

Crisis of confidence

Social movements which emerged in the wake of the economic crisis are sceptical of the UN's capacity to be a space to think of and enact the changes that are needed. The governance model proposed by the organization—and in particular the prominent role it gives to the corporate sector—and the type of solutions it is putting forward beg the question: is the UN up to task of building an alternative model, or even serving as a forum to discuss new models?

Some NGOs, seeing multi-stakeholder governance as an opportunity for more participation and influence in policy processes, have gone along with this model, while others are more critical.

As the UN enthusiastically embraces the corporate sector as “part of the solution” some are entertaining the idea that it may be very much part of the problem. By embracing transnational corporations as partners, the UN risks legitimizing the idea that “there is no alternative” to a free-market, privatised world. While one should be mindful of painting “the UN” with too broad a brush, this shift is affecting the system as a whole, including the Secretariat, the funds and programmes and the specialised agencies.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) and multi-stakeholder governance models tend to favour well-established and well-resourced players and they often focus on technical solutions, allowing states to outsource their responsibilities and obligations to civil society and the private sector while pleading impotence. Although promoted as “complementary” to governmental efforts, multi-stakeholder partnerships often become replacements for intergovernmental initiatives, especially in areas where the difficulty of achieving international agreement is leaving governance gaps. These multi-stakeholder initiatives, however, often lack transparent reporting requirements; while they claim billions of dollars in pledges and investments, it is usually difficult to assess where money has gone, whether it is “additional,” and its impact on policy direction. PPPs act

as “coalitions of the willing” but need to be answerable to agreed-upon frameworks, in particular international human rights instruments and environmental treaties.

If governance models promote “partnerships” and “consensus” without recognising the power imbalances between “stakeholders” and the interests invested in the status quo, “consultations” and “dialogues” are likely to lead to more of the same with minor changes and reinforce the imbalance. While the UN has a good track record of developing spaces for the participation of civil society and social movements, UN processes also tend to put too much emphasis on input. Ultimately, the consultation / dialogue model is limited if it posits that, with enough information on the impact of their decisions, policymakers will come to a rational conclusion beneficial to all. It bears stating that economic policies are not implemented not because decision-makers do not realise their harmful effects; they are the result of very deliberate choices answering to powerful interests. “Having a voice” in the process, while key, is not enough to challenge these. The possibility to hold powerful interests accountable, not just to debate with them, is critical.

Is the UN still “the best thing we have” to achieve a more just and sustainable world? In 2010, the French activist organization ATTAC argued in favour of “Another UN for another world.” ATTAC stressed that the UN is the repository of human rights-based international legal instruments—a legal framework that powerful, ad-hoc fora such as the G20 do not possess.

In spite of its recent turn towards the corporate sector and its embrace of market-led solutions, the UN remains the international forum friendliest to groups seeking to challenge the global concentration of power. Some parts of the UN have proven open to and supportive of alternative concepts and models. The UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service

(UN-NGLS) have all worked to promote the “Social and Solidarity Economy,” a development model based on cooperation, complementarity and mutual support that has gained traction in Brazil, Ecuador, France and other countries.

Time for an Ambitious Agenda

The post-2015 development agenda can be an opportunity to reclaim value-based multilateralism at the UN, to move beyond a development policy geared towards making the current system “better” to truly transformative change. The UN is the only place to hold all players accountable to universal standards and responsibilities, and to promote a value-based framework for sustainable development rooted in the UN Charter and human rights instruments.

This direction is possible if the UN stops favouring “stakeholders” whose interest is only to tinker at the edges of the system. The involvement of “stakeholders” who are not risk-averse and promote and defend a value-based, rights-based approach to development, including social movements, is crucial.

The UN has established many best practices for the participation of civil society and social movements. More consistent application of these best practices could help build a better institutional model for engagement, which would make clear that “multi-stakeholder dialogues” and “consultations” can challenge the status quo and would bring alternative policies forward. Such practices would help to:

- Promote a diversity of views, including social movements and people most affected who have so far been marginalised. While these people cannot be automatically assumed to be democratic and progressive, they are often representatives of communities who can bring alternative views to the table. The experience of people on the ground is a form of “expertise” just as relevant to the post-2015 process as the expertise of the scientific and academic community.

