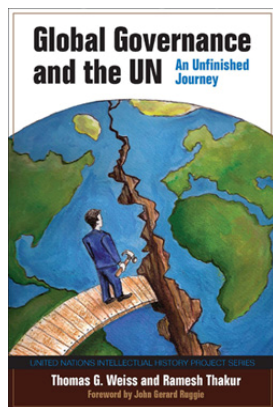# The UN's Role in Global Governance

There is no government for the world. Yet, on any given day, mail is delivered across borders; people travel from one country to another; goods and services are freighted across land, air, sea, and cyberspace; and a whole range of other cross-border activities take place in reasonable expectation of safety and security for the people, groups, firms, and governments involved. Disruptions and threats are rare—indeed, in many instances less frequent in the international domain than in many sovereign countries that should have effective and functioning governments. That is to say, international transactions are typically characterized by order, stability, and predictability. This immediately raises a puzzle: How is the world governed even in the absence of a world government? What accounts for the formal and informal norms, codes of conduct, and regulatory, surveillance, and compliance instruments?

The answer, Thomas G. Weiss and Ramesh Thakur argue in *Global Governance and the UN: An Unfinished Journey* (2010), lies in a concept that has gained greater acceptance over the last decade and a half—global governance. While in many ways the UN's work has always been devoted to improving the way that international society operates, the birth of the term can be traced to the 1992 publication of James Rosenau and Ernst-Otto Czempiel's theoretical collection of essays *Governance without Government*. In 1995 the policy-oriented Commission on Global Governance's report *Our Global Neighbourhood* was published, the same year as the first issue of the journal *Global Governance* appeared.

This volume in the UNIHP series examines not only the theory of global governance but the practice and more especially the UN's intellectual and operational contributions. In accordance with one of the project's main conclusions—namely, that a host of different actors come together in predictable and unpredictable ways in international attempts to address trans-boundary problems—our analysis not only highlights the role of UN member states (the "First UN") and the world body's professional secretariats (the "Second UN") but also of what UNIHP has identified as the "Third UN." The Third UN is comprised of such nonstate actors as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), academics, consultants, experts, independent commissions, and other groups of individuals who routinely engage with the First and the Second UNs and thereby influence the world body's thinking, policies, priorities, and actions (see Briefing Note #3).

Weiss and Thakur explore the contribution by all three UNs in addressing collective challenges through the analytical lens of five "gaps" in global governance. Before identifying these gaps, however, it is necessary to first define the concept of global governance.

Global Governance

Traditionally governance has been associated with "governing," or with political authority, institutions, and, ultimately, control. Governance in this sense denotes formal political institutions that both aim to coordinate and control interdependent social relations and that also possess the capacity to enforce decisions. In recent years, however, scholars have used "governance" to denote the regulation of interdependent relations in the absence of overarching political authority, such as in the international system. These may be visible but quite informal (e.g., practices or guidelines) or temporary units (e.g., coalitions). But they may also be far more formal, taking the shape of rules (laws, norms, codes of behavior) as well as constituted institutions and practices (formal and informal) to manage collective affairs by a variety of actors (state authorities, intergovernmental organizations, civil society organizations, and private sector entities). Through such mechanisms and arrangements, collective interests are articulated, rights and obligations are established, and differences are mediated.

Global governance can thus be defined as the sum of laws, norms, policies, and institutions

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that define, constitute, and mediate trans-border relations between states, cultures, citizens, intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations, and the market. It embraces the totality of institutions, policies, rules, practices, norms, procedures, and initiatives by which states and their citizens (indeed, humanity as a whole) try to bring more predictability, stability, and order to their responses to transnational challenges—such as climate change and environmental degradation, nuclear proliferation, and terrorism—which go beyond the capacity of a single state to solve.

In addition to interdependence and a growing recognition of the need for collective action to face what former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan aptly called "problems without passports," the other explanation for the emergence of global governance stems from the sheer growth in numbers and importance of nonstate entities, which also are conducting themselves in new ways. Civil society actors participate as advocates, activists, and also as policymakers in many instances. They play increasingly active roles in shaping norms, laws, and policies at all levels of governance. Their critiques and policy prescriptions have demonstrable consequences in the governmental and intergovernmental allocation of resources and the exercise of political, military, and economic power.

State-centered structures (especially those of the UN system) that help ensure international order now find themselves sharing more and more of the governance stage. Depending on the issue-area, geographic location, and timing, there are vast disparities in power and influence among states, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), TNCs, and international NGOs. Consequently, today's world is governed by an indistinct patchwork of authority that is as diffuse as it is contingent. In particular, the IGOs that collectively underpin global governance are not only insufficient in number but are inadequately resourced, lack the requisite policy authority and resource-mobilization capacity, and sometimes are incoherent in their separate policies and philosophies.

