A Volatile Context: A Revisionist Lens on Good Governance

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Abstract

Pressures on the legitimacy of global governance are coming from many sides, including from people who feel betrayed by unfulfilled promises and others who wonder if governance structures can ever become truly accountable and responsive to often deep and evolving human insecurity. This article calls for the integration of norms of governance that can better balance hierarchy and protocol with constituent care and service.

Keywords Servant leadership · Security Council · UN reform · Hierarchies · Norm building

Everyone has the power for greatness, not for fame but greatness, because greatness is determined by service.
—Martin Luther King Jr., US civil rights leader
‘Most good things have already been said far too many times and just need to be lived.’
—Shane Claiborne, social activist, New Monasticism movement.

The purpose of this essay is to reflect on what might be construed as ‘ideal’ forms of global governance, written from the vantage point of someone who has spent 18+ years watching multilateral initiatives rise and fall, global leaders do the same, and promises made by multilateral institutions rhetorically guaranteeing a full loaf to constituents delivering merely half of that, at times even less. This contribution will thus consider that balancing act between tinkering with the existing system and suggesting deeper remedies for governance structures that seem to have lost their way—that have (fairly or unfairly) forfeited much of the trust and goodwill of which they were once beneficiaries.

An unintended and complicating backdrop for this reflection is the January 2021 siege on the US Capitol by

insurgents incited by the (now former) US president citing conspiracy theories about ‘stolen’ elections, accusations rendered by the some of the very people who have long enabled the suppression of voters, mostly poor and working-class people of colour, many of whom overcame threats and severe inconveniences to deliver a rebuke to at least some of the remnants of what the prior US administration has wrought.

Like others, I was unsurprised by this eruption of violent grievance. Divides of politics, of economics, even of the basic tenets of reality itself have been widening within and beyond US borders over many years, certainly years before this particular insurrection. Having been present in several conflict-affected states, it barely occurs to me any longer that governments are operating with what might be understood as the active assent of more than a portion of the populace. To the degree to which such assent exists, it is often tempered by the suspicion that governments are devoted to serving some interests more than others, and that they are not sufficiently conscious of—let alone accountable for—the messes that have occurred on their collective watches, the cans that they (with insufficient resistance from the rest of us) have chosen to kick down the road, leaving them for another generation to pick up and attempt to discard. The heavily fortified and often-gated communities that characterize the domiciles of the wealthy and powerful, the large security contingents that accompany the movements of our global leadership, are tangible symbols of how disconnected we are from each other, perhaps long have been, as the moats encircling medieval castles attest. ‘Good governance’ has rightly become a core objective for many policy

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works, but consensus regarding who it is ‘good’ for or how we might best measure its progress in our bitterly divided world remains, to my mind at least, still in substantial doubt.

It was ironic that, virtually as the insurrection at the US Capitol was being instigated by former president Trump and other firebrands, a US representative to the UN Security Council was delivering a statement at a Council meeting hosted by the president of Tunisia and devoted to an exploration of the linkages between ‘fragility and conflict’. The representative, speaking at almost the same moment as armed rioters and fellow travelers headed towards the Capitol, lamented the fragility within states that is a consequence of both official corruption and what he referred to as ‘authoritarian tendencies’. The irony of this was perhaps lost on most listeners in real time, but as that day progressed, the discontinuities became much clearer.

For it is apparent that citizens from Minsk to Yangon are now living through what promises to be intermittent waves of angry and even violent incidents, including abuses against journalists and peaceful protesters, highlighting not so much the force of law but the law of force. Aside from their obvious implications for the stability of individual states and the global community as a whole, these incidents call to mind the extent to which the governance ‘we’ need is inextricably linked to the capacities of people to discern the times more deeply and fairly than our readily accessible conspiracies and disinformation require of us; to act in solidarity and not only in self-interest; to examine and soften grievances and not only to call them out with both our vocal chords and our deadly weapons; to eliminate the self-righteousness that manifests itself as conspiratorial ‘patriotism’ or which takes the form of policy utterances by self-referential guardians of our now-fragmenting social order, an ‘order’ which has long needed a serious course correction if not a series of such corrections.

