



How can we Transform Global Governance for the 21st Century?

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Abstract

The current global institutional architecture is a product of a bygone era of the power of dominant players to impose themselves on others. This paper argues that the multiple planetary emergencies upon us demand radical transformation of all institutions to reflect on the lessons learnt. It proposes an urgent examination of global governance institutions, with the UN system as the central pillar, with a particular focus on whether they are promoting justice and the social realisations that are part of their mandates. Countries in the Global South, such as South Africa, need to free themselves from the current irrational strictures of the Global Development Finance institutions, and mobilise their national resources—financial and natural—to provide basic needs and services to all their citizens to free their human potential. Citizens living dignified lives beyond survival would become creative energetic contributors to the wellbeing of all in a healthy biosphere, at local, national, regional, and global levels. We could do no better than heed Amartya Sen’s advice and overcome the “institutional fundamentalism” that has made us addicted to the current global institutional framework. The UN system, the Global Development Institutions have evidence of too many fault lines to be able to meet the reasonable social benefits of people living in Most of the World. A Reimagined global institutional framework for the 21st century is urgently needed to provide a platform for wellbeing of all in a healthy biosphere.

1. Introduction

Reimagining global governance is an urgent and critical success factor for the human community to redesign a system more appropriate for the 21st century. The post-WWII global governance regime that has served us for over 70 years is due for a major transformation. Governance needs to be seen to be fair, representative and effective to gain legitimacy and respect of those governed.

The current regime established some ground rules about what matters most in governance from local, national to global: respect for human rights and the sanctity of life formed the fundamental touchstones of global governance through the United Nations. The institutional infrastructure of the global governance system served an important role in bringing stability into the political affairs of the world at that time. It also promised to make impunity history.

Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen in his book, [The Idea of Justice](#), makes the case that the choice of institutions is a central element in the pursuit of the promotion of justice. He asserts

that "...we have to seek institutions that promote justice, rather than treating the institutions as themselves manifestations of justice, which would reflect institutional fundamentalism." In Sen's view, it is not enough to simply have institutions without examining the social realisations that are actually generated through that institutional base. I would like to suggest that the multiple planetary emergencies we are facing in the 21st century call for an examination of global governance institutions, with the UN system as the central pillar, with a particular focus on whether they are promoting justice and the social realisations that are part of their mandates.

The UN has over the last 70 years become a major pillar of the new way of seeing the world as an interconnected and interdependent whole. The global development institutions, instituted to drive post-war reconstruction, were primarily designed to provide the underpinning of mutual support to promote socio-economic development for post-war Europe. The common feature of the UN system reflected and continues to reflect the dominance of Western powers—the victors of WWII.

The fault lines in the UN system stem from the rigidity of this 70+ year system and the blind spots of self-styled major powers to the contradictions of the current system in the context of the realities of the 21st century. The idea of the UN Security Council having 3 of the 5 Permanent members being Western countries representing 5% of the world's population, is an absurdity in the 21st century. So too the idea of a group of 7 nations (representing a minority of the global population and a decreasing size of its real economy) that presumes to have all the wisdom to set standards and priorities in the global socio-economic and political spheres, boggles the mind.

One of the greatest ironies of the post-WWII global governance regime is its blindness to, and historic tolerance of, continuing colonial exploitation of most of the world by the very powers that were victors of the anti-Nazi war to end the genocide against Jewish people. Anti-colonial struggles did not enjoy the support one would have expected from the UN Security Council given the Human Rights Charter on which the UN system rests. The same lack of support applies to the anti-racism Civil Rights Movement in the USA. Yet those struggles succeeded despite the lack of support from the UN until very late in the day.

The power of the human spirit's quest for freedom of choice at the very core of being human, continues to challenge assumptions of the practice that 'might is right'. Military power is proving inadequate to impose itself over peoples who yearn for the freedom to express their cultural beliefs and values around the world. Indigenous people across many spaces are choosing the dignity of being who they would like to be and to express their cultural tenets that are significantly different from the so-called Western culture.

Afghanistan is the latest example of indigeneity trumping imposed values and governance models. Whatever one thinks of their political philosophy, the Taliban appeals to the emotional pull of self-governance of Afghan people. Successive foreign powers from the British, Soviet Union and now Americans, have over many decades been forced to bow to the resilience of traditional indigenous systems in Afghanistan.

2. What are the Challenges of Global Governance in the 21st century?

The complexities of the challenges of the 21st century demand boldness to dare to ask the right questions about what we understand by “global” and “good governance” in the context of our greater awareness of the interconnectedness and interdependence of humanity and the ecosystems we find ourselves in. Definitions of the “global” at the expense of the “local” are proving to be inadequate.

