





Chapter Sixteen

Multilateralism: Its Objects and Implications for Africa in an Evolving Global Order

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Abstract

Many would argue and accept that multilateralism finds its anchor in the United Nations (UN). Multilateralism is also the framing system of global relations that enables a global financial architecture, the architecture that dominates discourse on development finance and climate action today. Although the UN would have been expected to be more engaged, beyond the Financing for Development summits, Conference of the Parties (COP) summits, and others, it is the G20, a subset of multilateralism, that tends to claim leadership in certain policy areas, especially in relation to economic governance. The G20, as a global entity by influence, although a voluntary organisation with non-binding resolutions, responds to the global south's motivated agenda for reform. Africa, a region of the global south and a major proponent for reforms, has become an important voice in global governance, as evidenced by the inclusion of the African Union (AU) in the new G20. This chapter



discusses the role of the G20 as a subset of multilateralism and as an anchor for reform in a changing geopolitical landscape in the last of four successive global south G20 presidencies, the first by an African state, and the last in rotation. The inclusion of the African Union in the G20 is a means to solve the problem of the representation and legitimacy faced by the G20. It is not the evidence that Africa is a major proponent of reforms.

Keywords: G20, COP, AU, multilateralism, UN Reform, South Africa, Brazil

1. Multilateralism and the Argument for UN Reforms

Multilateralism is described as a process, practice, or alliance of at least three states coordinating policy, cooperating, and collaborating in international relations. The key characteristic here is cooperation by several states. The United Nations (UN) was founded precisely on this idea of cooperation among many states to achieve objectives that a single state or states working in silos would find it very difficult to achieve. Such objectives include peace and development. The advantages sought by the founders of the UN in multilateralism are the resources, expertise, and other advantages that individual states may have that, individually, may not produce the benefit that the collective may achieve. The global governance architecture was founded on these principles, that for the objective of delivering on human prosperity, all working together for the common good is better than one.

Two lenses allow for the recognition of collective effort as an advantage for humanity rather than a disadvantage. The first is history. The world went through devastating wars on such a scale that it was recognised that without global cooperation, destruction would be commonplace instead of development (britannica.com). The League of Nations was founded to help spare the world from further horrors of destruction and loss of life. While the United States (US) was an originator, it did not formally join the league. However, the failure of the league to prevent World War 2 changed that, as the benefits of collective

effort in global governance outweighed that of isolation. The UN was formed in 1945 to succeed the League of Nations as a better version of the eminent centre of global governance and multilateralism (Goodrich, 1947).

The second is the future. The future is often associated with technological advancement, the 4th, 5th, and other industrial revolutions coming (Philbeck and Davis, 2018). This revolution has significant potential to address many challenges affecting humanity. Challenges include the reduction of poverty and inequalities, climate action to reverse the harmful effects of pollution, among others, defining a polycrisis. But it also has potential for destruction. Future technologies require critical minerals, such as rare earths, for the production of semiconductors and other technologies. For regions such as Africa, this has come with afflictions such as the 'resource curse', illicit financial flows, and other harmful side effects of extractive activities (Ross, 1999). The role of global governance is to, among other things, mitigate this and develop solutions for the eradication of these challenges through collective action and deployment of resources.

Multilateralism ought to attain the objectives of the collective global community, at least this is what the UN Charter prescribes (UN Charter). This is an aspiration for a just peace in the world, good relations between states, steady development, and strong, legitimate global governance. At the centre of it is the UN Charter, which places the attainment of these objectives as the central role and function of the UN. But this was in the mid-1940s, and like any man-made thing, it is in need of regular maintenance to keep up with the evolution of the global political economy.