Imagining a More Responsive Governance System

To my mind at least, the most important questions regarding the health of global governance is related to the tone that we commit to establish: projecting institutional norms and attitudes which can respond to challenges in our future better than in our past, that can deliver on promises of peace and health, development and disarmament, and do so for a full complement of the world’s people and not only a fortunate subset. Our task is thus not so much to probe what is ‘realistically’ confined to the limits of what we have been trained to expect from leadership and their supporting bureaucracies. Rather it is to provide reflection on the ‘what if’. What if our governance structures were as inclusive and attentive as they sometimes claim to be? What if we could somehow insist

on governance that played by the same rules that the rest of us are required to play by? What if we could hold leaders accountable when they fail to keep their promises, including the promise to put the needs of constituents ahead of their own privilege? What if we had governance that acted like a capable ‘sentinel’, sniffing out problems and crises before they occur and ensuring that we are all properly inoculated against viruses real and metaphorical, not only highlighting but addressing (with the input and skills of many more of us) the varying dangers that proliferate in our time and for which we are still not sufficiently prepared, let alone accountable after the fact?

Answers to questions such as these remain exploratory at best. Indeed, one of the criticisms of our own Global Action to Prevent War and Armed Conflict project at UN Headquarters is that our policy recommendations aren’t sufficiently ‘realistic’, aren’t invested enough in the structural changes we might possibly be willing to make and too much in the normative and personal/individual changes we seem much less likely to make. But recent events around the world, including the DC insurrection, are evidence that agencies of global governance (including the UN and its Security Council) offer too little in terms of how their normative pronouncements—regulations and resolutions—translate into tangible dividends and hopeful energies for people. Even Security Council resolutions, despite their erstwhile ‘binding’ nature, are too often unenforced, as with Palestine and Syria, or (especially in their application to its permanent members) essentially unenforceable. And General Assembly resolutions, with few exceptions, outline destinations more than guarantee arrivals, with promises to besieged constituents only selectively honoured, even by the states that voted their support. And as the stakes rise, as is now the case with Yemen, the Occupied Territories, the Iranian Nuclear Weapons programme, climate change and trafficking in many forms, discussions in the Security Council Chamber and the General Assembly Hall can take on more of the flavour of a passive-aggressive squabble than a sincere attempt to uphold responsibilities as the Charter-designated guardians of our collective well-being. Such discussions often seem to be as much about staking out national interests as about meeting obligations to those growing millions whose lives continue to be upended in multiple ways by threats of many natures, many causes and many actors. Good governance indeed.

Global Governance and Peace and Security

Regarding the Security Council, there is no dodging based on some ascription of ‘realism’ the degree to which its policy failures or its politically motivated inaction have ramifications for the entire system of global governance. Most advocates with whom we interact assess the UN largely by

what the Council does or fails to do regarding its conflict-related responsibilities. Advocate views regarding the reliability and utility of the entire UN system—fairly or not—are linked to the ability of that chamber to prevent conflict in the first instance and resolve it quickly and fairly when prevention proves impossible. When Council diplomats fail to see a broader and more comprehensive conflict-related picture, when they fail to recognize that half-successes on peace and security potentially impair the lives and aspirations of millions—including the lives of courageous humanitarian workers seeking to minimize civilian damage from armed violence they are powerless to stop—then there is cause for concern, even alarm. As a January 2021 Security Council meeting hosted by Tunisia’s president made plain, the fragilities that continue to plague large swaths of the global population and which COVID-19 has made more severe, also continue their macabre dance with conflict actors and the illicit arms transfers that fuel so much misery among the most vulnerable. The equivalence here seems too clear to miss: the more fragility, the greater threat of conflict; the longer conflict persists, the more likely that fragilities risk being frozen into place if not expanding in much the same way that freezing water expands in its receptacle.

