CHAPTER 7

African Agency in a Fragmented Geopolitical Landscape and Amid Struggling Multilateralism: Navigating Pathways for Development

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African Agency

Kornegay Jr. and Mthembu (2022) position African integration as a major imperative with considerable potential to improve development outcomes. In their evaluation of Africa's place in the world, they observe an improvement in the exercise of agency. They cite the African Union's (AU's) reform initiative, known as the Kagame Report, the ten-year implementation plans of the AU's Agenda 2063, and the priorities set out in the AU's Shared Strategic Framework for Inclusive Growth and Sustainable Development. In terms of Africa's engagement with global powers, the Kagame Report (2017) recommended that greater coordination be established among the AU, the African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and the outgoing, current and incoming leadership of the continental body. This was seen as a means of boosting African agency, not just towards global powers broadly, but also towards global powers within the Global South. Eisenhardt (1989) describes agency theory as 'concerned with resolving two problems that can occur in agency relationships. The first is the agency problem that arises when (a) the desires or goals of the principal and agent conflict, and (b) it is difficult or expensive for the principal to verify what the agent is doing. The problem is that the principal cannot verify that the agent

behaved appropriately' (Eisenhardt 1989). A reading of these definitive perspectives from Africa and the Global South powers would suggest that African objectives and goals may conflict with those of the Global South powers. The reverse, where the Global South powers' interests may conflict, is a viewpoint that suggests that African actors may not be completely certain of the actions of the Global South powers, and vice versa.

In an endorsement of the improvement in African agency, Achieng (2014) argues that this development and the use of the African Peer Review Mechanism are not only imperative for attaining the goals of Agenda 2063 but also evidence of African agency. Brown (2012) observes that over the past decade and more, African states have become increasingly prominent actors in high-level international politics, evident in their international trade and climate change negotiations, their relations with the G7, the G20, and a range of new 'South–South' partnerships (Brown 2012: 1889). Notably, it is within the Group of Twenty (G20), more than in other international organisations outside the United Nations (UN), that African nations find space to negotiate their interests in concert with their Global South partners under the South–South rubric. The Global South countries in the G20 include Argentina, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Turkey, along with the AU. The G20 Global North countries are Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, South Korea, the UK, and the USA, as well as the European Union (EU). A casual look at the Global South–Global North split shows that the Global South compact in the G20 is better placed to advance African interests. Among other factors, this is because developing countries, or the Global South, within the G20 share similar political and economic objectives and interests in global affairs. Citing the departure of colonial rulers, Ojo (1981) argues that African activity in global affairs has increased and 'accelerated' through its participation in the UN. The same can be argued about the advance of the Global South within the UN, even though achieving equality with Global North powers remains a work in progress.

The AU's Shared Strategic Framework for Inclusive Growth and Sustainable Development (2014–2023) is an ideal point of departure for

African external engagements. The next ten years of the implementation plan will lean heavily on the shared strategic framework. It would be strategic for forward-looking plans to grasp and plan for the differences between the Global South and the Global North. The framework is a sound basis for exercising policy agency in the continental interest. This is important for the voice of Africa to be known, understood and felt in global affairs. There are several areas in which this voice has been found absent. The voice of Africa on UN Security Council (UNSC) reform since the Ezulwini Consensus – the AU's 2005 common position calling for expanded African representation – has been fairly muted. Not much has changed in its voice on the general reforms of the multilateral system, even after the Summit of the Future resolutions of 2024, which sought to prioritise the interests of developing countries, most of which are in the Global South.

South Africa's 2025 G20 presidency marked four years of successive Global South presidencies. The AU is a new member of the G20, an important partner, and a stakeholder in South Africa's G20 presidency. This is not merely an exercise in romanticism; it is important to consolidate Global South gains and push them further. This is certainly not an easy feat. The Trump administration's G20 presidency in 2026 has already proved to be a low point not just for South Africa but for the Global South as a whole. This was evident in the US's opposition to the progressive 'Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability' theme of South Africa's G20 presidency.

The exercise of agency by African state actors is not done in a vacuum, but rather in the environment of a dynamic, currently fragmented geopolitical landscape. This landscape features, among its key characteristics, the rise of trade wars, great power competition and even the re-ignition of concerns about a new scramble for Africa, among other sources of friction. This landscape also features the rise of the Global South, spearheaded by countries such as the BRICS+ members, such as China, Brazil, India, South Africa, Indonesia and Egypt, with Russia adding to the global majority, thereby carving out a new global order.