The globalisation of the world has been framed largely as a political-economic imperative. The same dominant powers that defined the post-WWII regime including the United Nations System, seized the growing awareness of our interconnectedness and interdependence as opportunities for enhancing their dominance. The “global” in globalization does not embrace the planetary system and Earth, our planet as part of the web of life. Champions of globalization have often given scant attention to the reality that human beings are but part of nature—a much younger species than other forms of life that continue to live more consciously in harmony with nature’s wisdom.

Globalisation as championed by dominant powers ignores, and in many cases, undermines the “local.” Communities—humans and others—that have lived for thousands of years in their ecosystems, are often uprooted to make way for global corporate interests and witness the destruction of the Amazon, the Congo and other forests in the name of development. In my own country, countless communities continue to be displaced or pressured into making way for global extractive corporate interests. For example, the Xolobeni Community, in the Eastern Cape, had to resort to the Constitutional Court for protection of their rights to decide on their own development pathway, against the imposition of an Australian mining company, Transworld Energy and Mineral Resources, by their own government. The love affair with the neo-liberal development model with its promotion of foreign investments as the engine of “economic growth” lies at the root of the undermining of the local in favour of the global.

Good governance without local meaning and resonance undermines its own acceptance and legitimacy. What is good in the governance of people needs to be defined by them if democracy is to be true to the ideal of it being governance of the people by the people for the people. The current global governance system fails to meet the standards of good governance at a basic level. All major global governance institutions suffer from the dominance of Western dominant powers at many levels: selection and election of top leadership; agenda setting and priorities for action; resourcing of global institutions; how progress and success are measured; etc.

We now have the benefit of a greater understanding of the value of indigenous knowledge and wisdom systems strengthened by modern science. This understanding confirms that our humanity expresses its essence through the affirmation of other human beings. The African moral philosophy of Ubuntu—I am because You Are—has at its core a value system that reflects this understanding. What we know for sure is that human beings are at their best when they are affirmed, respected and feel that they belong. Mutual prosperity is ensured by each member of the community contributing the best of their efforts to promote the common good.

This truism is what our ancient African ancestors learnt from observing nature's intelligence in the ecosystems they found themselves in. The tenets of indigenous wisdom are common to every culture that has preserved the Ubuntu philosophical heritage as they migrated out of Africa, the Mother continent.

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We also have the benefit of lessons from the disruptive impact of the multiple planetary crises we face. These crises compel us to understand anew that we need to reimagine new ways of being human and intentionally embrace our interconnectedness and interdependence. A reimagined global governance system would need to embrace the core values of Ubuntu that promote wellbeing of all in a healthy biosphere. Such a value system necessitates a reimagining of socio-economic systems that promote wellbeing of all, and a healthy biosphere as both goals and key indicators of progress.

The current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as set out by the UN, are a statement of a minimalist agenda to address the extreme inequalities and inequities in our current global sociology-economic system. Not only are the goals minimalist, but the Global Footprint Network* estimates that at the current levels of consumption by the well-off globally, humanity would need the equivalent seven planets' resource base to provide every human being with the minimalist good and services set out. The implications are clear—current consumption patterns driven by rampant financialised economic systems that require higher and higher consumption, are totally unsustainable. The current global economic and financial systems are not capable of promoting wellbeing of all in a healthy biosphere. We need to reimagine new systems.

The challenge for humanity today is to harvest the lessons of the current planetary emergencies and the greater appreciation of nature's intelligence, to explore how we might emerge with new ways of being human. What the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate change catastrophes have taught us is that wellbeing of a few is wellbeing of none, and that climate change impacts do not respect geographic nor any other boundaries. We also have learnt anew that what matters most in life is life itself. Social distancing and lockdowns have also reminded us poignantly that we are at our core relational beings. We thrive best when we are in relationships with others. The medium and long-term impacts of social and emotional distancing are not yet clear, but they are likely to be significant.

* <https://www.footprintnetwork.org>

3. A Reimagined Socio-economic Development Model

The current global development model is driven by an increasingly financialised economic system that is more and more distant from real life experiences of people in their day-to-day lives. The distancing of economics from communities at the local level is further exacerbated by the “vacuum cleaner” effect of multinational supermarkets and malls that internalise their profits and externalise the costs to local communities. Think of plastic waste; air pollution; location of polluting industries in poorer countries to benefit shareholders in rich countries; and other externalised ecological costs that are borne by the poorest people amongst us.

Consumer corporates have gone full steam to ensure that they dominate every aspect of communities’ consumer needs effectively replacing the ‘mom and pop’ corner shops in villages and townships across the world. Community savings and collaborative programs such as savings clubs, funeral schemes and revolving credit schemes have been hijacked and swallowed up by the rampant financial system to benefit their investors living in wealthy suburban areas. Poor people’s cash no longer circulates within their communities but is sucked out into banks that hardly invest in those communities, but in the wealthy suburban areas where they are situated.

