

The Role of Multilateral Forums and Organizations as Agents of Change and Development

Papel de los foros y organismos multilaterales como agentes de cambio y desarrollo

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Abstract

This article discusses the actions that single out development as one of the most pressing challenges facing States and formulae for ensuring multilateralism has a positive impact on the planet and its inhabitants. The author conduct a survey of multilateralism as a formula for interaction between members of the international community and promoting development, its challenges, and exposing the reasons for the Mexican multilateral foreign policy.



Resumen

En este artículo se destacan las acciones que identifican al desarrollo como uno de los retos más importantes de los Estados y las fórmulas para lograr que el multilateralismo tenga efectos positivos en el planeta y su población. La autora hace un recuento sobre el multilateralismo como fórmula de interacción de la sociedad internacional y de impulso del desarrollo, sus retos y expone las bases de la política exterior multilateral de México.



Keywords

Multilateralism, international organizations, U.N. System, sustainable development, transformative multilateral foreign policy



Palabras clave

Multilateralismo, organismos internacionales, Sistema de las Naciones Unidas, desarrollo sostenible, política exterior multilateral transformadora

The Role of Multilateral Forums and Organizations as Agents of Change and Development*

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Introduction

Multilateralism, which emerged in the 19th century as a formula for cooperation and collaboration between sovereign States, has been crucial to reaching agreements on the subject of development, although its effectiveness is now being called into question. Within the United Nations, multilateralism serves as a means of bringing visibility to issues and deciding on the best course of action to address them.

This article discusses the actions that single out development as one of the most pressing challenges facing States and formulae to ensure multilateralism has a positive impact on the planet and its inhabitants.

Inevitably, this form of collaboration is subject to exogenous factors and States are now asking whether or not they should continue with this model, especially now that it has come under scrutiny by an international community that put its faith in an interconnected, globalized world in times of crises. Nonetheless, Mexico remains an unwavering advocate of multilateralism, in the belief that it facilitates consensual decisions that address the greatest challenges facing the international community.

* English translation by Alison Stewart.

The origins of multilateralism and development

The very first multilateral arrangements incorporated the Westphalian principle that each State has an equal right to sovereignty, meaning they may not be forced to submit to the jurisdiction of other sovereign States nor, by the same token, may they intervene in the internal affairs of the latter. This model of interaction between States can be traced back to the Holy Alliance created at the behest of Alexander I of Russia and that was joined by Austria and Prussia following the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte at Waterloo in 1815. Intended to curb the spread of liberalism and restore the monarchy, this coalition is the earliest precedent we have of today's international conferences: an exercise in which more than two States come together to discuss common issues and reach agreements.

Among other matters, the first conferences focused on regulating the administration of the Rhine (1815) and the Danube (1856) in an effort to promote international free trade. It is noteworthy that, while the riparian States were the most involved in these meetings, those that did not have access to these rivers were also party because they wanted their own ships to be included in this new enterprise. Later, conferences would be organized to find new ways of settling disputes and regulating development. In was in this context that Mexico participated as an independent State in the 1899 Peace Conference at The Hague convened by Tsar Nicholas II, at which the principles of the 1864 Geneva Convention to improve the treatment of soldiers wounded in the field were adapted to maritime warfare.

In the 19th century, the advent of innovative technologies and the development of new methods of transportation and communication that transcended national borders necessitated common agreements and clear rules to facilitate the interaction of States, giving rise to the first administrative unions, including the International Telegraph Union (1865), the Universal Postal Union (1878) and the Central Office for International Carriage by Rail (1890).

Likewise, the transformations that production, distribution and consumer chains underwent as a result of the Industrial Revolution and a nascent capitalism required more standardized national rules. Thus emerged the International Bureau of Weights and Measures (1875), the Union for the Protection of Industrial Property (1883), the Union for the Protection

of Literary and Artistic Works (1886), and the Bureau of International Statistics (1913).

The Industrial Revolution prompted migration from the countryside to large cities, triggering structural social and demographic changes, such as the emergence of the working class. This, in turn, led to the creation of other unions, like the International Workingmen's Association (1864), the International Council of Women (1888), the Second International (1889), and the International Office of Public Health (1904), which later became the International Office of Public Hygiene (1907).

This constellation of entities that took shape in the second half of the 19th century reflected a new dynamic between States, while economic transformations influenced the development of international law, including multilateralism. There was, as yet, no talk of economic development, but the effects of trade on the freedom of the seas championed by Hugo Grocio were clear, as was the impact of technological progress on the community of sovereign States.

Consolidation of multilateralism as a formula for interaction between members of the international community and promoting development

In the 20th century, multilateralism became the prevailing response of the international community to the challenges that came its way, even though this was a constantly evolving concept, forced to adapt to many and varied circumstances and contexts.

