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BLOG POST January 16th 2025

Reforming multilateral institutions towards more justice in voice and representation

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Reading time: 9 min

Claims have multiplied in recent years on the need for more inclusive international governance–illustrated by a strong backlash against Bretton Woods institutions and some push back against organizations that are deemed not inclusive enough. The need for more justice in voice and representation at the international level was echoed in the recent Summit of the Future; the word “inclusiveness” is mentioned 72 times in the Pact for the Future. While the United Nations is positioning itself ever more strongly on its core values of universalism and inclusion (IDDRI, 2024) and the vast network of international organizations within and outside the UN are steadily but surely opening up to new constituencies, perception of unfairness and bias in representation remain. 10 years after the Paris Climate Agreement and the Sustainable Goals, IDDRI is taking a keen interest in the achievements of global governance and its core institutions for sustainable development. Addressing their fairness in voice and representation is a core ingredient of their capacity to deliver.

Evidence on voice and representation in multilateral organizations

Whatever their forms, international organizations (IOs) underpinning the common rule-based system have been under increasing pressure to become more transparent and inclusive. Traditional fora have opened their membership to new members, be they countries or new member categories such as different levels of government, civil society or private sector. In parallel, new, more opened fora embedding new constituencies on an equal basis from the start have emerged. Across the board, consultation and stakeholder engagement practices have deepened. There are also increasing efforts to go beyond formal participation rules and support active contribution through improving resources and capacity.

From its creation in 1919, the International Labour Organization (ILO) stood out as the only tripartite UN agency bringing together governments, employers and workers. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) was established back in 1948 as a membership union created of governments and civil society organisations. While the ILO and the IUCN were rather the exception at the time, a range of new multi-stakeholder actors has emerged since the 1980's alongside the traditional inter-governmental organisations (IGOs). They include the so-called trans-governmental networks (TGNs) that provide fora for specialized units of national governments–rather than State–to develop common approaches and rules, exchange information and help each other in enforcement (Abbott & Kauffmann, 2018). These organizations have broadened the notion of membership by including Non-State Actors, from industry, civil society and other IOs that can participate in the decision-making process. They can comprise industry or private sector organizations, non-governmental actors, sub-national officials, other IOs, or all interested stakeholders in the field concerned.

Beyond this development, IOs have sought to expand their membership–including geographically when not already universal–and to new kinds of members, including via partial membership. This is a quasi-universal trend (OECD, 2016), but to pick a couple of examples:

- The OECD has both expanded its Membership since 1961 (from 20 to 38 to date), and created different means for non-Members, and particularly a number of developing and emerging economies, to participate in its substantive committees.
- The Committee on World Food Security, established under the FAO, was reformed in 2008 to become "the foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for a broad range of committed stakeholders to work together in a co-ordinated manner and in support of country-led processes towards the elimination of hunger and ensuring food security and nutrition for all human beings". Membership is open to Members of FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the World Food Programme (WFP), as well as UN Members that are FAO Members (IDDRI, 2014).
- In 2016, IUCN Members voted to create a new category of IUCN membership for Indigenous Peoples' Organisations. In 2021, they introduced a new category for local governments. To date, IUCN includes 14,000 members.
- In 2023, the ILO launched the global coalition for social justice, hosted by the ILO Secretariat but governed by a separate governance, which allows a new set of partners to come together, including: governments (84), employers (33), workers (98), IOs (22 + 21 regional bodies), businesses (7), NGOs (35) and academic institutions (21).

To allow for more punctual contributions, most IOs have also strengthened their consultation practices–with some exceptions in the most sensitive sectors such as security and nuclear energy. They have done so by setting up specific policies and standing bodies or processes to engage stakeholders at key points in the development of their instruments. Examples include:

- The WHO has developed the “Framework of Engagement with non-State actors”, a comprehensive policy on stakeholder engagement that applies across the Organisation and governs the WHO’s engagement with NGOs, the private sector, philanthropic foundations and academic institutions. Four types of interactions are envisaged: participation in WHO meetings and hearings, provision of financial and in-kind contributions, provision on up-to-date information and knowledge on technical issues; advocacy; and technical collaboration.
- In 1992, the Earth Summit formalized 9 sectors of society as the main channels through which broad participation would be facilitated in UN activities related to sustainable development, including Women, Children and Youth, Indigenous Peoples, NGOs, Local Authorities, Workers and Trade Unions, Business and Industry, Scientific and Technological Community and Farmers. Member States ultimately decide upon the modalities of participation of these groups, which therefore varies depending on the sustainable development topic under discussion.1
- In 2024, one of the major outcomes of COP16 held in Cali was the establishment by the Convention on Biological Diversity of a new subsidiary body for the full and effective participation of indigenous peoples and local communities with a mandate to provide advice to the Conference of the Parties and other subsidiary bodies (IDDRI, 2024).