As a South African, I hang my head in shame about our economic system that has dismally failed to promote the socio-economic development of the majority population. The post-apartheid governments’ adoption of a neo-liberal economic system has perpetuated colour coded patterns of ownership inherited from colonialism and apartheid regimes. The desire to be acceptable to the global development finance institutions and their dominant Western shareholders, has blinded successive governments to the futility of top-down development programs, and the pre-occupation with GDP as a measure of progress. It is not surprising that we are not only the most unequal society in the world but have failed to prepare our youthful population to become critical thinking contributing citizens. Our unemployment levels at 40% overall and 70% amongst the youth, reflect the inappropriateness of our development model.

We urgently need to reimagine a socio-economic development model aligned to our reclaiming our indigenous value system that promotes interconnectedness and interdependence within a single web of life. Such a model would need to depart from the premise that economic and financial systems are not the pillars of development, but its tools to serve a higher purpose of promoting access to life-giving goods and services. It would also have to end the dominance of the local by the global with its one size fits all approaches to socio-economic development.

David Korten in his paper, *Ecological Civilization: From Emergency to Emergence*, proposes a set of two key principles of a possible reimagined socio-ecological model:

1. The purpose of a functional economy is to provide all people with material sufficiency and spiritual abundance while supporting the wellbeing, beauty, and creative unfolding of Earth’s community of life.

2. The economy best fulfils its purpose when we organise as communities of place in which people are empowered to fulfil their responsibility to and for themselves.

The fundamental feature of Korten's model is to reconnect local people with the sources of their spiritual wellbeing, livelihoods and sense of belonging as communities. The emphasis is on each community self-organising to meet its needs through its own labour in self-reliant balance with its local ecosystems. Such bottom-up development models would ensure that Earth's community of life remains in healthy balance with itself and Earth. Community based development models would also promote the localisation of power in an equitable manner. The focus in such models would be on making communities healthy and not on making corporates profitable.

Governance flowing from a bottom-up culturally appropriate development model would challenge the inordinate power that has been ceded to corporations, especially multinational ones that enjoy all the rights, but limit their responsibilities to the bare minimum in the conventional global regime in operation today. The current regime of limited liability, for-profit corporation legal framework, privileges unlimited concentration of economic power delinked from accountability to the communities in which corporations do business. The distancing of corporations from accountabilities to local communities undermines the very idea of rights and responsibilities being mutually reinforcing in a world of interdependence and interrelationships.

Africa and other regions of the so-called Global South have over many centuries suffered from the impact of extractive mining companies. Our vast mineral resources have been, and continue, to be extracted at the expense of generations of African families whose lives have been deeply scarred by the migrant labour system during colonialism and apartheid. The continuation of the migrant labour system in South Africa to date is a crime against humanity. Housing, health care and other social and emotional costs of mining have been externalised as private costs to the lowest paid workers, whereas these essential services are catered for as part of cost-to-company for the rest of higher paid staff.

The World Trade Organisation's mandate to ensure predictable free smooth flow of trade in the world economy is undermined by the inherent asymmetries of power relationships between participating nations. The same dominant global powers wrote the rules and regulations to suit their economic interests. In the name of free trade, countries with key infant industries find themselves falling foul of the anti-protectionist rules of the WTO. Powerful countries with more sophisticated legal practitioners are able to navigate the complex rules and regulations. A new regime of governance of trade and industry is needed to reflect a greater focus on the local before global and to embrace wellbeing of all in a healthier biosphere.

4. Conclusion

The world of the 21st century requires us to reimagine and establish new appropriate governance and development systems to meet the challenges upon us. We have the benefits

of lessons learnt from the existing systems that have served us over the last few decades to reimagine what would best emerge to meet current and future needs. The neo-liberal economic model has no place in our world today. The extent to which dominant Western powers abandoned the very strictures on debt and printing money by sovereigns that they impose on poorer countries, shows the bankruptcy of this orthodoxy.

Countries in the Global South, such as South Africa, need to free themselves from these irrational strictures of the Global Development Finance institutions, and mobilise their national resources—financial and natural to provide basic needs and services to all their citizens to free their human potential. Citizens living dignified lives beyond survival would become creative energetic contributors to the wellbeing of all in a healthy biosphere, at local, national, regional and global levels.

We could do so much better if we were to heed Amartya Sen’s advice and overcome the “institutional fundamentalism” that has made us addicted to the current global institutional framework. The UN system, the Global Development Institutions have evidence of too many fault lines to be able to meet the reasonable social benefits of people living in Most of the World. Is it not the time to rethink global governance fit for the 21st century?

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Notes

1. Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Penguin, 2010 p82.
2. See Court Order at Centre for Applied Legal Studies, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa
3. David Korten, *Ecological Civilization: From Emergency to Emergence*, Club of Rome, May 2021