



INDEPENDENT COMMISSION ON MULTILATERALISM

Social Inclusion, Political Participation and Effective Governance in Challenging Environments

Executive Summary

The purpose of this paper is to highlight how the growing crisis of legitimacy in the relationship between citizens and governance institutions relates to the multilateral system. Given that the essence of multilateralism rests in the state, the efficiency and legitimacy of the multilateral system as a whole is affected when the state finds itself under stress, or no longer constitutes the primary source of political identification. While the United Nations does not traditionally address peace and security challenges internal to the state, its mechanisms – at both the internal and inter-governmental level – continue to be hampered by the reverberations of distinctly “national” problems and their transnational permutations. Its role in this regard is to uphold the norms and rules-based system enshrined in its Charter and to be at the helm of appropriate and effective multilateral responses to these challenges.

The state, the classic provider of security and basic wellbeing in exchange for citizens’ loyalty, is under multiple pressures both internal and external. The complex, interconnected, and interdependent nature of today’s world is seriously affecting the art and craft of governing. Many local problems confronting national leaders have become transnational in origin and effect. The multilateral system cannot be reformed if the foundation upon which it rests – the state – remains under such stress.

A growing crisis in state-society relations poses a challenge for the multilateral system. In many countries, disenchanted citizens have grown less deferential to authority. Governments, for their part, frequently respond in ways that seem incomprehensible to their citizens. In some contexts, strong states conjuring up their sovereign rights have sought to roll back what they perceived as the unfettered exercise of individual rights and freedoms. In other contexts where state security is under threat, we have witnessed the militarization of public law and order, the allocation of a greater share of national budgets to internal national defense and, over all, an inherently securitized approach. In some circumstances, blind and brutal repression by security forces has backfired: militant groups have grown only more appealing to disillusioned and persecuted civilians.

In any discussion that begins with the state, the evolving nature of sovereignty and the impact that this is having on the concept of the state itself needs to be highlighted. Sovereignty is a relative concept and not a fundamental element of power. States may be seen as having a social contract with

the multilateral system, because in adhering to this system, their sovereignty is protected. And yet, the status of the system is being impacted by the weaknesses of individual states, which is being compounded to such an extent that the system is being significantly weakened in its capacity to protect state sovereignty. In summary, there is both a breakdown of the social contract within states and between states, and one has an effect on the other.

- Social Inclusion: The multilateral system has a responsibility to promote inclusive societies, particularly ones that take into account women and youth. The new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes a stand-alone goal on peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice and effective institutions, known as SDG 16. Furthermore, civil society and the state have to be seen in a balanced manner, theoretically as well as practically. A more concerted effort should be made to recognize non-state actors as potential partners for peace. Innovative means of engagement represent a potential for peacebuilding, conciliation, and healthier state-society relations, and ultimately, more stable inter-state relations. Moreover, the centers of international decision-making need to be made more inclusive and reflective of global diversity. For the United Nations in particular, a concerted effort toward Security Council reform remains particularly worthy as a means to enhance the system's legitimacy and credibility.
- Political Participation: While the advantages of a democratic political system—as opposed to one-party states, authoritarian governments, or military dictatorships—seem obvious, especially with respect to the authority derived from the consent of the governed, what is important is that those who are elected to power not only function in the interests of all but also do so in a responsible and transparent manner. There is a need for a concerted effort on the part of multilateral institutions to recognize that the practice (i.e., implementation) of democracy is as important as the system (i.e., classification) of democracy.
- Effective Governance: The notion of “effective governance” means many things to many people, and yet, the key challenge is precisely defining the principles upon which it rests. As such, the multilateral system is best suited to promote the twin norms of “effective governance”, i.e., capacity of the state to provide and deliver effectively and “legitimate governance,” which entails democratized leadership, enhanced citizen engagement and a participative manner of governing for the purpose of promoting the rights of individual citizens and the public interest. The role of new technologies – while often serving as a challenge – also have the potential to transform how government works and how citizens interact with one another in a positive way.

The nexus between local, national, regional and global governance requires closer scrutiny. To revitalize its role at the center of multilateral governance, the United Nations must strengthen its capacity to engage with both international and local partners. While the UN remains the best placed and most legitimate vehicle for international action, an emphasis on greater cooperation with regional and subregional organizations, civil society actors, and the private sector, would help bolster its standing as an effective leader in setting norms, coordinating responses, delivering services, and providing

assistance when necessary. The reality that regional organizations and powerful member states have at times bypassed the UN can result in the unfortunate perception that the latter is redundant. Such an assumption is ultimately false given that the UN Security Council remains the only instrument mandated by international law to authorize enforcement actions to maintain or restore international peace and security. Stronger engagement and bolstered cooperation would thus be mutually beneficial. While the UN does not have to “be” everywhere, it still needs to be able to rely on functional partnerships and a holistically sound protocol for approaches on regional governance, in conjunction with the national and local level.