

PRIMER 1 - MAPPING THE GLOBAL MULTILATERAL SYSTEM



This primer introduces some of the multilateral institutions and frameworks that have had a particular impact on the rights of women, youth, LGBTIQ+ people and other marginalized identities. We aim to increase understanding of how these institutions work, and the challenges and dynamics relevant to younger generations to push for a new people-centred multilateralism.

Today's multilateral system (see more of its evolution, context, and complexity in Primer 2) encompasses almost every aspect of global policies and governance from human rights, women's rights, workers' rights, economic development, sustainable development and climate change, trade, finance, international security, migration, global public health, and the environment. This evolution is also a reflection of the world's context, in which many of today's most urgent issues – whether it would be the climate, economic or health – are globalized and require collective responses and actions from governments. As intangible as multilateralism might feel, and as far away as these halls of power in Geneva, New York, Washington, and Vienna are, the decisions made in these spaces impact on all our lives. They shape, influence, and even dictate the policies made at local, national, and regional level both in the Global South or the Global North. They also create important legally binding frameworks and opportunities for people to hold their governments accountable to collective commitments made.

Current international relations should be understood as a combination of multilateralism, bilateralism and unilateralism. For example, the decisions made and actions taken by powerful states (such as the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003¹ or the ongoing US-imposed economic sanctions against Cuba and Iran) are regarded as unilateralism under the guise of multilateralism. A number of disarmament agreements made during the Cold War era (such as the Helsinki Accords² in 1975) were in fact bilateral treaties between the US and the Soviet Union under the framework of the larger international multilateral system. Approximately 3000 bilateral trade and investment treaties³ exist outside of the World Trade Organization (WTO) together with the WTO's own multilateral trade rules governing the entire global trade system. Many returning and rising authoritarian governments have resorted to numerous unilateral measures, such as the recent US government's withdrawals from the Human Rights Council and the Paris Agreement⁴ on climate change. While the multilateral aid architecture which created the Bretton Woods Institutions, has since spawned regional development banks such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

The select number of key multilateral institutions, systems and frameworks introduced in this primer are by no means exhaustive. This primer focuses on the institutions that have significantly and visibly impacted our lives, economies, environments and laws. They are particularly relevant to creating new multilateral architectures based on the principles of human rights, historical responsibility, justice, accountability, international cooperation and solidarity. It also considers some of the spaces where new forms and rules of multilateralism are being discussed in order to tackle our most pressing and urgent global crises. This theme is built on further in Primers 2, 3 and 4.

1. Kreps, S. (2008). *Multilateral Military Interventions: Theory and Practice*. Political Science Quarterly, 123(4), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25655566>. Pp. 573-603.
2. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) : Final Act of Helsinki, 1 August 1975, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3dde4f9b4.html>
3. See United Nations Conference on Trade & Development (UNCTAD) database of International Investment Agreement Navigators.
4. 21st session of the Conference of the Parties to the 1992 UNFCCC, *Paris Agreement*, 12 December 2015.