Global relations have evolved much since then, while power balances have also shifted significantly. With this evolution, the UN has remained the central authority, with no other organisation of its nature formed since. The argument for reform is precisely to ensure that the UN not only continues to do what it was established to do, but to do it better. Capturing both the state of multilateralism and the material conditions of

global relations today, the words of Antonio Guterres are crucial as a basis for a conversation on reforming multilateralism, when he said on 19 September 2023, that,

“At the beginning of the 20th century, Europe had numerous powers. It was truly multipolar. But it lacked robust multilateral institutions, and the result was World War I. A multipolar world needs strong and effective multilateral institutions. Yet global governance is stuck in time. Look no further than the United Nations Security Council and the Bretton Woods system. They reflect the political and economic realities of 1945, when many countries in this Assembly Hall were still under colonial domination. The world has changed. Our institutions have not. We cannot effectively address problems as they are if institutions do not reflect the world as it is (Guterres, 2023).”

The UN Secretary General has made an argument for reform before the world. The world has changed, and the geopolitical landscape continues to change. But this change is a change away from a system and architecture of both financial and political governance of global relations, designed by the victors of World War 2 (Muldoon Jr, 2018) and the delegates of the Berlin Conference’s scramble for Africa (Heath, 2010). Despite its origin, this system remains the anchor for collective action to solve global problems. Guterres goes further to say in his assessment of the unreformed UN system and its institutions that:

“Instead of solving problems, they risk becoming part of the problem. And, indeed, divides are deepening. Divides among economic and military powers. Divides between North and South, East and West. We are inching ever closer to a Great Fracture in economic and financial systems and trade relations, one that threatens a single, open internet, with diverging strategies on technology and artificial intelligence, and potentially clashing security frameworks. (Guterres, 2023).”

Guterres, in this address to the UN General Assembly, crystallised the argument for reforms of the UN and its system very aptly. In his argument, the global challenges are vast and urgent, cutting across all areas of reality, from the economic to the political, security, and development. These are issues that are pivotal for attaining the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These are also issues at the core of the purpose of establishing the UN, as instructed in its founding charter. Article 1 of the UN Charter specifically outlines the first and urgent role of the UN in developing relations between states in today's reality. The charter authors' objective is for the UN to establish and sustain its centrality in multilateralism.

While the centrality of the UN is reiterated in various fora such as the BRICS and G20, its effectiveness and legitimacy have also become increasingly tested in practice, especially in a fragmenting geopolitical landscape with various cleavages coming to the fore. Indeed, this was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when leading developed countries went against the prescriptions and advice of the World Health Organisation (WHO), hoarding vaccines, imposing unilateral travel bans, and not cooperating optimally on the manufacturing of vaccines, and in terms of allowing intellectual property waivers within the WTO during the pandemic. Challenges also remain in terms of the UN remaining central to safeguarding peace and security, especially when one of the members of the UN Security Council are themselves involved in a conflict. This has been a challenge in recent years and continues to afflict the UN as it marks its 80th anniversary in 2025.

Sentiments about the reform of the UN or parts of its system are not new. The desire for improved multilateralism and global order is not new. As the UN embarks on a reform process informed by, they would still have remembered the desire for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in the 70s. This is particularly relevant today because, according to Antonio Guterres, "we are inching ever closer to a Great Fracture in economic and financial systems and trade relations (Guterres, 2023)." This is when the full potential of a just multilateral system is required to drive collective action towards

attaining the SDGs. But also to do so justly, accommodating particularly developing economies in a just transition and climate action, access to development finance, industrialization, and global value chains, including pandemic preparedness and a new security architecture. With the world fast approaching the 2030 agreed to deadline on eradicating extreme poverty, human development indicators have actually regressed or stagnated in recent years, negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing wars and disruptions to supply chains.

