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Reclaiming multilateralism: A roundtable discussion

United Nations NLB Conference Room 4
Monday, 17 December 2012, 1:00 PM-3:00 PM

Background Note

The world is reaching a tipping point of growing inequalities within and amongst developing and developed nations, the looming consequences of climate change, patterns of unsustainable development and consumption, and staggering levels of poverty. These call for immediate actions, many of which can only be achieved with a multilateral system equipped to that end.

A forward-looking and effective multilateralism will require governments and multilateral institutions, the United Nations system in particular, to engage in an open debate, drawing on the perspectives and participation of all stakeholders and partners. Key questions include: how, where, and in what ways do partnerships enhance or contribute to the kind of effective multilateralism needed to address these global challenges? How can multilateralism be responsive to the sustainable development priorities of countries and people in diverse contexts, and what should be measured to assess development?

In the multilateral arena, particularly in the United Nations, the relationship with non-state actors has changed dramatically in recent decades, beginning with the global conference processes of the nineties. The models of partnership have been evolving, with new implications for global governance and inclusive development. The Secretary General's five-year action agenda emphasizes the importance of harnessing the full power of partnership across the range of UN activities. There is now a plethora of multi-stakeholder arrangements, mechanisms and partnerships active in and around the UN and other multilateral institutions. In particular, partnerships with civil society bring the added value of defending the normative principles of the United Nations and enhance democratic space. Civil society organizations contribute to policy-setting processes with a wealth of expertise grounded in the non-profit expression of the public good. Multi-stakeholder approaches can also be fraught with a number of risks and limitations for the UN, however. These include risks to reputation, fragmentation of global governance, replacing rather than complementing governmental efforts and responsibilities, weakening of representative democracy, and allowing business and transnational corporations an undue influence without related accountability mechanisms.

A perennial challenge is to ensure greater coherence between the normative goals set at the United Nations and the policy positions of trade and financial institutions operating outside the strict remit of UN accountability structures. This requires greater coordination and accountability at the national level for positions taken in international bodies, while ensuring that the interests and voices of the most affected stakeholders can play a meaningful accountability role in ensuring coherence at these different levels.

The debate on these new multi-stakeholder partnerships and new forms of multilateralism is therefore of critical importance to the United Nations, which is contributing to the growing practice and [discourse on the subject](#). The United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (UN-NGLS) has published a report, "[Reclaiming Multilateralism: For People, Rights and Sustainable Development](#)." UNDP is promoting multi-stakeholder dialogues to strengthen civic engagement in the pursuit of the MDGs and sustainable development. The UN Development Group as a whole is engaged in wide-ranging thematic and strategic consultation with state and non-government actors in envisioning a post-2015 development framework. This roundtable will discuss how these and other developments can help to shape a new inclusive multilateralism.

Some key challenges and ways forward to consider

Who should be at the multilateral table? And what attributes should they possess?

What are the implications for sustainable development and human rights when some countries exempt themselves from international standards? Does this reflect power imbalances among and between States and non-State actors; how can multilateralism contribute to reducing these imbalances?

What kinds of participatory multilateral governance structures would ensure that all multilateral institutions operating within the broad remit of the United Nations (including trade and financial institutions) adhere to UN principles of human rights and sustainable development?

How can the socially-excluded in multilateral systems and their accountability structures be addressed? Should accountability include broadening space for minority and under-represented voices such as grassroots social movements to be better heard?

How do the many multi-stakeholder partnerships and arrangements involving the UN affect, impact, and contribute to multilateralism and global governance?

How can multilateralism provide accountability mechanisms not unduly influenced by factors such as funding patterns, different degrees of political voice and variable expectations around accountability driving these biases?

Panel speakers

A list of biographic details on the speakers is available [here](#).

Moderator: **Barbara Adams**, Member of the Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives

Reflections: **Hamish Jenkins**, Programme Officer, United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service, presenting [Reclaiming Multilateralism](#)

Fadzai Gwaradzimba, Deputy Assistant Administrator and Deputy Director of the UNDP Bureau of External Relations and Advocacy

Tomas Christensen, Senior Adviser for Partnerships to the Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Planning

Inputs from: **Magnus Lennartsson**, Minister, Economic and Social Affairs, Permanent Mission of Sweden to the United Nations

Andrew Davis, Head of Delegation, Delegation of Catalonia to the United States

Additional resources

A compilation of civil society perspectives on multilateralism is available [here](#).