Subsidiarity and Global Governance

Introduction

It seemed reasonable, in 1945, to conceive of a single international organization with the task of global governing. The UN Charter, in part, reflected this thinking; it also reflected the views of realists who wanted to protect the concept of sovereignty from the encroachment of centralized global governing arrangements. So at least there was a recognition from the beginning that the UN would not be the only mechanism of global governance.

In any event, the demands of international society in 1945 were quite different from those of today. Thus it has become essential to question the relevancy of extant institutions that were established immediately after the Second World War. It is on this point that Rosemary Righter’s contribution to the UN reform debate, despite its flaws, is valuable. Righter correctly points out that:

• multilateralism is ‘an established, ineluctable, part of our lives’;
• the rapid evolution of new forms of multilateral cooperation are increasingly more sophisticated and flexible than previous forms and has outflanked the activities of traditional global intergovernmental institutions because those institutions are either defective, inefficient, ineffective or largely irrelevant, or a combination of all of the above;
• while the UN has no doubt contributed to progress in multilateral cooperation, its future impact on this process is currently in doubt and could depend on the extent to which the organization is able to demonstrate ‘relevance’ in dealing with the emerging demands of the international community;
excessive fidelity to particular institutional moulds (such as the 1945 UN system) will inhibit further development of international collaboration;

the UN is not necessarily synonymous with multilateralism or international governance, it is merely one vehicle for accomplishing these things.¹

This analysis raises the issue that alternative multilateral arrangements to the UN ought to be considered at this juncture. The argument made previously, that the UN is overstretched and overburdened, supports the suggestion that new multilateral arrangements may now be necessary, if only to give the UN sufficient space to introduce necessary comprehensive changes to its structure and processes.

Beyond the UN system? Alternative multilateral arrangements

Bearing the above in mind, it is imperative that we continue the process of rethinking the concept of global governance and multilateralist evolution. Recent literature on multilateralism and global governance has contributed to this reconceptualization.

Based on the expanded definition of governance advanced by the Commission on Global Governance (see Introduction) the concept of global governance must be broad enough to embrace ‘the whole exciting patchwork of institutions, processes, and people which together make society’. Global governing cannot be limited to the management activity of the formal intergovernmental bodies like the UN or regional organizations. Neither can it be confined to those activities performed by more informal, issue/functionally-specific international regimes.² Although the UN was conceived of as central to the functioning of global governance and multilateralism, it does not represent the ‘full picture’ of such operations.

Global governance redefined

Those who advocate a single model of global governance, be it in the form of intergovernmental and pluralistic decision-making or a more amalgamated, less accommodating construct (e.g. world government), are open to the charge that their vision is either too exclusionary, or so all-embracing as to suffer from the fatal flaw of practical unattainability.

At the present historical juncture, we cannot speak as though we have arrived at any coherent, or viably aggregated, form of ‘global governance’.

¹ Excessive fidelity to the UN system will inhibit further development of international collaboration.

² Alternative multilateral arrangements should be considered. The UN is overstretched and overburdened, supporting the suggestion that new arrangements may now be necessary.