



## Is There a Future for Multilateralism?

### The Challenges of Global Governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

#### Webinar 1 – The UN System and the Structures of Global Governance

22 October 2020 – 4 to 5:30 pm

#### Blog Post by Daniel Manzoni (Student Intern, Master in European Governance)

In conjunction with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN, the UNESCO Chair on Human Rights at the University of Luxembourg organized two webinars dealing with Multilateralism and the challenges of Global Governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The opening session, on 22 October 2020, examined the UN System and Structures of Global Governance, attracting a total of 23 participants. The session was moderated by the holder of the Chair, Professor Robert Harmsen, hosting the speakers Dr. Basak Baglayan (Postdoctoral Researcher, Department of Law, University of Luxembourg), Mr. Luc Dockendorf (Counsellor for Human Rights and International Organizations, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Luxembourg) and Dr. Christopher Lilyblad (Policy and Strategy Specialist, UNDP/UNICEF/UNFPA Joint Office, Cabo Verde).

The discussion was introduced with general remarks by **Professor Harmsen**, laying out the path ahead and providing an overview of definitions relevant to dealing with multilateralism. Harmsen noted that as we are marking the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN system, discussions on multilateralism are increasingly concerned with wider governance architectures. Concurrently, the role of the UN system is being reconceived towards acting as an orchestrator for both better ‘networked’ (bringing together diverse regional and international organizations in more structured forms of cooperation) and ‘inclusive’ (drawing on and in a wider range of NGOs and other civil society actors) multilateralism.

The first speaker, **Dr. Baglayan**, presented a number of contradictions at the heart of the emerging governance architecture at the international level. Within the context of the business and human rights debate, the speaker gave an overview of the (thus far failed) attempts by the UN to impose legally binding obligations on companies focusing on the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). She noted that the UNGPs, despite being a soft law instrument, were producing some hard results through private law contracts and domestic legislation. The speaker then argued that there was a general trend towards an increase in soft law instruments, which were filling gaps in the absence of treaty law. The speaker observed that these soft law instruments often emanate not only from states but also non-state actors, leading to a rather depoliticized model of governance, which she argued is replacing multilateralism with ‘multi-stakeholderism’.

The second speaker, **Mr. Dockendorf** presented a balance sheet of both some of the successes and some of the failures of the UN over the past 75 years, gives us a daunting set of challenges for the future. Quoting Dag Hammarskjöld's famous observation that the UN was 'not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell', the speaker underlined the impressive achievements of the UN over the past 75 years, such as its contribution to the eradication of smallpox, the accompaniment of decolonization, and overseeing the construction of a complex and ever more complete set of protections for human rights, dignity and equality. At the same time, many challenges such as conflict, genocide, poverty, inequality, authoritarianism, and the climate crisis remain unsolved, while progressive and authoritarian states promote divergent forms of networked cooperation and have different visions of the future of multilateralism.

The third speaker, **Dr. Lilyblad**, raised the question of a possible mismatch between the reality of state capacity on the ground and the assumptions we make when talking of the multilateral system. Drawing on his personal experience in Cabo Verde and enriching it with an excursus into political philosophy, the speaker took illicit social orders as a case study to demonstrate that global governance goes beyond a multilateral international order of recognized territorial states and in fact is inherently polycentric, emerging from spontaneous interactions of numerous forms of human agency ranging from the local to the global and vice versa, including not only states and regional systems but also myriad forms of non-state governance of NGOs, CSOs, and illicit social orders that interact in local arenas.

The speakers were then questioned by the moderator and members of the audience. The subsequent discussion moved from multilateralism to multi-stakeholderism – eliciting a sense of the complexities and difficulties of these new governance architectures. The moderator concluded the session on the remark that as we multiply actors, we have to understand configurations and various asymmetries of power and influence within them, and how these new networked structures may reproduce existing domestic imbalances to the benefit of particular actors within the multilateral structures.