With the emerging multipolarity, a new global order is in the making and presents an opportune moment for African agency to take shape as

this new order is constructed. It is therefore essential to examine this geopolitical landscape more closely – the outgoing and incoming global order – to gain a deeper understanding of the environment in which Africa's aspirations are to be pursued. Much has been made of debates on the global order, and with good reason. Momentum towards reforming multilateralism, global governance and the global financial architecture is growing. Countries in the Global South, the majority of which are located in Africa, are seeking a greater role in these dynamics.

The global appetite for a new 'order,' especially in the Global South, is not only high but is already here, according to John Rennie Short (2025). Key evidence of this is the frequent engagement of global stakeholders, both within and outside the UN system, at the Summit of the Future in September 2024, hosted by the UN. These forums are geared towards reforming the global governance system first established at the Conference on International Organisation in San Francisco on 26 June 1945, at which the founders of the United Nations signed the UN Charter, ushering in a new global governance regime (UN 1945). This began what many would describe as a new 'world order' of that time. It was a new world order because it replaced the one that preceded it, which lacked a UN but had a League of Nations. It is worth noting that much of Africa, and most of the Global South, were not involved in the creation of the UN. There have also been attempts since 1945 to establish new orders, including the 1970s push for a 'New International Economic Order', formalised in the 1974 UN General Assembly Declaration (UN 1974). Evolution is always imminent with the passage of time, especially when systems do not serve their intended purpose, or when new environmental developments prompt change. One such development is the rise of major emerging market economies such as China, India, Brazil and Russia, which adds to this momentum of economic accumulation. South Africa arguably punches above its weight on the global stage (Draper 2011; Carmody 2017). African agency is applied within a global context and environment that greatly influences the outcomes of its efforts.

The purpose of the UN Charter: the common purpose, the common good

The purpose of the UN Charter is very clear – and its authors, who had just emerged from the brutality of the Second World War, sought a measure that would help prevent a recurrence of another such war. It is, however, interesting to note that, at the time of its promulgation, large swathes of the Global South were fighting colonialism, itself a brutal, imperial governance method. To make this Charter possible, several considerations based on the realities of global regions, such as the need for development, were factored in as prerequisites for lasting stability (UN Charter 1945). Yet, for the most part, the developmental aspects of the then-new global governance architecture were directed towards post-Second World War reconstruction in Europe, rather than in Africa and the Global South. Still, the UN Charter outlines the UN's work and objectives as the premier institution of global governance. A 2020 report by the Stimson Centre and its research team, led by Dr Richard Ponzio, captures the evolution of the institution of global governance briefly when they say that,

> In the midst of a past period of global turmoil – the Second World War, on the heels of the 1930s Great Depression – leaders from the Republic of China, the Soviet Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom gathered, in 1944, at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., to consider a new postwar international architecture to succeed the failed League of Nations. Six months later, a gathering of delegates from fifty nations convened in San Francisco to negotiate over two months and then sign, on June 26, the Charter of the United Nations. (Stimson 2020: 9)

In this statement, we see the absence not only of the Global South countries, many of which were still under colonial rule, but also of any meaningful attempt to capture their interests at the time. The UN's common purpose is derived from the Charter, which spells out its objective of achieving and sustaining a lasting global peace. The clearest statement of this is where it says of its expectations in its preamble, that it

is 'to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples' (UN 1945). However, turmoil from the past and some current conflicts around the globe have their roots in various realities, both current and possible, such as economic or security concerns (Fisher 2000). The UN Charter attempts to address these issues. In addressing these issues, the UN has established institutions that, together with other new institutions and policies, have formed an architecture of multilateralism (Keohane 1990). The critique from the Global South, however, is that some of the UN's critical organs and agencies remain in the hands of the founding nations, most of which are in the Global North.

