

Time Running Out: Transformation of the International Institutions in the 21st Century

Commonwealth Journalists' Association
and Action for UN Renewal

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Introduction

Thanks to Rita Payne and to the Commonwealth Journalists' Association for inviting me to speak today on this important and timely topic on 'Time Running Out: Transformation of the International Institutions in the 21st century.' It is timely because of the meeting of the G20 world leaders in the UK, who like to assume the role of a self appointed global institution. The title of our talk alludes that international institutions are not working and because of that the world is sliding into crisis after crisis. In this dire situation, what can be done for these institutions to put their house in order? Can the UN and Bretton Woods institutions (IMF, World Bank), and the EU, and WTO meet the huge challenges of the 21st century?

It is great to be among so many dedicated movers and shakers who are a driving force behind all social change, who keep a check on the excesses of governments and leaders.

The present global crisis

The world security situation is more dangerous now than during the Cold War. Several recent developments are a testament to that. The continuous violence in Pakistan and Afghanistan, tensions with Iran and the continued threat from terrorist organisations are a few examples. The humanitarian situation in the Gaza, Darfur, Burma, Sri Lanka, and Congo is getting worse. The failure of the international community to enforce the 'responsibility to protect' doctrine in Darfur and the situation in dealing with detainees of Guantanamo Bay has been nothing less than shambolic.

The global system for finance, economic growth and development have collapsed, with food prices rocketing, leaving millions on the brink of starvation. The global warming and climate change crisis has put the planet in peril.

In the backdrop of the above situation what should be the role of global governance, the United Nations and Bretton Woods institutions for meeting the huge challenges of today.

Pitfalls of world institutions

Many of today's international institutions were created at the end of World War II, more than 60 years ago. Since then they have responded in many significant ways to the challenges arising during the second half of the 20th century, including decolonisation, the end of the cold war, global security, environmental threats, and global poverty. Even though many new global and regional organisations were added since 1945 - when the United Nations was created and the Bretton Woods organisations opened their doors - very little has been altered in the basic structure of these global institutions.

Global institutions are not working well individually and as a group. For example, the global institutions at the core of the international system, such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the G8/G20 Summit are, to varying degrees fragmented, unrepresentative and ineffective, and generally suffer from an corrosive decline in their legitimacy. They are increasingly fragile and unable to address the global challenges of the 21st century.

NATO

For, example there are organisations like NATO, a relic of the Cold War period, who, after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, is looking for a reason to exist. It is called the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, yet it is called for military incursions in places like Afghanistan serving mainly US interests.

The most disturbing fact is that in September 2008, an accord was signed between the United Nations and NATO Secretaries General, Ban Ki-moon, and Jaap de Hoop-Scheffer. This took place without any reference to the United Nations Security Council. Both secretaries general committed themselves to acting in common to meet threats and challenges.

In these current times of confrontation, one expects from the United Nations secretariat an especially high level of political neutrality. The UN/NATO accord is anything but neutral and will thus not remain without serious consequences. The United Nations was created to promote and maintain worldwide peace. NATO exists to assure the self-interest of a group of 26 UN member countries. Its mandate, grounded in the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, originally dealt with the defense of its member states.

Several important questions thus arise: Is the United Nations accord with NATO – a military alliance with nuclear weapons – in contradiction with Article 2 of the United Nations Charter, which requires that conflicts be resolved by peaceful means? Can UN and NATO actions be distinguished when three of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council are also NATO members? How can future violations of international law by NATO be legally prosecuted? Is an institution like NATO, which in 1999, without a UN mandate, unlawfully bombed Serbia and Kosovo, a suitable partner for the United Nations?

It is urgent that one or several member states petition the International Court of Justice to rule on the interpretation of the UN/NATO pact of 23 September 2008, in conformity with the Courts statutes.

What is global governance?

Global governance system is composed of national governments, international organizations such as the United Nations, nongovernmental organizations, transnational corporations, and technologically-driven arrangements such as the international currency exchange that govern and in many ways change the rules for governments. The mass media have created a "global theatre" that is also inescapably a part of this system.

Global governance is therefore extensive and multilayered; extensive because it can embrace pretty well any challenge facing the global community. The peoples of the world are becoming interconnected and interlinked and therefore mutually concerned. This can be climate change, human rights; the environment, operation of financial markets, or the health of national economies; it is a case of "what affects one can affect all."

A healthy form of global governance is that its implementation must be by popular consent, and yet it must also be consented to and implemented by nation-states.

For example, there is a small self selected body that has become like one institution, the G8 (France, United Kingdom, Germany, USA, Japan, Italy Canada and Russia) or G20 initially concentrating on economic matters, now in a sense representative of the world community, and yet playing a powerful role in guiding the response to international challenges.

