

The 'Transnational Turn' in Multilateralism

Jönsson, Christier, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Lund University, Sweden, and a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. He is currently directing the research program Transdemos ("Democracy Beyond the Nation State? Transnational Actors and Global Governance") and is co-editor of Transnational Actors in Global Governance (2010). He serves as Chair of the ACUNS Board of Directors.

Four times in modern history statesmen and diplomats have convened to create new world orders: at the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 after the Thirty Years War, at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 after the Napoleonic Wars, in Paris in 1919 after World War I, and in San Francisco in 1945 after World War II. The Peace of Westphalia established a European system of secular authority, laying the foundation of the modern state. The Congress of Vienna begot the Concert of Europe, a club of great powers dedicated to preventing the emergence of revolutionary states. The legacy of these early reordering attempts is still with us. The system of states has spread beyond Europe and is now worldwide. And the club model has contemporary global applications in the UN Security Council as well as the G8 or G20. The twentieth-century postwar conferences gave rise to modern multilateralism based on a system of global and regional intergovernmental organizations (IGOs).

The recent global financial and economic crisis has not elicited a new assembly of statesmen and diplomats to deliberate on a new world order. To be sure, the previous reordering attempts came in the wake of major wars; and, although the financial crisis has had grave effects worldwide, it did not threaten world peace. But the contemporary situation differs from the previous four in another, more profound way. Today government representatives would not have been able to chart a new global order, even if they had had the political will to do so. States are no longer the sole, sovereign arbiters of world affairs.

This means that traditional multilateralism in terms of interstate collaboration is insufficient to offer viable solutions to pressing global problems. Today various actors from the economic sphere and civil society claim, and are increasingly granted, access to various national and international forums. For instance, while the UN was initially restrictive in allowing NGOs into the organization, almost 3,000 NGOs now have consultative status with ECOSOC, as compared to 41 in 1948. In addition, more than 5,000 businesses participate in the UN Global Compact, a UN initiative launched in 2000 to establish a partnership with the transnational business sector around a number of universally accepted principles.

This means that any discussion of contemporary multilateralism must take a broader set of transnational actors into account. These are individuals and groups who act beyond national borders yet are not controlled by governments. While international organizations were long the exclusive preserve of national governments, the past decades have witnessed a gradual and partial shift from interstate multilateralism to more complex forms of governance, involving participation by transnational actors, such as NGOs, advocacy networks, party associations, and multinational corporations. Increasingly,

states and international institutions are engaging transnational actors as policy experts, service providers, compliance watchdogs, and stakeholder representatives.

The World Bank, for instance, draws on the expertise of NGOs in the formulation of country reports, engages in operational collaboration with civil society actors in the field, and conducts policy dialogue through the NGO-World Bank Committee. Whereas only 21 percent of all World Bank funded projects involved civil society participation in 1990, this figure had risen to 72 percent in 2006. The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) provides another example, engaging transnational actors by offering NGOs accreditation to its meetings, operating a Global Civil Society Forum, and drawing on civil society in the implementation of its programs. At the 2008 Global Civil Society Forum, about 190 representatives of civil society organizations from 42 countries participated. A final illustration is the World Trade Organization (WTO), which traditionally has been hesitant to consult or collaborate with non-state actors, but which nowadays invites NGOs as observers at ministerial meetings and grants private actors the right to submit legal briefs on trade disputes. At the Hong Kong Ministerial Conference in 2005, more than 700 NGOs eventually attended, among them faith-based organizations; business, labor and farmer associations; and human rights, environmental and development groups.

The mechanisms by which transnational actors participate in global governance come in multiple shapes and forms. Provisions for formal representation of transnational actors on the decision-making bodies of international organizations remain rare. The International Labor Organization (ILO) and the EU offer exceptional arrangements in this regard. Formal mechanisms for collaboration between international organizations and transnational actors have become increasingly common since the 1980s. Two prominent forms are contracts for NGOs to perform services on the part of international institutions, and access for private actors to international courts and tribunals. In the UN, for instance, support to NGOs working as sub-contractors to UN projects has grown remarkably, with official funding of NGOs tripling in the 1980s, and then doubling again in the 1990s. And nearly all new courts created since 1990 offer direct mechanisms for individuals, NGOs, or firms.

Consultation arrangements probably constitute the most common form of participation for transnational actors in international institutions. They include arrangements for NGO accreditation to international conferences, civil society advisory bodies, and complaints procedures for private parties. Institutions that previously did not permit transnational actors in decision-making bodies, such as the WTO, have introduced accreditation procedures, and institutions that already offered such provisions, such as the UN, have expanded them.

Public-private partnerships have emerged as a prominent new type of arrangement in recent decades. These are formally agreed cooperative ventures between public and private actors (including companies, NGOs and foundations), aiming at the provision of public goods. Within the UN, public-private partnership is defined as “a voluntary and collaborative agreement between one or more parts of the United Nations system and non-State actors, in which all participants agree to work together to achieve a common purpose or undertake a specific task and to share risks, responsibilities, resources, Increasingly, states and international institutions are engaging transnational actors as policy experts, service providers, compliance watchdogs, and stakeholder representatives. Within the UN, public-

private partnership is defined as “a voluntary and collaborative agreement between one or more parts of the United Nations system and non-State actors, in which all participants agree to work together to achieve a common purpose or undertake a specific task and to share risks, responsibilities, resources, competencies and benefits.” Partnerships differ in degrees of formal institutionalization and geographical scope, and operate in a range of issue-areas. The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) are prominent examples in global public health; “CDM partnerships,” projects under the Kyoto Protocol’s Clean Development Mechanism, and “Johannesburg partnerships,” adopted at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, exemplify the growing reliance on multi-stakeholder partnerships in environmental governance.

Why, then, has this “transnational turn” occurred in recent decades? There may be several possible explanations. One focuses on functional needs for policy-relevant information, efficient implementation and monitoring of commitments. The more demanding the governance problem – in terms of technical complexity, local programmatic activity and non-compliance incentives – the greater the need for transnational actors.

Another explanation highlights challenges to IGO legitimacy. Critics increasingly portray international organizations as suffering from “democratic deficits,” when measured against traditional standards of democracy, such as participation, accountability, and transparency. Several transnational actors claim to enhance democracy at the global level. While controversial, such claims are widely acknowledged. For example, the Cardoso report, the most recent UN document outlining the relationship between civil society and the United Nations, stated categorically that “the growing participation and influence of nonstate actors is enhancing democracy and reshaping multilateralism.”

Thus, granting transnational actors a more active role in global governance arrangements may be a response to challenged legitimacy on the part of IGO member states and secretariats. This response could be either a form of tactical adaptation or a genuine adoption of new norms of global participatory democracy.

In short, the “transnational turn” in multilateralism raises important questions and calls for more insights. Several research efforts are in progress, including a Lund-Stockholm program I’m directing. The ACUNS Annual Meeting in Waterloo this summer will be an excellent opportunity to compare notes and shed further light on the changing character of multilateralism.

Christer Jönsson is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Lund University, Sweden, and a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. He is currently directing the research program Transdemos (“Democracy Beyond the Nation State? Transnational Actors and Global Governance”) and is co-editor of Transnational Actors in Global Governance (2010). He serves as Chair of the ACUNS Board of Directors.