It is through this multilateralism that many, particularly in Africa and the Global South, seek to address the issue of development because, according to Freeman (2004: 1), among other reasons, 'over the period of globalisation world inequality, measured as the ratio of income per capita in the Global South as a whole and the Global North as a whole, has more than doubled, whilst growth has been largely static.' In this respect, the UN's common purpose, as derived from the UN Charter, has not fared very well. The African experience illustrates this, particularly the rebuff of African agency that followed the adoption of the Lagos Plan of Action in 1980, when the World Bank promoted its 1981 'Berg Report', *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Agenda for Action*, as an alternative framework (Berg 1981).

The Berg Report, prepared for the World Bank, is of particular importance due to its influence at the time, as it demonstrates the relationship between the continent and the World Bank, because, '… one can expect that Bank policies and programme in this region will be guided by it in the near future… also, the report is likely to have a considerable influence on the thinking and actions of bilateral donors, many of whom look to the IBRD [International Bank for Reconstruction and Development] for guidance on economic analysis and policy direction' (Loxley 1983). It is also within the context of the current discourse on multilateral development banks (MDBs), including the Bretton Woods Institutions, regarding the global financial architecture, particularly in institutions such as the G20 (G20 2025).

Finkelstein (1955) writes, however, that the Charter was drawn up at a time of great optimism, with the expectation that the victorious powers would then maintain the post-war peace and police the vanquished. He also describes the pressures for considering Paragraph 3 of Article 109 of the UN Charter, arguing that it 'is the urge to revamp the United Nations to bring it into conformity with circumstances which differ vastly from those which existed when the Charter was drafted' (Finkelstein 1955). Today, there are efforts to reform not only the UN but also multilateralism, with advocacy initiatives such as those of the Article 109 group (Global Challenges Foundation 2025). A key aspect of the UN reform agenda is a greater role for regions that were not involved in its creation. Most of these regions are located in the Global South.

The UN is a post-Second World War (WWII) construct that draws heavily from its Charter, experience of the war, and the need to prevent future wars. However, the post-WWII global governance architecture was designed by the victors of the war, according to Scheffer (2025). While requiring vast sums for their own post-war reconstruction, they established the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs) alongside the UN. However, they did not include many of the states that currently constitute the now 193-member UN and that have been heavily impacted by the BWIs for decades, and continue to be. While the founders of the Charter had immediate experience of war and the global power dynamics of the time, characterised by deep polarisation, some, such as Jokela (2011), link the inspiration for the role and importance of increased collective action to a common purpose to globalisation. Jokela also writes about the development of plurilateral institutions, such as the G20, as a derivative of globalisation's influence on collective efforts to address global challenges. Plurilateral organisations are increasingly more representative of a diverse world, bringing together the wealthy Global North and the developing Global South.

Power in multilateralism and 'world order'

Multilateralism also tends to be complex. This is despite the tenets of the UN Charter, which envisions global relations differently. It is often

complicated by bilateral relations, which are framed by the power- and wealth-differential between states. Africa and the several Africa+1 summits have often been criticised for perpetuating a dynamic whereby the power of an entire continent is equated with that of a single developed economy (Mthembu et al. 2022). Even the G20 has seen the theme of inequalities within and between states debated. Others, such as Dworkin and Gowan (2019), discuss the divisive impact of great power competition between the US, Russia and China on Europe, while some criticise the 'new scramble for Africa' (Mlambo et al. 2024). These perspectives speak to the sophisticated complexities of power competition between the Global South and the Global North, within the Global North, and within the Global South.

This complexity sparked considerable academic interest in the International Political Economy (IPE) discipline, resulting in numerous theories within the field. One such theory that captures Africa's negative experience with global relations over many decades is the Hegemonic Stability Theory, proposed by Charles Kindleberger. It suggests that the international system is more stable under the leadership of a single dominant power, such as the unipolar system from which the globe has departed. This unipolar-led system was evident from the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed, to the late 2000s (coinciding with the global financial crisis), when the US reigned as the single superpower. Combined with the alliance between the US and Western European countries, this gave the Global North an upper hand in global governance. The end of the brief period of hegemonic stability at the behest of the US ushered in multipolarity, with Global South countries such as China, India and Brazil on the rise in global affairs. Sachs (2020) critiques the multilateral system's inability to provide global public goods, arguing that no single state or group of states is currently positioned to serve as a global hegemon and satisfy the need for such goods. He makes this argument in response to the spectacular collapse of global solidarity and collective action for a common purpose at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Africa was one of the regions left stranded by a shortage of vaccines and equipment, despite a cash-on-hand offer to purchase, because developed economies had hoarded the supply. In other words, the emergence of

multipolarity, in which Global North countries lost some of their global power while some Global South countries rose in prominence, did not necessarily improve the agency of African countries.