Despite such discouraging disconnects, one of the factors that keeps people like me engaged with the UN, its agencies and growing roster of partner organizations, is its ability to convene conversations on a dazzling array of concerns—from ocean health and the rights of persons with disabilities to eliminating child soldiers and establishing accountability mechanisms for atrocity crimes. In the security field, the UN has brokered treaties to regulate the global arms trade and prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and has created new structures—principally its Peacebuilding Commission—which hold promise beyond Security Council bickering and bottlenecks for engaging conflict threats more holistically and at earlier stages. In the development field, the UN engages in often-honest and intense conversations about how to promote, implement and finance the various, connected elements of our game-changing responsibilities under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. And in this area, as in others, the UN has access to the most thoughtful and recognizable figures in fields from urban design to cyber-security, ensuring that resolutions and intended actions have at least a ‘puncher’s chance’ of embodying the most innovative thinking within the most impactful policy recommendations.

But in this impressive policy bubble, I fear we lose sight of the extent to which our policy discussions and resolutions not only clarify expectations for global constituents but also raise them. And one of the frustrations is the degree to which UN aspirations for constituents remain closely tied to the expectations of states and not enough to ‘end-user’ constituents themselves. The UN services many global public

interests, including food assistance and civilian protection, and often discharges that service under extreme and threatening conditions. But so much of that response seems akin to a complex and unsatisfying concession to the armed conflict we all have failed to prevent, the climate crisis we have insufficiently addressed, the rights abuse to which we have so often turned a blind eye. Our system of multilateral governance is, more than we might wish to admit, a function of what affluent and powerful states permit it to become, influenced more by such states than it often influences in return, and this basic limitation to our current system of global governance remains largely hidden from constituents. They rarely understand the extent to which the UN’s lofty and progressive rhetoric masks its fealty to powerful state priorities, resigning the ‘lofty’ and ‘progressive’ to largely rhetorical space, crying ‘wolf’ on global crises so often that the very urgency and compassion of policy and action that might better guarantee a common, sustainable future in practice is duly undermined.

The repercussions from alternately raised and dashed peace and development expectations are clearly grasped by a growing number of UN Member States and stakeholders, which in part explains why the UN’s general membership continues to invest as much energy as it now does in ‘Security Council reform’. To be fair, such ‘reform’ has been on the formal agenda of the General Assembly for many years and will continue to be so in 2021¹ with impediments to its success related both to differences of opinion on how to prioritize reform (do we focus on expanding elected membership, on eliminating the veto, or on making room for more geographically representative permanent members) as well as on how to force the five permanent members to abide by agreed-upon changes if ever consensus on substance and direction can be achieved. Such discussion will continue, should continue, as more and more stakeholders see the Council as much a roadblock to as an enabler of the global governance we need now.

Personal Dimensions of Governance

While such efforts to ‘fix’ the current governance system continue, there is another aspect that it is essential for us to consider and which is often lacking in analysis, and that is the demonstration of personal conviction that can help

¹ The current president of the UN General Assembly, Volkan Bozkır, outlined his priorities for 2021 and communicated that Security Council reform will remain high on the General Assembly agenda <https://www.un.org/pga/75/2021/01/21/briefing-to-the-general-assembly-on-priorities/>. His predecessor, Tijjani Muhammad Bande, highlighted the most likely to be endorsed options for such reform: <https://www.un.org/pga/74/2020/02/13/security-council-reform-2/>.

cultivate constituent trust and inspire constituent participation. We often ask, how might we fashion governance structures freed of corruption and indifference, structures which embody more effective incentives to care and compassion for each other? In addition, can we possibly attain governance freed from the limitations of politics and bureaucratic inertia if people being governed are unable or unwilling to cast aside their own questionable habits, including of consumption and grievance, of conspiratorial leanings and discriminatory practices? In this time when people in the US are literally being attacked over suggestions from health officials to wear a face mask in the middle of a raging pandemic, what are the disconnects that need to be exposed and remediated, not only of institutional architecture but more fundamentally of human solidarity, compassion and generosity?

Can we truly imagine forms of global governance distanced from its habituated and limiting moorings without also imagining a constituent community better distanced from its own such moorings?

