INDEPENDENT COMMISSION ON MULTILATERALISM

The Relationship between the UN and Regional Organizations, Civil Society, NGOs, and the Private Sector

Executive Summary

Since 2014, the world has been confronted with a series of crises—from the rise of ISIS, to the dispute in Ukraine, to the spread of Ebola—that have struck at the core of the international system. These crises, to which no single state has the capacity to respond in isolation, have highlighted global interconnectivity. At the same time, the multilateral system centered on the United Nations has struggled to adapt to this interconnectivity. Increasingly, a consistent refrain has been heard: The global architecture of multilateral diplomacy is in crisis.

Whether a moment of high risk or great opportunity—most likely a bit of both—this is without a doubt a moment of growing complexity. More actors, institutions, and networks of interests are engaged in the international sphere than ever before. This paper briefly discusses three groups of these: regional organizations; civil society and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); and the private sector. It also asks how the UN system can better leverage relations with and among these actors and institutions for a more efficient and legitimate multilateral system.

The number of actors and institutions in the international sphere has been growing rapidly, particularly in the post-colonial and post–Cold War era. Since the UN was founded, the number of intergovernmental organizations has grown more than sixty-fold, driven in part by regionalization and regional integration. International NGOs have proliferated, and private sector actors have become increasingly involved in international affairs. If the UN is to remain capable of fulfilling its mandate, it must strive to improve its relations and partnerships with regional organizations, civil society, and the private sector.

Regional organizations: While the relationship between regional organizations and the UN is sometimes posed as one of competition, it is more often one of partnership. The issue is how to improve cooperation (e.g., between the UN and African Union on peacekeeping). Improved cooperation could help avoid the challenges of regime complexity and promote burden sharing. At the same time, it must be recognized that all regional organizations are distinct and that they are not a panacea.

Civil society and NGOs: Civil society participation in the work of the UN—whether through participation in deliberations, advocacy, operational partnerships, or involvement in mediation processes—has the potential to augment the UN's legitimacy and effectiveness. The issue is how best to ensure inclusion of representative civil society voices both in the field and at headquarters. Not all civil society is representative, and the UN must engage a more diverse range of civil society organizations, including local actors. Moreover, engagement must be geared toward effective participation, not tokenism.

Private sector: The private sector has emerged as a critical UN partner in areas such as ensuring respect for human rights, promoting and funding sustainable development, undertaking the operational side of the UN's work in areas such as security, and governing and securing cyberspace. The challenge of these partnerships lies in holding private sector actors accountable when they violate laws and norms and in addressing the incompatibility that can arise between their profit motive and the pursuit of global well-being. Most important, however, is for the UN system to leverage private-sector dynamism for the common good of the planet.

Considering these challenges, the paper provides a number of recommendations for the UN system:

1. Early in her or his first term, the next secretary-general should produce a **strategic vision document** defining the UN's commitment to partnerships at all levels.
2. A consortium of research institutions, in consultation with the UN Secretariat, should convene an **expert-level conference on Chapter VIII** to better understand how it has been interpreted in the past and how it could be better utilized in the future.
3. The UN Secretariat should convene a **working group to facilitate expanding the UN-AU partnership** beyond its previous focus on peacekeeping, including join analysis of issues in the interest of long-term conflict prevention and sustainable peace.
4. The AU and UN should extend the **joint framework for an enhanced partnership in peace and security** across the AU Commission and to other arms of the UN system.
5. The president of ECOSOC should convene a **general review of the arrangements for consultation with NGOs**, with a view to modernizing access and improving partnerships.
6. **Inclusion of civil society**, already seen in the process of designing the 2030 Development Agenda, should be carried through to implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the follow-up and review in the High-Level Political Forum.
7. The **SDG Fund's Private Sector Advisory Group's Framework for Action** should serve as a starting point for continuing to engage the private sector in implementing the SDGs.
8. The UN Innovation Network should establish a **platform to connect and scale up "innovation labs"** to better leverage private sector dynamism.
9. The General Assembly should take up the outcomes of the **UN Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) Lessons Learned Exercise** to improve partnerships in emergencies.

In order to be effective, the UN must recognize that while it is uniquely placed by international law at the center of the multilateral system, it is but one among a host of local, national, and international actors. The challenge will be for the UN to recognize the transformation of the international sphere to best make the organization fit for purpose in the twenty-first century.