

Chapter 7

Frameworks, Not Recipes; Processes, Not Projects – Redefining the Focus of Sustainable Development Governance

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The international community is navigating significant halfway points for a number of United Nations processes, including the Sendai Framework, the Sustainable Development Goals, elements of the Paris Agreement, and others. Attention is rightly turning to these mid-term reviews, but thought is needed around how such reviews lead to meaningful implementation and transformation.

The current development model often approaches impact in much the same way we measure economic growth. Practitioners speak of things like “quick wins,” “best practices,” “replicability,” and “scalability.” Such concepts have their uses, but over-emphasizing them can undermine human agency and, ultimately, the notion of community ownership and true sustainability. Development is human-driven. It is context-dependent. And it hinges on process as much as substance. That is to say, the process by which we arrive at a solution is as important as the solution itself.

Imagine that Community A, after months of inclusive consultation, investigation, and co-creation, arrives at a simple approach to address a water-supply challenge. The approach is implemented and, after six months, access to water, sanitation, and hygiene improves significantly. Leaders of Community B, on the opposite bank of a shared river, see the improvement and decide to implement the same approach. But this time it fails. Why?

A review might identify differences in soil quality, infrastructure, culture, or similar variables. A well-meaning international agency might do further experiments, taking the Community A solution to various contexts around the world, the vast majority of which fail. The lesson learned might be that Community A simply found a unique solution—valuable, but not replicable or scalable.

In a case such as this, the search for a quick win or replicability would be well-intentioned, but would miss the central lesson to be learned. What was replicable was not the mechanics of the project itself, but the qualities of consultation that led to it—the inclusive approach, the participatory environment, the co-creation, the context-based-solution arrived at. And it is elements of this kind, having to do with process, orientation, voice, and values, that need to be identified, shared, and replicated throughout the multilateral system and in particular around governance for sustainable development.

What does this mean for mid-term reviews and the UN more broadly? Meaningful reform of sustainable development governance will hinge on elements of collective process, conceptual framework, and commitment to principle as much as the adoption of any given mechanism or intervention. Movement in this direction will require new ways of envisioning the future, including building capacity to free strategic vision from the veils of present institutional arrangements, as well as to approach specific proposals as potential steps in a process of ongoing improvement, rather than sufficient solutions in themselves. It will call for far greater acknowledgement of the

basic truth that lived reality is one holistic experience—acknowledgement that will need to find practical application in the definitions we use to shape our collective endeavours, the institutional mandates which structure them, the ways that various thematic areas are understood to overlap, and even the way that event speakers are identified and oriented. And it will require far greater commitment to an overarching global civic ethic, grounded particularly in norms of trust, trustworthiness, and reciprocity. Initial thoughts in each of these areas are offered below, in a spirit of collective exploration and consultation.

Better Ways of Envisioning—and Building—the Future

There is a growing recognition that renewed commitment to cooperative frameworks is critical to effectively advancing complex goals, such as those related to sustainable development. Yet current systems of international governance are unlikely to be in place in the distant future. Present arrangements do not represent the pinnacle of development in the realm of governance. What, then, will constitute the international governance system of the future? What should it be and not be? And what steps can be taken today to help us get there?

Present institutions, systems, and structures can act as veils to vision and imagination. Aspects of the present order are often taken as a given, such as the networked but often ad-hoc system of international agreements, the competition-based interaction between actors on the global stage, even the nation state as the fundamental unit of international relations. When these assumptions are consciously set aside, even temporarily, space is opened to conceive new arrangements, guided by fundamental tenets more suited to the spirit of the age.

With the proposed Summit of the Future taking place in September of 2024, much thought will be devoted to various elements of humanity’s collective future. This offers an important period to advance ideas for more effective governance arrangements in areas of sustainable development and beyond. There is a particular opportunity to flesh out the real-world implications of bedrock ideals upon which a stable international order must be built. For example, how might a mechanism of global governance hold sufficient authority to ensure the common good, without fostering an over-concentration of power and authority? How can the wealth of individuals, corporations, and nations be more equitably distributed to benefit the whole of humanity and the earth upon which we depend? How can the international community, given matters of pressing urgency, ensure that future generations are considered in all deliberations? Given the limits of a GDP-centric approach to development, what values should truly be driving development and how can we find ways to measure them?