The United Nations System

UN Principal Organs

General Assembly

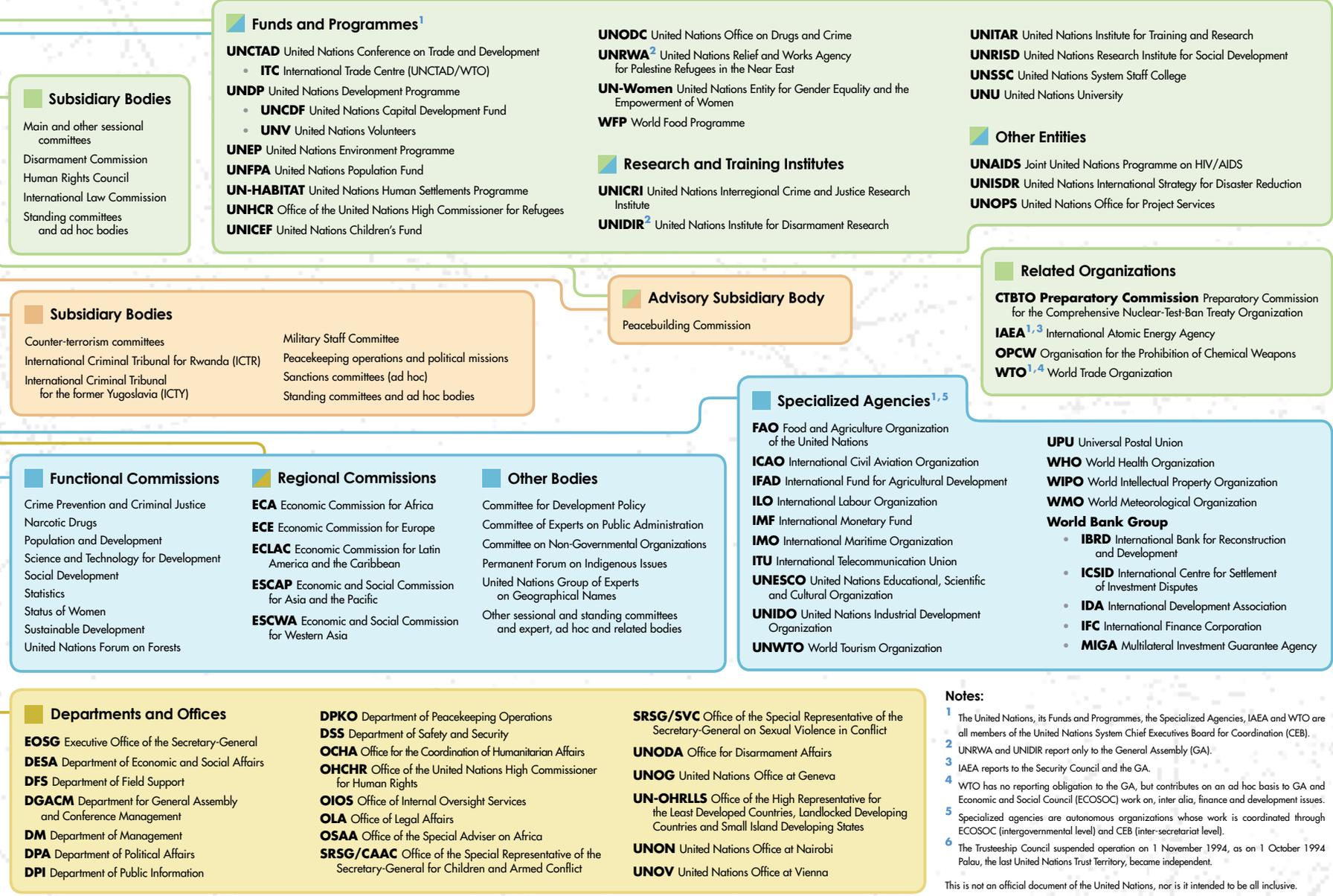
Security Council

Economic and Social Council

Secretariat

International Court of Justice

Trusteeship Council⁶



Notes:

- ¹ The United Nations, its Funds and Programmes, the Specialized Agencies, IAEA and WTO are all members of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB).
- ² UNRWA and UNIDIR report only to the General Assembly (GA).
- ³ IAEA reports to the Security Council and the GA.
- ⁴ WTO has no reporting obligation to the GA, but contributes on an ad hoc basis to GA and Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) work on, inter alia, finance and development issues.
- ⁵ Specialized agencies are autonomous organizations whose work is coordinated through ECOSOC (intergovernmental level) and CEB (inter-secretariat level).
- ⁶ The Trusteeship Council suspended operation on 1 November 1994, as on 1 October 1994 Palau, the last United Nations Trust Territory, became independent.

This is not an official document of the United Nations, nor is it intended to be all inclusive.

MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY, PEACE AND SECURITY: THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND SECURITY COUNCIL

Since its creation in 1945, the United Nations (UN) has been at the centre of multilateralism and global governance. It is today the largest of the multilateral system by virtue of its 193 member states, along with its 6 main organs, 27 departments and offices, 15 specialized agencies, along with other funds, programmes, and a rapidly growing number of partnerships with other non-state actors.

Box 1: The United Nations Global Governance System

Today, the global governance system around the United Nations consists of three concentric circles:

1. Core: the organization of the United Nations with its main and subsidiary bodies (such as the UN General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council);
2. Expanded: the larger UN system, encompassing the various UN funds and programmes (such as the United Nations Development Fund and the United Nations Children’s Fund), and 15 specialized agencies (such as the World Health Organization and the International Monetary Fund);
3. Periphery: a rapidly growing number of “global partnerships” amongst public and private actors, with UN institutions being just one of the partners and occasionally providing administrative support and funding (such as the recent partnership agreement with the World Economic Forum).

Source: Barbara Adams and Jens Martens, [Fit for whose purpose? Private funding and corporate influence in the United Nations](#) (2015).⁵

UN Security Council

Consisting of just 15 member states— 10 non-permanent members elected for two-year terms by the UN General Assembly and 5 permanent members— the Security Council is arguably the UN’s most powerful organ, and in the view of many, its most undemocratic. The Security Council is primarily responsible for maintaining international peace and security by responding to crises around the world and overseeing ongoing UN peacekeeping operations. The Council has been plagued by constant political dynamics between its five permanent members — France, Russia, the United Kingdom, China, and the United States (U.S.) – the 5 states who emerged as winners of the Second World War and were considered the most powerful at the time of the UN’s founding. Any one of these five states have the authority to overturn any resolutions with their veto power, even those resolutions with majority support.⁶ These veto powers have been controversial since the founding of the UN and remain viewed perceived as an example of the disproportionate power of the five permanent members, and an impediment to credible international action to address crises.⁷

5. Barbara Adams and Jens Martens, [Fit for whose purpose? Private funding and corporate influence in the United Nations](#) (2015), Spotlight Report 2015.
6. A full list of the Security Council’s Veto is available on the Dag Hammarskjöld Online Library.
7. For more information, read the Global Policy Forum’s [General Analysis on the Security Council Veto](#)



UN General Assembly

The UN General Assembly (UNGA) is the most representative organ of the United Nations consisting of all member states, with each member having one vote and no members having any veto power. Most decisions either requires a two-third majority or a simple majority of support from member states. The General Assembly occupies a central position as the chief deliberative, policymaking, and representative organ of the UN. Comprised of all 193 Members of the UN, it provides a unique forum for multilateral discussion of the full spectrum of international issues covered by the Charter.⁸ It also plays a significant role in the process of standard-setting and the codification of international law. In the last several decades, the UNGA has been the arena for the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR); the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 and the most recent 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development or Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 (see more on these below). The UNGA has also been key in defining legal standards on questions of self-determination and sovereignty, particularly for colonised countries such as the 1960 UNGA Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and People⁹