- Better feature local experiences to inform policymaking debates at UN headquarters. Contributions from CSOs and social movements do not only take the form of direct participation in processes, but their innovative experience at the local or national level is not recognized in processes that adopt a hierarchical, top-down interpretation of global decision-making.
- Build an institutional environment that moves beyond “consultations” and “consensus” to allow the expression of dissent and alternative views. This would counter the worst aspects of the “multi-stakeholder” model, which tends to focus on weak areas of agreement rather than tackle difficult issues. The post-2015 process should give a space to and recognize the expression of alternative and confrontational views and not force “civil society” to speak in one consensual voice. Dissenting positions should be respected and clearly recorded into official proceedings and documents. This is especially necessary when “civil society” becomes a misnomer that includes representatives of the corporate sector and of private philanthropic foundations.
- Recognize and address the power imbalances between “stakeholders.” Giving more time to people on the ground and social movements to speak, make their positions known and present alternative policies can rebalance the power dynamics. That time is especially important for groups that are looking for recognition of their constituency at the global level (such as Indigenous Peoples).

Accountability

Good modalities for engagement are a step in the right direction but not enough: a successful post-2015 development agenda also demands policy and political changes. The question is not only whether participation in policy processes reflects diversity and alternative views; the process must also be able

to challenge power structures responsible for the status quo, and people at the local and national levels must ultimately be able to support its outcome. People on the ground and social movements support the UN when they see it as a credible forum to remove global obstacles to justice and sustainability that cannot be tackled nationally, and to set norms and standards that will help and support national level rights-based mobilisation. Without necessarily directly participating in UN processes, these movements can play a key role in engaging their national government to push for change and implement policies negotiated at the global level. But they are not likely to do so if they see UN policies as one more barrier to achieve social justice and protect the commons.

A new accountability framework, rather than a new partnership for development, should be the priority on the post-2015 development agenda. Accountability can ensure that the interests of “stakeholders,” especially of the most powerful players, are truly aligned with the purpose they are claiming to be working towards and do not contradict the value-based standards of the organization. Transparency and accountability standards should of course also be applied to NGOs, CSOs and social movements. However, in the current context, the UN and member states have generally submitted “civil society” to more intense scrutiny than the corporate sector. While organizations applying for ECOSOC accreditation have to be approved by member states, there is no equivalent accreditation process for corporations independent of the business associations they may belong to. Further, many individual states have enacted draconian legislation that seriously limits the capacity of their citizens to organize as CSOs and to demonstrate, while transnational corporations rarely encounter the same difficulties.

To rebalance the power relations, the UN should focus on accountability for the corporate sector.

At the very least, it should establish better public disclosure and conflict of interest

policies to regulate corporate sector engagement. In the current system, international business associations can participate in UN processes as “NGOs” on the ground that they are nonprofit, even though they represent the interests of their corporate members. Public interest NGOs have long called on the World Health Organization (WHO) to classify private-sector actors outside of its NGO category, to better make the distinction between Public Interest NGOs (PINGOs) and Business Interest NGOs (BINGOS). Such distinction could be made systemwide.

Better public disclosure and conflict of interest policies are also needed for the UN itself. The organization should disclose financial contributions from the corporate sector (including in the form of “extra-budgetary resources”) and establish a clear framework for interacting with the private sector and managing conflicts of interest, in particular by differentiating between policy development and appropriate involvement in implementation. Protection for whistleblowers would ensure that UN staff can speak out on practices that do not respect the mandate and values of the organization. Specific language in the code of ethics for UN employees could also help address the potential issues raised by the circulation of staff between UN entities and national governments, private foundations, corporations, lobby groups and CSOs.

Progressive NGOs, CSOs and social movements can advocate and lobby for such changes. They can also challenge the UN to rethink how it has adopted the language and worldview of the corporate sector. What does it mean when the organization promotes health, education and even people as good “returns on investment?” When it argues that sustainable development needs to be sold to the corporate sector as “more profitable” to save us from disaster?

