



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

The United Nations must reform to represent the interests of the Global South

By Klaus Kotzé

Our world is very different to the one which spawned the United Nations in 1945. Today the Global South with the increasing bulk of the world's population, also comprises the majority of United Nations member states. The Global South, the political term that expresses a marginal but not inferior position in global relations, comprises a diverse arrangement of states that consider the world order to be dominated by the north, the West and the United States in particular. The South sees this order as unjust, unpeaceful, undemocratic and unfriendly to its interests. Global governance reform has been central to the South, which, instead of regarding itself as a hemispherical body, has pursued a global alternative since at least the 1960s. Unlike their erstwhile compatriots, the states of the South are not insignificant global players. Today they serve as the nodes of global expansion and development, driving economic and democratic growth - their global significance will only grow.

The Global South is aspirational. It wants to correct the imbalance in global political power. As groupings such as the G77, the Non-Aligned Movement and most recently, BRICS, it has adopted a global outlook and seeks to overcome (neo-) imperialism and intervention. It has been closely connected to the decolonization movement and continues to advance global emancipation. Moving from subjugation to liberation, the Global South advocates for states to assume their subjectivity and for developing states to be supported and resourced to be able to pursue their interests.

The Global South recognises that countries differ in size, structure and access to resources. For a global order to function, states must be accordingly capacitated and afforded their agency and cultural sensitivity to assert their own policies, through their own approaches. Instead of the failing one-size-fits-all approach, this would represent a truly multilateral system comprising a plethora of members. This bottom-up or many-to-one approach would ensure a global arrangement where everyone is better off. It is, therefore, critical to the Global South that corrective measures, such as support and concessions, be applied to assist Southern states. Greater parity between states would boost trade, security and development for all. The Global South is deeply and loudly committed to the United Nations as the only global arrangement able to pursue these ends. Its legitimacy rests on accommodating the global South.

Reform to effect greater representation and ensure greater legitimacy, offers the best chance to mitigate global concerns and ensure that the United Nations executes its core mandate. Reform

initiatives that do not address the concerns of the majority of the world's population and therefore do not address the inequity between the north and South would be inadequate.

It is, therefore, encouraging to see that the United Nations has commenced a new reform programme. In its declaration on the commemoration of its seventy-fifth anniversary in 2020, the United Nations recognised that “the world of today is very different from what it was when the United Nations was created 75 years ago”. It commits to reform, so to “ensure a more agile, effective and accountable organization that can deliver better in the field and adapt to global challenges”. Central to Secretary General Guterres' mission is improving focus and efficiency; bringing decision-making closer to people, empowering managers and restructuring budgetary procedures. The reform process is thus both structural (operations and management) and ideational (orientation and perspective).

We see that reform continues to represent a response to legitimacy concerns. When at the turn of the 21st century, at the Millennium Summit, the UN decided to go beyond its peace, security and humanitarian concerns, to become an instigator of global norms and ‘good governance’, it again repositioned, to offer ideational leadership. Programmes such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) collectively provide meaning and direction as guided by their principles and values. These are legitimate reforms as they have been collectively substantiated through extensive debate by the member states.

From the perspective of the Global South, adequate United Nations reform would see a plethora of member states asserting their own meaning and culture, in multilateral cooperation. To the South such a many-to-one world would be global. Unfortunately, the analysis of recent reform initiatives points to something else. A one-size-fits-all collective, where different stakeholders are accommodated in an increasingly voluntary and undifferentiated way. The documents assessed suggest a broadened perception of multilateralism. One that expands upon existing meaning but in doing so opens space for confusion. One that is future-oriented and defers action on current crises and moves responsibility away from the state as the legitimate agent.

Accordingly, current reform proposals do not take the perspective, nor do they accommodate the interests of the Global South. Whereas the Global South demands specific, enforceable commitments that respect national sovereignty and are enacted through state-led partnerships, the analysis shows a preference for generalised commitments that ignore state-to-state responsibilities and are continuously reworked leaving delivery for the future. This negates urgency and defers responsibility. The increased agency and arbitrary influence of unaccountable, non-state actors such as foundations and corporations see the governance environment becoming re-territorialised. A new type of universality is introduced, a multilateralism comprising multiple stakeholders, many of whom serve business or other partial interests. The United Nations works by precedent, unless the increased role of non-state actors is checked, their influence will be allowed to grow out of control.

If the United Nations Secretariat continues to creatively borrow ideas away from state-centred intergovernmentalism, it risks further existential and legitimacy backlash. It is from the relationship-centred, intergovernmental arrangement of member states that the United Nations receives its authority and legitimacy. When agency is distorted and territory shifts, it threatens its very edifice. States are already the occupying agents of territory and there is no basis for them to re-evaluate their

circumscribed authority. They must however ensure that they deliver on their responsibilities and create frameworks that harness the potential of other actors without encroaching on their power and agency.

Dr Klaus Kotzé is the Inclusive Society Institute's international rapporteur. This article is drawn from the paper: 'Assessing the official perspective of and approach to United Nations reform'. The paper was recently delivered to the Global South Perspectives Network on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, in New York.