A common thread in the reflections of many scholars on multilateralism is the emphasis on power. Chomsky (2003), Strange (1988) and others, such as those who emphasise the US drive for dominance, point to the prominence of power in one guise or another in state-to-state relations. They highlight its significance in current global governance and geopolitics, as well as its influence on multilateralism. One interpretation is that multilateralism disperses power, from the dominant Global North to the hitherto marginalised Global South, including Africa. Keohane (1990) defines multilateralism as 'the practice of co-ordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions' (Keohane 1990: 731). This definition appears to align with the UN system, which includes organs such as the Security Council, the General Assembly (GA), and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), as well as other institutions that form part of today's global governance architecture, including the World Trade Organization (WTO). The Security Council, comprising France, the US, Russia, the UK and China, is dominated by the Global North, given that only China is considered a Global South country. The rest of the UN organs include Global South countries, including African states, which constitute the largest group of UN member states. However, the other UN organs lack the binding power of the Security Council.

Multilateralism in these debates is often shaped by understandings of power relations, their roles, and their impacts since the UN was formed in 1945. The unipolarity of the post-Cold War era resembles the tenets of the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, given that this unilateral US principle carved out the Western hemisphere as a preserve of US dominance, much as the US has dominated certain aspects of global governance. The US National Security Strategy of 2025 (White House 2025) reflects the US objective of prevailing in global governance, grounded in the America First policy, which runs counter to the tenets of multipolarity. The visits to the White House by five African states in July 2025 and by European states in August 2025 illustrate this point, as the leaders from these regions

were essentially paying homage to the US as the dominant power in the international system. This is despite the shift to multipolarity, a topic often debated. All of them were visiting the White House, among other agendas, to discuss the role of the UN and multilateralism in addressing global issues. These developments show that the US, the fulcrum of Global North power, remains important in global affairs. It shows that the Global South is rising but has not yet gained sufficient power to overcome the staying power of the US as the underwriter of Global North power.

Cox (1992) offers an apt reflection on the concepts of 'multilateralism' and world 'order'. He argues that, 'The two concepts are interrelated. Multilateralism appears in one aspect as a subordinate concept. Multilateralism can only be understood within the context in which it exists, and that context is the historical structure of the world order. However, multilateralism is not just a passive, dependent activity. It can appear in another aspect as an active force shaping world order. The agent/structure dilemma is a chicken-and-egg proposition' (Cox 1992: 161).

This is an apt description of the place power and hegemony occupy in global governance, and of how multilateralism is, in practice, heavily influenced, if not shaped, by this dynamic. The two concepts have often been used or quoted interchangeably. The value of this distinction to Africa may lie in the potential instrumentality of multilateralism in shaping a world 'order' in its interests, as noted by Dworkin and Gowan (2019). It is also essential to reflect beyond academic definitions of multilateralism to understand precisely what it is and how it operates. This is useful considering that 'the dominant tendencies in existing world order can be examined within a global system with three principal components – a global political economy, an inter-state system, and the biosphere or global ecosystem' (Cox 1992: 161). From a world-systems perspective, the twentieth-century world order was dominated by the Global North. In the twenty-first century, shifts are being experienced in the Global South, of which Africa is a part, contesting the historical dominance of the Global North. It can thus be surmised that the Global South, as a collective, is a force shaping an emerging global order.

The components of world order discussed above hold significant

value in the African context. The case of EU (Global North) and Africa (Global South) relations is shifting from a history of domination and a dominant–subordinate relationship to a hope of genuine development partnership through a series of bilateral EU–Africa agreements, as noted in Suh (2020). This relationship is complex, as is any other relationship of this nature. A part of the explanation for this could be the changing geopolitical landscape, which provides impetus for reforming global relations through institutions such as the UN and the G20.