Unlike many of my politically progressive friends and UN colleagues, I retain more faith in people than in institutions. Over many years of sitting in UN conference rooms, I have witnessed an expansion of institutional life and governance which rightly focuses attention on a bevy of important, connected issues and concerns; and which also attracts vast quantities of elite talent to define and implement such concerns, much of it stemming from our most renowned universities, and then sets it on a path to communicate—often subtly—that ‘we’ know what is best for the rest of you, the ‘rest’ about whom we in our institutional bubbles probably assume too much and know much too little.

We who are inheritors of so-called ‘Western values’ and their institutional embodiments, we who have passed through our own sordid embrace of colonialism, institutional racism and authoritarianism should have long ago renounced any pretensions regarding some innate relationship between the ‘best’ upbringing and schooling on the one hand, and the real-world application of our most humane values on the other. As the environmentalist, farmer and philosopher Wendell Berry has long noted, the system of higher education from which much of our governance ‘leadership’ graduates is largely devoted to ‘consumerist, selfish motives’ and promises of ‘upward mobility’, which he believes (as do I) has done considerable damage to our land and our communities.² Whether we like it or not, whether it suits our self-concepts or not, the education and background required to hold a place at the table of global governance is, of itself, no guarantee of governance that is humane and believable, that can act competently, honestly and persuasively, or that can cultivate and maintain trust such that urgent pronouncements

(such as on climate change and global pandemics) are something other than one more occasion for suspicious or cynical minds to posit some back-door ‘benefit’ from the warnings emanating from our policy centres, benefits that will likely not accrue to themselves or their communities. We in policy have more still to prove to constituents, and much of that is about the values to which we aspire and seek to incarnate more than the institutions we presume to serve and represent.

Forward Looking and Backsliding Leadership Bubbles

I do not wish to dismiss or demean attempts within our current configurations of global governance, including and especially the UN, to fix what isn’t sufficiently functional in either issue priorities or working methods. Many of us appreciate how hard UN Secretary-General Guterres has pushed this past year on pandemic response and a global cease fire. We support his commitment that 2021 will be a year for expanding progress on reducing the life-threatening impact of greenhouse gases. For her part, Deputy Secretary-General Mohammed has invested considerable personal and institutional energy on efforts to reform the UN Resident Coordinator system such that it might become more directly responsive to national needs and priorities. She has also kept pressure on government and other stakeholders to fund the Sustainable Development Goals and accompanying targets that Member States adopted in 2015, targets which in many key instances are lagging well behind their anticipated performance. The UN’s humanitarian system, including its food programme leadership, has organized the provision of courageously-delivered, life-saving assistance to millions even as the major causes of hunger and displacement—climate change and conflict—remain largely unresolved by the agencies and powers to which such resolution has been entrusted.

Despite these efforts, it has become clearer to me as to others in this policy space that our structures and institutions of governance are barely keeping up with the fresh challenges which continue to expose the limitations, not only of governance itself, but of human beings and human communities. We are living in a time which could aptly be described as ‘backsliding’. Under the cloud of COVID-19, which is now excessively posited as both a cause of and excuse for our personal and policy failings, individuals have pulled up their ‘welcome’ mats and shrunk their circles of concern, governments have stepped up their sometimes-repressive ‘security measures’, commitments to accountability for atrocity crimes are waning, weapons continue to proliferate in some global regions like locusts, and the number of unresolved conflicts on the Security Council agenda remains frustratingly static. And while ‘condemnations’ for abusive and violent behaviour flow freely from the Council,

² A point well established in Baker and Bilbro (2018).

Secretariat leadership and numerous NGOs, it is unclear that such denunciations matter whatsoever to the perpetrators of abuses who remain largely unaccountable for their actions, at least in the short term.

