

States will remain unable to solve global crises like climate change until they let go of their sovereignty

Efforts to tackle climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic have been undermined by a lack of global coordination. Arvind Ashta argues that if states are serious about solving the global crises of the future, it will be necessary to let go of their sovereignty and invest legitimacy in an international body that has the power to implement real solutions.

Alok Sharma, the President of the [COP26 climate summit](#), was apologetic, even on the verge of tears, when last-minute changes were made to the [Glasgow Climate Pact](#). A commitment to 'phase out' coal, included in earlier drafts, was finally changed to 'phase down'. Although the summit did eventually produce an agreement, it is questionable what was really achieved.

The summit reaffirmed the [Paris Agreement](#) and recognised that further efforts are required. But nothing was decided on implementation. Many countries agreed on one thing (reaching net zero, for example), but others did not. Some countries agreed to other things (such as moving away from coal); others did not. One might conclude from all of this that any convention which requires unanimity is simply not fit for purpose. Such agreements may signal the importance of an issue, but they appear incapable of actually tackling a crisis like climate change.

It is possible that climate change still appears too distant from some people for real change to be achieved. The same cannot be said of the Covid-19 pandemic, which according to the World Health Organization (WHO) killed at least [three million people](#) in 2020 – more than the number of officially reported deaths. By the end of 2021, excess deaths during the pandemic were estimated to have reached around six million people.

Yet despite the immediacy of this crisis, all of the actions taken by the WHO have failed. Richer countries have rolled out booster campaigns while some poorer countries have not even been able to vaccinate a small percentage of their population once. In fact, Covid-19 has delayed the realisation of the WHO's key goals: extending universal health care, establishing better protection from health emergencies, and creating better health and wellbeing for a billion people by 2023. Clearly, the WHO can set goals, but it has no power to achieve them.

The above examples concern extreme consequences from a crisis (the end of the world, sudden death). But there are many other examples where the effects are not so intense. Take an agreement where all nations would undoubtedly gain, such as the imposition of a minimum tax rate. Even this does not work because some countries want a low minimum tax rate to attract firms. Therefore, any efforts to move toward tax-harmonisation tend to peter out quickly.

Joe Biden may have made a lot of noise about the proposal to set a [15% minimum corporate tax](#), announced at the end of last year, but he cannot even be sure that his own Congress will accept it. According to the OECD, so far only 136 countries have accepted the proposal, and only for giant corporations with a turnover of more than €750 million. According to Oxfam, this will exclude the [vast majority](#) of multinationals. In short, even for issues with milder consequences than climate change and Covid-19, it isn't easy to achieve unanimity.

Unless sovereignty is transferred, international organisations assigned the responsibility for tackling global crises will never have legitimacy.

The problem with summits like COP26 and single-purpose crisis resolution mechanisms is that they have no authority over their members. Member states do not want to lose their sovereignty and they do not want to give an inch because they know that it may become a mile with time. Yet, unless sovereignty is transferred, international organisations assigned the responsibility for tackling global crises will never have legitimacy. As a result, all resolutions will require unanimity, which makes any agreement virtually impossible. Indeed, the last member holding out may make spectacular gains.

If the unanimity requirement does not work, we must usher in a regime where a majority – even a substantial majority – can make decisions. This means that all member countries, even those dissenting, must provide powers to a supranational body to collect data, monitor, control, and punish any member that does not meet specified requirements.

For this body to have authority, it must have legitimacy. There are at least two avenues for achieving this. The first is for a form of direct democracy to be implemented, such as electing the President of the body via universal suffrage. The second is for member state governments to accept that they will be governed by the body's decisions. Neither approach would be easy to achieve, as the experience of the United Nations shows. Even International Criminal Court decisions have low effectiveness because members may not agree to its jurisdiction. Again, the United States is a prime example of dissent.

Progress toward a genuinely effective supranational body is likely to be slow. The fact that it is difficult to achieve, however, makes it no less necessary.

Today, the world can be thought of as having four superpowers: the United States, China, Russia and the European Union. The latter is often considered weak because it is not a federal body with strong powers to represent its members. Yet, the EU remains influential and it has the capacity to block initiatives which it believes violate its standards of fairness. The other three have a track record of abstaining from or vetoing agreements that are not in their favour. For a supranational body to work effectively, this type of veto power cannot exist.

It is unlikely the United Nations can be reformed along these lines. It seems clear that China and the United States will never agree to removing their veto power over UN decision-making. Russia is also unlikely to ever agree to this. Perhaps France and the UK may accept it if the others did so, but without all five agreeing to relinquish their veto power, it is difficult to see how the UN can become an effective vehicle for solving the global crises of the future.

An alternative to reforming the United Nations is to seek to gradually expand the powers of a new body. This is the model the EU has pursued. Beginning with six member states, it has slowly expanded both the size of the membership and the powers invested in the EU's institutions. However, this process appears to have stalled precisely because of the limited sovereignty that has been transferred to the EU level. There has also been a lack of solidarity among member states. Greater support is required not only to bring new and poorer member states up to the level of others, but also to compensate them for opening up their markets.

One possibility would nevertheless be to create a merger between the EU and unions of states in other parts of the world. The problem here is that there may be a clash of cultures, which is a frequent occurrence even in the world of corporate mergers. Such a merger would require accepting that if we truly value democracy, we cannot expect all members to subscribe to the cultural positions of economically developed countries. Culture cannot be imposed – it must develop from within.

A final option would be to build momentum behind the Non-Aligned Movement. This collection of 120 states is intended to sit independently from the world's major powers. Despite this, it has often been viewed as being closer to China and Russia than the other global powers. The members of the Non-Aligned Movement appear no more willing to sacrifice their sovereignty than other states, with a focus currently on cooperation between countries in the Global South. Yet the movement could potentially be reframed in time, perhaps by cooperating with the EU to increase its diplomatic power. Whether the EU would ever be willing to share its resources in this way is debatable.

All of this underlines that progress toward a genuinely effective supranational body is likely to be slow. The fact that it is difficult to achieve, however, makes it no less necessary. Yet once a majority of countries and the planet's population speaks with one voice, perhaps the four superpowers will realise it is in their interests to join them, one by one, rather than remain in opposition. And the likes of Alok Sharma will no longer have any need for tears.

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