International Human Rights Law and Treaty Bodies

“Human rights provide a common framework of universally-recognised values and norms and set out state obligations to act in certain ways or to refrain from certain acts. They are an important tool to hold states, and increasingly non-state actors, accountable for violations and also to mobilise collective efforts to develop communities and global frameworks conducive to economic justice, social wellbeing, participation, and equality. Human rights are universal, inalienable, interdependent and indivisible.”¹⁰

The idea of human rights did not begin with the United Nation (UN).¹¹ However, the current system of international human rights law, traces its origins to adoption of the Charter of the United Nations¹² in 1945 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)¹³ in 1948. The rights defined in the UDHR are given full legal force through a series of treaties, conventions, covenants and protocols which also set international norms and standards. These treaties and conventions are then ratified by countries in order to be part of domestic jurisprudence or laws. Further, the UN has established a variety of mechanisms – such as Treaty Bodies, Universal Periodic Review and Special Procedures (see Box 3 and 4) – for monitoring the compliance of state parties with their human rights obligations.

The UN Human Rights Council (HRC) (discussed below) is mandated to strengthen the global promotion and protection of human rights, assess the compliance of all UN member states with their human rights obligations under the UN Charter and to address human rights violations and situations of concern. Treaty Bodies do the same, but their mandate is focussed on monitoring compliance with specific treaties such as the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)¹⁴ and the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)¹⁵ (see Box 5). There are also a number of specialized UN agencies and Commissions such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) (see Box 6) or the Commission of the Status of Women (CSW) which complement the functions of the HRC.

The multilateral human rights treaties and declarations adopted under the auspices of the UN and its agencies, and occasionally, regional-level multilateral bodies, additional treaties and instruments, together with the range of mechanisms that have entered into force through states’ adoption and ratification during the decades that followed the adoption of the UDHR, form the backbone of this complex and far-reaching multilateral human rights system.¹⁶

8. For more background on the functions and powers of the UN General Assembly <https://www.un.org/en/ga/about/background.shtml>

9. See the UN and Decolonisation <https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/about>

10. ESCR-Net What are Economic Social and Cultural Rights? <https://www.escr-net.org/rights>

11. See for example: <https://www.amnesty.nl/a-brief-history-of-human-rights>

12. United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, 24 October 1945, 1 UNTS XVI, available at: <http://www.unwebsite.com/charter> [accessed 9 July 1980]

13. The United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

14. UN General Assembly, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 16 December 1966, Treaty Series, vol. 999, p. 171.

15. UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, 18 December 1979, Treaty Series, vol. 1249, p. 13.

16. There are also regional multilateral agreements and systems that have emerged in recent times, such as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (also known as the Maputo Protocol) and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (also known as the Istanbul Convention) which are seen as complimentary to the global multilateral frameworks and can also be used by civil society organizations to hold state parties to account.



Human Rights Council

The UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in Geneva is a key mechanism for human rights global governance, comprising 47 Member States, elected for a three-year term on a regional group basis. The HRC meets three times per year in ordinary session, convening special sessions on crises and emergencies, and overseeing both the Universal Periodic Review and the work of Special Procedures (the UN's independent human rights experts).

The HRC's work has often been plagued with numerous criticisms ranging from the election of authoritarian and undemocratic governments to the HRC, backlash and threats towards activists and civil society organizations utilizing the HRC's mandate, and the withdrawal of some states from the HRC council itself.

Amidst all these, the HRC does remain a space where critical human rights issues such as genocide, refugee concerns and torture are addressed. It is also a site where new analyses about rights issues are developed and promoted, as in, for instance, maternal mortality, access to safe abortion, rights of LGBTIQ+ and gender non-conforming persons and Indigenous people. While it is generally a place where states are the main actors, civil society still plays a critical role in demanding accountability and expanding the body of human rights norms.

Box 2: Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the Special Procedures Mechanism

The UPR is the first international human rights mechanism to address all countries and all human rights. This unique mechanism of the Human Rights Council sees the record of UN Member States reviewed by their peers every four to five years, with every State having the opportunity to ask questions or make recommendations to the State under review.

Civil society organisations are able to feed into this process formally, by submitting 'shadow' reports which are incorporated into a compilation prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and published in advance of the review, and can also lobby delegations directly as to the questions they should ask and recommendations they should make. Civil society also has a crucial role in monitoring and pushing for implementation of recommendations at the national level.

Visit the OHCHR website for information on [how to engage with the UPR process and the schedules for country reporting](#).

The Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council are independent human rights experts, appointed to monitor and report on specific sets of human rights violations and to advise and assist in promoting and protecting rights. The mechanisms are also particularly significant as they are sometimes the only mechanism that will alert the international community to certain human rights issues, as they can address situations in all parts of the world without the requirement for countries to have ratified a human rights instrument. These experts are either called Special Rapporteurs, Independent Experts or Working Groups. To date, there are currently 44 thematic mandates and 12 country mandates.

Civil society organisations can engage directly with the mandate holders to inform their mandates via consultations, submissions or filing of specific complaints of human rights violations falling under the mandate.

Visit the OHCHR website for a [full list of the special procedures mandate holders and how to contact their office](#).



Human Rights Treaty Bodies

The treaty bodies are international committees of independent experts that monitor State parties' implementation of the nine core international human rights treaties and their optional protocols. These treaties were developed to build on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by creating binding obligations for state parties. The treaty bodies' functions include considering State parties' periodic reports, adjudicating individual complaints, conducting country inquiries, adopting general comments, interpreting treaty provisions, and organising thematic discussions related to its respective treaty. Civil society organisations are able to feed into this process formally, by submitting reports which are incorporated into a compilation prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and can also lobby members of the treaty body directly as to the questions they should ask and recommendations they should make.