Calls by the UN Secretary-General for reforms, beginning with internal operational reforms and the broader UN system, including the Bretton Woods institutions and the global financial architecture, are informed by work done all over the globe. One work particularly useful for this conversation is the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB) report in 2023. The HLAB Report offers proposals it describes as required ‘shifts’ to attain an improved multilateral system. Such shifts include thinking and actions that can bring the global community together and improve the legitimacy of global governance. The thinking and actions proposed involve significant reflection on how the global financial architecture works, including reforms of Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs) and institutions. Indeed, a growing chorus of voices continues to echo the need for reforming the global financial architecture in a manner that also addresses the impact of the cost of finance, especially to development countries across the global South. This particularly affects African countries, who are forced to lend at a premium due to risk calculations that are at times divorced from empirical reality. The HLAB report proposes the following shifts:

The first shift aims to “Rebuild trust in multilateralism through inclusion and accountability” by, among other things, broadening voices in the international system to include structures such as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Civil Society, and Cities, among others, with a more transparent decision-making process. The UN Security Council (UNSC) reform would constitute a major shift.

The second shift aims to “deliver for people and planet by regaining balance with nature and providing clean energy for all” by shifting thought and policy action to achieve what the G20 India also advocated for: a new development paradigm that includes environmental conservation and protection in all developmental undertakings.

The third shift seeks to “ensure sustainable finance that delivers for all,” which includes a better debt management system to help manage and reduce debt, particularly of developing economies, and better access to development finance on better terms that do not hinder domestic priority and policy setting. Most importantly, it seems to seek to encourage global solidarity for the mobilization of resources for development, both for infrastructure spending that includes climate action and economic and social infrastructure. This also involves ‘major reforms’ of the WB and IMF, review and reform of debt management, and ‘just financing’ among others.

Shift Four to “support a just digital transition that unlocks the value of data and protects against digital harms” involves one of the important attributes and features of Susan Strange’s idea of power: knowledge. This draws a lot of relevance from the motive for reforms of the multilateral system. Minerals, including some rare earths vital for the technology of the current and future, are extracted with little developmental benefit for the continent. This remains a difficult colonial legacy, which the AU seeks to remedy. The AU has this as one of the 15 flagship projects in line with its agenda for the renaissance of Africa and in pursuit of the “Africa we want” by 2063. Knowledge and finance are indeed important aspects of multilateral relations.

Shift Five seeks to “empower equitable, effective collective security arrangements” that involve development as an important step towards dissuading appetite for violent extremism, among other issues well-articulated by the UN’s Agenda 2030. However, any security arrangements will remain distant from adequacy without the involvement of the people concerned and with thorough consideration for economic, political, geographic, cultural, and other material conditions and

interests of concerned regions, such as Africa. And in keeping with social justice virtues and in pursuit of improved legitimacy of the international system, the reform of the UNSC to include regions such as Africa, which has a population of 1.3 billion with projects of 2,5 billion by 2050, is a vital step.

Shift Six seeks to “strengthen governance for current and emerging transnational risks,” which in today’s context can best be described as a Poly pandemic. A most recent case of a failure of this element can be argued to be vaccine nationalism and hogging. Some states bought up to five times their needs, leaving nothing for others, including Africa, which had cash in hand and sought to procure much-needed vaccines to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. This is despite all the efforts by the UN system, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) COVAX facility, among other initiatives.

Reforms of the UN system have become a virtue. The extensive report by the HLAB makes a strong case for this. Antonio Guterres, at the 15th BRICS Summit 2023 in Johannesburg, makes the point that,

“We must urgently restore trust and reinvigorate multilateralism for the 21st century. This requires the courage to compromise in the reforms that are necessary for the common good. It requires full respect for the UN Charter, international law, universal values, and all human rights – social, cultural, economic, civil, and political. And it requires much greater solidarity. Of course, none of this is easy. But it is essential. And it is essential, especially for Africa. The African continent, a historic victim of slavery and colonialism, continues to confront grave injustices (Guterres, August 2023).”

With 2025 marking 80 years of the United Nations, and marking the first year of the pact for the future adopted at the 2024 UN Summit of the Future, it will become ever more important to ensure that the various reform efforts underway within the UN and Bretton Woods Institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, and World Trade Organisation (WTO) do not get completely

derailed, especially in a context where the US is reviewing all of its international commitments in the pursuit of an 'America First' policy agenda. Geopolitical tensions should also not be allowed to get in the way of a multilateral system able to deliver on peace and security matters, development objectives, and a fairer financial architecture.