One of the highlights of the changing geopolitical landscape is the rise of Africa from being the 'dark continent' (Pimm 2007) to a 'rising star' (Taylor 2014) and a new 'major growth pole for the world economy' (Vickers 2013: 673). This optimistic narrative has become part of the broader Global South discourse that emphasises renewed agency and developmental momentum. This, according to Vickers, is coupled with the rise of new powers such as China, India, Brazil, South Korea and now even Russia, as indicated by new World Bank economic data on European economies, which classifies them as High-Income Countries. Thus, the 'Global South rise' narrative is backed by evidence of economic advancement. The emergence of BRICS+ and its potential to become the largest bloc within the G20 is also significant, as it could drive a development agenda in this prominent global policy coordination group. The BRICS+ bloc (representing 35% of global GDP) is already larger than the G7 (30% of global GDP) in terms of population size and economic output, according to Statista.com (2024). Discussions of this nature begin to seem like the pendulum swinging away from the Global North and towards the Global South.

The rise of Africa as a significant voice in global governance, as evidenced by the inclusion of the AU in an expanded G20, presents an additional opportunity to exercise agency in pursuit of the objectives and aspirations outlined in the AU's Agenda 2063. However, all this occurs amid a 'poly-pandemic' of crises, challenging the very nature of multilateralism as the world knows it, which is meant to aid in conflict prevention and resolution, and promote peace and development. Africa will be watched by the world as it exercises its agency in this environment for its continental interests. From certain viewpoints, African agency in the G20, through the AU, adds

54 countries to the Global South's collective, boosting Global South agency in this important organisation. At the very least, African voices are now being heard on the global stage through the G20.

Multilateralism and its instruments for a new Africa-friendly world 'order'?

The founders of the UN intended for multilateralism to advance the collective global community's objectives at the conference in San Francisco in 1945. These are aspirations for a just world peace, good relations between states, steady development and strong, legitimate global governance. At the centre of it is the UN Charter, which places the attainment of these objectives at the centre of the UN's role and function. However, this was in the mid-1940s, and global relations have evolved significantly since then. The refrain so far in this chapter is that the evolution of the UN has been greatly influenced by the emergence of the Global South countries as members of this global governing body. And, alongside this evolution, the UN has remained the central authority, with no other organisation formed in its place, even though other organisations have emerged, sometimes complementing the UN, and at other times contesting it. Capturing both the state of multilateralism and the material conditions of global relations today, the seminal words of António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, are crucial for and as a basis for a conversation on reforming multilateralism, when he said that,

> "At the beginning of the 20th century, Europe had numerous powers. It was truly multipolar. But it lacked robust multilateral institutions, and the result was World War I. A multipolar world needs strong and effective multilateral institutions. Yet global governance is stuck in time. Look no further than the United Nations Security Council and the Bretton Woods system. They reflect the political and economic realities of 1945, when many countries in this Assembly Hall were still under colonial domination. The world has changed. Our institutions have not. We cannot effectively address problems as

> they are if institutions do not reflect the world as it is. Instead of solving problems, they risk becoming part of the problem. And, indeed, divides are deepening. Divides among economic and military powers. Divides between North and South, East and West. We are inching ever closer to a Great Fracture in economic and financial systems and trade relations, one that threatens a single, open internet, with diverging strategies on technology and artificial intelligence, and potentially clashing security frameworks" (Guterres 2023).

In September 2023, Guterres, in his address to the UN General Assembly, crystallised the case for reforms to the UN and its system very aptly. In his argument, the global challenges are vast and urgent, cutting across all areas of reality, from the economic to the political and security- and development-related. These are pivotal issues for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These are also issues at the core of the UN's purpose, as outlined in its founding Charter. Article 1 of the UN Charter specifically outlines the UN's first and urgent role in developing relations between states in today's world. The Charter authors' objective is for the UN to maintain its centrality in multilateralism.

Guterres' words echo the sentiments of many in the Global South who are critical of the UN in its current form. For instance, it has become clear that reform of the Security Council to include African representation is a matter of justice, because it is unconscionable for a region as large as Africa not to be represented. The structure of the Bretton Woods Institutions, based on the percentage of contributions, which in turn dictates decision-making, is a matter related to inequalities in the global system to the detriment of African countries. The fact that the UN has by and large remained in the form in which it was established in 1945 is a matter of atrophy, because realities such as demographic expansion have shifted meteorically.