It is a signature component of our worldview that justice is essential to lasting peace, yet too many in the world lack either, nor the development that can keep families and communities afloat until the guns are silenced and our international and other ‘special’ courts can more effectively do their investigative and prosecutorial work. And while the UN and its core institutional partners have been a consistent voice in recent times for sanity and solidarity, it is concerning that some of its most urgent messaging seems to be losing its impact. Leadership has been properly vocal at the range of challenges—unmet and only partially addressed—which continue to threaten the lives of humans and other species on this planet. And such leadership is often quick to confirm that there are indeed glimmers of hope beyond the darkness and loneliness that currently plague us. But what constituents really need is what some refer to as ‘peace dividends’, concrete measures indicating that there is an actionable plan to reallocate funding for war and weapons, from corruption and illicit financial flows, and to use that to promote a safer, healthier world for all. We all long to see that governments can honour promises in more than a piecemeal manner, that building blocks have been set in place that can provide a stable foundation for justice and security, abundance and equity. For many people, this is the only ‘hope’ that matters now, not a pious promise of change but a gender, race, age and capacity conduit to tangibility based on assurance that the ‘solidarity’ we routinely tout is more than a rhetorical commitment, more than a pipe dream, more than a goal too lofty to pursue let alone attain.

Can we truly incarnate this hope? Are we up to this challenge? Are we prepared to demonstrate in our leadership and governance that habits of self-interest can give way to common interest? Are we able to ensure that those who manage our institutions are as committed to social and economic inclusion as the times now demand? If the answer is no, then we are left with governance ‘bubbles’ that relate primarily to the segment of states that pay the bills and the segment of civil society that is well-presented and well-educated, that advocates social justice in fluent English and that respects the protocols and privileges of governance in which it (not always so secretly) hopes to share.

Tinkering and Transforming

I have no firm blueprint to offer regarding the most effective paths forward. I am, however, convinced of the need to establish and nurture forms of global governance that can galvanize compassionate and competent response to human

and biosphere threats and not merely highlight them; that can create what Kenya in January 2021 in the UN Security Council referred to as ‘bridges of peace’ that all are able to walk across; that can guarantee empowerment and participation as universal aspirations not confined to those with the ‘right’ pedigree, DNA or academic training.

In this 75th year of the existence of the UN, we have seen a bevy of suggestions and recommendations under the rubric ‘The UN We Need’ that seek to address a few of the more pressing and largely neglected institutional governance concerns. Many of these recommendations have been courtesy of groups of well-resourced and branded NGOs which have rightly highlighted existential threats to the global commons to which the UN is often structurally and culturally impaired in its responses. A core component of these solutions is the greater involvement by civil society which is assumed to be key to a more responsive, less state-focused governance system, an assumption I would support albeit with caveats regarding the importance of avoiding any and all ‘gate-keeping’, thereby creating NGO hierarchies that mirror the hierarchies (and their participation limitations) of states and multilateral institutions.

Two of the proposals suggested by civil society in response to the demands of the times and the UN’s 75th year self-assessment are worth noting in this context: the call for a parliamentary assembly (either advisory or elected) as a supplement to the diplomat-exclusive General Assembly and another call for a special envoy on civil society relations who would, in effect, serve as a member of the Secretary-General’s cabinet and help resolve issues and tensions regarding civil society participation at UN Headquarters and other UN sites, issues which are only rarely resolved within the current NGO governance structures.³

Such ‘tinkering’ with the system, massaging some of the obvious markers of institutional inclusion, working to ensure that historical entitlements of power can yield in some measure to new global circumstances and constituencies, could surely be helpful at one level. Global Action has, for instance, long been on record as favouring more horizontal dynamics within the community of NGOs as well as within the full UN system and its Security Council, reinforcing the

³ These civil society recommendations can be found in a one-page ‘elements paper’ under the aegis of UN 2020 entitled: ‘Acknowledging Achievements and Looking Ahead’, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Au9HYX19hAjXcNC5BFdhW6vEtSuyCqIS/view> as well as in a document of responses to the ‘elements paper’, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1CPYGhRB2Sdqotesn1F76bWNzoRX2181Oc_4ta26mUkc/edit. It should also be noted that in 1995 the report of the Commission on Global Governance issued a list of ‘cornerstone values’ for such governance which included: life, liberty, justice, equity, mutual respect, caring and integrity. *Our global neighborhood: The report of the Commission on Global Governance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

importance of all stakeholders to take up their responsibility for international peace and security in the same way that we expect permanent Council members to fulfill institutionally relevant development and rights commitments.