2. The G20 and Discourse on a New Global Order

The Group of 20 (G20) is a forum of "the world's major economies, representing 85% of global Gross Domestic Product, over 75% of international trade, and about two-thirds of the world population (g20.org)." It emerged at the leader's summit level, at the advent of the global financial crisis, or at the point when the mortgage market crash in the US started to have global implications in 2008. It was elevated to summit level as a response to the growing financial crisis at the time by President George Bush. Prior to this, the G20 was concerned with the global financial architecture to look after global macroeconomic policy coordination, such as on global liquidity (Prodi, 2016).

Since its elevation, it has expanded in scope and taken up a clear shape of a hub of global governance (Kirton, 2013). With this elevation in scope and influence, the G20 presents an opportunity for significant utility in the move for reform of the global financial architecture, global governance, and other battles against ills affecting humanity. The gain of a political authority has made it a platform to which progressive policy positions on climate change, inequalities and poverty, and sustainable development (g20.org) can be presented and argued with a chance of real impact.

The real impact of the G20 as a subset of multilateralism is the collective power and influence of its leaders to drive change in multilateralism. A change for improved representation and legitimacy, and improved coordination and cooperation, is what the authors of the UN Charter wished for (Kirton, 2005). Such an improvement would be seen in better and more impactful outcomes in positive change in the lived realities of people. However, the G20 also has its challenges. There are differences

in interests among the member states and various lobbies in their domestic scenes. While there may seem to be consensus on the need to reform the global financial architecture, there is polarity on the how and what of such reforms. Similarly, there are differences in issues of trade governance and issues of social protection.

One of the emergent new threats to multilateralism is a direct attack by the second Trump administration. In its first nine months, the administration has pushed to upend the global trading system with the unilateral imposition of tariffs, both for its argument for domestic re-industrialisation as well as an instrument to inflict punishment (Carvalho, 2025), such as on Russia, Brazil, India, China, South Africa, and other BRICS members. The Trump administration has also made known its disaffection with South Africa (za.usembassy.gov), the current President of the G20. It has also made known its intention to do away with many of the elements of the G20's expanded scope when the US takes over the G20 Presidency on December 1, 2025. Lastly, the administration has made known its position against consensus on climate change and, therefore, climate action. In nine months, the globe has witnessed a significant new attack against multilateralism.

Multilateralism is also changing, albeit slowly. It is changing as a new world order begins to appear. This is apparent in the changing roles of the emerging economies such as China, India, Brazil, South Africa, Russia, and others in global affairs, both political and economic. This is true of the composition and role of the G20, a subset of multilateralism (Cooper, 2015). The 2025 G20 South Africa Presidency is the fourth successive Global South Presidency that began with Indonesia in 2022, followed by India in 2023, and Brazil in 2024. These four countries are also full members of the BRICS bloc, with Indonesia having joined on January 5, 2025. This is significant in that it reflects part of the changing global political and economic landscape that Antonio Guterres has been arguing.

In this sequence, the G20 has put a number to what is needed in annual investments for both development and climate

action; from \$ 4 trillion, according to the G20 India Leaders Declaration, to a proposed 2% tax of the super-rich to amass \$200 billion to fight poverty, hunger and inequalities by Brazil. South Africa, for its part, has confirmed that it will continue where Brazil left off in the effort to eradicate poverty, hunger, and inequalities. This is reflected in its three anchor themes for its G20 presidency: Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainability. G20 Brazil also succeeded in adopting a road map for the reform of Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), and in an effort led by the African Development Bank and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in 2023, MDBs of the global south (afdb.org), the IMF agreed to transfer SDRs directly to MDBs in May 2024.