Sentiments about reforming the UN or parts of its system are not new. The desire for improved multilateralism and global order is not new. As the UN embarks on a reform process informed by this reality, among other factors, it will still have memories of the desire for a New International

Economic Order (NIEO) in the 1970s, which was very much an agenda driven by the Global South against the Global North. This is particularly relevant today because, according to Guterres, 'we are inching ever closer to a Great Fracture in economic and financial systems and trade relations' (Guterres 2023). This is when the full potential of a just multilateral system is required to drive collective action towards attaining the SDGs. But this must also be done justly, by ensuring that developing economies are accommodated in areas such as the just transition and climate action, access to development finance, industrialisation, participation in global value chains, pandemic preparedness, and the emerging global security architecture.

Calls by the UN Secretary-General for reforms, beginning with internal operational reforms and extending to the broader UN system, including the Bretton Woods Institutions and the global financial architecture, are informed by work across the globe. One initiative particularly useful for this conversation is the 2023 High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB) report. The HLAB report offers proposals it describes as required 'shifts' to attain an improved multilateral system. Such shifts include thinking and actions that can bring the global community together and improve the legitimacy of global governance. These proposed thoughts and actions involve significant reflection on how the global financial architecture works, including reforms to MDBs and other institutions. The report proposes the following shifts.

The first shift aims to 'Rebuild trust in multilateralism through inclusion and accountability' by, among other things, broadening participation in the international system to include structures such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society and cities, and by adopting a more transparent decision-making process. UNSC reform, particularly its expansion to include African and other countries of the Global South, would constitute a major shift.

The second shift aims to 'deliver for people and planet by regaining balance with nature and providing clean energy for all', by shifting thought and policy action to achieve what India's G20 presidency also advocates for: a new development paradigm that includes environmental conservation and protection in all developmental undertakings. Climate

change has long been a major area of contestation between the Global North and the Global South, and particularly for Africa. Although African countries contribute the least to global greenhouse-gas emissions, they bear some of the most severe impacts of climate change, evident in the desertification of parts of the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, as well as the recurrent cyclones and flooding in southern Africa.

The third shift seeks to 'ensure sustainable finance that delivers for all', which includes a better debt management system to help manage and reduce debt, particularly in developing economies, and better access to development finance on better terms that do not hinder domestic priority-setting and policy-making. Most importantly, it seeks to encourage global solidarity in mobilising resources for development, including infrastructure spending that supports climate action and economic and social infrastructure. This also involves 'major reforms' of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), review and reform of debt management, and 'just financing', among other things. Indeed, the global divide that underlies today's inequalities is evident in the heavily indebted Global South versus the Global North, which holds the purse strings of finance and capital.

Shift four seeks to 'support a just digital transition that unlocks the value of data and protects against digital harms', which involves one of the important attributes of Strange's (1988) idea of power: knowledge. This draws a lot of relevance from the motive for reforms of the multilateral system. Minerals, including critical minerals vital for the technology of the present and future, are extracted with little developmental benefit for Africa and other regions of the Global South with natural resource endowment. This remains a difficult colonial legacy, which the AU seeks to remedy. The AU lists this as one of 15 flagship projects in line with its agenda for the renaissance of Africa and in pursuit of the 'Africa we want' by 2063. Knowledge and finance are indeed important aspects of multilateral relations. Additionally, it is important to note that the digital divide between the Global North and the Global South is one of the fissures that demonstrates global inequalities.

Shift five seeks to 'empower equitable, effective collective security arrangements' that involve development as an important step towards

dissuading appetite for violent extremism, among other issues well-articulated by the UN's Agenda 2030. However, any security arrangements will remain inadequate without the involvement of the people concerned and with thorough consideration of the economic, political, geographic, cultural and other material conditions and interests of the concerned regions, such as Africa and the larger Global South. In keeping with social justice virtues, and in pursuit of improved legitimacy for the international system, reforming the UNSC to include regions such as Africa, which has a population of 1,5 billion and projects projected to be worth US$2,5 billion by 2050, is a vital step.

Shift six aims to 'strengthen governance for current and emerging transnational risks', which, in today's context, can best be described as a poly-pandemic. A most recent case of a failure of this element can be argued to be vaccine nationalism and vaccine-hogging during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some states bought up to five times their needs, leaving nothing for countries in the Global South, including Africa, which had cash on hand and sought to procure much-needed vaccines to combat the disease. This is despite all the efforts by the UN system, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) COVAX facility, among other initiatives.

