

# After Rio+20: What New World Governance Does the World Need?

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There have already been a good deal of post-Rio+20 articles. A large majority of them have expressed discontentment, disappointment, the evidence of failure foretold, the inadequacy of the governments' final declaration, etc. Some of these articles, digging deeper, have not stopped at establishing that the governments were not able to reach an agreement equal to the challenges of the major global problems and have gone on to mention that the Conference of the United Nations exposed a crisis in world governance.<sup>2</sup>

## A crisis in world governance

But what is world governance? While not intending to explore the more-or-less complex definitions of what world governance, or global governance, might be and the technocratic conceptions involved in the concept, we prefer to think of world governance as simply the *collective management of the planet*. This definition may have the weakness of being broad, but it makes it possible to explore all the dimensions of what ought to be, what could be a fair and democratic governance, which we know has to transcend the restrictive framework of "international relations," the only prism through which relations are perceived in the limited vision of the dominant political entity, the nation-state.

Should we have to draw a conclusion from the last twenty years, it is that in the current state of things, we do not have the adequate structures to address and solve problems at the global scale. States, and first and foremost the major powers and the emerging powers, are clearly stakeholders in the development of new responses. But they also constitute inertial forces that will necessarily have to be outstripped because obviously, the world's evolution of the past decades has made the practice of international relations obsolete, based as they are on national interests and power struggles, something the UN system has to some extent attenuated, without having modified its basic principles.

What is true is that many of us already knew that the governments meeting at the Rio+20 Conference of the United Nations would not be capable of agreeing on a common work plan to face and solve the severe problems humankind is dragging along in this era. We had already produced scores of analyses demonstrating that governments, the political expression of nation-states, are unable to respond to the challenges raised by the great global mutation humankind is caught up in as the twenty-first century begins, which had been germinating since the end of the past century. This inability, not only of states but also of corporations, multilateral organizations, global networks, and international NGOs, is the expression of the world-governance crisis we are experiencing, and it must be understood in the context of a deep historical mutation, which is articulated around two simultaneous events that are in a way also interconnected.

The first is globalization. Globalization is not new, of course, but since the late twentieth century, it has reached a critical threshold at which its various manifestations have completely trumped the

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<sup>2</sup> This article takes up several of the ideas developed in documents recently written, in particular the Proposal Paper, "The Commons and World Governance," written with Arnaud Blin in April 2012.

competences and capacities of all actors working on a global scale, those of states above all, all the more that they are still operating on the “national interest” principle.

The second phenomenon, which back in the fifties had brought on the threat of a nuclear disaster and then in the seventies, the first signs of a rapid and worrisome deterioration of the environment, is awareness that the past two centuries’ mode of production and consumption and all their excesses have led to a critical stage of history in which not only can human beings self-destruct as a species, they can also destroy their planet.

In this context, current modes of governance are obviously discrepant with the instancy and complexity of the problems. From globalization and awareness of the dangers for life on the planet, the conviction rises that on the one hand, we are facing completely new problems of utmost urgency and complexity (migrations, financial crises, environmental degradation, etc.) and on the other hand, we do not have the suitable modes of governance to solve these problems.

We already knew this, and the Rio+20 Conference confirmed it one more time. But we must not generalize nor restrict ourselves to analyzing the final declaration. Rio+20 opens a new phase in the global redistribution of power that has been taking shape since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008.

### **A new configuration of the world’s power centers**

The main actors’ behavior around the Conference is consistent with this new scenario, starting with those who were not there. Obama did not go to Rio. We already knew that the US government was not only not prepared to take up the leadership at Rio+20, but that it had abandoned, as well, any intention of implementing global policies that would regulate the ongoing ecological imbalances, national and global. Angela Merkel did not go to Rio either. François Hollande came to establish that the official declaration was not equal to the challenges and returned to France to concentrate on the first measures of a government surrounded by countries in crises with repercussions in the whole of Europe, bogged down in ever-growing debt and unemployment. The African countries were far from forming a united and solid bloc, and neither did the governments of the other continents, including the majority of Latin American countries, organize a united front. The Chinese government, wishing to avoid a leading role given how very difficult that would have been in a world in crisis, and at the same time under pressure from ever-stronger economic and social tensions in China, decided to keep a low profile and skirted any global decision that might bind it to obligations it is not prepared to assume. So the government of Brazil played the only role left to play to prevent a complete fiasco of the Conference, and it imposed a text based on the lowest common denominator to avert disagreements.

As for corporations and the UN agencies, they upheld the green-economy discourse as the novelty that would allow the world economy to exit the crisis, but seeing the governments’, to say the least, lily-livered position, they also restricted themselves to stopping measures from being adopted that would constrain their global strategies. Moreover, many corporations had not put all their eggs in the green-economy basket as the magic wand that would solve the current crisis.