Conversations at the UN tend to focus on proposing new mechanisms, funds, processes, and bodies. These are what get noted in summary documents and analyzed in editorials. And it is true that many new arrangements will be needed in the coming years. Yet proposed mechanisms often resemble or duplicate extant arrangements. In many cases, problems arise not because a needed structure does not exist, but because the one that does exist is underfunded or opposed by certain factions or lacks a sufficient mandate. Novelty has an inherent allure; the fact that something is new and untested offers the possibility that it might be able to avoid shortcomings that plagued previous efforts. But unless underlying assumptions, models, and conditions are changed, this hope will rarely bear fruit; layering more and more additions on top of faulty foundations is a recipe for

disappointment. We therefore need to consider not just what more we can create, but how to improve and build on what we already have—and how relevant lessons learned in one space can be shared to others.

Equally important is expanding and strengthening an orientation that views any one project, programme, or policy not as a definitive solution in itself, but rather as one step in the path of improvement. Any well-regarded proposal might indeed have benefits that should be explored. It might also have unforeseen consequences, which should also be interrogated objectively. No matter how replicable or scalable, no project will be sufficient, in itself, to meet the needs of humanity. The need, in all cases, is a process-oriented approach to progress—one that builds gradually on strengths, responds with agility to evolving realities, and rests on reasoned and dispassionate inquiry into the merit of any given proposal.

One Lived Reality

Conceptual categories and the institutional structures that flow from them are necessary for organizing large-scale activity. Often, however, such tools are used in ways that constrain, rather than advance, the aims of the multilateral system. Consider, for example, the definition of climate adaptation and that of disaster risk reduction. The former is turned to for how actual or expected stimuli or their effects can moderate harm or exploit beneficial opportunities for natural or human systems. The latter refers to preventing the creation of risk, the reduction of existing risk, and the strengthening of economic, social health, and environmental resilience.

The overlap is obvious—different words being used to describe realities that are almost identical in practice. More to the point, when you get down to the local level of lived, daily experience, they are, in fact, the same thing. To a community leader or small business owner, there is little meaningful difference in what it looks like to pursue these complementary ends. This complementarity needs to be reflected in the spaces and conferences taking place this year and beyond. Those attending COP 28, for example, can learn from the disaster risk space. The Midterm Review of the Sendai process can similarly learn from efforts on climate issues, where significant research has been done. Both can learn from other related fields, such as land use, cities, and food systems. We need to become much more intentional in seeking to identify what is taking place in one space that can be drawn on and learned about in another—and to overcome the jargon that can act as a barrier.

What might this look like in practice? Panel discussions could include one speaker each from various related areas and such experts could be encouraged and assisted to synthesize their contrasting knowledge, perspectives, and experience into one overarching analysis which serves as a record to be referred to in the future. Alternatively, protagonists from different vantage points of a common successful endeavour could create a narrative related to that experience, for example, how a donor, a recipient, a community leader, a private sector actor came together to determine their needs and take action to meet them. What qualities were present? What capacities were built? What lessons do they wish to share? The policy papers prepared for each UNFCCC COP can inform the Sendai Process, UNEA, meetings on the Conference on Biodiversity, and vice versa. Similar analyses could be requested across many circles, not just at the UN level, but also at the Ministry level of governments, civil society, and the corporate sector. The possibilities are many,

and can span a wide range of technical depth and sophistication.

While such proposals are relatively minor, and some are already taking place occasionally, it is the underlying spirit which must change. Rather than one institution or agency ‘owning’ terminology, or being credited with progress, a spirit of collective ownership and shared endeavour needs to be encouraged. The United Nations and its Member States already have sufficient competing demands and priorities; let the spaces where there is overlap become sources of shared aspiration and advancement.

Trust, Trustworthiness, and a Global Civic Ethic

Movement toward more coordinated and effective structures of governance, in the realm of sustainable development will require leaders coming together to recast aspects of the current global order. The idea of large-scale international cooperation has, at times, been viewed as idealistic or utopian. But in light of the obvious and serious challenges facing humanity—almost universally global in scope and nature—such cooperation has become nothing less than a pragmatic necessity.

The efficacy of steps in this direction will hinge on well-worn patterns of stalemate and impasse being relinquished in favor of a global civic ethic. Deliberative processes will need to be more magnanimous, reasoned, and cordial—motivated not by attachment to entrenched positions and narrow interests or territoriality, but by a collective search for deeper understanding of complex issues. Objectives incompatible with the pursuit of the common good will need to be set aside. Until this is the dominant ethic, lasting progress will prove elusive.