Thus, the Treaty of Versailles that brought an end to World War I led to the creation of the League of Nations, whose mandate was to promote "cooperation and maintain international peace and security." Some international relations experts are of the opinion that the League did not achieve its intended purpose, because it did not have the means to prevent another war. Be that as it may, there can be no denying cooperation was a significant aspect of its work with the various administrative unions and new organizations to emerge at the time, such as the International Labour Organization (1919) and the Permanent Court of International Justice (1920). Created in the interwar period, this court was a jurisdictional

body independent of the League of Nations, to which States had recourse to settle their differences. Likewise, 1928 saw the adoption of the Kellogg-Briand Pact, whose signatories agreed to renounce the use of war as a means of resolving international conflicts.

The United Nations was created in 1945, at the end of World War II, giving rise to a new multilateral order that rests on three main pillars of action: peace and security, economic and social development, and respect for human rights. The U.N. Charter establishes the principles of international relations (some of which were adopted after the Peace of Westphalia) and regulates coexistence between States, acknowledging these as the main subjects of the international arena. At the same time, it admits the possibility of creating a more extensive system based on a network of regional multilateral entities and other agencies specialized in diverse areas, which would broaden the scope of relations between States, and between these and other subjects. The United Nations and its six main bodies are governed by a legal framework that acknowledges the powers of each, translating into greater certainty both for the organization and its Member States.

Initially, the new multilateral model addressed the corollaries of World War II, namely the need to rebuild the economies of Europe, while the Bretton Woods Conference resulted in the creation of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. Thousands of refugees and people left stateless by the war were attended to and international practices that provided a solid legal framework were codified.

Of particular relevance to this article is that the U.N. Charter incorporates the aspiration of all peoples to improve their standard of living (Article 55), an important task that was mandated to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). To effectively address social and health problems, and other issues related to education and culture, the Charter provided for the creation of a series of commissions, with special emphasis on the establishment of the Commission on Human Rights, which promoted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Declaration reaffirms what the U.N. Charter already states: “Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the

economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality” (Article 22).

Like every social organization, the United Nations has had its fair share of ups and downs over the decades. During the Cold War, hostile economic blocs, the nuclear race and scientific and technological progress plunged the United Nations into a state of relative paralysis. In the 1960s, new members joined the organization, but global society found itself facing hitherto unknown problems, such as environmental protection, overpopulation, technological development and the exploitation of outer space with the landing of man on the Moon. In every instance, international conferences proved an effective means of reconciling divergent opinions and reaching consensus, especially with newly independent States that found themselves at an economic disadvantage, but whose situation was provided for pursuant to the principles of the U.N. Charter, via cooperation for development (Article 1.3).

Several multilateral meetings were held over the course of the decade that brought greater exposure to the issue. In 1964, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development discussed issues related to international trade, investment, the transfer of technology and the implications of globalization for development. One year later, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was created to support the internal efforts of individual States to achieve sustainable human development, eradicate poverty, revert environmental damage and encourage the participation of women. Later, in 1966, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) were adopted—a separation that mirrored the very different realities of the two economic blocs into which the world was divided. In this regard, the ICESCR provides a definition, albeit incomplete, of the *right to development* as an expression of the aspirations of human beings to fully exercise their human rights, both as individuals and collectively.¹

¹ United Nations, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights> (date consulted: April 24, 2023).

Two decades later, the Declaration on the right to development was adopted via resolution 41/128, which acknowledges the right to development as “a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting therefrom”.² Later, at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action not only acknowledged the rights of women as human rights, but determined that no differentiation can be made between human rights and human freedoms because they are all universal, indivisible, inalienable and are interrelated. Likewise, the issue of the human right to development was picked up again, except this time it was also considered an economic principle.

In early 2000, U.N. Member States attended the Millennium Summit to discuss the common destiny of humanity, and embarked on an in-depth debate on the inequalities between the countries and peoples of the world.³ Their commitment to eradicating poverty, enforcing human rights and democracy, and promoting the strengthening of the United Nations was set forth in eight goals. All these goals had specific targets, but not all were achieved within the 2015 deadline, and while this endeavor translated into a successful rallying of forces, the gap between rich and poor and between rural and urban areas remained substantial, while conflicts still posed a serious threat to development. It was in a context of major global challenges—not least meeting the basic needs of persons, turning economies into sustainable systems that consider the wellbeing of future generations, that provide for the eradication of poverty and hunger, and that guarantee 800 million people access to basic services—that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was crafted.⁴

² U.N. General Assembly, “Declaration on the Right to Development,” A/RES/41/128, December 4, 1986.