Box 3: The current nine core international human rights treaties are:

- [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination \(ICERD\)](#)
- [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights \(ICESCR\)](#)
- [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#)
- [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#)
- [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment \(CAT\)](#)
- [Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#)
- [International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families \(ICRMW\)](#)
- [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\)](#)
- [International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance \(ICPED\)](#)

To see the country-by-country status of ratification of these treaties and other optional protocols, visit the OHCHR website.

The state of human rights multilateralism

The international system for the protection of human rights remains a work in progress. The UN's human rights multilateral system has raised awareness and, arguably, helped foster greater respect for human rights. It has led to further recognition of new sets of rights that were acknowledged in the past, such as women's human rights, indigenous peoples' rights, migrant rights, children's rights, the rights to sexual orientation and diverse gender identities, environmental rights, and community rights to name a few. As democratic space shrinks and violations to rights and freedom of expression, protest and assembly, and to safety and security, rise at the national level, many human rights defenders are turning to international and regional human rights mechanisms to expose these violations, demand accountability, promote solidarity and build pressure for change on the ground. Experience has shown that people who have been given recognition of their rights, will challenge their denial. International and regional mechanisms can also provide defenders and survivors with a powerful platform to tell their story, exercise the right to freedom of expression and dissent denied at home, and to build movements and solidarity with each other.

At the same time, the UN's human rights multilateral system's record is arguably less impressive when it comes to holding states accountable for their own gross and systematic human rights abuses. Acts of intimidation and reprisals against human rights defenders, survivors and activists, including those who advocate within the UN, are on the rise¹⁷. There are large gaps in states'

17. Human rights: Reported reprisals continue unabated, says UN
<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/human-rights-reported-reprisals-continue-unabated-says-un>



implementation of human rights commitments— while states are required to carry out periodic reporting on their efforts to advance human rights enshrined in the treaties, there is no recourse when they fail to do so, or to implement the recommendation. This is markedly different, for example, from the enforcement of multilateral trade rules where failure of state's obligations can carry economic sanctions or trade embargoes.

Box 4: War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity: The International Criminal Court

The International Criminal Court (ICC) is an independent judicial body with jurisdiction over persons charged with genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and crimes of aggression. The Court was established by the Rome Statute, adopted on 17 July 1998, and entered into force on 1 July 2002. This treaty was negotiated within the UN, however it created an independent judicial body distinct from the UN. The Rome Statute was the outcome of a long process of consideration to the question of international criminal law within the UN.

Article 2 of the Statute provides for the ICC's relationship with the UN. The [UN-ICC Relationship Agreement](#) governs the cooperation between the two organizations. The ICC reports to the General Assembly annually. The UN Security Council can refer certain situations to the Prosecutor of the ICC, in accordance with Article 13(b) of the Rome Statute and [Chapter VII](#) of the [UN Charter](#).¹⁸

The Rome Statute is a landmark document in international law, as it clearly outlines acts that constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and crimes of aggression. For example, the Rome Statute defines crimes against humanity as follows:

*“Crime against humanity” means any of the following acts when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack: (a) Murder; (b) Extermination; (c) Enslavement; (d) Deportation or forcible transfer of population; (e) Imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of fundamental rules of international law; (f) Torture; (g) Rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity; (h) Persecution against any identifiable group or collectivity on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender as defined in paragraph 3, or other grounds that are universally recognized as impermissible under international law; (i) Enforced disappearance of persons; (j) The crime of apartheid; (k) Other inhumane acts of a similar character intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health.”*¹⁹

While the International Criminal Court has been fraught with controversy particularly for its failure to prosecute obvious war crimes committed by imperial countries and their allies, the existence of the Court and the Statute criminalises many acts of mass violence particularly by States and rejects the notion of sovereignty or internal affairs when it comes to certain conflicts.

18. Adapted from UN Dag Hammerskold Library FAQ Series What is the International Criminal Court? <https://ask.un.org/faq/97157>
19. International Criminal Court - Rome Statute <https://www.icc-cpi.int/resource-library/documents/rs-eng.pdf>



Human and Social Development: UN Specialised Agencies

There are a number of UN “specialised agencies, funds and programmes” that are considered part of the UN system even though they may operate independently of the purview of the UN General Assembly. These specialised agencies, funds and programmes are probably the most familiar face of the UN at the country level, providing technical and financial support to government ministries, NGOs, donors and communities. Their work ranges from policy formulation, implementation of UN resolutions, humanitarian aid and coordination, and gathering statistics and data.

Many of these agencies are of particular importance in securing the rights of women, youth, LGBTQI+ people and other marginalised groups. Below is a list of some of the agencies that we are most familiar with in our own country settings²⁰:

UN Women is the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) works in nearly 170 countries and territories, helping to eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities and build resilience so countries can sustain progress. The UNDP is best known for its Human Development Report (published since 1990) and the development of the Human Development Index and the Gender and Development Index.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is the lead UN agency for delivering a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, and every young person’s potential is fulfilled.

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) works in 190 countries and territories to save children’s lives, to defend their rights, and to help them fulfil their potential, from early childhood through adolescence.

The World Health Organization is the directing and coordinating authority on international health within the United Nations system. The objective of WHO is the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health.

The World Food Programme aims to eradicate hunger and malnutrition. The world’s largest humanitarian agency, WFP helps almost 100 million people in approximately 88 countries with assistance every year through food or cash distributions, and more.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) leads international efforts to fight hunger. It is both a forum for negotiating agreements between developing and developed countries, and a source of technical knowledge and information to aid development.

