

Time for ‘Frugal Multilateralism’ With A Single Doctrine: Delivery

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Abstract: This paper argues for ‘frugal multilateralism,’ focused less on major pronouncements, declarations, and summits; instead on effective approaches to solve specific problems, built around norms and multi-stakeholder coalitions that deliver results. This requires stepping outside of an intellectual paradigm in which institutions and legal frameworks are the source of legitimacy and power, and instead consider networks, influence and trust and the key currency through which goals are achieved.

Key Words: Development Cooperation, Multilateralism, Experimentalism, Global Public Goods, Global South, Public Policy Capacity, Development Finance.

1. Multilateralism in a Moment of Fragmentation

Eighty years since the creation of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods Institutions, principally the IMF and World Bank, these architectures have come to an inflection point. Funding cuts from traditional donors – particularly the United States – are forcing significant staffing cuts and long running debates about restructuring UN Agencies are quickly shifting to operational plans, layoffs,¹ and a proposal from the UN80 Taskforce² to consolidate significant parts of the UN system to address “*increased mandates, often without clear exit strategies, and complexities [that] have led to significant overlaps, inefficiencies and increased costs.*” A growing call from global majority countries for reform

of the Bretton Woods Institutions has helped shape the World Bank’s ‘evolution roadmap’ process to update its mission and operating model and the G20 has led a process for better leveraging the Multilateral Development Bank system.

These events, and the response of major institutions to them, are largely symptoms of a series of broader trends driving the need for reform of our vision for multilateralism – not just multilateral institutions.

The norms and values embedded in the rules-based international order are increasingly under attack by major powers that seek instead to bypass norms through unilateral action, bi-lateral deals or informal coalitions.

The multipolar and fragmented world we live in today is not one that would be recognizable to the founders of the

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multilateral system and its institutions, who designed them for a world where a relatively small number of states held the majority of power and resources and could assume responsibility and capability for averting conflict, leveraging the power of capital markets and trade to build prosperity, and use formal intergovernmental processes to establish norms that would be respected and enforced by members.

We now live in a world where power is disbursed (though unequally) between countries, businesses, social movements; where coalitions form and dissipate rapidly; where politics is polarised and polarisation is amplified by technological innovation that is rapidly accelerating; where trust in institutions of all forms has been declining consistently for a decade, and that collapse of trust is fuelling extremist and populist politics. A politics that is, in turn, fuelling the weakening of the multilateral system.³

The UN and Bretton Woods system is clearly ill equipped to act on today's challenges. Arresting the atrophying trust requires delivering well on a core mandate. But that in itself requires institutions and member states to ask fundamental questions about what that core mandate should be in today's world. Then to articulate that renewed mandate and deliver on it.

Instead, the response of institutions has been to take on more within the existing framework. As the world becomes more complex, and competing challenges interrelate, the official mandate bestowed on these institutions creates incentives to assume a central role in designing

solutions; whether through establishing norms, implementing programs, or providing a moral voice.

It is, in the words of Peter Drucker, "acting with yesterday's logic" which he characterised as the greatest risk during facing leaders during turbulent times.⁴

The temptation to 'boil the ocean' is strong but the lack of focus and horizontal consensus-based approaches lead to lowest common denominator positions which are uninspiring, hard to communicate and impossible to enforce. This is compounded by institutional competition for funding and power with leads of escalation and mission creep.

These dynamics have been evident in the negotiation and creation of the Sustainable Development Goals which laudably sought to codify the a large range of human and environmental issues and interests into an overarching framework of 17 Goals and 169 targets.⁵ The UN's 'Pact for the Future,'⁶ a 60 page document included 56 'actions' covering everything from building and sustaining peace to the 'exploration and use of outer space for peaceful purposes.' Yet the realpolitik decisions impacting on these issues largely happens outside of the UN system with little regard for these negotiating texts.

As a result, rather than the United Nations being a central coordinator for development and enforcing norms, it is increasingly in competition with new coalitions and institutions which have emerged to respond to this changing world such as regional development banks; the BRICS, G7 and G20 and OECD; regional and subregional groups such as the EU, AU and ASEAN.

These dynamics are not new, nor exclusively driven by western powers. For example, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), founded in 1961 by leaders such as Nehru, Nasser, and Nkrumah, was a pivotal multilateral initiative led by countries in the Global South which sought to chart a course independent of both the Western and Soviet blocs, rooted in principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and solidarity against colonialism. The G77 remains a powerful grouping that articulates key concerns of the South. Yet the proliferation of coalitions acting outside of the UN offer an alternative and often competing theatre. These coalitions often succeed because they can focus, move faster and deliver impact, but lack the scale and legitimacy of a truly global body.