But we also note those times when we have watched state and non-state actors willfully disregarding their funding and programmatic responsibilities to the UN as though the maintenance of this system—including its effective and reliable promise keeping—is less important in fact than it appears to be in rhetoric. And we recognize the largely unchecked tendencies of gate-keeping and narrow issue interests that characterize much of our own NGO community, our willingness to ‘silo’ issues even when we know they cannot be resolved in that way, our openness mostly to those ideas ‘from the field’ filtered through the policy preferences and mandates of our organizational and funder interests. We are not convinced that a citizen parliament or special envoy would do much other than to establish new hierarchies and create fresh bottlenecks to participation, rather than inspiring greater courage and commitment to planetary welfare in all our communities.

A Service and Care-Oriented Lens on Institutional Governance

For our part, we have examined alternate frameworks to help incarnate a more person-centered, values-driven set of priorities by those exercising the levers of global governance. To this end, Global Action has long advocated a model of what it calls ‘servant leadership’, a model which is increasingly gaining an audience within corporations grappling with how to attract and retain candidates with skill and character, candidates who see the success of business interests as inextricably linked to the well-being of the retail, manufacturing and supply-chain communities of which they are a constituent part. The key to servant leadership is the core commitment of leadership to the personal and professional well-being of colleagues both proximate and distanced. It seeks to promote structures of authority (more than power) which are more horizontal in nature, structures where responsibility can be modeled, cultivated and shared, and where characteristics of empathy, stewardship and commitment to the personal growth of colleagues and constituents temper tendencies to preserve institutional power and its perks. A structure that is built on mutual and cooperative accountability.

Servant Leadership has in fact been embraced more and more by managers who have come to understand the limitations of a dominant leadership mode that consolidates both institutional direction and benefit in a few hands. Such managers have embraced this approach (and encouraged people like me to interrogate its potential with business students)

despite what is often initial skepticism regarding the applicability of more ‘personal’ models to the complexities of modern institutions. But the person generally honoured as one of the seminal founders and interpreters of servant leadership—Robert K. Greenleaf (2009)—explains how this model has broader applicability than we might otherwise suspect:

Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person to person, now most of it is mediated through institutions—often large, complex, powerful, impersonal; not always competent; sometimes corrupt. If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them.

This ‘regenerative’ commitment to genuinely horizontal and compassionate forms of governance that can inspire and integrate care and growth within the most complex of bureaucratic structures is clearly a high bar, perhaps higher than our current human capacity to attain. For it requires not only that we examine how we might be freezing others out of policy involvement, but also that we interrogate and, if necessary, dismantle the hierarchies within our own policy sectors, shifting the ways in which we over-reference the goals and methods of our own work and inadvertently or deliberately exclude, demean or marginalize the efforts and aspirations of others. The horizontal, person-centred governance for which we advocate is, we believe, well equipped to build constituent confidence not only regarding its competence but its responsiveness as well, demonstrating in practical ways that the well-being of our diverse and too-often vulnerable constituencies are as important to us as our own. It represents a commitment to shift our power-driven frameworks to those of mutual authority and solidarity, to renounce privileges of power that serve mostly to divide wedges between those who rule and those on the other side of the metaphorical throne longing for relief from the multiple ills which afflict themselves, their families and their communities.

It is through this (for us) familiar and reassuring lens of servant leadership that I can best fulfill the aspirations of this essay—to posit forms of governance that are more attentive and humane, that are genuinely enthusiastic about recruiting and involving diverse expressions of talent and expertise, and which prefer to look constituents squarely in the eye rather than peering down at them from some lofty policy perch. We may never see such horizontal, service-oriented governance modeling in our collective lifetime (and the recent rise of authoritarian, autocratic leadership should give us pause), but the inclusive trust and solidarity many are calling for in this 75th UN year, and which are needed

to heal and restore their own conflict- and climate-affected settings, will likely remain elusive until we do.

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