Despite its shortcomings, however, the United Nations is the most universal and legitimate organization with the greatest potential for expansion. Although the world

body cannot displace the responsibility of local, state, and national governments, it can and should be the locus of multilateral diplomacy and collective action to solve problems shared by many countries. "Good" global governance implies, not exclusive policy jurisdiction, but an optimal partnership between diverse types of actors operating at the local, national, regional, and global levels.

Five Global Governance Gaps

In *Global Governance and the UN*, Weiss and Thakur identify five gaps between the nature of many current global challenges and available inadequate solutions. These gaps pertain to knowledge, norms, policy, institutions, and compliance. The extent of the UN's success in filling these gaps has varied both within and between issue areas. In general, the world body has been more effective in filling gaps in knowledge and norms than in making decisions with teeth and acting upon them.

Knowledge Gaps

The first is the "knowledge gap." With or without institutions and resources, there often is little or no consensus about the nature, causes, gravity, and magnitude of a problem, either about the empirical information or the theoretical explanation. And there is often disagreement over the best remedies and solutions to these problems. Good examples are global warming and nuclear weapons.

The United Nations has played a role in filling two knowledge gaps that are important for contemporary notions of global governance. For many global issues, there are well-defined ideological stances, and empirical data may or may not be sufficiently powerful to call into question positions that often have been formed and hardened long before information has been gathered and experiences registered. The role of the state sector in the development process and in controlling market forces is a good example.

There are also issues like population in the 1970s or global warming in the 1990s that appear on the agenda because of a previously unknown or undervalued threat, and about which we do not have sufficient information—or we have conflicting information—in order to

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make informed decisions. This constitutes a different type of knowledge gap for decision makers, but presumably one for which new information can more easily have an impact than in the face of rigid ideologies.

At least partially filling the knowledge gap is essential for dealing with the other gaps in global governance. If we can recognize that there is a problem and agree on its approximate dimensions, then we can take steps to solve it. While in a few cases the UN has generated new knowledge, more often it has provided an arena where existing information can be collated and collected, a host of interpretations can be vetted, and differing interpretations of competing data debated. Depending on the strength of political coalitions and entrenched ideologies, there may be more or less room for the actual increase in knowledge to make a difference in terms of policy recommendations.

In the past, the First and Second UNs played a relatively more important role both in generating data and in creating and disseminating theoretical explanations than did civil society. This is not to say that they do not continue to play these roles; but civil society actors—such as universities, research institutes, scientific experts, think tanks, and NGOs—currently are playing a growing role in filling knowledge gaps.

Normative Gaps

The second is the "normative gap." A norm can be defined statistically to mean the pattern of behavior that is most common or usual—or the "normal curve," a widely prevalent pattern of behavior. Alternatively, it can be defined ethically, to mean a pattern of behavior that should be followed in accordance with a given value system—or the moral code of a society, a generally accepted standard of proper behavior. In some instances, the two meanings may converge in practice; in most cases, they will complement each other; but in some cases, they may diverge.

Norms matter because people—ordinary citizens as well as politicians and officials—care about what others think of them. This is why approbation, and its logical corollary shaming, is often effective in regulating social behavior. It is also why the United Nations and especially its

Secretaries-General have often relied upon the bully pulpit.

The UN is an essential arena in which states actually codify norms in the form of resolutions and declarations (soft law) as well as conventions and treaties (hard law). As a universal organization, it is an exceptional forum to seek consensus about normative approaches to address global challenges. Problems ranging from reducing acid rain to impeding money laundering, from halting pandemics to anathematizing terrorism are clear instances for which universal norms and approaches are emerging.

At the same time, the UN is a maddening forum because dissent by powerful states or mischief by large coalitions of even less powerful ones means either no action occurs, or agreement is possible only on a lowest-common-denominator. The main source of ideas to fill normative gaps is therefore quite likely to be civil society, the Third UN whose members often affect change by working both with and through the other two United Nations, member states and secretariats.

Policy Gaps

The third is the "policy gap." By "policy" we mean the interlinked set of governing principles and goals, and the agreed programs of action to implement those principles and achieve those goals. "UN policy" documents may consist of resolutions or international treaties and conventions.

UN policymakers are actually the world body's principal political organs, the Security Council and the General Assembly. In these intergovernmental forums the people making policy decisions do so as delegates of national governments. And they make these choices within the governing framework of their national foreign policies, under instructions, on all important policy issues, from their home governments. Or member states may make the policy choices directly themselves, for example at summit conferences.