2. The State of Multilateralism in Today's World

Much of the debate, including the recommendations of the UN80 Taskforce, has focused largely on institutional restructuring and consolidation; the logical outcome of this way of thinking is similar approaches and ways of working at a smaller scale delivering less impact.

Yet the challenges we face demand action on a greater scale, at a faster pace and delivering more impact. This moment requires going back to first principles and considering the purpose of multilateralism and considering the development of a set of tools allowing the most appropriate approach to be deployed to the specific challenge at hand.

An effective approach to supporting

international 'order' requires a degree of legitimacy for the norms, rules and institutions mandated to steward them. Yet, on almost every dimension we see a crisis of legitimacy and effectiveness and an inability of multilateral institutions to resolve these challenges.

For example, NATO's war in Kosovo in 1999, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, have been accompanied by an increasing paralysis of the Council highlight the lack of legitimacy and respect for the norms promoting peaceful co-existence.⁷

The World Trade Organization has reached few significant agreements beyond accords on trade facilitation (2013) and fisheries subsidies (2022) highlighting a lack of effectiveness in facilitating economic exchange and prosperity.⁸ Efforts by the G20 to provide a framework for orderly debt restructuring in a complex creditor environment have largely failed due to an inability to incentivize a combination of public and private creditors to act together. Meanwhile the increasing interdependence and interconnectedness of economic systems and trading regimes have led to the weaponization of economic and health policy in achieving broader geo-political objectives.⁹

The hope that agreements to safeguard critical global public goods from these conflicts seems increasingly distant following the dynamics regarding vaccine deployment during COVID,¹⁰ the deployment of economic sanctions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the US administration's pullback

from the Paris Climate Agreement, World Health Organization and actions on Environmental Social and Governance investment programs.

It is easy to highlight examples of the failure of these norms and institutions without considering counterfactual scenarios for where their absence would lead to more disruption and conflict. But it is also critical to consider the risk that, in a world of fragmentation, the effectiveness of these approaches may wane further.

As we look ahead, we can imagine international governance could play out

based on two axes: Interests and Power.

- *Polarised vs Collective Interests:* On one axis we could see increasing polarization and fragmentation as states and non-state actors disregard long established norms and act unilaterally in their self-interest, or we could see a return to focus on norms and principles that protect people and planet.
- *Centralised vs Distributed Power:* On another axis, we could see these dynamics play out in a centralised way with elite in business, governments and other institutions

Table 1: Polarised vs Collective Interests and Centralised vs Distributed Power

	Centralised	Distributed
Polarised / Fragmented	Driven by oligarchic power, surveillance capitalism, likely corrupt and promoting division and xenophobia nationally and internationally. Unlikely to resolve collective action challenges such as climate and pandemics except where economic or political interests are aligned.	Chaotic but innovative approaches by local actors that solve immediate problems have local impact but limited coordination on collective action fails to ladder up to a resolution of major challenges or reach scale.
Collective	States driven by generous norms seek to solve collective action problems but are ill equipped to do so because institutions are slow-moving, and approaches lack innovation. Local communities have little agency as decisions are centralised around big institutions.	Local action is shaped by international norms that are agreed in an inclusive way and provide ‘north star’ approaches. Outcomes are focused on function rather than form, on learning and ideas that are contagious and adopted by billions of people acting in their own and collective interest, rather than institutions with official mandates acting for ‘others.’

Source: Author’s compilation.

consolidating and centralizing power; or alternatively, power could be distributed with actors at every level taking action on problems within their own context.¹¹

And these two axes could interrelate to create a series of scenarios laid out below:

At present, the politics of many major powers (and their bilateral interactions) is centralized and polarized. Elites consolidate power nationally and act in their own interest through 'might makes right' politics. These states are influential members of the current multilateral system embodied in the UN and Bretton Woods Institutions which are acting in a centralized and collective manner; seeking consensus through state led negotiation processes and traditional governance structures which are increasingly held captive by 'centralised polarisers.' They fail to deliver and therefore lose legitimacy and relevance.

As a result, the logical approach for those seeking positive action on social challenges whether in civil society, business or philanthropy is to bypass multilateral processes and norms and instead pursue a distributed model which is effective on its own terms, but highly fragmented. This is evident in many philanthropic activities and the social innovation movement which promotes solutions to individual problems but suffers from an inability to systematically learn, scale and ladder up to tackling global collective challenges. In today's world a Collective / Distributed model is much more likely to succeed for most of the challenges where multilateralism plays a critical role.