The mission of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) is to promote socially and environmentally sustainable human settlements development and the achievement of adequate shelter for all.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) promotes international labor rights by formulating international standards on the freedom to associate, collective bargaining, the abolition of forced labor, and equality of opportunity and treatment.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) focuses on everything from teacher training to helping improve education worldwide to protecting important historical and cultural sites around the world.

20. See the list of Specialised Agencies, Funds and Programmes at <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-system>



The International Telecommunication Union is the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies. It is committed to connecting all the world's people – wherever they live and whatever their means.

The World Meteorological Organization facilitates the free international exchange of meteorological data and information, and the furtherance of its use in aviation, shipping, security, and agriculture, among other things.

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) leads and inspires the world to achieve its shared vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – UNHCR protects refugees worldwide and facilitates their return home or resettlement.

The International Organization for Migration works to help ensure the orderly and humane management of migration, to promote international cooperation on migration issues, to assist in the search for practical solutions to migration problems and to provide humanitarian assistance to migrants in need, including refugees and internally displaced people.

The UNFCCC Secretariat (UN Climate Change) was established in 1992 when countries adopted the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East has contributed to the welfare and human development of four generations of Palestine refugees.

There is no standalone UN agency dedicated to young people. Following the designation of the International Year of Youth (2010-2011), members of the informal Inter-Agency Group formalised the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development (IANYD) to establish a more structured coordination mechanism and to ensure the greatest possible efficacy in UN efforts.

Since its existence, the UN has been a subject to much criticism for its perceived inefficiency, opaque processes, and lack of accountability. Today, the UN's role in the international global governance itself is under scrutiny. However, people still turn to the UN in their desire for peace and justice, as other structures of multilateralism are seen as less democratic and legitimate.²¹ The fundamental necessity of the UN remains as it is the institution with the mandate and machinery to bring together the silos of development, peace and human rights, which has led to many – past and present calls by states and civil society – for reform and changes to the UN system (discussed further in Primer 4).

21. Barbara Adams, "Democratic global governance: if it doesn't challenge power it isn't democratic", Spotlight on Sustainable Development Report, (2019).

Box 5: The International Labour Organisation and Youth

The International Labour Organization (ILO) was founded in 1919 and precedes the creation of the United Nations. It is the first and oldest specialized agency of the UN. The ILO aims to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes promoting decent work for all, as part of advancing social and economic justice. The ILO is also the only tripartite agency in the entire UN system in providing an equal voice to workers, employers and governments. The ILO defines its principle of tripartism as when the formulation of standards and policies dealing with labor matters are made through dialogue and cooperation between governments, employers, and workers.²² The tripartite structure is maintained throughout the entire ILO, including in the formulation of international labour standards.

The first ILO convention was adopted in 1919 and covers the issue on hours of work. The ILO has since adopted 402 instruments which includes 190 conventions, 6 protocols and 206 recommendations. There are 8 conventions of the ILO, that are considered as core conventions due to the universal binding nature of these conventions on all ILO members, regardless of whether they have ratified any of these conventions or not. The 8 core conventions of the ILO are:

1. Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87)
2. Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98)
3. Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) and its 2014 Protocol
4. Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105)
5. Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138)
6. Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)
7. Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100)
8. Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111)

In addition to the labour standards set above, the ILO has dedicated extensive effort to the question of youth, employment and labour rights.

The ILO played an instrumental role in making child labour illegal in international law, and is the leading organisation keeping data on youth employment trends and labour rights violations experienced by young people across all sectors of the economy.²³ A major triumph for women workers was the passing of the ILO Convention 190 in 2017, which is the first international treaty to recognize the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence and harassment.

22. See for example: the ILO's International Labour Standards on Tripartite consultation.

23. See <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/youth-employment/lang--en/index.htm> for more information about the ILO's work on youth employment



Financing for development: International Monetary Fund and the World Bank

The Bretton Woods Institutions²⁴ - known more commonly as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank are the two most important multilateral organisations that deal with providing financing— mainly in the form of loans— to developing countries for major development projects. The World Bank Group as the major lender, consists of three different arms: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD); International Development Association (IDA) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC).

Towards the end of the Second World War, 43 countries – led largely by the colonizing states of the Global North – gathered in Bretton Woods, USA in July 1944 to establish a number of multilateral institutions in the area of international development financing and assistance. The Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs) consists of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and also initially had plans for an International Trade Organisation (ITO) which lay dormant until the World Trade Organisation (WTO) was created in 1995.

The most immediate concern was how to finance the reconstruction of Europe devastated by the Second World War. Leaders of the Allied countries, particularly the United States and Britain, also felt the world needed a multilateral framework to overcome the destabilising effects of previous global economic crises, particularly the 1930s Great Depression.

The IMF's original goal was to create a stable climate for international trade by harmonising its members' monetary policies, and maintaining exchange stability. It would also provide temporary financial assistance to countries encountering difficulties with their balance of payments. The World Bank, on the other hand, would serve to improve the capacity of countries to trade by lending money to war-ravaged and impoverished countries for reconstruction and development projects.

Similar multilateral institutions have since also been created at regional level, known as regional development banks. The Asian Development Bank (ADB), African Development Bank (AfDB), Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) are some of the examples though many more similar banks have emerged since, all very much shaped in the shadows of the Bretton Woods Institutions and are therefore often viewed as complementary instead of competing institutions to the BWIs. Collectively, these organisations are referred to using the acronym IFI's (international financial institutions).

