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Why Global Governance Is Failing

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CAMBRIDGE – The United Nations was established in 1945, succeeding the failed League of Nations, to pull humanity back from the brink of self-destruction. It was a bold experiment in collective security, designed to prevent another world war and manage conflicts through diplomacy rather than violence.

Yet, 80 years later, we find ourselves back on the precipice of disaster. Global temperatures have breached the 1.5°Celsius threshold that scientists see as a Rubicon for reining in climate change over the long term. Public trust in institutions – and in democracy – is critically low, and geopolitical tensions are rising. What happened?

The UN has, justifiably, drawn criticism for a variety of reasons. The composition of the Security Council is antiquated. Violent conflict, and even genocide, still occur with alarming frequency. And the organization has proven to be generally ineffectual, overly bureaucratic, and unfair in its treatment of the Global South.

But the inadequately diagnosed problem is that the UN is bringing a twentieth-century logic to bear on the twenty-first century's fundamentally planetary problems. Today's most urgent challenges – climate change, pandemics, AI regulation, financial contagion, supply-chain disruptions – do not respect national borders, yet UN institutions remain stuck in a framework of nation-states jealously guarding their sovereignty. Our international institutions simply were not designed to address essentially systemic issues indifferent to national borders. The UN is not just slow; it is structurally incapable of tackling such problems at scale.

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With even conventional governance structures faltering in the face of heightened tribalism and nationalism, any proposed new paradigm of planetary governance runs the risk of sounding utopian. Fortunately, the world already has a serviceable blueprint: the European Union, for all its flaws, has demonstrated that a supranational federation can work, allowing previously warring countries to pool sovereignty in exchange for economic and political stability. Nor is this such a radical idea. In a 1946 Gallup poll, 54% of Americans believed that “the UN should be strengthened to make it a world government with power to control the armed forces of all nations, including the United States.”

In 2024, by contrast, 58% per cent of Americans thought that the UN was doing a “poor job.”

This description suggests that the UN needs to take a bolder approach. Big, planetary issues like global warming are what philosopher Timothy Morton calls “hyperobjects.” They are “entities of

such vast temporal and spatial dimension” as to require a fundamentally different kind of human reasoning. To change how we think about such problems calls for both an intellectual and a psychological shift – beyond the nation-state, or what Benedict Anderson famously called “imagined communities.”

Intellectually, planetary thinking requires its own theoretical framework. This demand is not new. In the twentieth century, John Maynard Keynes saw a need for a global currency and proposed the “bancor” to replace the dollar-focused Bretton Woods institutions; Hannah Arendt advanced her own vision of planetary politics; and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin developed his concept of the “noosphere” (collective human consciousness). In more recent scholarship – from Johan Rockström’s work on “planetary boundaries” to Bruno Latour’s description of our ecological age – the intellectual elements of a new planetary paradigm are beginning to come together.

Psychologically, we need a new narrative. The historian Yuval Noah Harari argues that human civilization is built on shared myths: nationalism, religion, capitalism. If planetary governance is to succeed, it needs to tell a compelling new story, one that moves beyond outdated ideas about sovereign nation-states to acknowledge humanity’s interconnectedness.

Again, the impulse is not entirely novel. As the psychologist Ara Norenzayan has shown, many major world religions (the “Big Gods”) did exactly this. In the same vein, Joshua Greene’s work on “moral tribes,” Peter Singer’s views on “expanding the circle,” and Kwame Anthony Appiah’s insights into “how moral revolutions happen” have provided much of the scientific and philosophical arsenal that we need. Equally important, imaginative works – from Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* to Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry of the Future* – have offered narratives to convey the urgency of the challenge we confront.

To reach people where they are, rigorous planetary thinking must be accompanied by stronger local thinking. Improvements to our governance structures must look both “up” and “down,” as the Berggruen Institute’s Jonathan Blake and Nils Gilman have put it. Global governance cannot succeed without resilient, empowered local structures. The nation-state would remain one element, but cities, regions, and local networks would be given more attention and integrated into planetary decision-making. This kind of nested approach could offer an alternative to the outdated system of nation-states without requiring its wholesale dismantling.

The growing urgency of planetary crises – from the 2008 financial crash to pandemics and climate change – graphically illustrate the inadequacies of the UN in its current form. The UN itself emerged from the shell of the League of Nations, and now it is time to build anew. Governance must pivot from the nation-state-based logic of the Bretton Woods system to the planetary sensibilities of the bancor. Even if the United Nations had succeeded in uniting the world’s nations, its current design would be unequal to a moment defined by inherently planetary challenges. It’s time to imagine new communities centered on our planetary realities.

ANTARA HALDAR

Antara Haldar, Associate Professor of Empirical Legal Studies at the University of Cambridge, is a visiting faculty member at Harvard University and the principal investigator on a European Research Council grant on law and cognition.

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