Rio+20 thus marked the entry point into a turbulence zone where the pilot, represented by the United Nations, does not know for sure how to manage the plane and no one is willing to replace him. Every bloc, especially the one made up of the major so-called emerging countries headed by China, Brazil, and India, has just fastened its seatbelt and is waiting for the plane to move back out

into stable atmosphere so they can go back to the growth strategies and social policies that will mostly stabilize their own inner spaces. All the others, especially the North Americans and Europeans, are too engrossed in their domestic problems to take on the burden of global problems.

This tableau, which we experienced at Rio+20 in a context of meetings and debates prepared by the Brazilian government, which is also preparing Rio to be the center of global events such as the World Football Championship in 2014 and the Olympic Games in 2016, is in sharp contrast—though it features the same characteristics of the current power struggles—with the tragic war scenario playing out in Syria. Obviously, the actors and their positions are not exactly the same, but the intensification of the war in Syria is a pathetic display of the world-governance crisis we are witnessing.

### **The incapacity of rulers and the powerful, and the helplessness of new actors and the social movements**

From the point of view of citizens and social movements—they are ultimately the passengers of the plane, they helped to build it and make it work—the fact that the power sectors, those that control the power and hoard the wealth, are incapable of exiting the turbulence zone and that none of them is willing to be the pilot, could be good news. Like all crises, the world-governance one carries its share of risk and its share of opportunity for new, innovative, dynamic, bold actors to open new perspectives and overcome the crisis.

The problem is that faced with this void in political leadership, neither do the social sectors, global-justice movements, *indignados*, and the rest constitute an alternative. To overcome a situation of crisis, it is not enough that the dominant sectors be incapable; it is necessary, incontrovertible, for the dominated sectors to take on the task of overcoming the crisis and above all, to be capable of doing so.

Persisting fragmentation among the actors and movements that could promote a new vision to exit the world-governance crisis is diminishing their capacities enormously. Paradoxically, although communication technology and means of transportation have facilitated communication as never before, direct contacts and joint initiatives among the actors and movements are practically non-existent. The young and the women who were at the forefront of the fight against the dictatorships of Tunisia and Egypt do not know the young Chilean students who are fighting for an accessible and fair education system. The native peoples fighting in the Andean highlands to safeguard their territories against the mining and transportation companies that are wreaking irreparable damage on nature are not managing to articulate their efforts with the thousands of African and Asian small-scale fishers watching over the protection of marine resources.

Examples are many and varied. Incidentally, there should be no attempt to pool all efforts into a single container as one of the essential features of the new globalization scenarios is the diversity of the actors and the social movements. Articulating them all, however, in such a way as to overcome current fragmentation, becomes an indispensable historical task, all the more that the dominant sectors and the capitalist market have definitely, on their side, built global networks and are continuing to secure their hold at the global scale. Building articulation mechanisms among actors promoting new perspectives and ensuring the diversity of the whole requires inventing and putting into practice answers to the challenges of the present, which are rooted in everyone's, every people's, specific context. This implies acknowledging the different bodies of knowledge of every continent and every people without attempting to make just one of them the indisputable

benchmark. This is why the foundations of the new architecture of world governance must be built with a critical spirit and a democratic ethos. This is of the essence because the changes in the political systems that will be capable of underpinning a new architecture of power from the local to the global must necessarily be lasting and sustainable. These tasks may seem Utopian, but they are already appearing in the daily struggles of those who are building the new forums of world citizenship, from the world's territories to the world itself.

### **World governance starts from the territories, but does not stop there...**

It is important here to highlight a fundamental pillar of the new architecture of world power. The idea is to localize and territorialize, as much as possible, the economy and power, because citizenship materializes primarily in a *citizens' territory*. Take, for instance, the climate question. This is obviously a planet-wide issue that requires world governance. And yet, world governance will not work without an effective compromise on the part of citizens in their territories. The territory is thus the specific unit for the relationship between society and nature; it is where a symbiosis can be reached in which the planet's sustainability is expressed socially.

We are witnessing the "revenge" of the territories, which until recently had been forgotten in the macroeconomic and macro-political cogs of the architecture of world power. It has become obvious today that the new architecture of governance requires that the territories be re-appreciated. But their contours are still fuzzy: Where is the territory? In the neighborhood? In the county? How large is an urban territory, a city, a neighborhood, a rural location? Is a country a territory, whatever its size? Are there continental territories such as Europe, South America, the Indian sub-continent, etc.? After all, isn't the whole world a territory?