3. Frugal Multilateralism: A Toolkit for Tackling Today's Challenges

Moving towards the Collective /Distributed scenario requires a fundamental shift on two fronts that require ecosystem, networked thinking:

First, there is need to build consensus and secure agreement on purpose: the unique areas where multilateralism should focus: that it does (and only does) what no other systems or institutions can do.

Second, there is a need to develop an agile structure: a toolkit which applies the most appropriate model to the problems at hand.

The overall purpose of multilateralism can be codified into five themes:¹²

- 1. Promote Basic Stability and Peaceful Coexistence:** norms and agreements aimed at reducing the likelihood of conflict and maintaining international peace.
- 2. Facilitate Economic Exchange and Prosperity:** frameworks that govern international economic interactions, trade, and financial systems.
- 3. Promote Cooperation on Transnational and Planetary Challenges:** collective efforts to tackle global issues such as climate change, pandemics, and the regulation of emerging technologies.
- 4. Embed Liberal Values in the International Sphere:** the promotion and protection of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.
- 5. Supporting National Development Strategies:** Helping countries to define and pursue their own development

paths and promoting learning between countries and regions.

But the level of focus needs to change. Reforms should be built on the principle of subsidiarity, which posits that social and political issues should be addressed at the most immediate level of governance.¹³

For example, there are clearly some challenges where the enforcement of norms is critical; such as respect for territorial integrity, the use of certain form of weapons, and the preservation of macro-economic stability; the forum to agree those norms must be maintained, even if the bodies to enforce those norms are not successful in every case.

Yet for shared global challenges, such as poverty, climate and preventable diseases, the goldilocks scenario is one of collective action on agreed norms pursued through distributed power. Here the focus should be less on enforcement and implementation (through UN agencies and international Non-Governmental Organizations, for example) and more on agreement around the challenges and shared goals, communication of compelling and contagious ideas based on shared values that can be replicated at scale to deliver significant impact.

In this scenario, individuals and communities at all scales become inspired, equipped and resourced as agents of change in their own context, rather than recipients of a system designed to protect or help those in vulnerable positions from a centralized position of power.

Stewart Patrick of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace lays out four approaches for state-led multilateralism which could be pursued:¹⁴

1. **Charter Model:** Focuses on the United Nations and other encompassing treaty-based bodies based on the core virtue of legitimacy. This can enhance cooperation through global membership and builds on legal foundations and binding commitments but is vulnerable to institutional sclerosis and lowest-common-denominator outcomes. The reaffirmation of the universal values codified in the UN Charter could be updated for the reality of today's world, through invoking Article 109.
2. **Club Model:** Seeks to rally established democracies as the basis for cooperation, based on the core virtue of solidarity. This allows democracies to define and defend principles and rules of an open world. However, it is vulnerable to electoral shifts among members, and global problems don't align neatly by regime type. This could support the development of norms and the facilitation of economic exchange and prosperity among states that have shared values and norms.
3. **Concert Model:** Aims for joint action to manage strategic rivalry among major powers that are not aligned in terms of approach or values but based on capability. This requires consensus on basic rules of conduct and collective crisis management. This could be applied to thorny issues that need cooperation of states to avoid dangerous escalation over nuclear proliferation or Artificial Intelligence.

4. Coalition Model: Builds ad hoc arrangements tailored to specific global challenges. An à la carte approach, with a shifting constellation of actors which adapts to each challenge, but increases transaction costs and may lack enforcement, legitimacy, and accountability. This could be developed to solve specific problems that don't necessarily require agreed rules of the game but simply require those with the right incentives to work together to solve problems. Here initiatives on global health such as Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, The Global Fund on AIDS, TB and Malaria provide powerful examples of effective action, though they have been criticised for undermining national health systems.

Yet this approach, if focused on the state and the central actor, only goes so far as trust in states and their legitimacy and capability to solve major problems wanes, and non-state actors increase their power and influence

In 2000, Elinor Ostrom proposed applying the idea of polycentric governance to climate change,¹⁵ arguing that dynamic forms of governing complex challenges such as climate change were not just possible but were already emerging spontaneously from the bottom up.¹⁶ Norms could be agreed at the international level but then the ownership and implementation of these principles could be devolved to the subnational and local level.

Devolving decision making and action, she argued, is more likely to build trust, tap into local motivations, unlock energy

and ideas that don't require the same level of public financial investment. Action at the local level enables, innovation, rapid course correction and learning; learning which can then be shared with other actors to strengthen the ecosystem.

The Paris Climate Agreement, in some respects, seeks to embody these principles; global negotiated goals are pursued through states pledging to make emission reductions, then gradually ratchet them up as part of a process of ongoing assessment and review; non-state and sub-national actors are incentivised to act in line with the global framework.