³ U.N. General Assembly, United Nations Millennium Declaration, A/RES/55/2, September 13, 2000.

⁴ See UNDP, *Human Development Report 2015: Work for Human Development*, New York, United Nations, 2015, p. 17.

The challenges achieving sustainable development poses to multilateralism

As the 21st century unfolds, the international community has reflected on problems of a global nature from a multidimensional perspective of security, not just security in the military sense, but one that extends to protecting the freedoms of persons to live free from fear and poverty, while enjoying their human condition, exercising their rights and being able to achieve their full potential.⁵ In response, the United Nations has evolved into a complex system in which its three, closely interrelated pillars of peace and security, sustainable development, and human rights have given rise to the concept of human security. This, however, requires strategic coordination between States and specialized international organizations, as well as the United Nations agencies, programs and funds that complement the work of governments in the drafting of regulations and public policies. These organizations also help shore up the capacity of States to comply with their international obligations.⁶

In 2023, the international community was comprised of 193 U.N. Member States that continue spearheading international relations, while other entities that are not members of the United Nations or do not have full international recognition participate as observers, along with certain atypical subjects that, for historical reasons, are deemed a part of this community, like the International Committee of the Red Cross and a wide variety of specialized international organizations. Today they are joined by civil society organizations, which may be called upon for consultation, according to Article 71 of the U.N. Charter, and other actors who contribute their technical know-how or have the power to influence development, such as the private sector and academic institutions. Finally, the international community is increasingly focused on the human person and marginalized

⁵ U.N. General Assembly, “2005 World Summit Outcome,” A/RES/60/1, October 24, 2005.

⁶ U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Objetivos del Milenio,” at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/es/millennium-development-goals.html> (date consulted: April 24, 2023).

groups, like women, the LGBTIQ+ community, indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities, among others.

Adopted in 2015, the 2030 Agenda can be deemed a roadmap that champions people, the planet and prosperity, peace and the forging of partnerships, based on the concepts of inclusion and non-discrimination inspired by the principles of the U.N. Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “We pledge that no one will be left behind”.⁷ The backbone of the 2030 Agenda is sustainability and it takes a three-dimensional approach to economic and social development, and environmental conservation, with development priorities, like eradicating poverty, guaranteeing health and food security, to be achieved by means of 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) and their 169 targets.

The targets themselves clearly represent a challenge for the States that have committed to them, for as SDG 17 establishes, States must improve their ability to mobilize internal and external resources with a view to gaining access to new technologies by means of international cooperation in all its forms, build capacities that support the implementation of the SDGs on their domestic fronts and strengthen global macroeconomic stability. While the United Nations must align itself with States and act in coordination with them as regards this commitment adopted at the 70th General Assembly, the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and conflicts like the Russian invasion of Ukraine have reduced the amount of resources available to achieve development and meet the SDGs. Obtaining the necessary financing will depend on international stability, the creation of an environment conducive to investment, debt relief for developing countries, facilitating access to capital markets and promoting dialogue and cooperation with Bretton Woods institutions, the World Trade Organization and regional development banks.⁸

Since 2002, a series of international conferences have been organized to promote development financing. The first of these, held in Monterrey,

⁷ U.N. General Assembly, “Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” A/RES/70/1, October 21, 2015.

⁸ U.N. General Assembly, “High-level International Intergovernmental Consideration of Financing for Development,” A/RES/54/196, January 14, 2000, paragraphs 7 and 14.

the International Conference on Financing for Development, was attended by 180 representatives of different States and international finance organizations. Later, at the 2008 follow-up conference, the Doha Declaration on financing for development reported on the progress of the Monterrey Consensus and recognized that procuring the necessary financing for development would require adopting a new agenda. Thus, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, adopted in 2015, covers seven areas—domestic public resources; domestic and international private business and finance; international development cooperation; international trade as an engine for development; debt and debt sustainability; addressing systemic issues; and science, technology, innovation and capacity-building—, whose goal is to direct financing flows to development-oriented policies.⁹

Aside from the challenge of forging a strategic synergy to create the conditions for sustainable development under this new agenda, multilateralism has come up against criticism. A great deal of this criticism concerns the practices of various forums, both permanent and temporary, institutional and non-institutional, that discredit multilateralism. Notwithstanding, multilateral negotiations remain an essential means of finding solutions to issues that affect the international community, including sustainable development and the wellbeing of all people.

The transformative multilateral foreign policy that seeks to achieve sustainable development

Mexico remains as firm an advocate today as it was back in 1945 of effective forms of multilateralism that prioritize the dignity of individuals and help address the challenges facing the planet and humanity.

Today when we speak of multilateralism we are referring not just to an international organization, but an entire system created by the United

⁹ U.N. General Assembly, “Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (Addis Ababa Action Agenda),” A/RES/69/313, August 17, 2015.