Stakeholder engagement practices mainly take place in substantive committees and working groups rather than in governing bodies. In most cases, comments are received from specific stakeholder groups (rather than the general public, which is daunting at international level) and these groups are entitled to provide inputs based on an official status in the organisation and/or through specific advisory committees.

- The International Maritim Organization (IMO) grants special consultative status to stakeholders prior to consulting with them. Any organization seeking consultative status must demonstrate expertise and the capacity to contribute to the work of the IMO, within its field of competence. It must also show that it is international in membership, with its members geographically diverse, usually from more than one region. This status gives selected stakeholders the right to receive the agendas of meetings of IMO bodies and to submit documents on items of these agendas. To date, the IMO has granted consultative status to 89 international NGOs (up from 77, 10 years ago).

A number of international organizations have invested in ensuring that de jure equal participation is followed through by de facto capacity to participate through adequate funding and capacity building.

- In 2012, the UN Human Rights Council has established a Trust Fund to support the participation of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), in particular those with no permanent representation in Geneva, in the work of the Council. The Trust Fund runs on voluntary contributions from UN Member States.2

You don’t get points for efforts – show me the results

Despite these developments, the perception of unequal participation and biased representation remains strong and has even amplified in recent years–notably with the structuring of the voice from the “Global South”. This is also fueled by specific debates around the reform of the Bretton Woods institutions and around international taxation. And in some respects, the promise of universality of the Paris Climate Agreement also seems to have been broken, leading to anger and frustration (IDDRI, 2025). So how do we solve the paradox and growing divide between, on the one hand, the IOs procedural progress in opening up, and, on the other, the growing frustration and pervasive perception of an imbalance. There is no simple answer to this. While thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of mechanisms and procedures adopted by specific IOs to open up to new constituencies would need to be conducted to assess their reality, two transversal aspects may fuel the divide.

First, as illustrated by the trends above, inclusiveness of international governance is elusive and multifaceted–it takes several forms: more equal country participation in international rulemaking vs. a wider range of represented interests in international fora (beyond States); procedural representation vs. effective influence. Beyond the many complexities of inclusiveness of international governance, the lack of tangible or clearly recognizable impacts might be driving the negative perception. In the specialized fora where they are invited, the new voices at the table may not yet feel able to influence the outcomes or may feel neglected in the cacophony of voices that IOs may sometimes be. And from the outside, some of the worsening trends that affect disproportionally the most vulnerable countries–in terms of conflicts, health or debt following the COVID 19 pandemic–may also give the feeling that multilateralism is not delivering on its promises and cancel out the procedural improvements that may take place in international governance.

Second, the “normative” IOs whose trends are discussed above share several important governance arrangements, including that decision making relies on the 1 member-1 vote formula, and most act under the consensus rule for substantive matters (i.e. decision is taken unless one member actively opposes). They differ from other types of international fora such as international financial institutions (IFIs) where the financial contributors hold the decision making. In recent years, finance has become both a very structuring theme in sustainable development discussions and a contentious one–as illustrated by the blockages in the climate discussions at COP29 in Baku (IDDRI, 2024) and the growing focus in various fora, notably the G20, on reforming the international financial architecture. In many ways the contentious finance discussions are spreading across international fora and affecting all sustainable development negotiations as illustrated, inter alia, by the mixed results of COP16 on biodiversity. This may make one wonder whether the quest for inclusivity in international governance can be resolved until the reform of the IFIs and the Bretton Woods institutions is addressed head front.

Going forward, one thing is clear: with the fast development of the international ecosystem needed to deal with the complex interactions across issues and geographies, most countries risk struggling even further to find the resources (including the technical expertise) required to follow discussions that are taking place in the multiple fora of relevance to their national policy making–making the promise of inclusivity an increasingly challenging one to meet. While new practices introduced with COVID, for example remote participation, may provide some partial answers to the resource challenges (notably the travelling aspect), there is a need for countries to reconsider their participation in multilateral governance with a view to strengthening its effectiveness–via, inter alia, sharing roles among countries and better aligning position within governments. Whether it is reasonable to see international law continuing addressing complexity through the same instruments and by mandate expansion is also a more structural discussion to take up.

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About Major Groups and other stakeholders: Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform

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LDCs/SIDS Trust Fund | OHCHR

CLIMATE | GOUVERNANCE | INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS | MULTILATERALISM