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The United Nations and Multilateral Actors in Development

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Governments and non-government actors have increasingly pursued multilateral approaches to a wide range of issues, including those facing lower-income countries. This chapter discussed the rise, and in some cases the decline, of multilateral organizations considered relevant for development (apart from the Bretton Woods and related bodies, which are discussed in other chapters). The chapter highlighted their origins, purposes, operations, and impacts in terms of power and politics. Official multilateral bodies fall into three categories, as distinguished by their geo-political alignments and accountability systems: The United Nations (UN) specialized agencies and programs; global and regional bodies answerable to governments of industrial countries and the Global North; and organizations accountable to non-Western actors. For the first two clusters, a major influence has been the hegemonic power of the United States, whose interests can be detected in these organizations' development priorities and policy formulas. Many of these agencies and organizations have failed to gain real legitimacy, especially in the Global South. The chapter also called attention to new forms of multilateralism, some of them driven by non-state actors, that are helping create spaces and alternative approaches to development and global governance.

VIDEO RESOURCES

The UN, tower of babble

<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/empire/2010/09/20109287246422540.html>

Time 49:26

The United Nations has opened its 65th General Assembly in the shadow of mounting questions about its credibility, efficiency, accountability, and leadership. Many would like to see the UN re-

formed, and a growing minority would like to see it bypassed by effective international organizations like the G8, G20, NATO, or similar regional organizations. And yet, as the only legitimate global body, the UN is uniquely positioned to initiate and manage international humanitarian efforts, peace-keeping missions, and global campaigns such as the Millennium Development Goals to eradicate poverty and disease, among others. But like its last conference on climate change, and the countless debates on nuclear proliferation, the arms race, international terrorism, and other contentious issues, these meetings tend to culminate with no consensus, and when they do, produce modest results. Last year, much of the focus was on the need to reform the UN Security Council; this year, much of the criticism was directed at the lack of leadership and the absence of a new vision for the organization.

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Is Poverty Necessary? Looking back at the Millennium Development Goals

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5DZF7YvwwM>

Time 3:59

John Green examines the progress of the UN's Millennium Development Goals over the last 15 years and looks ahead to the Global Goals. Can we live in a world where extreme poverty and undernourishment are rare? Are we closer to gender equality? How have infant mortality rates and maternal mortality rates changed in the last 25 years? And how will we ensure that the astonishing progress since 1990 continues?

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Secretary-General's Video Message for International Day of Peace

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gldY-n3F9dg>

Time 1:13

Each year the International Day of Peace is observed around the world on 21 September. The General Assembly has declared this as a day devoted to strengthening the ideals of peace, both within and among all nations and peoples.

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Jeffrey Sachs: The End of Poverty Economic Possibilities. C-SPAN Video Library

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUz_2ph5Ljk

Time 1:22:44

American economist Jeffrey Sachs explains the dimensions, major contents and background of the book, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*. In the book, Sachs argues that extreme poverty—defined by the World Bank as incomes of less than \$1 per day—can be eliminated globally by the year 2025 through carefully planned development aid. He presents the problem as an inability of very poor countries to reach the “bottom rung” of the ladder of economic development; once the bottom rung is reached, a country can pull itself up into the global market economy, and the need for outside aid will be greatly diminished or eliminated.

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Transitioning from the MDGs to the SDGs

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_hLuEui6ww

Time 3:02

An end to poverty, hunger and inequality worldwide is on the agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed upon by 193 countries at the United Nations in September 2015.

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The World We Want: The UN Sustainable Development Goals

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kR-YRC5D-QY>

Time 10:08

A short film about the soon-to-be finalized United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and why our generation must get involved.

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Sustainable development: What, where and by whom?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sJ-uixn7Jg>

Time 19:13

Sustainable development has been the red line in Kitty van der Heijden's career. After working for the UN, she is now director at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ambassador for sustainable development. At TEDxHaarlem, Kitty van der Heijden takes us on a journey through international sustainable development conferences.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the three significant phases that the UN has gone through?
2. What are the goals of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization?
3. What are the UN's peacekeeping organizations and their actions?
4. What are some of the challenges to the integrity and transparency of the United Nations?
5. Can multilateral initiatives support more equitable development outcomes, as power and resources are distributed unequally between nations?
6. For what purposes was the UN created?
7. What are the sphere of influence organizations, and in what way do these organizations contribute to international development programs?