In a report by the Commission on Global Governance entitled, "Foundation for Global Governance" the Commission is of the belief that the world is now ready to accept a "global civic ethic" based on "a set of core values that can unite people of all cultural, political, religious, or philosophical backgrounds." This belief is reinforced by another belief: "that governance should be underpinned by democracy at all levels and ultimately by the rule of enforceable law."

The report continues, "We believe that all humanity could uphold the core values of respect for life, liberty, justice and equity, mutual respect, caring, and integrity." Similarly, the United Nations, World Bank and other international organizations, various regimes, coalitions of interested nations and individual nations when they act globally to address to various issues that emerge beyond national borders, such as development, the environment, human rights, infectious diseases and international terrorism are part of global governance.

However, the world institutions of today are slow to react and bureaucratic. They are in need of radical reforms if they are to be more effective and relevant to the present realities. The leaders and governments of the world are pursuing relentlessly their own national agenda to the detriment of the planet.

Clearly, our present system of global governance is very poorly equipped to handle the challenges of the global agenda. And it is not hard to see why. "Short-termism" prevails as our public and corporate leaders face an average tenure of less than five years. National interest dominates to the detriment of global interest in an antiquated system based on national sovereignty. Existing institutions tend to be compartmentalized with separate organizations for security, health, labour, environment and trade and are thus ill-equipped to address the interrelated challenges of the 21st century.

The United Nations and other international organisations reflect a previous world order which is out of step with today's challenges and priorities. The G8, the UN Security Council and other institutions require new approaches and structures to deal with the realities of the post-WWII world in which developing economies wield more influence and power.

The end of the Cold War, the expansion of the European Union and the rapid economic rise of developing countries such as China, India, Brazil and Mexico mean that the international organisations dealing with broad governance issues no longer include important players.

Strengthening the existing institutions through reforms

In the backdrop of the above situation how a reformed, effective United Nations and Bretton Woods institutions can play a pivotal role for seeking solutions to the major problems of today?

I am going to list some of the essential reforms of the UN should incorporate:

1. Diminish the power of the veto which the five permanent members of Security Council (SC) enjoy —which puts all major reforms under the control of the existing P5
2. Widen the membership of the Security Council to make it more representative, democratic, transparent and accountable.
3. Change the way in which the SC orders military action in order to control the process.
4. Work for General Assembly regaining its powers.
5. A new mechanism to fund the UN so that it is not dependent on the whim of a few powerful countries
6. Develop the 'responsibility to protect', a concept supported by the discussions at the UN General Assembly in September 2005 for dealing with situations like Darfur and the Congo
7. Have wide ranging peacekeeping reforms which should include:
 - Using preventative diplomacy, dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution as opposed to military intervention
 - Continuing the work on general and complete disarmament
 - Promoting a culture of peace, reconciliation and non-violence as a vision of future peacekeeping
 - Dealing with violations of human rights as a precondition for peacekeeping
 - Convening a World Summit on disarmament, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and combating terrorism.

If the Security Council enlargement and fair representation, including giving more powers to the General Assembly, is not achieved, then the influence of the P5 will be diluted in due course. The increased strength, and influence of countries like India, Brazil, Japan and Germany will become strong, diminishing the importance of the veto power of the P5.

Besides the UN reforms, there is urgent need to reform the Bretton Woods institutions which has led to decades of underinvestment in health, education, social welfare in developing countries which are poorly prepared to manage the impact of financial crisis head on. A successful G20 means hearing the voices of those most harmed by the financial disaster - the poor and vulnerable. They can only be heard if the Bretton Woods institutions are significantly reformed to include voting rights for nations and citizens who will be most affected by the policy decisions made.

We need to see a comprehensive reform of the international financial institutions to make them more representative, effective and responsive to global challenges. A shared determination to secure the successful conclusion to the Doha Development Agenda would boost confidence and trade, contribute to reform of world agriculture markets, and help to subvert protectionist sentiment.

Forming new institutions, frameworks and initiatives to meet new challenges

As the financial meltdown starts to bite, the effects of the recession are going to be felt in areas which are already in a state of neglect. For this reason we need the following new institutions which can face the challenges of today.

- A global institution for poverty reduction, development and completion of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The brunt of the global financial meltdown is accelerating at a fast rate and it will affect the poorest very badly who are already worse off. It might take up to 140 billion to protect nations from the worst of the slump. We are already running a worldwide shortfall of 140 billion in the completions of MDG's.

