

Experimental Multilateralism and Variable Geometries

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Abstract: This paper argues in favour of a reinvention of multilateral cooperation in response to the growing criticism of traditional international governance structures. Against the backdrop of mounting crises - including climate change, inequality, global health challenges, and the erosion of trust in institutions - the paper outlines key junctures for rethinking multilateralism. It emphasises the need to reform not only the actors and decision-making mechanisms, but also the goals and operational models of cooperation. The paper proposes a move away from rigid, top-down paradigms towards a more flexible, inclusive and functional multilateralism. This approach is based on joint analyses, regional experimentation and pragmatic, task-oriented cooperation. It argues for the integration of existing multilateral institutions with emerging models that better reflect the realities and aspirations of the Global South, while including non-state actors and enabling peer-to-peer learning. In this way, it presents a vision of multilateralism that is more equitable, participatory and responsive to the complexity of today's interconnected challenges.

Keywords: Variable Geometry Cooperation, Development Cooperation, Multilateralism, Experimentalism, Global Public Goods, Global South, Public Policy Capacity, Development Finance.

1. Multilateralism, Where Is It?

The cruelty of current international conflicts often masks a deeper, more pervasive phenomenon: a growing sense of discontent spreading across societies both in the North and in the South. This discontent may appear as apathy or erupt as open hostility. It often takes the form of rejection of institutions increasingly viewed with suspicion amidst a wave of populism that demands quick fixes to complex issues - poverty, inequality, marginalisation and a lack of prospects. Support or resignation

for coups d'état or authoritarian regimes can be seen as a symptom of this broader malaise. This reality is often rooted in domestic causes but is also fuelled by the frustration of not being able to act effectively in the face of the supposedly external dynamics that are generally attributed to globalisation. Conflict and dissatisfaction thus reinforce one another, feeding a dangerous spiral where multilateralism itself comes under strain.

No doubt, there is an urgent need to rethink the present multilateral system and reimagine international

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cooperation. Trust in global settings, once providing at least financial assistance, is eroding. The many climate summits and declarations have yielded little compared to the devastation already unfolding. The hypocrisy of “vaccine nationalism” that emerged during the Covid crisis has left its mark, and the deepening post-pandemic economic disparities, have further undermined confidence. Trade and capital flow rules are contested and are currently undergoing a thorough overhaul. New protectionist trends in the U.S., across both parties, are dimming faiths that globalisation might lift middle classes and help the poorer segments of society out of poverty. Meanwhile, China is accused of sidestepping multilateral rules, while the WTO is seen as ineffective.

However, the need to strengthen cooperation and reform its institutions have often been satisfied with provisional solutions: transactional realism centred on national interests, power and pacts, where everything becomes a subject of negotiation, or goodwill, especially from civil society. Today’s complexity arguably exceeds any precedent (consider the UN’s attempt to renew itself through the proposed Pact for the Future). A rising tide, bolstered by nationalist movements, challenges multilateralism outright, portraying it as a threat to sovereignty and a vehicle for decisions at odds with national interests. This critique goes beyond inefficiency; it questions the system’s very legitimacy.¹ Short-sightedness, antagonism and sovereignty become the yardstick for

everything. Cooperation becomes the exception. Mistrust prevails, especially when cooperation entails even minimal supranational decision-making. In this climate, bilateralism among ‘like-minded friends’ tends to prevail, constrained by the logic of contingent convenience.

2. Some Junctures of a Reinvention

The concerns raised above must be taken seriously. Multilateral cooperation remains the only viable arena capable of addressing some defining global challenges of our time: preserving and developing global public goods, advancing sustainable and just peace, supporting development efforts in countries, and revitalising the relationship between the North/West and the Global South. Therefore, what are the most important junctures to focus on in order to reorient and revitalise multilateralism?

2.1 The Actors

One critical juncture for rethinking multilateralism concerns the very actors who shape it. The credibility - and, increasingly, the legitimacy - of the multilateral system is openly questioned. While many countries of the Global South still support the UN and key financial and trade institutions, and even occasionally engage with selective forums like the G7, they often regard these venues as platforms for advocacy rather than actual tables for their contribution to decision-making. Their longstanding critique centres on governance structures that remain uncooperative and non-

inclusive - even when decisions taken in these spaces have profound consequences for the Global South.

The critique extends beyond the composition of the UN Security Council to encompass institutions responsible for shaping the purpose, scope, and priorities of development cooperation.² Important forums are mainly chaired and attended by traditional donors - primarily Western countries - with little or no structured representation from the South, despite the fact that the South is the primary stakeholder of assistance policies. This imbalance is counterintuitive: policymaking, monitoring, and evaluation should include those most directly affected to ensure relevance, effectiveness, and legitimacy as well as to capture diverse experiences and needs.³ Frustration is further exacerbated by the significant shift in focus from cooperation to funding, which has increasingly become a metonym for cooperation itself - as if funding were its only dimension or concern. Discussions increasingly revolve around financing allocations - often with limited success - while collaborative efforts to design and experiment concrete solutions to shared challenges have become marginal. Even the exchange of knowledge and innovations - particularly those developed and tested in the South - has been sidelined.