It is worth noting a major disconnect in global governance. While the source and scale of most of today's pressing challenges are global, and any effective solution to them must also be

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global, the policy authority for tackling them remains vested in states. The implementation of most "UN policy" (as determined by the First UN) does not rest primarily with the United Nations Secretariat itself (the Second UN) but is kicked back upwards to member states.

Institutional Gaps

The fourth is the "institutional gap." Institutions are normally thought of as formal, organizations but they may also be informal entities. If policy is to escape the trap of being ad hoc, episodic, judgmental, and idiosyncratic, it must be housed within an institution with resources and autonomy.

There are international institutions that deal reasonably well with a problem area, and those that are most effective often deal with specific issues and have well-embedded norms and consensus among member states. Many institutions actually do make a difference to global governance: the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN Children's Fund (better known by its acronym, UNICEF), the International Telecommunication Union, and the World Health Organization, to name but four. Positive examples thus should figure in contemporary discussions along with laments about those that fall short, for example the late Commission on Human Rights that was replaced by the Human Rights Council.

Institutional gaps often exist even when knowledge, norms, and policies are in evidence. They can refer to the fact that there may be no overarching global institution, in which case many international aspects of problem-solving may be ignored—for example, the control of nuclear weapons. Or it may be impossible to address a problem because of missing key member states—e.g., the World Trade Organization (WTO) before China's entry. One of the most obvious explanations for institutional shortcomings, or gaps, is simply because the resources allocated are incommensurate with the magnitude of a problem.

A second major disconnect in global governance is that the coercive capacity to mobilize the resources necessary to tackle global problems remains vested in states, thereby effectively incapacitating many international institutions. The institutional gap is especially

striking within the UN system because there are neither powerful, global institutions with overarching authority over members nor even flimsy ones whose resources are commensurate with the size of the trans-border problems that they are supposed to address. Even the most "powerful" institutions such as the Security Council, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) often lack either appropriate resources or authority or both.

Although states establish institutions and pay the bills (sometimes), networks of experts pushed by activists in civil society usually explain the impetus behind their emergence. Consensus among experts has been central to restructuring the UN system and to the creation of new institutions to meet newly recognized needs.

However, the source of ideas about filling institutional gaps is still more likely to be governments and IGOs than nonstate actors. The absence of international political will means that many of these organizations are only partially constructed or remain largely on drawing boards with only a small prototype to address gargantuan threats.

Compliance Gaps

The fifth and final is the "compliance gap," which has three facets: implementation, monitoring, and enforcement. Recalcitrant or fragile actors may be unwilling or unable to implement agreed elements of international policy. Even if an institution exists, or a treaty is in effect, or many elements of a working regime are in place, there is often a lack of political will to rely upon or even provide resources for the previously established institutions or processes. Second, who has the authority, responsibility, and capacity to monitor that commitments made and obligations accepted are being implemented and honored? Third, confronted with clear evidence of non-compliance by one or more members amidst them, the collective group may lack the strength of conviction or commonality of interests to enforce the community norm.

The source of ideas to fill enforcement gaps is mixed: it is just as likely to be governments and intergovernmental organizations as it is civil society. The source of monitoring is as likely to be civil society actors, for example Human

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Rights Watch, and states, for example the United States vis-à-vis Iran's and North Korea's compliance with Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations, as it is to be international organizations, for example the IAEA. The source of implementation is also likely to be mixed. The past six-and-a-half decades of UN history are the story of the never-ending search for better compliance mechanisms within the constraints of no overriding central authority.

One of the main institutional tactics within such constraints has been "embarrassment," which can result when either UN secretariats or NGOs, generate information and data about non-compliance. With the exception of the Security Council, UN bodies can only make "recommendations." Hence, monitoring and then publicizing information about non-compliance mixed with the use of the bully pulpit has been a central dynamic in efforts to secure compliance.

The cumulative challenge—some might say the fatal shortcoming—of filling global governance gaps is demonstrated by the extreme difficulty in ensuring actual compliance. Indeed, this last gap often appears as a complete void because no ways exist to enforce decisions, certainly not to compel them. Depending on a country's relative power, this generalization may vary because influential organizations (especially the WTO, IMF, and World Bank) can make offers to developing countries that they dare not refuse. The more relevant and typical examples, however, are in the area of international peace and security. Even though the UN Charter calls for them, there are no standing UN military forces and never have been. The UN has to beg and borrow troops, which are always on loan, and there is no functioning Military Staff Committee.

In the area of human rights, whether it is hard or soft law, there is often no enforcement capability. Ad hoc tribunals and the International Criminal Court are institutional steps that have led to some indictments and convictions, while assiduous efforts to monitor and publicize mass atrocities have, on occasion at least, secured an enforcement response from the Security Council in the form of collective sanctions, international judicial pursuit, and even military force.