This forms part of a growing momentum for reform of global governance, both political and economic, with the G20 playing a major part in it and the UN playing its role as through Financing for Development (FFD) summits, the 2024 Summit of the Future (SOTF), and other multilateral efforts. FFD4, taking place in Seville from the end of June 2025 will also bring these matters to the fore, complementing key policy discussions taking place under South Africa's G20 Presidency. These engagements have become even more important with the US cutting 83 percent of USAID and key European countries also reducing their development cooperation commitments in recent years, with some of their previous allocations being redirected towards military expenditure.

However, the nature of a global order depends on the lens through which it is viewed and for what purpose. Some view global order through the lens of what they believe to represent development or modernity. One view, by Phillips (2001), who was pondering evolving modernity during her travels to the Northern, Southern, and Western hemispheres, is that "The old static order in which one people speak down to another, lesser, people is dead. The colonial, or postcolonial, model has collapsed. In its place, we have a New World order in which there will soon be one global conversation with limited participation open to all and full participation available to none. In this New World order, nobody will feel fully at home (Phillips, 2001, p 41)."

There are other lenses too, such as a world order's economic or political gazes. Robert Cox (1992) provides a political economy treatment of the concept of world order. The reformist movement of the 70s, its failure to realize a New International Economic Order (NIEO), and its demise remain a good reminder of the nature and urgency of the reform of multilateralism today. Perhaps at the time, the Cold War was still at its full strength, and the rise of China, India, Brazil, and other emerging economies was still a dream. The timing for that reformist movement has been at a disadvantage. Other perspectives suggest that as proponents of a new reformist movement, "critical approaches expect emerging powers to maintain a reformist stance as they experience the pressures exercised by structures of the global economy (Efstathopoulos, 2016, p 3)." Debate on the behaviour of rising powers, especially in analysing the dynamics of the 'neo-liberal order' as thinkers such as Chomsky and Cox would describe it, is of critical concern to the Global South and Africa.

The contemporary rise of global powers from the South takes place under conditions vastly different from those of the aspirational NIEO era, which provides additional opportunities for the implementation of their ideas. In the 1970s and even 1980s, many of the global South powers, as they increased their global footprint, did not possess the material resources to finance their own development ideas, and continued to be aid recipients. However, a few decades later, they have become significant sources of development finance, with leading development finance institutions responsible for financing projects in their immediate regions and beyond. They have thus changed the development finance landscape and key debates, at times even forcing countries from the global North to seek ways of emulating global South powers through the use of various blended finance models for development projects. The fact that these Southern powers now possess more material resources to finance their development adds a significant qualitative change when comparing contemporary conditions to those of previous decades. This ensures that while multilateral institutions are still largely skewed towards established powers

in the global North, leading countries from the global South are in contemporary times more actively shaping the emerging international order.

It can be argued that the G20 South African presidency is paying attention to the raging discourse on the rise of the global south and great power competition with China, Russia, and the United States (US) at the center of this competition (Colby and Mitchell, 2020). There has also been commentary on a 'New Scramble for Africa,' as these great powers do their best to 'woo' Africa's allegiance. But even such commentary tends to treat African Agency with disdain as if to suggest that Africa is a mere passive taker of instruction in the grand strategies of others. There has been major commentary analysis of the concept of a 'rules-based global order', in which these grand strategies play out, often used by Western political actors and often referring to an order of their creation and one that, even according to Kissinger (2014), does not consider the views of other global citizens when he argues that,

No truly global 'world order' has ever existed. What passes for order in our time was devised in Western Europe nearly four centuries ago at a peace conference in the German region of Westphalia, conducted without the involvement or even the awareness of most other continents or civilizations. A century of sectarian conflict and political upheaval across Central Europe had culminated in the Thirty Years' War of 1618–48—a conflagration in which political and religious disputes commingled, combatants resorted to "total war" against population centers, and nearly a quarter of the population of Central Europe died from combat, disease, or starvation. (Kissinger, 2014, p1)

But a new world order in which relations between Africa, the global south, and 'great powers' are on equal, mutually beneficial, and mutually respectful terms must remain a goal. One that will effect greater inclusivity, broader access to development finance, and, on fairer terms, improved representativity at the UN, among other needed reforms, as

aptly explained by the UN Secretary-General. But this emerging world order has much to achieve. Climate action is a new global priority, as is pandemic preparedness.