Nations, in which States remain the most important subjects, along with other international organizations, traditional observers, like the International Committee of the Red Cross, and individuals, while other actors, like civil society organizations, multinationals, subnational governments, indigenous peoples and vulnerable populations (women, young people, persons with disabilities) are acquiring an ever-greater say. Meanwhile, illegal actors, such as terrorist groups and international criminal organizations, have barged in on this community, adding to the burden of States and in some cases, thwarting concrete actions to achieve economic development.

Mexico continues to view multilateralism as the most effective means of reaching agreements on climate change, arms trafficking, conflicts and food insecurity, among other problems affecting the international community. That said, it is in favor of an agile multilateralism, one that meets the needs and expectations of society, that is inclusive and that people can relate to.

It is for these reasons that Mexico, under the leadership of Chancellor Marcelo Ebrard Casaubon, has introduced a transformative multilateral foreign policy based on seven pillars. The first of these is to build prosperous, inclusive and happy cities by acknowledging the essential role played by subnational governments and local authorities in reducing inequalities. With the support of federal government policies, the goal is to help these authorities improve the resilience of the cities they govern and their residents.

The second pillar of this policy is to achieve sustainable development and combat climate change. Equality and the dignity of the individual are at the center of this new vision, where Mexico's approach to development is one of complete respect for the environment, with priority being given to food security, biodiversity and global health. As part of efforts to find joint solutions to the crises that continue to affect the planet and people's lives, such as climate change, pollution caused by waste, the loss of biodiversity and desertification, the Secretariat is firmly committed to the 2030 Agenda, whose progress it monitors closely, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing for development, and the Paris Agreement.

The third pillar rests on sustainable peace and is of particular importance in the current climate in which the multilateral system seems to have a diminished capacity to smooth over tensions between the world's major

powers and settle conflicts peacefully, reason why Mexico has returned to a preventive approach to peace that addresses the structural causes of violence by promoting sustainable development.

The fourth pillar is migration and human rights. The fundamental rights and dignity of individuals are at the very heart of Mexico's policymaking, which is founded on the rule of law, justice, non-discrimination and openness to international scrutiny. To this end, Mexico adopted the United Nations Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in 2018.

The fifth pillar is non-discrimination and gender equality, the promotion of which is intended to contribute to the empowerment of women and girls, help combat gender violence, and condemn expressions of racism, xenophobia and hate speech.

The sixth pillar is to shore up the global economy by attracting foreign investment flows that share the country's inclusive view of economic development in the interests of the wellbeing of its population and gender equality, while taking into account the irrefutable correlation between development and the environment.

The seventh pillar views innovation and social justice as a means of countering the disruptions caused by rapid technological progress, and aims to prevent inequalities in the creation and distribution of wealth.

To achieve the goals of its transformative multilateral foreign policy, Mexico actively participates in all the specialized agencies of the United Nations through its missions in Nairobi, Vienna, Rome, Geneva and New York. Since the outbreak of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Mexico's missions have not supported initiatives that seek to issue declarations, suspend Russia's membership of the United Nations or have its officials removed. Although the purpose of such measures is to force Russia to the negotiating table, Mexico views them as contrary to the principle of the sovereign equality of States and believes they would not be conducive to dialogue.

Likewise, Mexico participates in U.N. conferences on food security, migration, the prevention of arms trafficking, water, the combatting of climate change, the need for a sustainable ocean economy, and the ethics of artificial intelligence and its disruptive effects. At these conferences, agreements are reached and commitments made to find solutions in the

medium to long terms. Mexico also promotes multilateral forums to address the challenges facing cities, and problems associated with gender equality and the rights of minority groups.

Finally, the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs oversees the continuity of commitments undertaken by the country in international treaties via the various follow-up bodies established by the latter, be these implementation mechanisms or councils and technical committees.

Conclusions

Multilateralism has been constantly evolving since the second half of the 20th century, particularly in the current context in which the vast majority of global problems require international cooperation. As interdependent nations, we must all do our part if we are to effectively respond to phenomena like climate change, migratory flows and the loss of biodiversity, among other issues. And while it is not always clear what form these agreements will take, States must be resolved to reach them.

Today as always, Mexico's foreign policy takes a multilateral approach, which, despite its vicissitudes, reaffirms and is reflected in the unwavering commitment of the Mexican government to address the most pressing of global challenges. The strategic contributions Mexico makes and the multilateral actions it takes are founded on a strong sense of solidarity, while the country's diplomatic, legislative, political, financial and scientific capacities are all focused on achieving the development goals that will guarantee the wellbeing of the planet and its inhabitants, peace and collaborative partnerships, *without leaving anyone behind*.