In the area of international trade and finance, the WTO is considered a relatively effective enforcement mechanism although it is among the youngest of IGOs. While it undoubtedly is an improvement from its predecessor, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)—that is, the WTO has some teeth—international trade disputes are still largely regulated bilaterally. Monitoring by the Second and the Third UNs has led to changes in policy and implementation by some governments and corporations—that is, voluntary compliance by good citizens.

And finally, in the area of environment and sustainability, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol created binding emission targets for developed countries, a system whereby developed countries could obtain credit toward their emission targets by financing energy-efficient projects and clean-development mechanisms in less-developed countries, and emissions trading (trading the "right to pollute"). Back-tracking, however, began almost before the ink was dry on the signatures. As the world hurtles toward an irreversible tipping point on climate change, there is no way to ensure that even the largely inadequate agreements on the books are respected.

Each of these cases illustrates hesitant but insufficient progress toward ensuring compliance with agreed objectives. This progress has been easier to see in the areas of human rights and trade. In the areas of security and the environment, regimes are in flux, and progress is more difficult to ascertain. The planet will remain hard pressed to respond to current and future challenges without more robust intergovernmental institutions.

The UN's Ideational Role in Global Governance

The United Nations plays four essential roles as an intellectual actor. These are managing knowledge, developing norms, promulgating recommendations, and institutionalizing ideas.

Basic research is done in universities, not in the United Nations. Yet the UN is a knowledge-based and knowledge-management organization. Flagging issues and keeping them in front of reluctant governments are quintessential UN tasks. The vehicles through which idea-mongering occurs include expert groups, organizing eminent persons into panels

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and study groups, and of course the global ad hoc conferences that were especially prominent in the 1970s and 1990s.

One under-appreciated comparative advantage of the United Nations is its convening capacity and mobilizing power to help funnel knowledge from outside and to ensure its discussion and dissemination among governments. UN-sponsored world conferences, heads of government summits, and blue-ribbon commissions and panels have been used for framing issues, outlining choices, making decisions; for setting, even anticipating, the agenda; for framing the rules, including for dispute settlement; for pledging and mobilizing resources; for implementing collective decisions; and for monitoring progress and recommending mid-term corrections and adjustments.

Once information has been collected and knowledge gained that a problem is serious enough to warrant attention by the international policy community, new norms need to be articulated, disseminated, and institutionalized. In spite of the obvious problems of accommodating the perspectives of 192 countries, the First UN is an essential way to permit the expression and eventual coagulation of official views from around the planet on international norms. Similarly, despite the obvious problems of running a secretariat with a multitude of nationalities, cultures, languages, and administrative norms, the Second UN is also an ongoing bureaucratic experiment in opening up the range of inputs to include a wide range of views.

After norms begin to change and become widespread, a next step is to formulate a range of possibilities about how governments and their citizens and IGOs can change behavior. When an emerging norm comes close to becoming a universal norm, it is time to address specific approaches to problem-solving, to fill the policy gap. The policy stage refers to the statement of principles and actions that an organization is likely to take in the event of particular contingencies. The UN's ability to consult widely plays a large part in its ability to formulate operational ideas. This is a function that is quintessentially in the job descriptions not only of member states but also of the Second UN, the staff of international secretariats, who are often complemented by trusted consultants, NGOs,

and expert groups from the Third UN. Policy ideas are often discussed, disseminated, and agreed upon in public forums and global conferences.

Once knowledge has been acquired, norms articulated, and policies formulated, an existing institution can oversee their implementation and monitoring. But if they are sufficiently distinctive from other problems, cohesive in their own cluster of attributes, and of sufficient gravity and scale, then the international community of states might well consider creating a new IGO (or hiving off part of an existing one) dedicated to addressing this problem area.

Institutions embody ideas but can also provide a platform from which to challenge existing norms and received wisdom about the best approaches to problem solving. For instance, the generalized system of preferences for less industrialized countries—which was hardly an item on the conventional free-trade agenda— grew from both the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and GATT.

Conclusion

The story of global governance remains an unfinished journey because we are struggling to find our way and are nowhere near finding a satisfactory destination. It is messy, untidy, and incoherent, with many different actors and the separate parts often moving at different paces and in different directions. Global governance is what the French would call a "faute de mieux," a kind of replacement or surrogate for authority and enforcement for the contemporary world. Try as we might, the sum of many governance instruments, inadequately resourced and insufficiently empowered to enforce collective policies as they are, cannot replace the functions of a global government.

The essential challenge in contemporary global problem-solving remains a world without central authority for making policy choices and mobilizing the required resources to implement them; and consequently, only second- or even third-best solutions are feasible at present. Generating ideas about how to attenuate all five kinds of gaps is an essential task of the United Nations at the dawn of the new millennium.

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