Reforms of the UN system have become a virtuous pursuit. The extensive report by the HLAB makes a strong case for this. Guterres, at the 2023 BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, makes the point that,

> "We must urgently restore trust and reinvigorate multilateralism for the 21st century. This requires the courage to compromise on the reforms necessary for the common good. It requires full respect for the UN Charter, international law, universal values, and all human rights – social, cultural, economic, civil, and political. And it requires much greater solidarity. Of course, none of this is easy. But it is essential. And it is essential, especially for Africa. The African continent, a historic victim of slavery and colonialism, continues to confront grave injustices" (Guterres 2023).

The sentiments of the UN Secretary-General resonate with many scholars

and certainly tally with the daily lived African reality, as a representative of the Global South reality more broadly. It is instructive that Guterres' views above were made to an audience of the Global South, of which BRICS has emerged as an important platform. In reflecting on the UN's successes and failures, Nadine (2019: 12) first recounts that 'the founders saw the UN as the heart of international economic and political relations – an organisation with the power and capacity to solve the world's most pressing problems'. He argues that this was based on three main pillars: maintaining international peace; addressing economic, social, cultural and humanitarian issues; and promoting human rights. While some successes can be noted, the state of multilateralism today cannot list these three areas as theatres of resolute success since 1945, at least not in the African reality. The failures inform the reason why the Global South has become an avenue for African countries to pursue UN reforms while at the same time seeking alternatives outside of the UN.

Africa's independence and multilateralism

The total liberation and emergence of Africa from colonialism is at the core of the efforts behind the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in May 1963. In a significant demonstration of agency, Africa took a step on what was to be a long journey towards its formal inclusion in institutions such as the G20 six decades later, in recognition of its rising significance in 2023. One important error in the process of the UN's formation, which undergirds the multilateral system, is the exclusion of the majority from the design process of multilateralism and the institutions that maintain it. When the UN adopted its Charter, it had good intentions, namely the promotion of lasting global peace, stability and economic development for all (UN Charter 1945). However, it did not anticipate and factor in the self-governance or independence of African states. Ajaegbo (1986) noted, 'When the UN was founded in 1945, only three independent African States – Ethiopia, Liberia, and Egypt – were members of the world body. South Africa also participated even though it was not, by definition, free. Most of Africa was still under colonial domination.' It was at least another fifteen years before many

more African states gained independence from colonial powers, following prolonged struggles. This was also the case with a few other Asian, Latin American and Caribbean countries.

From the outset, the global governance architecture was not designed with an eye to equality among states, but perhaps with an emphasis on equality among the founding powers. According to Fox (1950), 'organized international intervention in colonial affairs has never found favour in the eyes of the European colonial powers. It did not at San Francisco when they sought to restrict the United Nations role in non-self-governing territories.' This is one of the original sins of the UN; it was set up in a manner slanted against the then-colonised countries, which we today understand as constituting the Global South. Nonetheless, independence was inevitable, and the eventual new reality would require the responsibility for Africa's development to lie somewhere. The establishment of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in 1958, with its headquarters in Addis Ababa (Henry 1962), is an example of the compartmentalisation of African issues.

Agency was demonstrated in the anti-colonial struggles for dignity and independence, and for the rightful place of African states as equals among others in the global community. But that was not the last demonstration of African agency in the multilateral sphere. Most recently, Namibia co-facilitated the Summit of the Future with Germany, which is an interesting and positive case of a Global South country partnering with a Global North country, the former a (former) colony of the latter. The adoption of the UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation (United Nations 2024), as well as many other similar progressive developments in global governance, has been championed by Africa with the support of broader Global South solidarity. Several instruments of the UN system have established offices in Africa, including the WTO, the WHO and the International Labour Organization (ILO), among others, thereby fully placing Africa within the UN's ambit. However, this did not spare Africa from the negative consequences of structural adjustment policies imposed by the Bretton Woods Institutions (Heidhues and Obare 2011; Mkandawire and Soludo 2003). Neither did it shield it from sustained colonial interference, as seen in the case of France's role in the

now-troubled Sahel region and other West African countries, a case of the negative long-term effects of Global North neocolonialism.