Whatever the case, we already have a few appropriate answers. The idea is to articulate the scales and levels of governance, though not to force the relationships between the different levels or expect them to be necessarily harmonious. The new political architecture is built simultaneously at two main scales: the local one, for the territory (states also come under this local scale though they may be very dissimilar), and the global one, which refers not only to the inter-state scale but also, and rather, to the new transnational and global spaces.

Local is where people's daily life plays out, and global is where the policies that will affect this daily life are increasingly decided. The scale of the phenomena is increasingly greater: migrations, pandemics, climate shocks, financial crises, etc. The territory, however, the local scale, grassroots democracy are the basics, the foundations upon which it will be possible to build the new architecture of governance. Nonetheless, in this era of ever-accelerating globalization of financial and trade flows, information flows, and movement of persons, the global dimension conditions daily life at the local level. This is why it is necessary to propose and materialize changes in governance at the local and global scales at the same time. There is a dialectic relationship between these two main dimensions of governance.

### **The old world is dying away, and the new world struggles to come forth: now is the time ...**

In any case, the road ahead is long and in the current turbulence zone we mentioned previously, given the inability of the social actors and movements to change the course of history in the short and medium term, the most likely scenario is that capitalism will progressively exit the crisis and new ideological, social, and political forms of leadership will appear, which are hard to predict.

Faced with this perspective, the gravity of the current situation should not be underestimated. The image of the plane entering a turbulence zone can help to grasp the transition phase into which we have entered. We can also quote Antonio Gramsci and his lucid, pioneering vision: “The old world is dying away, and the new world struggles to come forth: now is the time of monsters.” The situation in Syria is here to corroborate this. And most likely, once the situation in this country has reached a solution, hoping that the solution is close and that democratic stability will bring about some calm in the region (which at the moment is only a wish), new hotspots of conflict and war will cast a shadow over the horizon as long as we have not succeeded in instituting a world governance that is fair and based on solidarity.

This new governance will be all the harder to establish that the situation of the majority of the world’s population and life on the planet continue to be extremely precarious: famines, no access to basic services, violation of human rights, devastation of the ecosystems, etc. The populations suffering war, hunger, forced migration, floods, and attacks attest to this. To this we can add the networks of organized crime trafficking in drugs, children, women, and men, and the millions traveling the world in search of a place where they might be able to bear the difficulties of their daily life a little better. In the poor neighborhoods of some cities, large and small, in every continent, there is real more or less open social warfare, a permanent expression of economic and social exclusion and inequalities.

The wars and conflicts we are facing today have a variety of causes: economic inequalities, social conflict, religious sectarianism, territorial dispute, control over basic resources like land and water, etc. All of these are the illustration of a deep crisis in world governance. And though in recent years the number of conventional conflicts between states has declined, this does not make the current conflicts any less violent nor stop them from being increasingly waged against civilians and in the world’s most fragile regions, mainly in Africa and in the Middle East.

There are other dangers threatening peace and security besides wars. Growing populism, fundamentalism, and nationalism have become an increasingly massive reality in large democratic societies, not only in Western and Eastern Europe, but also in Asia and America. Some African countries are trying to exit their crises, but large regions are still deeply bogged down in permanent crises, hindered by corrupt, authoritarian regimes, and whole swathes of the population are surviving in conditions of extreme poverty.

Against this background, in many of the states that arose from independence movements, whose institutions were for a large part “imposed” on society, the exercise of power is judged illegitimate by the population itself. Representative democracy, as it is practiced in many countries, is seen by most as a system through which a minority grabs all the power and wealth.

Confrontations have become numerous and recurrent, and economic, political, and military multilateralism is blocked by warmongering tensions and exclusionary ideologies. As a result, it remains difficult to lay the ground for new, appropriate institutions at all the scales of governance, from the local to the global.

## **Rethinking democracy**

This is why we have to rethink democracy, radically. The state structures, whether executive, legislative or judiciary, inherited from the past do not make it possible to respond to the complexity

of contemporary societies, and the management of private companies and the public sphere has often been deeply penetrated by corruption. The abyss separating civil society from public institutions has become dangerously deep and wide in most countries. This has undermined the entire existing institutional system, and along with it the idea of democracy. Political parties themselves have shown that they are incapable of reflecting on an ever-complex citizenry. Democracy requires strong movements, but social movements and civil-society organizations do not solve the core issue of the legitimacy of power in society.

The democratic systems we have are themselves very diverse and complex. Different countries and regions work with traditional democracies with parliamentary or presidential regimes, others have developed democratic systems favoring ethnic-based groups, and others yet have established democratic systems that are openly linked with religious orientations.