Over the past 25 years, the power asymmetry has become more acute and visible. The growing economic and geopolitical weight of emerging economies has transformed their role and cannot be ignored in the multilateral

discussions. Therefore, there must be increasing recognition that countries in the South bring essential, context-specific knowledge about their own development pathways.⁴ However, unable to influence decision-making within traditional multilateral bodies, these countries are creating parallel institutions where they expect to be better represented and heard - or at least shielded from chronic exclusion. This proliferation of new platforms reflects, in part, the broader geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China. While this diversification may offer the Global South more options, it does not necessarily strengthen international cooperation, in particular for global public goods. In fact, it often contributes to a deepening polarisation.

The crisis of legitimacy in multilateralism is not limited to the divide between North/West and South. It also concerns the role of non-state actors - cities, local and regional governments, NGOs, trade unions, and businesses. These actors are vital not only for crafting solutions to global challenges such as climate change, but also as connectors to local realities and communities. Their inclusion can help reduce fragmentation, foster genuine participation, and address the root causes of dissatisfaction: disempowerment and marginalisation.

2.2 The Goals

A second critical juncture in the reorientation of multilateralism lies in the evolution of its goals. What, after all, did structural adjustment policies

achieve, if not the prioritisation of fiscal consolidation and the reduction of national economies to the narrow lens of prevailing neoliberal theory? These approaches largely overlooked the complex structural challenges faced by countries of the Global South.

Today, multilateral action should be guided by the logic underpinning 2030 Agenda. First, the preservation and enhancement of global public goods must be a central objective. Second, development must be seen as something that is linked to, but not synonymous with, growth. Third, multilateralism must embrace the diversity of development trajectories and harness the unique opportunities each country offers.

At the same, international cooperation should address the persistent 'development traps' that entrench structural and social disadvantages - both within and across countries. The poverty trap is the most visible, but others also obstruct progress, even in so-called middle-income countries. These traps fuel vicious cycles, deepen social discontent, and demand coordinated public policies to disrupt their perpetuation. For example, dependence on low-value-added natural resources deteriorates terms of trade, heightens exposure to price fluctuations, and hinders industrial diversification. Moreover, the weak diffusion of innovation to small enterprises or marginalised regions contributes to underemployment, depressed wages, precarious working conditions, and the exodus of skilled professionals. Additionally, the limited mobilisation of domestic resources,

compounded by multinational tax avoidance and the high cost of credit, constrains public investment, escalates debt burdens, and fosters a widespread sense of resignation.

There remains significant work to align multilateralism with the spirit of the 2030 Agenda. A key shift is to move beyond GDP-based metrics in development cooperation. Aid and funding are still overwhelmingly tied to GDP or gross national income - indicators that fail to capture the multidimensional nature of well-being. Alternative indicators,⁵ aligned with the 2030 Agenda and developed by organisations such as the UNDP and OECD, are available and actionable. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres has pointed out, these metrics allow us to 'measure what we care about'. Yet their adoption remains limited. The continued dominance of outdated metrics reflects bureaucratic inertia, resistance to change, and entrenched interests, alongside an overemphasis on financial flows as the sole determinant of development.

This bias distorts development strategies. Rather than adapting to the specific contexts of countries and regions, too many strategies, when they even exist, follow predetermined pathways dictated by an increasingly obsolete economic orthodoxy that claims universality. Terms such as 'differentiation' and 'ownership' often amount to rhetorical flourishes, lacking substantive application - particularly in contexts marked by distributional conflict and fragile social cohesion. From the perspective of the

Global South, this perpetuates a sense of stasis and intensifies the legitimacy crisis facing both development policy and multilateral institutions.

Lastly, for too long multilateral action has fallen short in fostering large-scale initiatives for sustainable investment. While there are signs of progress today - with renewed attention to industrial policy in the North/West and in the Global South - still a clearer recognition of strategic investment needs and opportunities is lacking. The same for policy dialogue: a dialogue that must facilitate mutual learning, alignment of priorities, and the identification of potential joint investment efforts within a multilateral framework.

2.3 The Modalities

A third critical juncture concerns the 'how' of international cooperation.

Increasing development funding is undoubtedly part of the answer. Public finance is even more indispensable today than in the past - to support social inclusion, redistributive policies, and the transition to climate resilience.⁶ Private investment also plays a crucial role, and rightly so. It is essential for catalysing employment and productivity, particularly in contexts where public capacity is limited.