The World Bank and IMF are extremely important to the question of financing for development. For poorer countries seeking finance for development projects, the World Bank's IDA facility provides low interest loans, which is preferable to going to international credit markets. Likewise for developing countries that face balance of payments difficulties (i.e., ensuring adequate foreign currency to meet their external payments) the IMF is the first port of call for seeking assistance. In both cases however, the loans come with stringent policy conditionalities generally requiring countries to cut public spending to reduce deficits, privatise state owned entities and deregulate and liberalise various sectors. The IMF and World Bank also wield power in other ways: their judgement of a country's economic performance can influence flows from other donors and financiers.

Primer 2 will address some of the criticisms of the role of international financial institutions in exacerbating poverty and inequality, slowing down human development, impeding economic and social rights, and accelerating climate change and environmental degradation through the projects they fund and the policy conditionalities that they impose on countries with their loans. Rather than helping countries get out of situations of financial distress, the IMF and World Bank's ideological attachment to its policy prescriptions are making things worse for countries, rather than better.

24. For more information about the history of the IMF and the World Bank read: What are the Bretton Woods Institutions? FAQ - Bretton Woods Project <https://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/2019/01/art-320747/>.

Trade, investment and globalisation: The World Trade Organisation

Initial ideas of a multilateral trade system first emerged at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944. The failed negotiation for the International Trade Organization (ITO) – due to the U.S.'s withdrawal – led to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)²⁵ in 1948. The GATT's overall purpose was to promote international trade by reducing or eliminating tariffs as one of the barriers to trade. From 1948 to 1994, the GATT provided the rules for the post-war trading system and much of the world's trade. And as tariffs largely came down, trade agreements sought to begin addressing non-tariff barriers to trade instead, such as rules regarding patent and trademarks, regulations around how a product should be manufactured, handled or advertised and policies that promote the use of or provide subsidies to domestic producers. In 1986, the Uruguay Round – the eighth round of trade negotiations conducted within the framework of the GATT – began in Punta del Este, Uruguay. This negotiation continued until 1993 and took the multilateral trading system into uncharted waters, by extending its reach to trade in services and the protection of intellectual property rights among others, and finally, for all these rules to be converged under the World Trade Organization (WTO), which was established in 1995.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) is the third, after the IMF and World Bank, of the big three multilateral regimes which determines the rules of the game for economic, financial and trade relations between the nations of the world. And while the WTO allows for a “one country, one vote” system, the institution does not make its decisions based on votes. Instead, the WTO relies on a system of decision making by ‘consensus’ which makes it far more difficult for developing country members to stand in open opposition to the forceful delegations of the EU, USA and other rich countries. Similar to other multilateralism, it is an arena that is also wrought with the asymmetrical power relations and dynamics between rich and developed countries and poor and developing countries.²⁶

BOX 6: WTO Agreements

The main WTO Agreements consist of the following:

General Agreement on Tariffs & Trade (GATT)

Agreement On Agriculture (AOA)

General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)

Trade Related aspects of Intellectual Property rights (TRIPS)

Trade Related Investment Measures (TRIMS)

Agreement on Technical Barriers Trade (TBT)

Sanitary & Phyto Sanitary (SPS) Agreement

Dispute Settlement

25. General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, Oct. 30, 1947, 61 Stat. A-11, 55 U.N.T.S. 194 [hereinafter GATT].

26. See for example: https://www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/doc_lib/54_1_wto_democracy_reform.pdf

Unlike the multilateral agreements such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) whose rules and commitments are non-binding, the WTO's rules are enforceable through its own state-to-state dispute settlement process. The WTO dispute settlement process allows for a member country to file a complaint against another member country who it deems to be in violation of WTO's trade rules. Successful complainant governments can subsequently use economic retaliatory measures such as import restrictions or increasing tariff and non-tariff barriers on the nationals and the businesses of the country found in violation of the WTO's rules. Some of these measures are in effect equivalent to the application of sanctions utilized in the UN through the Security Council to uphold international law, although arguably the interests being protected under the WTO's trade regime are not public goods, but private and corporate interests instead.

Alongside WTO rules, most countries also belong to one or more regional multilateral trade agreements such as free trade areas, customs unions or regional economic communities. The largest of these is the European Union, but since the formation of the EU Single Market and the WTO, there has been a proliferation of these regional trade agreements. The new generation of these trade agreements, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)²⁷ or the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) have been opposed by social movements in these regions as they impose even more extreme trade rules than the WTO (WTO plus) particularly in terms of constraining governments ability to regulate corporations or protect vital sectors of their economies.

(see Primer 3 for a summary discussion on COVID19 vaccine controversy and the WTO TRIPS agreement, the WTO and vaccine apartheid, and the People's Vaccine campaign.)

Climate Multilateralism and the Sustainable Development Goals

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

The issue of climate change did not garner global attention until the 1990s. As such, multilateral action around climate change is considerably younger than the other multilateral frameworks discussed in this primer. The signing of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)²⁸ by 154 nations at the Rio "Earth Summit" in 1992 marked the beginning of the multilateral climate negotiations. It was the first attempt to reconcile global economic development with the protection of the environment. The numerous outcome documents that emerged from the Earth Summit required nations to take inventories of their plants and wild animals and protect their endangered species and forest resources; reduce the emission of carbon dioxide, methane, and other "greenhouse" gases responsible for global warming; and develop global strategies for cleaning up and protecting the environment and encouraging sustainable development. However, the Earth Summit stopped short of setting binding targets for carbon emissions reductions. These targets were eventually established in an amendment to the UNFCCC through the Kyoto Protocol²⁹ in 1997, which was subsequently succeeded by the Paris Agreement³⁰ on climate change in 2015.