Are there opportunities for member states and civil society to work together to build an alternative to a multi-stakeholder governance model that privileges the

corporate sector? A recent initiative in the Human Rights Council, spearheaded by Ecuador and supported by more than 100 governments and dozens of CSOs, proposes to advance a binding instrument to regulate transnational corporations. Could this be an indication that the discourse on the role of the corporate sector is shifting?

The UN has so far seemed to assume that cooperation with large transnational corporations would help it regain relevance. This trend has accelerated in the context of discussions and negotiations around the post-2015 development agenda. The

challenges that the UN addresses—poverty eradication, climate change mitigation and adaptation, a shift to sustainable production and consumption practices—require nothing less than radical changes. But the UN's corporate partners (and the powerful states that advocate in their favour) are generally happy to support UN efforts only as long as they fall into the realm of acceptable discourse.

The UN is reflecting, rather than driving, many of the trends in the current world order. But the organisation has the potential to be a space where this order can

be challenged, and the processes for the post-2015 development agenda offer a window of opportunity. The post-2015 agenda cannot be limited to allowing “stakeholders” to debate future goals and establish partnerships based on weak areas of agreement that avoid difficult issues. Rather, the post-2015 provides a moment to reclaim the UN's value-based framework, challenge the powerful interests and politics that have led to the current situation and hold all players accountable. ■

“Big data”: threat or revolution?

Steve Baccus, an American farmer and president of the Kansas Farm Bureau, made a trip to Washington in April 2014 as part of what he called “an educational effort” to make sure members of Congress know about data collecting and “the implications of the issue for our farmers and ranchers.”

The issue is the gathering of large swaths of data by large seed companies, Monsanto in particular, using sensors installed on tractors. The corporations argue that the sensors help crop yields by measuring and evaluating soil conditions and seeding rates, among other variables.

That information would allow them to give out seed prescriptions optimized for each farm's soil, disease history and pest evaluation in the area.

Monsanto calls this a “Green Data Revolution” — a play on the so-called Green Revolution of the 20th century, based on intense use of fertilizers and pesticides and seeds adapted to resist them. To steer this revolution, Monsanto has recently purchased Precision Planting, a farm equipment manufacturer and Climate Corporation, a database analytics firm.

Similarly, biotech giant DuPont Pioneer has partnered with farm equipment manufacturer John Deere to provide “decision

services” that allow farmers to upload data onto servers, which ultimately feed electronic data prescriptions of seed and fertilizer back to the tractor in the field. Tractors may be built with GPS systems or seed monitoring tablets that allow farmers to download information. In theory, this GPS technology serves as an information dragnet, analysing raw field data to provide farmers with industry-funded solutions.

The prospect of sharing intimate details of their operations with the companies has raised concerns with some farmers who are worried that the companies could tap the information for their own purposes or sell it to other entities, like commodity traders. By gathering information directly from the tractors in the moment of seeding, corporations could make estimates about harvests several weeks in advance (and with better accuracy) than the US Government itself. This information can then be used to speculate in commodity markets, resulting in price fluctuations that may hurt the very farmers that provide the data but do not control their use.

Yet, in reply to their concerns, Kansas Representative Lynn Jenkins expressed the prevalent view in Washington that “information and data utilization is the way of the future.” He did acknowledge privacy concerns and wrote plainly that “just as our

federal government struggles with privacy concerns through records at the NSA and various health records, so too must we maintain appropriate privacy protection of individuals from corporations.”

A spokeswoman for DuPont said that the company abides by data-privacy laws, but urged farmers “to always read and understand the terms and conditions of any services they sign up for as each company maintains its own policies and provisions.”

Governments should take this advice very seriously, since as part of the post-2015 development agenda, the UN Secretary-General has stated that advances in information technology over the past decade provide an opportunity for a “data revolution” that should enable countries to strengthen existing data sources and develop new ones.

This rather cryptic language echoes the observation of the High Level Panel (HLP) co-chaired by UK Prime Minister David Cameron and Presidents Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia that there have been “innovative initiatives to use mobile technology and other advances to enable real-time monitoring of development results.”

Earlier, in a *Wall Street Journal* piece, Cameron envisaged using aid “as a catalyst to unleash the dynamism of developing