However, scaling up funding alone is not sufficient. Too little attention has been paid to strengthening the capacity of states to formulate and implement public policies that can channel and complement private investment. These include ensuring access to quality healthcare and education, decent employment,

and equitable territorial development in areas where inequalities remain stark and deeply rooted. Only by reinforcing the ability of public institutions to deliver can we address discontent, rebuild trust in governance, and avoid falling into persistent development traps.

This raises a fundamental question: what modalities should be adopted to effectively strengthen states' capacities? A renewed multilateralism should not primarily be about imposing conditionalities or standardised criteria for accessing funding. Instead, it should promote continuous dialogue, joint experimentation, and peer-to-peer learning.⁷ Through these interactions, cooperation can move from a strictly normative framework to one that supports the co-construction of missions aimed at advancing common goods.

This kind of cooperation is still difficult to achieve within many existing multilateral institutions. Developing countries often remain subject to external decisions, grounded in frameworks and categories set by others. This remains true not only for traditional multilateralism - where Northern countries dominate - but also for newer forms of cooperation led by the Global South. Even in more recent arrangements, such as those developed under the Belt and Road Initiative, a normative logic may resurface over time, despite early pledges of equality and experimentation. Nonetheless, these newer forms of cooperation continue to appeal, in part because they appear more open and symmetrical than their predecessors.

3. How Do we Reinvent Multilateralism?

In summary, the complexity of today's challenges requires no less, but rather unprecedented levels of cooperation. Domestic tensions and global issues often call for a renewed commitment to building transnational 'roads' that serve the collective interest. Yet multilateralism is increasingly fragmented. On the one hand, global institutions have lost significant influence, fail to reflect the realities of Global South countries, and are struggling to respond effectively and in a timely manner to systemic challenges such as climate instability, widening economic disparities, and global health risks. On the other hand, alternative forms of multilateralism are emerging with potential, but remain underdefined and, in some cases, are still susceptible to many of the shortcomings that have affected traditional cooperation frameworks. Amid all this, transactional short-term realism is rapidly gaining ground.

How can we rebuild meaningful dialogue in such turbulent times? In a mid/long term perspective, we should of course integrate the strengths of both traditional and emerging multilateral approaches, rethinking their foundations to overcome outdated models, and building a renewed cooperation framework. This integration cannot be based on extending old North/West standards to the Global South, perpetuating a view of these countries as rule takers. Rather, it must rest on new proposals and a bold reimagining of governance that is representative, participatory, and balanced. A framework

that amplifies the voices of the South and of civil society, fosters mutual understanding and trust, and collectively redefines principles of long-term global sustainability.

In the short term, however, a full overhaul of multilateralism may not be realistic. What is possible—and urgently needed—is the launch of a 'functional' multilateralism based on Experimentalism. This would consist of practical, goal-oriented experiments that are flexible, adaptable, and free from unnecessary bureaucratic constraints. Such a variable-geometry multilateralism would be built around coalitions of actors that change according to the issue at hand, aligning capacities and energy toward clearly defined objectives. This approach offers a pragmatic way forward, enabling progress even amid systemic inertia and political fragmentation.

This functional approach would:

1. Build inclusive and representative dialogue platforms, specific for each new cooperation initiative. These platforms should go beyond normative logic and adopt an approach aimed at fostering a shared understanding of priorities and strategies. Dialogue should begin with mutual exchange and validation of data - ensuring reliability, relevance, and comparability - and proceed through joint interpretation as well as the elaboration of a consensual language. Cooperation should prioritise actor dialogue over the creation of centralised administrations with regulatory power. This is still rare in international governance structures, particularly among the so-called 'knowledge banks'

that continue to follow intrusive legacy paradigms. Some new platforms could be exceptionally hosted within existing multilateral bodies,⁸ provided they enjoy sufficient autonomy and purpose-built governance.

2. Identify the specific 'Common Goods or Bads' to be addressed through a shared diagnosis. They should be turned into targeted, concrete missions - rather than vague, overarching objectives. Discussions may take place on a global scale but should more often be regional,⁹ and anyhow reflecting the geography of impact. For example, instead of generic goals like 'Global Health' or 'Education for All', cooperation could focus on eliminating malaria in Mercosur or promoting sustainable diets in specific regions. Historical functional initiatives, such as Danube navigation and international rail coordination, offer valuable lessons that can be revisited to meet today's needs.
3. Define the missions and modes of action collaboratively with diverse stakeholders - governments, local authorities, businesses, trade unions, and civil society organisations - to pool resources and knowledge. Avoid centralised, bureaucratic approaches. Foster voluntary, open agreements with light governance that maintain flexibility and agility in decision-making. A minimalist approach to management could improve the speed of intervention and cut bureaucratic costs, enabling a better response to specific project needs. Incentives and sanctions to reduce opportunistic behaviour and maintain commitment could be defined collectively.