27. For more information all the various regional trade agreements visit www.bilaterals.org on RCEP <https://bilaterals.org/?-rcep-218-#> TPP <https://bilaterals.org/?-tpp-#> and others.

28. UN General Assembly, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change : resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 20 January 1994, A/RES/48/189.

29. 3rd session of the Conference of the Parties to the 1992 UNFCCC, 1997 Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 11 December 1997.

30. 21st session of the Conference of the Parties to the 1992 UNFCCC, Paris Agreement, 12 December 2015.

Even though climate change is recognised as an existential threat to humanity, climate change multilateralism has had more than its share of difficulties and challenges. Similar to other multilateral negotiation processes, it has been an arena particularly fraught with the asymmetrical power relations and dynamics between rich and developed countries and poor and developing countries. Climate multilateralism has also been widely made ineffective by the challenges and difficulties of enforcing the climate obligations on states, and by some countries' refusal to participate in it. The world's two top carbon dioxide-emitting countries, China and the United States, refused to participate in the Kyoto Protocol, while the U.S. withdrew from the Paris Agreement in 2017 only to join again in 2021 under a new administration.

From the start, the Earth Summit was hampered by disputes between the wealthy industrialized nations of the North and the poorer developing countries of the South. In general, the developing and least developed countries of the Global South were reluctant to slow down their development progress with the environmental restrictions unless these were accompanied by adequate financing and resources. The financing was deemed necessary as developed countries from the Global North bore the most responsibility for the climate crisis, and while developing and least developed countries of the Global South who were least responsible, also suffered the worst impacts of the climate-related disasters.

Adequate finance and resources were also necessary to ensure that the developing and least developed countries have the resources to build resilience to climate shocks and disasters and ensure that their development pathways were environmentally sound. There was – and still are – strong reluctance from Global North and developed countries to commit the required finance to support developing and least developed countries to achieve sustainable development (see Box 7 on the Green Climate Fund). The absence of financing and technology has been a particularly contentious point for developing and least developed countries who are now subjected to the same pressures to reduce carbon emissions as developed and late industrializing countries.

The principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities” (CBDR) that emerged from this contentious point at the Earth Summit has remained contentious to this day. Under the CBDR principle, the historical contribution to climate change and the respective ability of countries to reduce emissions become measures of responsibility for environmental protection and climate action. Based on the polluter-pays principle, CBDR recognizes the disparity between developed and developing countries – that the more industrialized and developed a country is, the more likely that it has contributed to climate change by emitting vast amounts of greenhouse gases.

In recent years, youth mobilisations globally have become somewhat of a gamechanger in the climate change debate. This has been welcome. As governments are obliged to at least appear responsive to these demands, climate negotiations have tended to come up with ‘false solutions’ that do little to address the issue as the world accelerates towards climate crisis. Understanding climate negotiations, as complex as they may be, is key to holding governments accountable for their positions and commitments to urgently address an issue that we already know will dramatically alter the lives of future generations.

Box 7: Green Climate Fund (GCF)

The Green Climate Fund (GCF) is a multilateral climate fund which was established under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2011 to assist developing countries in adaptation and mitigation practices to counter climate change. It is the largest global climate financing institution, the only one that is dedicated to projects in developing countries and was designed to ensure equal representation of developing and developed countries. Multilateral climate funds such as GCF are important due to their ability to fill gaps in finance from other International Financial Institutions (IFIs) – such as World Bank and other Development Banks. The GCF provides for projects that do not promise a financial return, such as building community resilience. The GCF financing is in the form of grants, which in theory, can be accessed by any national and subnational organisations (either public, private or non-governmental) without any intermediary. This differs from the common access route of most global funds which requires that large international institutions and banks serve as an intermediary ('international access').

The GCF however, has been criticised by civil society organizations for accrediting a growing number of private banks, with worries that profit-driven institutions and “business-as-usual type of investments” are increasingly dominating the fund. A majority of the GCF’s funds go to the private rather than the public sector. In addition, just 42% of its funds are given out as grants, with the rest distributed through loans, equity and guarantees. It has also been criticized for being increasingly skewed towards distributing money through large international financial institutions, with the requirements for the smallest funding category being the same as for bigger projects, leading to disadvantages for smaller national or subnational entities. It is also facing issues with regards to its future funding, with many developed and rich countries either refusing to contribute or failing to meet existing pledges.

Source: [The Green Climate Fund: A CSO Guide for engagement and local access, with a specific focus on the Indonesian context, \(2017\)](#).³¹

2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#)³² are a collection of 17 interlinked goals designed to be a “blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all”. It was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015 and was an attempt to bring together and provide some coherence to the different multilateral frameworks and disciplines – of environment, finance, development, gender equality, poverty – into one agenda. It posits that efforts to end poverty and other deprivations by 2030, must include strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, promote decent work, address gender inequality and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.

31. See for example: [The Green Climate Fund: A CSO Guide for engagement and local access, with a specific focus on the Indonesian context, \(2017\)](#).

32. UN General Assembly, *Transforming our world : the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1.

The SDGs also seek to build on and bring together a number of different multilateral processes and frameworks – the Rio processes that begun at the Earth Summit in 1992, the Millennium Development Goals that was ending in 2015, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change in 2015, and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development in 2015 – to name a few³³.

