural arrogance, marginalization and exclusionary practices also add to what is effectively a cluster of problems.

Historically entrenched divisions and transcultural misunderstandings perpetuate problems whose solutions must go beyond the national level. Such challenges to human welfare and dignity throw into stark relief the interconnectedness of all peoples and the remote consequences of local actions, as well as the need for efficient institutional solutions that are able to bypass long-standing power struggles between select nations. At its minimum, good global governance, as implemented by multilateral institutions, must work by a set of criteria that are general enough to allow for distinct cultural interpretations to coexist. A sustainable agenda for global governance must be clearly guided by:

1. Effective multilateralism

2. Effective multilateral institutions

3. Representative multilateral decision-making structures

4. Dialogue

5. Accountability

6. Transparency

7. Burden-sharing

8. Stronger partnerships between multilateral organizations and civil society

Global governance suffers from both ineffectiveness and a crisis of legitimacy. Credible and sustainable global governance requires that institutions cease to work predominantly to the advantage of those groups or nations already in positions of power. It must create the conditions for those in less fortunate positions to have stable and meaningful social lives. Progress has begun on these fronts with the partial integration of multilateral agencies

and non-state governing bodies. However, progress continues to occur at a rate far slower than that of globalization and is inadequate to address the emerging global challenges. Placing these criteria at the centre of developing forms of global governance will assure that such institutions and partnerships do not lose sight of their intended purpose.

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