4. Create continuous cycles of experimentation, monitoring, and learning. Participant experiences and knowledge should be valued. These cycles can identify what works, where, and under what conditions. They should also inform whether general objectives should be revised and which rules must be adapted to local realities. Shared monitoring fosters transparency, mutual accountability, and the cross-fertilisation of ideas.
5. Bridge short-term action with long-term vision. Lessons from these initiatives should feed into shaping the future of multilateralism. They can guide which strategies are sustainable, which objectives need recalibrating, and how cooperation frameworks might evolve. Ongoing monitoring is essential - not just for evaluating progress, but for building coherence and adaptive governance over time.

4. Conclusions

In times of profound uncertainty such as the present, it is essential to embrace a form of multilateralism that is grounded in practical objectives and enriched by the experimental experiences of all participants. Such an approach should not only foster inclusive dialogue, but also prioritise tangible outcomes. Public policies must be adaptable - constantly refined in light of feedback and emerging evidence from on-the-ground experimentation. Governments, in turn, should favour flexible organisational models capable of adjusting to shifting priorities. Multilateral institutions have a crucial role to play: they must help to

legitimise bottom-up multilateralism and support experimentation by enabling innovative methods and solutions. This functional and adaptive approach could prove instrumental in addressing today's pressing global challenges and in shaping a more effective, equitable, and representative system of international cooperation.

Endnotes

¹ For example, it denies or underestimates the needs for the preservation and development of global public goods.

² One of the best-known tables in this context is the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), which is responsible for setting guidelines, international standards and governance of official development assistance (ODA) as well as for the regular publication of statistics on the contributions of its members. The DAC has 31 members, including many of the world's richest countries, such as the United States, Japan, Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the European Union, but no countries in the South. The DAC represents a coordinated effort by traditional donors to ensure that the amount of aid is consistent with the commitments made by the traditional donors themselves, which is not the case. Over time, however, it has also tended to see itself as the place where not only funding but also development policy is discussed. That is, about the what and how of cooperation. It has created networks in which the effectiveness of cooperation programmes, transparent governance, gender equality, etc. are to be discussed. In short, on topics where the knowledge of the countries of the South should be at least as important as that of the countries of the North. But the South is not part of the DAC.

³ This is a point often made by Dennis Snower, President of the Global Solutions

Initiative and Fellow at Brookings and Oxford.

⁴ Consider by way of example the African Agenda 2063.

⁵ Although there are multiple feasible proposals for alternative measures of well-being, for example from organisations such as UNDP and OECD, and calls from several countries such as India to adopt them, we remain constrained in a path dependency where metrics such as GDP continue to dominate public decision-making. Undoubtedly this reflects a mix of bureaucratic inertia, obstacles to the perception of change, an almost exclusive emphasis on financial resources for development, and vested interests.

⁶ The rationale is widely understood: climate change disproportionately impacts the poorest populations – those who have contributed least to the crisis, yet bear its heaviest burdens. These communities not only suffer from worsening climate conditions but also face a compounded threat from rising levels of infectious disease and deepening poverty. Many of these countries are trapped in debt, which further constrains their capacity to invest in climate transition efforts. In light of these realities, the global community must step up with stronger, more consistent financial support. Least Developed Countries (LDCs) receive only minimal assistance, while numerous middle-income countries – despite being caught in severe development traps – are systematically excluded from aid mechanisms. This is not merely a question of moral responsibility; it is a matter of strategic necessity. The effects of climate change, and the economic instability they bring, do not respect national borders. They threaten global resilience and demand a truly collective response.

⁷ See the extremely fertile and helpful work of Charles Sabel and his idea of experimentalism in public policies and multilateralism.

⁸ The secretariat of international organisations includes, in several cases,

valuable experts and technicians. However, it is also important to take into account the context and culture in which the talents operate: the institutional structures, conventions (written and informal), work organisation, career conditions and institutional memory in which the experts work. Now this context can have a strong inertia and be particularly resistant to change, complicating the adaptation to the new objectives and modalities of multilateral experimentation, not to mention the legitimacy of the existing bodies in the eyes of the actors of the South.

⁹ In the absence of systemic convergence, geographical proximity can sometimes facilitate cooperation between countries that follow similar development paths and have similar preferences, as seems to be the case in Africa and less so in Latin America. This may imply trade agreements, harmonisation of legislation, but also, and above all, knowledge sharing on public policies. But how to build it? Europe could play a role, but not by closing in on its privileges and the memory of its former powers, but rather by enhancing its experience of regional integration.

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