It is often thought that Africa is a weak link on several fronts in the global system, particularly in the Global South. There are, however, indicators that show Africa's rising contributions. Development has since been a dominant pursuit of the AU and its predecessor, the OAU. Independent Africa has also seen a relative growth in its contribution to global GDP. It shares in the several industrial revolutions, with a consensus that it is in its fourth, while some suggest it may already be in its fifth. What is the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)? There are various ways of explaining or defining it, such as Moll's characterisation of a deep-seated, digitally powered and rapid change. It is a revolution of 'smart machines' and 'information technology' (Moll 2023). In his review of Moll's argument, Ntlatlapa (2023) argues that Moll's definition is narrow and insufficient to encompass its impact or role across all spheres of life, as Schwab (2016) notes. An expanded conceptualisation of the 4IR shows that Africa has not been entirely left behind. In some respects, Africa is partaking of the 4IR thanks to investments and support from Global South partners such as China and India. China has been particularly instrumental in building the African digital infrastructure, for instance, enabling access to the internet and mobile telephony.

Much as Africa has been co-opted into these industrial revolutions, it has not kept pace with other regions of the world. Africa wants to industrialise rapidly, taking its place in the global production value chain. The AU's Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want and its 15 flagship projects are a point of departure for this conversation. These flagship projects are meant to propel Africa's renaissance at a point of an industrial revolution characterised by rapid development in technology, such as the Internet of Things and artificial intelligence (AI), which have changed and advanced production methods, healing methods, teaching methods and general communication methods, among many other modern advancements. It is not hard to imagine the financial outlays Africa would require to be on the cutting edge of tech renewal, given the African Development Bank's commitment to investing over US$200 billion per annum to bring Africa up to par with Global North and Global South powers. The continent

has not advanced to a state-of-the-art level of modern infrastructure nor developed technological capabilities comparable to those of other regions. Despite possessing essential critical minerals as a natural endowment, Africa has yet to advance its space programme to levels comparable to those of advanced economies, or develop semiconductor fabrication capabilities. Both the digital technology and the critical minerals spaces constitute areas in which Africa should be focused on reform of the multilateral system. In both sectors, regulations by the UN and other global governance systems are weak, exposing Africa and many parts of the Global South to mercantilist exploitation by the Global North (as well as exploitation by some Global South powers).

Conclusion

Africa has long shifted from independence to the post-independence pursuit of development and a place in the global order. Its adoption of Agenda 2063 can be seen as an acceptance of its role in multilateralism to advance its agenda and those of the Global South. Capable Multilateralism, with instruments to develop a new Africa- and Global South-friendly world order, is precisely what the Global South is pursuing in its reformist agenda, as demonstrated by efforts at the Summit of the Future in September 2024. It is a multilateralism that the UN Secretary-General argues must be fit for purpose, in keeping with new realities. It is this multilateralism, coupled with a global financial architecture conducive to significant African investment in research and development, productive capacity and capability, and sensitive to the continent's substantial debt burden, that offers a viable pathway for Africa's full participation in the global order.

Africa's ascension onto the high tables of multilateralism has come at a time of significant difficulty for all humanity. The world is facing a polycrisis – a cocktail of multiple global-scale crises occurring simultaneously. They include rising, unsustainable global public debt, the climate crisis and insecurity caused by conflict, among others. The recent COVID-19 pandemic was yet another of the multiple crises humanity has faced. It was at this moment that the power differential shaping the multilateral environment in which Africa must exercise

its agency was at its most brutal. Vaccine nationalism demonstrated a very dark side of this power differential. Africa demonstrated yet another act of agency when it collectively mobilised resources to procure supplies and confront the pandemic.

In this conversation, the principal is the African people, whose development has long been hindered by myriad factors, including the fact that a world order was created without their input, as argued by Kissinger (2014). The agent is the state, the AU, and other African players with power and influence at that level. Therefore, what is to be done is (1) the effective application of agency in the interest of the continent's people, (2) the application of agency in such a way as to drive, with great focus and sheer will, the fulfilment of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, and realise the continent's renaissance in its full potential. The AU's fifteen flagship projects are a good starting point. Stevens et al. (2023) of Standard Bank, South Africa, argue that 'the onus is on African policymakers to draw more developmental value from relations with China.'

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