The global public debt continues to rise, with concern over the impact that possible new financing would add to the crisis. This is exacerbated by the structural conditions many developing countries, especially those in Africa, face, where loans denominated in US dollars become more and more expensive to repay over time due to a number of factors. Some of these include rising interest rates in the global North, which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, supply chain disruptions, and currency fluctuations. Biased ways in which risk is calculated in Africa also contribute to a higher cost of capital for African stakeholders.

Africa's relations with others must navigate these competing issues and perform its agency for its development aspirations. The African Union is now a member of the G20 and must be proactive in how it positions itself within the G20 ecosystem. The new G20 membership of the AU should also positively impact Africa's role within fora such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), US-Africa summit and meetings, Tokyo International Conference of African Development (TICAD), EU-Africa summits and meetings, Russia-Africa summits and meetings, India-Africa Forum summits and meetings, Turkey-Africa meetings, South Korea-Africa engagements, and other multilateral platforms of engagement with others.

African state and non-state actors have also increased their analysis on how the continent can better optimise these international partnerships to meet its development priorities. These are certainly developments to look forward to keenly. This is important because, after all, "to regard 'development' as a buzzword strikes me as highly apposite, for although it has been in vogue for almost 60 years (a record indeed!), its actual meaning is still elusive since it depends on where and by whom it is used (Rist, 2007, p 482)."

Deliberations at multilateral platforms such as the G20, BRICS, and the like are argued to reflect the extent to which globalization, the global economy, and the geopolitical landscape has evolved. The debate on a just energy transition and climate action momentum has led to an agreement at the COP 28, 2023, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), although these agreements are threatened by the US pulling out of their commitments. Discourse on the poly pandemic emphasizes the need to scale up investment in social infrastructure in developing economies. At the same time, the G20 India placed a figure of \$4 trillion in annual investment in developing economies to close the infrastructure gap and meet future infrastructure requirements. Development is not merely a buzzword but a realizable ideal upon which Africa's relations with others in the future are based. This is a basic case for a new world order that removes the obstacles to the attainment of 'The Africa We Want' by 2063. It is a view of a world order that is more optimistic in its ability to deliver development and equity in global governance aspirations of developing economies than that of Colombo (2023), which says,

“After all, global governance was heralded as the culmination and synthesis of the grand plan to reorganise international coexistence under the label of the 'New World Order'. In turn, the myth of global governance rested on a set of expectations that represented more than anything else, the climate of euphoria that accompanied the project (Colombo 2023, p 9).”

3. What is to be done?

Eisenhardt (1989) describes agency theory as:

“concerned with resolving two problems that can occur in agency relationships. The first is the agency problem that arises when (a) the desires or goals of the principal and agent conflict, and (b) it is difficult or expensive for the principal to verify what the agent is doing. The problem is that the principal cannot verify that the agent behaved appropriately (Eisenhardt, 1989, p 58).”

For the purposes of this conversation, the principal is the African people, those of the global south, whose development has long been hindered by a myriad of factors, including the fact that a world order was created without their input, as argued by Kissinger (2014), and those of the globe. The agent is the state and the African Union (members of the G20), and other African and global south players with power and influence at that level. Therefore, what is to be done is (1) the effective application of agency in the interest of the principal. (2) the application of agency in such a way as to drive, with great focus and sheer will, the fulfillment of the Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, and realize the continent's renaissance in its full potential. One of the opportunities to do this is by leveraging the G20 at both multilateral and sideline bilateral engagements to further the momentum for global financial architecture reform, debt mitigation and reduction, investment for infrastructure and industrialisation, and greater access to global value chains. The 15 flagship projects of the AU are a good starting point. Jeremy Stevens et al. (2023) of Standard Bank, South Africa, argue that "the onus is on African policymakers to draw more developmental value from relations with China (Stevens et al., 2023, p 1), and others.

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