The SDGs came at a time when there was an urgent need to correct the world's economic, social and environmental trajectory. It was an ambitious and potentially transformative agenda that offered the opportunity to respond in an integrated manner to urgent global problems, such as climate change and growing inequalities. It was the first of its kind to incorporate both a recognition and a commitment to reduce inequalities both within and between countries. The SDGs have been widely popularised at the national level and introduced into domestic policy, providing some ability for demanding accountability at the national level.

The SDGs have also been criticized for a number of reasons.

Firstly, many civil society organizations have criticized the SDGs for being an agenda that is still economic growth-focused or based on the failed “trickle down” economics that have exacerbated inequalities between and within nations and skewed the distribution of power, resources and finances to the 1%. Secondly, the SDGs lack an effective accountability mechanism with a weak voluntary process for reviewing progress. The High-level Political Forum (HLPF) as the sole global arena in reviewing the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been criticized as a “forum/talk-shop” of states and therefore, provides no genuine reflection of states’ implementation of the SDGs. Thirdly, the SDGs have expanded the role of the private sector, paving the way for unaccountable multi-stakeholder and public private ‘partnerships’, weakening the initial principle of a global partnership between states that the SDG Agenda was originally built on (explained further in Primer 2). This dilutes the principle of state obligation and responsibility and by extension, the UN to deliver and protect human rights and public goods.³⁴

Finally, the SDGs miss the mark on securing adequate and predictable financial commitments from developed countries and addressing the imbalances of the global financial system that is bleeding developing and least developed finance of their own domestic resources. While so many parts of the agenda have the potential for addressing the systemic and structural issues we are facing, without the necessary funding, the SDGs will not be achieved. It is estimated that there is an overall gap of \$2.5 trillion dollars that will be required annually to finance the SDGs. Meanwhile, it's well known that between \$21 and \$32 trillion dollars are sitting undisturbed in offshore tax havens. Developing countries are also expected to repay a substantial amount to their public external debt in 2020-2021 - amounting to between \$2 trillion and \$2.3 trillion for high-income developing countries and to between \$600 billion and \$1 trillion for middle and low-income developing countries.

33. See for an overview of UN World Conferences such as the UN World Conferences on Women; World Conferences on Population and Development, World Conference on Racism and the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination etc. <https://www.un.org/en/conferences>

34. See for example: <https://actionaid.org.au/6-reasons-why-privatisation-impacts-womens-rights/>



Conclusion

This primer maps out some of the key multilateral institutions, systems and frameworks in various areas: global governance, human rights, human and social development, financing for development, trade and investment and climate change. Within each of these systems and frameworks sit complex rules, processes, mechanisms and institutions. They are beset with complex geopolitics and contradictory objectives and trade-offs, both internally and in some cases between them. The primer focuses on international/global multilateral systems, but it is important to recall that there are other forms of multilateral interaction between states according to regional, political, historical or economic interests and commonalities. All of these systems and frameworks can all be viewed as separate, complimentary, overlapping and conflicting – all at the same time.

In an increasingly globalised and integrated world, many of these spaces address some of the most important issues and crises of our time – issues and crises that are likely to remain for generations to come. Understanding some of these rules and frameworks, their history, importance and implications on all our lives and on the planet, is key for transforming multilateralism for the better, building on its important contributions to human rights, peace and cooperation, while addressing the many weaknesses in the system that are either creating paralysis or regression in terms of global progress. Only then can youth, women and other marginalized peoples begin to rewrite and transform our current multilateralism into one that takes into account historical responsibility, is based on the principles of accountability, international cooperation and solidarity and one that puts human rights, environmental, social and gender justice at its centre.

This is the first of four primers in the series *Towards a People's Multilateralism*:

Primer 1 - Mapping the Multilateral Systems seeks to help young people understand some of the major multilateral institutions and their impact on women, youth, LGBTIQ+ people and other marginalized identities. Through understanding some of these institutions and frameworks, their history, importance and implications on all our lives and on the planet, young people can begin the process of rewriting and transforming these multilateral spaces from an intersectional, intergenerational and human rights perspective.

Primer 2 - Challenges facing Multilateralism outlines the crisis currently facing multilateralism, why we still need multilateralism and how the increasing retreat to unilateralism has not and will not tackle many of the crises that we are currently faced with.

Primer 3 - Peoples' Power in Action: Social Movements and Multilateralism recalls the power that civil society and social movements hold and continue to have in shaping, influencing and ensuring accountability in multilateralism. It looks at select stories and examples of how peoples' and social movements, especially youth, feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements – working at community, local, national, regional and global level, on a range of themes and policy areas and contexts – have fought and ensured people's spaces and voices in the multilateral systems and how working in solidarity across different issues and borders can transform the world we live in.

Primer 4 - Reclaiming and Transforming Multilateralism: Towards a Peoples' Multilateralism explores what “new forms of” multilateralism could look like based on various proposals from governments, multilateral institutions, civil society organizations, including youth and women's rights organizations and social movements from around the world. We hope to generate further thinking and open debate among youth movements and young human rights defenders for a “peoples' multilateralism” that is fit for people and the planet, that redistributes wealth, resources and power, that takes into account historical responsibility, and that puts human rights, environmental, social and gender justice at its centre.



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This report was authored by Diyana Yahaya, with inputs from Katherine Robinson, Rachel Noble, Nancy Kachingwe and Neelanjana Mukhia

Edited by Nancy Kachingwe

Design and layout by: The Media Chilli
Artwork by: Donovan Ward