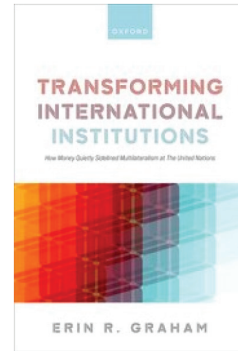


# Transforming International Institutions: How Money Quietly Sidelined Multilateralism at the United Nations

Graham, E. R. (2023). *Transforming International Institutions: How Money Quietly Sidelined Multilateralism at the United Nations*. Oxford University Press (224 pp, ISBN- 0198877943)



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## Introduction

United Nations (UN) as an inter-governmental organisation was established in 1945 with an aim to maintain international peace and security and to achieve cooperation among nations on economic, social, and humanitarian problems. These were and are formidable ideals with which the UN was established and it continues to strive towards achieving them in present times. However, operationally, the UN's Security Council, by design gave Veto Powers to its five Permanent Members who have stifled various negotiations and decision-making processes throughout its history (Popovski, 2020; Trivedi, 2021; Lepard, 2021; Trahan, 2022). The democratic nature of the UN's General Assembly also has been found wanting on various occasions like the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in

2000 which took place in a non-inclusive and non-participatory manner (Arts, 2017; Amin, 2006). Small States and small developing countries have found that even the democratic UNGA is claustrophobic and has been challenged with respect to coping strategies in the UN General Assembly (Panke and Gurol, 2020). Moreover, all decisions and declarations of the UNGA lack operational teeth as they are merely recommendatory in nature (Maxim, 2020; Al Afnan, 2022).

The United Nations' peacekeeping efforts have faced criticism on several fronts, highlighting the challenges and complexities inherent in such operations (Williams, 2020; Rebeiro and Pires, 2023). One recurring criticism revolves around the effectiveness and efficiency of peacekeeping missions in achieving their

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mandated objectives (Walter and Fortna, 2021). Critics argue that peacekeeping operations often lack clear and achievable mandates, adequate resources, and robust strategies for conflict resolution, leading to limited impact on the ground (Ludgren and Coleman, 2021). Moreover, the presence of peacekeepers has sometimes been marred by instances of misconduct, including allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse, which have tarnished the reputation of UN peacekeeping and eroded trust with local communities (Comstock, 2023).

Criticism of the UN regarding the delay in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) often revolves around the slow progress and inadequate action taken to address pressing global challenges (Filho et. al., 2023). Despite the ambitious agenda set forth in the SDGs, many argue that the pace of implementation has been sluggish, with several targets falling behind schedule. Critics point to factors such as insufficient funding (Barua, 2020), limited political will (Biglari, 2022), bureaucratic hurdles (Singh, 2023), and geopolitical tensions as key impediments to progress. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and setbacks (Mukarram, 2020), further complicating efforts to achieve the SDGs within the designated timeframe.

Some of the challenges and criticisms faced by the UN as enumerated above are well researched; however, the financing aspects of the UN is a

topic that remains under-researched. It is in these contexts that one should look at the financial aspects of the UN. The questions regarding how the UN is funded and how the earmark funding is utilised towards furthering certain agenda-driven projects and programmes. In her work, *Transforming International Institutions: How Money Quietly Sidelined Multilateralism at the United Nations*, Erin R. Graham offers a penetrating analysis of the intricate relationship between financial contributions and the erosion of multilateralism within the UN system. The author tries to answer these through the case study of the earmarking of the funds or what other authors previously have preferably called bilateralisation of the multilateral funds at the UN. Published in 2023, Graham's book sheds light on the subtle yet profound influence of financial power dynamics on the functioning and effectiveness of international organisations (IOs). This comprehensive review will critically assess the key arguments, strengths, weaknesses, and contributions of Graham's book to the field of international relations.

### **Unveiling the Power Dynamics**

Graham's central thesis revolves around the idea that earmarked contributions have become instrumental in shaping the priorities and decision-making processes of the UN, thereby sidelining the principles of egalitarian multilateralism and impartiality. The author argues that the increasing reliance on voluntary funding from member states has empowered major donors to assert influence over

the UN's agenda, undermining its ability to serve as a neutral forum for international cooperation. These earmark fundings are used exclusively and selectively in a sector-specific manner with geographic specificity. Through a combination of empirical analysis and theoretical insights, Graham explores the mechanisms through which funds permeate the corridors of multilateral diplomacy, reshaping the landscape of global governance. In the process, the author also discusses the theoretical aspects of how decisions are taken at international organisations in general and at the UN in particular.

One of the strengths of Graham's book lies in its meticulous research and empirical evidence. Drawing upon a rich array of data, case studies, and interviews, she provides an understanding of the financial dynamics at play within the UN. From peacekeeping operations to humanitarian aid initiatives, Graham illustrates how donor preferences and funding mechanisms shape the allocation of resources and the implementation of UN mandates. By unpacking the complexities of financial contributions and their implications for institutional autonomy, Graham offers valuable insights into the structural challenges facing multilateralism in the contemporary world.

Moreover, Graham's interdisciplinary approach enriches her analysis of the intersection between international relations and international law. By integrating perspectives from political

economy, international relations, and organisational theory, she makes the readers understand the complex interplay between money and power within the UN system. This interdisciplinary lens enables Graham to explore the underlying mechanisms driving institutional change, from the influence of major donors to the strategies employed by smaller states and non-state actors to navigate the power asymmetries inherent in multilateral diplomacy.

Furthermore, Graham's book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the evolving dynamics of global governance. By highlighting the centrality of financial contributions in shaping the UN's policy priorities and operational capabilities, she challenges conventional narratives about the neutrality and impartiality of multilateral institutions. In an era marked by growing geopolitical rivalries and resource constraints, Graham's analysis serves as a timely reminder of the need to critically examine the influence of money on the integrity and effectiveness of international organisations.

Despite its many strengths, *Transforming International Institutions* is not without its limitations. One potential criticism is the book's somewhat narrow focus on the UN system, which may limit its applicability to other IOs and contexts. While Graham's analysis offers valuable insights into the specific challenges facing the UN, a broader examination of multilateralism beyond the UN framework could enhance the

book's comparative perspective and relevance.

Additionally, some readers may find Graham's argumentation overly deterministic or pessimistic regarding the prospects for multilateralism. While she convincingly demonstrates the influence of financial power dynamics on the UN's operations, her analysis occasionally lacks nuance in exploring potential avenues for reform or resistance against dominant donor interests. A more balanced assessment of the possibilities for revitalising multilateralism within the existing framework could enhance the book's overall impact.

In conclusion, Erin R. Graham's *Transforming International Institutions: How Money Quietly Sidelined Multilateralism at the United Nations* offers a compelling analysis of the complex interplay between finance and governance in the realm of international relations. Through its rigorous research, interdisciplinary approach, and critical insights, the book provides valuable contributions to our understanding of the challenges facing multilateralism in an increasingly interconnected world. While not without its limitations, Graham's work serves as a thought-provoking exploration of the not so easily seen dynamics shaping the future of global governance.

Overall, *Transforming International Institutions* is a must-read for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to deepen their understanding of the

evolving landscape of global governance. By unveiling the influence of financial contributions on multilateral institutions, Graham's book stimulates important conversations about the need to safeguard the integrity and autonomy of international organisations in the face of mounting pressures and constraints. As we navigate an increasingly complex and uncertain world, Graham's insights provide valuable guidance for charting a course towards a more inclusive, equitable, and effective system of global governance.

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