

RECLAIMING AND TRANSFORMING MULTILATERALISM: Towards a Peoples' Multilateralism



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As young people increasingly make up the majority of the world's population, it is now more urgent than ever that we arm ourselves with knowledge, power and solidarity to collectively push back against an unravelling and increasingly polarised and militarised global order to advance a new peoples' multilateralism.

Multilateralism “refers to three or more states cooperating on international issues or functional aspects of international relations (security, trade or environmental management) instead of either unilateral efforts by a single state or bilateralism; a way to achieve shared gains by developing mutually acceptable institutions and norms”.¹

The world is facing multiple and intersecting crises – of climate, inequality, debt, financial instability, and pandemics – all of which require urgent systemic and structural transformations most notably, global governance, international cooperation, and solidarity. It can only happen through forms of multilateralism that guarantee democracy, human rights, and dignified lives for present and future generations. Yet today the world is facing a veritable crisis of multilateralism with on the one hand, paralysis in finding collective solutions to global challenges, and on the other, attacks on the very principles upon which the existing system of international norms and laws governing how countries relate with each other, is founded.

The end of the Second World War in 1945 saw the establishment of many of the global multilateral organizations and systems that we know of today such as the United Nations (UN), the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWI) which consists of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT which was the predecessor of the World Trade Organization (WTO), to name a few. These institutions form the core of today's multilateralism, a concept intended to include all the world's states, apply the same rules and adherence to international law on all members and foster cooperation and solidarity between them. Some of these institutions were intended to centre human rights and global public goods (such as health, the environment or cultural heritage), while others were intended to serve the economic reconstruction and development needs of the post-War world.

The principle of equality between states enshrined in the UN Charter is foundational to global peace and security; today it is clear however that these ideals have not addressed the inequalities arising from asymmetrical power relations between the Global South and the Global North, between former colonies and former colonizing countries. Nor has the current system of international cooperation been able to stem the rise and return of right-wing nationalist, neoconservative and authoritarian governments around the world, or rein in the unchecked power of transnational capital – both the symptom and the cause of the current crisis facing multilateralism.

1. Jorgenson KE. International Relations Glossary. MacMillan Higher Education [https://www.macmillanlearning.co.uk/resources/CW%20resources%20\(by%20Author\)/J/Jorgensen-International-Relations-Theory-2e/Glossary.pdf](https://www.macmillanlearning.co.uk/resources/CW%20resources%20(by%20Author)/J/Jorgensen-International-Relations-Theory-2e/Glossary.pdf)

As young people increasingly make up the majority of the world's population, and as we inherit multiple and intersecting crises, it is now more urgent than ever that we arm ourselves with knowledge, power and solidarity to collectively push back against an unravelling and increasingly polarised and militarised global order to advance a new peoples' multilateralism.

Since the creation of the UN in 1945, the current system of global governance has evolved into a complex, multi-layered system of norms, institutions and treaties that should be complementary or mutually reinforcing but are frequently competing or conflicting. Far from being flawless, the multilateral system is a mixed affair with built-in contradictions and tensions. Trade and investment regimes that pollute and dispossess communities nullify the human rights and environmental protection obligations of states; a global financial architecture that enables tax avoidance and illicit financial flows makes it impossible to deliver on commitments to finance and protect global public goods. Certain multilateral institutions – such as the Bretton Woods Institutions and the World Trade Organization – effectively have a separate and dominant jurisdiction over economic policymaking, imposing unjust macro-economic policies on countries that defeat their stated purpose of economic and financial stability and shared prosperity.

Civil society and social movements have made important contributions to shaping the multilateral system over the past 75 years, particularly in advancing human rights, setting norms, shaping agendas, and demanding accountability from governments. Multilateralism is filled with stories of solidarity, mobilization, and actions between civil society, social and peoples' movements working across issues and beyond borders. Young people in particular, have been breathing new life into civil society and social movements. By being part of and at the forefront of civil society and social movements, young people are no longer content to just push for change from the fringes of power, they are taking the reins themselves, either through the democratic process or by spearheading movements that are commanding the world's attention.

This series of primers are intended to raise awareness and increase participation amongst the youth movements and young human rights defenders, including young women and feminist activists, on the importance of multilateral spaces in safeguarding and expanding their rights, advancing social justice, defending democratic space, and fostering cooperation and solidarity between states as well as between peoples'. With a focus on global multilateral spaces and institutions, it explores the current state of multilateralism, the challenges, and the potential to do more in advancing human rights – including the rights of young people and all women and girls – together for a just and equitable development and democratic future for all.

Primer 1 - Mapping the Multilateral Systems seeks to help young people to understand some of the major multilateral institutions and their impact on women, youth, LGBTIQ+ people and other marginalized identities. Through understanding some of these institutions and frameworks, their history, importance, and implications on all our lives and on the planet, young people can begin the process of rewriting and transforming these multilateral spaces from an intersectional, intergenerational, and human rights perspective.

Primer 2 - Challenges facing Multilateralism outlines the crisis currently facing multilateralism, why we still need multilateralism and how the increasing retreat to unilateralism has not and will not tackle many of the crises that we are currently faced with.

Primer 3 - Peoples' Power in Action: Social Movements and Multilateralism recalls the power that civil society and social movements hold and continue to have in shaping, influencing, and ensuring accountability in multilateralism. It looks at select stories and examples of how peoples' and social movements, especially youth, feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements – working at community, local, national, regional and global level, on a range of themes and policy areas and contexts – have fought and ensured people's spaces and voices in the multilateral systems and how working in solidarity across different issues and borders can transform the world we live in.



Primer 4 - Reclaiming and Transforming Multilateralism: Towards a Peoples' Multilateralism

explores what “new forms of” multilateralism could look like based on various proposals from governments, multilateral institutions, civil society organizations, including youth and women’s rights organizations and social movements from around the world. We hope to generate further thinking and open debate among youth movements and young human rights defenders for a “peoples’ multilateralism” that is fit for people and the planet, that redistributes wealth, resources, and power, that takes into account historical responsibility, and that puts human rights, environmental, social and gender justice at its centre.

The challenges facing multilateralism are enormous, but debates around tackling these challenges are also flourishing. Everyone, especially the youth, need to be part of these debates and conversations. The young people that make up the majority of the world and who will inherit its challenges, must be the ones to re-envision and re-imagine the world they want to live in.

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