Despite the complexity of the challenge, action of climate brings great clarity: based on imperative to reduce carbon emissions in the atmosphere by a series of deadlines past which the warming of the climate creates destabilizing effects. A molecule of carbon cannot be fudged as part of a political negotiation. Yet for many other challenges, establishing a clear 'north-star' goal and measuring progress against it is much more challenging.

Yet if multilateral institutions like the UN were to focus their energy on a limited number of on core 'missions' on issues where norm-setting and consensus building could create 'north star' goals which then shape and empower local communities to act, share learning and scale up approaches to an international level using the power of technology and storytelling, this frugal approach could help deliver tangible results and begin to restore trust that delivery and impact is not only possible, but the norm.

Part of this refocusing must involve tough decisions on what not to do.

Development programmes currently account for roughly 75 per cent of total UN funding (\$26bn), two-thirds of its staff (50,000), and more than 1,000 offices.¹⁷ Yet, much of this work could arguably be devolved to the local level and conducted more efficiently by non-state actors in a more inclusive way.

Shehara Natalie Samarasinghe proposes two fundamental shifts.¹⁸ First a four-way governance structure in all UN funds, programmes and agencies which brings together states, businesses, NGOs and young people. This would build on the experience of the International Labour Organisation, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, The Global Fund on AIDS, TB and Malaria, and the UN Global Compact.

Second, a global capacity-building drive that sees the UN transfer the bulk of its development-related tasks to non-state stakeholders, who would bid competitively for contracts.

A similar approach could be applied beyond development agencies to cover knowledge creation, data and analysis and a more effective division of labour between regional and informal coalitions and regional UN entities.

4. Conclusions: Principles for Reinvention

Applying the principle of subsidiarity, a toolbox approach, and the idea polycentric governance could lead to a segmentation of activities, which could then facilitate a level of agreement build around the idea of from 'Frugal From – To' shifts:

1. From Institution to Influence:

Ultimately the value of multilateral institutions in the future will lie

less in their centralised operational function and more in their ability to credibly influence actors to prioritize action at the local level. Action which then ladders up to global impact, rooted in universal values. Involving moral leaders, artist and story tellers in designing solutions and ideas which can inspire action among others will be critical. All actions for reform should focus on building influence and credibility.

2. From Mandate to Mission: Select a limited series of timebound measurable 'missions' which the UN and other multilateral entities can coalesce around and convene non-state actors to support.

3. From Contributor to Catalyst: Take steps to move away from operations and agencies that deliver products and services on the ground and instead focus on inspiring action and promoting solidarity and learning among change makers and involving those changemakers in the core governance and decision making of institutions.

4. From Fuzziness to Focus: As the multilateral system consolidates, the core actions and activities of multilateral institutions should focus on what they can uniquely do. This means selecting core areas where coordination and norm setting can help shape the actions of other actors in the system.

5. From Concentration to Collective: Where global agreements are negotiated the process for agreement should be devolved from the state being the central arbiter of power, to being one locus of power, along-

side expert groups and citizens. The use of technology to poll globally representative views of issues, global citizens assemblies and selection

of input through a form of global jury service could be piloted as new forms of inclusive governance.

Table 2: Five Purposes of Multilateralism

	Charter	Club / Concert	De-centralized / Coalition
Promote Basic Stability and Peaceful Coexistence	Updated UN Charter and global enforcement mechanism, e.g. Security Council.	Peer review of implementation of norms. Coordination to create economies of scale.	Knowledge production, inspiration, learning and coordination around local action in support of north star goals.
Facilitate Economic Exchange and Prosperity	Norms of trade, taxation and the spillovers of economic activity.	Peer review of implementation. Multilateral financing of initiatives.	
Promote Cooperation on Transnational and Planetary Challenges	North star agreements on governance climate change, pandemics and critical technologies.	Peer review of implementation. Multilateral financing of initiatives.	
Embed Liberal Values in the International Sphere	Norms on governance of Oceans and Outer Space.	Peer review of implementation. Knowledge production, coordination and financing.	Local implementation.
Support National Development Strategies	No role	Multilateral financing of initiatives. Learning, coordination and knowledge production	

Source: Author’s compilation.

These shifts could then be filtered through the five purposes of multilateralism (Table 2) to yield a framework for mapping the ecosystem of relevant actors, and identifying areas where the United Nations, regional and informal bodies should be active and areas where new capabilities are required.

Ultimately, this frugal approach to multilateralism focused on building evidence bases, establishing norms, and then empowering others on a specific set of challenges to act at local levels will increase the influence and credibility of the multilateral system within a highly fragmented world where trust is a valuable and critical currency of change.

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