- A global initiative for combating terrorism. This should include the closing of the military detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, renouncing torture, withdrawing forces from Iraq, and restarting the Middle East peace process. Furthermore, it should be complemented by more concerted, better coordinated, and more holistic approaches to building counterterrorism capacities and partnerships around the world.
- A global institution for mitigation and containment of climate change. If we don't address it, we can expect major destabilisation, an increase in rioting and potentially significant problems with international migration, as people move out to avoid food and water shortages. It will unleash public unrest, cross border conflicts, and mass migration.
- A global institution for reduction of military spending, disarming nuclear weapons, small arms and reducing the incidence of wars and violence. The concept of security through military might is a flawed one and has been refuted by the history of the last 60 years.
- New regional organisations on the model of European Union in different parts of the world in Asia, Africa, Latin America would be an excellent framework for regional governance. For all of its weaknesses and defects, the EU has largely been successful and remains a model to be emulated.
- To set up a global institution to coordinate arrangements on exchange rates that would end the monetary chaos as countries like Estonia, Lithuania and Romania are under serious threat of economic meltdown. The idea is to link several key currencies through exchange rates that are in turn adjusted to inflation rates in each country. Other currencies would be pegged to one or a group of these key currencies. By doing so, it will stabilise exchange rates by direct and coordinated intervention in order to confront the next wave of crisis which threaten to bring down whole economies of many countries.
- A new framework to establish a relationship between civil society and global institutions. There is a role for global civil society and institutions to make important contributions to global policymaking, particularly on issues of human rights, development and the environment. The civil society expertise is underused and the consulting mechanisms with global institutions are inadequate, especially in the completion of the MDGs.

For global governance and countering trans-national threats including terrorism, climate change, responding to violent conflicts and proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, it's essential that we have the new institutions by which we can work together for the common progress of humankind.

Conclusion

In order to create legitimate global institutions, multiple goals need to be achieved. First, the institutions must be representative including the active participation of civil society. Second, the institutions need to be effective. Third, collectively the international institutions need to serve as an effective global governance system. Fourthly, the international institutions should offer opportunities for national and international leaders to forge coalitions for action and reform. Finally, countries have to forgo their narrow agenda for working through the global institutions in cooperation for the good of the planet.

In the early days of the new American administration, President Obama has dealt with global economic meltdown, announcing the end of the Iraq war, ordering the closure of Guantanamo Bay. Furthermore, talking to Iran, Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan, appointing envoys to kick-start the Middle East and North-West Frontier peace process. Obama has written to Russian president, Dmitri Medvedev, offering a deal for scraping the planned installation of a Missile Defence System, in Eastern Europe in exchange for help to assist in Iran to abandon its quest for nuclear weapons. He has also moved to ease trade and travel restrictions with Cuba.

This opens the door for international organisations (the UN, IMF, World Bank, the EU, and the Commonwealth) to get their act together and perform. The world is in the midst of a extraordinary opportunity to pursue a dialogue, a chance which only comes a few times in history. The example which comes to mind is the end of the Cold War, when many expected a peace dividend which never materialised. Let us not squander this golden opportunity of pursuing a path of multilateralism for achieving a peaceful society based on justice and the rule of law.

Thank you for listening.

Notes

The following publications were consulted and excerpts have been taken from them during the writing of this article:

- 1) The Guardian, 'After a flurry of early activity, the Obama doctrine is taking shape,' 11 March 2009
- 2) The Guardian (Letters), 'Global Poor must be the G20 Priority,' 13 March 2009
- 3) Commission on Global Governance, 'Foundation of Global Governance.'
To view report see <http://www.libertymatters.org/globalgovernance.htm>
- 4) For figures on global military expenditure see Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). "Recent Trends in Military Expenditures" 2004. http://web.sipri.org/contents/milap/milex/mex_trends.html
- 5) Talk by Vijay Mehta at Royal Over Seas Club, Scotland.
'Reforming the UN for the 21st Century.' 8th December 2009
- 6) Talk by Vijay Mehta at House of Lords, London.
'World Security, Global Governance and the role of the UN.' 29th October 2009
www.vmpeace.org

The full version of this speech can be downloaded from:

- Action for UN Renewal www.action-for-un-renewal.org.uk
- VM Centre for Peace www.vmpeace.org

Vijay Mehta is president of VM Centre for Peace, Founding Trustee of Fortune Forum Charity, Chair of Action for UN Renewal, and co-Chair of World Disarmament Campaign. He is an author and global activist for peace, development, human rights and the environment. Some of his notable books are The Fortune Forum Summit: For a Sustainable Future, Arms No More, and The United Nations and Its Future in the 21st Century.

He along with his daughter Renu Mehta founder of Fortune Forum charity (www.fortuneforum.org) held two summits in London in 2006 and 2007. The summits raised over a million pounds for charity and attracted a worldwide audience of 1.3 billion people (one fifth of humanity) including print and media coverage. The keynote speakers for the first and second summit were Bill Clinton, former US President and Al Gore, former US vice-President, and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize 2007.

Vijay Mehta has appeared in various TV programmes including BBC World, Press TV, Ajjak-24 hour Indian news channel, and Think Peace documentary, Canada, among others. The Independent, Observer and Guardian newspapers, among other journals have written about him. His life is devoted to the service of peace, humanity and our planet.

He has written a book called 'Climate Change 365,' which will be soon available to download free of charge in electronic form from the website www.climatechange365.eu.