This will require trust and trustworthiness, among many other requisites. The lack of trust has been identified, time and again, as a key weakness in the multilateral system. In his *Our Common Agenda* report, the Secretary-General declared that “Building trust and countering mistrust, between people and institutions, but also between different people and groups within societies, is our defining challenge.” The High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism similarly noted that the “overall thrust” of its report, *A Breakthrough for People and Planet Effective and Inclusive Global Governance for Today and the Future*, was to “rebuild trust in the multilateral system.”

Trust thus emerges as one of the most vital resources we have, and one without which we can have little expectation for the success of any program, project, or agreement. But building trust is no small task, of course. It requires sacrifice, honesty, and dependability. We have to learn how to break cycles of mistrust and build on successes. We also need to overcome tendencies of aversion to loss—of reputation, position, status, power, resources, and so many similar qualities—that inhibit us from working together more collaboratively with others. Not infrequently do we ourselves, whether personally or in institutional capacities, entrench various silos because we fear ceding advantage or ‘turf’ to other actors, even those sincerely committed to the same goals we are. Overcoming narrow and zero-sum conceptions of identity, and building increasingly expansive and inclusive frameworks for deep and meaningful collective identity, will therefore be central in allowing learning, insights, and understanding to flow freely throughout the multilateral system.

As important as trust, in this regard, is the role of trustworthiness. Trust can be understood as a logical response to conditions of the world. If we sincerely believe that a co-worker, organization, department, or nation cannot be depended on or is opposed to our well-being, the answer is not to simply trust them anyway. This would be contrary to reason and sound judgement. Focusing on trustworthiness, our energies become centered not so much on determining how much we can trust others, but on how much others can trust us. Can others trust that the reasons our organization or country gives for taking a certain course of action—true though they may be—are actually the ones that prompted the decision? Can our colleagues trust that we will accomplish what we commit to—even when complications arise, resources are reduced, or priorities shift? Giving attention to issues such as these contributes to the construction of a culture of trustworthiness, in which behaviour of this kind becomes assumed and expected—simply the way things are done. And this, in turn, nurtures the expansion of trust so needed throughout the multilateral system.

New Challenges, New Narratives

Were one to graph the mandate of the United Nations over the last 75 years, it would be a steep upward curve, with ever more issues falling under its ambit. Necessary as this has been, were such a graph placed alongside another that charts the global challenges humanity faces, the latter would be even steeper. One can quickly conjure an image of an overburdened vehicle carrying far more weight than it ought to, yet still insufficient for the task at hand. Unsurprisingly, then, any meaningful conversation about how UN processes can strengthen and reinforce each other should strive to understand the bigger picture of where we are and where we hope to be.

For this reason, we must not only assess perennial challenges like territoriality, redundancy, and the like, but peel back the workings of the international order to get to the underlying assumptions which guide it. We know, for example, that consumption-based indicators like GDP contravene the carrying capacity of the earth. We know that territorialities of all kinds—whether state sovereignty, NGO funding, private sector monopoly, UN mandate, or any other—are contrary to humanity's (and the planet's) shared, holistic needs. This chapter looked at some of the outward expressions of sustainable development governance that could be modified through different postures and approaches. But it also sought to ask fundamental questions about the narratives that guide the international community's efforts. With this latter issue come a number of questions that are vital, but often sidelined in favor of technical or institutional deliberations. Elements such trust, justice, notions of progress, and a culture of learning should be central in all these debates. And every time different UN mandates are given the opportunity to interact, sustainable development governance is given the opportunity to advance.

As 15-year development processes reach their midpoints, the international community needs to reflect on areas of progress as well as shortcomings. In particular, it will be vital that the universality expressed in these agendas finds expression not only in rhetoric, but in truly shared efforts. Given the institutional structures of the multilateral system as it stands today, this will be no small task. Different agencies, programmes, and Member States of the UN speaking on each other's panels and similar incremental steps are indeed needed, but the harder work will be developing a compelling and collective vision of the future together. But as this is done, advancement will be faster and more sustainable. The SDG wheel, with its diversity of colors,

represents a lovely symbol of progress in different areas coming together for one purpose. Let's not reinvent it, but rather find ways to use it properly.