ANSWER KEY: REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. The United Nations has evolved through three discernible phases. In its early years during the 1950s the UN was the “mother church” of developmental optimism, and the main launching pad for initiatives to promote peace and prosperity in the world. Headquartered in New York City, the UN even during this early period was significantly influenced by the US and was sometimes used as a geostrategic instrument by the Americans and a few other powerful countries, in conflict situations such as Korea and the Congo.

The second phase of the UN began in the 1960s. During this period a new emphasis on development of non-Western countries emerged, particularly post-colonial nations. Membership ballooned from 51 states in 1945 to 99 in 1960, many newly independent nations in Asia and Africa. As membership grew the one-state-one-vote policy of the General Assembly shifted toward the non-Western world expanding the agenda and scope of UN agencies’ work.

Finally, in the 1990s the UN entered its current phase, one marked by diminished influence as powerful nations increasingly act unilaterally sometimes in disregard for international agreements on the use of force. In addition, aggressive promotion of free-market capitalism has increased the influence of agencies such as the IMF and World Bank, by extension making the UN less important. (p. 182)

2. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was founded in 1946 to promote national systems of education, natural and social science education, and the exchange of knowledge, cultural policies including cultural heritage, and communications technology and media policy. UNESCO has pursued these goals through various means. Intergovernmental conferences, for example, have been held in an effort to generate consensus that education is a public good rather than a commodity. UNESCO also attempted to advance a more inclusive media policy in the 1980s, with the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems’ publication of the *Many Voices, One World* report. The report advocated a New World Information and Communication Order that would democratize the production and consumption of media. UNESCO has had mixed success in realizing its goals, in part because of its turbulent relationship with first-world governments, along with some internal management issues. (pp. 187–188)
3. The UN’s peacekeeping organizations, coordinated by the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (UN DPKO), have experienced both successes and failures in efforts to create preconditions for reconstruction and development in politically fragile countries. Armed conflicts can cause serious strain to social, economic, and political progress, which motivates the deployment of UN peacekeeping and enforcement troops in conflict zones. These missions sometimes find success—as in Côte D’Ivoire and post-war Mozambique—but have largely failed in other situations—such as Angola, Congo and Rwanda. Two major criticisms are made of peacekeeping efforts to explain their frequent failure. First, peacekeeping responses often neglect the socio-political causes of conflict, and second on-the-ground UN interventions tend to narrow options along “militarized” or “securitized” lines, making other solutions more difficult to find. (pp. 189–191)
4. United Nations agencies face a number of challenges. They are often perceived as non-transparent and have low and uneven quality of contact with citizens’ organizations. Their integrity is challenged by technocratic ways of defining problems and solutions, high overhead costs, and unproductive working cultures that depress staff morale. The technocratic approach to defining problems often creates silos of action where the FAO deals only with rural issues and UNICEF exclusively with children, an approach that overlooks the interrelated complexity of development issues. The response to this complexity is often an unproductive “mission creep”

with multiple agencies responding, without coordination, to the same issue—for example HIV/AIDS. Beyond issues of agenda and effectiveness the UN is also challenged by a dominance of big powers who hold the funding control and whose citizens disproportionately hold senior UN positions. Various UN reform efforts are under way, their effectiveness, however, remains to be seen. (p. 192)

5. The ability of multilateral initiatives to support more equitable development outcomes between nations with different resources and power is hotly debated. The nature of the multilateral initiative is extremely relevant when considering this issue. Regional trading blocs have demonstrated uneven results at best. While they have contributed to growth, often it is polarized as stronger economies reap the most benefits. However, the multilateral actions in regions such as Latin America and Southeast Asia are often based on mutual advantage and are positively shaping development and political power. Similarly regional lobbying blocs are undermining the ability of powerful northern nations to maintain hegemonic control of the international sphere, which, in time, may lead to more equitable outcomes. (p. 197)
6. The UN was created to shape the post-war international order according to the interests of the triumphant states in World War II, to preserve peace and security, to encourage the states in collaboration. And to launch many global initiatives in the name of economic and social well-being. It was the “mother church” of developmental optimism. However, in most of the time the UN served as a geostrategic instrument for a few powerful countries. It provided legitimacy and military power in support of US foreign policy, such as for the war in Korea in the early 1950s and during the upheaval in the Congo in the early 1960s. (p. 182)
7. These are the organizations were created to maintain ties with their former colonies or dependencies. The Organization of American States (OAS), for instance, originated from US efforts in the 1880s to advance its commercial interests in Latin America. Another example is the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) comprises 57 member states in which French culture and the French language play at least some role in national identity. The Commonwealth of Nations consists of 53 countries is another examples of these organizations. Sphere of influence organizations have been mandated to promote policy dialogue, cultural ties, and development efforts. (p. 195)