There is an obvious political risk implied in this type of situation. Recent history has shown that a participatory institutional system is not only fairer, it is also more efficient than an authoritarian regime. But how can the current trend to discredit democracy be reversed, both in the public debate and in political practices? How can these world-governance problems be approached? How can what needs to be preserved be preserved? How can what needs to be changed be changed? Can the architecture of world power be rehabilitated, or is it necessary to lay new foundations for a new architecture of power?

### **Rethinking the state**

At this point, it also becomes necessary to rethink the whole issue of the state, insofar as it continues to be the cornerstone of the current world-governance system.

The state as entity regulating and organizing society, beyond its limitations, is suffering the onslaughts of hidden transnational economic and political powers seeking to diminish it while peoples are still seeing it and defending it as an instrument for the regulation of these powers and as the guarantor of citizens' rights. This is why it is not a good idea to promote anti-state proposals. A state respecting citizens' rights is a condition for the democratic institutionality of power.

This does not dispense from rethinking the notion of nation-state in a given territory. Many states today in their direct nation-state form no longer reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the peoples and the idea of a pluri-national state has shown up increasingly and in certain countries, been embedded in their constitutions. Clearly, migratory and trade flows the Internet, etc. cut across the territorial limits of states, so it is necessary to think about de-territorializing the role of states—no easy task, given the historical weight of borders.

Today's state plays an ambivalent role. The state is necessary for the regulation of governance mainly within the national space, but even there it steps away from grassroots democracy and, on the world scale, it is not the most appropriate instrument to respond to the global challenges. States are also institutions in dispute, and they need to be geared toward democratic and efficient governance. In any case, and looking at the medium- and long-term perspective, the form of state that played an important role, for instance during the decolonization phase, has grown and is growing much weaker, and it is indispensable to think about its transformation.

In the dialectics between society and the state, the core issue is participation and representation. We know that representation systems do not meet the requirements of active participation. The priority

is to strengthen participation by implementing transparent information systems and open consultation mechanisms so that decision making is effective. But we have to go deeper than that. It is incontrovertible to radicalize democracy, in state institutions as well as in society as a whole.

Thus, gradually, new political institutions will be formed as the state and representation systems are transformed. This stands as a historical challenge as we witness a crisis in the legitimacy of the elite. The current crisis in democracy is mainly about bringing the elite into question and looking at how, historically, it came about. The protests against political parties in certain countries are mostly about challenging the elite. But beyond this questioning, what we need is to invent a new organization of the political systems, where citizens are the main actors, making democracy deeper, those in positions of responsibility are legitimate, and institutions are transparent and effective. This is more than just a political-engineering issue. It is much deeper than that and has to do with ethical foundations capable of sustaining new ways of life in society.

### **Rethinking the market**

Besides rethinking democracy and the state, there is a third element that needs to be radically rethought in view of building a genuinely democratic, legitimate, and effective architecture of world governance. This element is the market, and more specifically, the capitalist market.

Capitalism, after its triumph over the ill-fated so-called Communist system, has responded with partial success to the problem of global economic growth, but it has been disastrous in terms of social and economic justice, offering instead a source of apparently unlimited power to a privileged caste. The inequality and injustice it has generated make it unsustainable and unacceptable. The collusion of the state and the market forces has made a badly deteriorated situation worse, as shown by the recent economic and financial crises, which have revealed to unsuspected levels the high degree of selfishness, greed, irresponsibility, corruption, cowardliness, and lack of foresight permeating the highest rungs of government and financial institutions, particularly in the United States and in Europe.

Nonetheless, some people are still arguing that where the state is helpless or ineffective, the “market” will solve everything. Unlike the state, which is a (political) construction with a framework and goals that are defined, the market would merely be a mechanism. But in this historical phase it is not just a trade-facilitation mechanism. We are dealing with the capitalist market. As such, its only law is profit, and hidden behind the mask of freedom and the pretension of serving consumers, this market generates intense predatory activity that favors the rich and the powerful and crushes the weak and the poor. Like the government, the capitalist market is inclined to generate and concentrate power, which is then abused by those who have managed to hoard it. Like for the government and contrary to what is argued by neoliberalism advocates, the point is not to give it a blank check but to impose on it a series of checks and balances.

Like the colonial empires of the nineteenth century, which sought to colonize new territories to increase their power, the capitalist market tends to move to territories where it can impose its will with no restrictions. This became a basic element in commercial and economic practices a long time ago, but in a very short time, it has progressed qualitatively and quantitatively, so much that the erratic behavior of the market might alter the geopolitical status quo to an unprecedented degree. Paradoxically for what is supposed to be no more than a mechanism, the capitalist market has given birth to an ideology that has replaced nationalism and communism as the most potent ideology of the times.

Both the liberal democratic model and neoliberal ideology have forged an ethics of egoism, the former by exacerbating individualism, the latter by doing away with all barriers to economic wealth, promoting, on top of that, the selfish pursuit of such wealth, and establishing consumption as the very purpose of life. At the same time, states have been implementing policies focused on what is called “national interest.” The spirit of competition conveyed by the capitalist market has eroded the sense of community and its inclination to cooperation.

Nonetheless, in spite of all their limitations and flaws, the state, the market, and democracy cannot just go up in smoke or be eliminated in the blink of an eye. And should they be? The state is the basic infrastructure of all human activity and, under a potent democratic system, can guarantee citizens’ basic rights to some extent. The market, when regulated with intelligence and force, offers a medium for economic growth, and regulated and sustainable economic growth is indispensable for the health and general well-being of the peoples. Obviously, the market cannot be considered as the solution to all the problems of humanity. Setting control mechanisms for the market is a more viable imperative today for effectiveness and justice than *laissez-faire* and continuing to push billions of human beings toward the fascinating magnet of consumption, including the excessive and conspicuous consumption of the richest. It is imperative for democracy to evolve, improve, and adapt, because there is no other system that seems, for the moment, to protect individual rights within closed political entities. In any case, the nation-state, market economy, and the democratic political regime are here to stay, at least in the medium run, for better or for worse. Thinking any other way would be an idle dream.

### **What world society do we want?**

So, then, in this historical transition phase, before proposing any project for institutional or economic reform, a fundamental question is inevitable: What world society do we want?

The ethical dimension is vital. By exploring and appreciating the ethical foundations that have sustained civilizations, we shall learn to overcome our differences. The ethical grounds of biocivilization for the sustainability of life and of the planet will allow us to answer the big question that we have to keep in mind when we undertake to build a new architecture of power: How can the different civilizations be the starting point to rebuild universality? Our ability to really move forward will depend on our readiness to tackle these difficult, but essential themes. The new principles of governance need to transcend national borders and get states, companies, as well as citizens to assume their responsibilities, each according to their possibilities—both their individual and their collective responsibilities—in the name of general interest, of the planet, and of its inhabitants. These principles entail new requirements in terms of legitimacy, of collective action, of competence, of exercising citizenship in a way consistent with respect for human rights, and of the resolution of tensions between the local, national, and global levels.

The recent past should nonetheless keep us very cautious. The League of Nations started out as a bold and extremely novel idea, but it was not enough to ensure peace, or at least to prevent war, as demonstrated by the past century’s succession of two world wars. We have another example in Europe, which designed a sort of social contract expressed in the indecisive and bureaucratic institutionality of the European Union, but it did not really manage to solve the issue of what this contract was about, who were the contracting parties, and why it was so important. Not having done this is the main reason behind its current crisis and perhaps its irreversible decline.



More generally speaking, despite all the talk of solidarity, responsibility, or compassion, states, political regimes, transnational corporations, and in fact, many individuals are still clearly functioning mainly, though not exclusively, on the basis of blatantly egoistic behavior, often cruel (primarily a number of large predatory corporations and all authoritarian governments), and with outstandingly short-sighted vision. To think for even a minute that this fact can be altered is a recipe for disappointment, or worse, for disaster.

### **Building a new world governance**

Against this background building a new world governance is not only an institutional issue or a matter for consideration in the field of politics or sociology. Any proposal and design for governance will depend on the action and mobilization of large majorities of persons, actors, movements, and peoples. This is the decisive question. And in this action and mobilization, ideas and proposals play a key role. This is why we have to rethink the architecture of governance by integrating it into the perspective of a biocivilization for the sustainability of life and of the planet. The architecture of a governance working for citizens, in solidarity and justice, will have to be based on firm ethical and philosophical pillars. It will also have to be rooted in—as well as, inversely, make possible—a new economy geared toward social and environmental justice. Everything is interrelated—ethics, politics, and the economy—and all fronts have to be acted upon simultaneously.<sup>3</sup>

Rio+20 came and went. Twenty years have gone by since the Earth Summit held in Rio in 1992. The world has continued to change, deeply and swiftly. The current period was marked at the start by significant events: The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 from 27 years of imprisonment and his election as President of South Africa in 1994, the widespread development of Internet-based communication starting in the mid-nineties have all, among others, signed history's entry into a new age. Other facts have left footprints that have set back the achieved progress. Each of us, depending on his or her geographical roots and world vision, could identify the historical events that have marked the past twenty years. Visions are fortunately multidimensional. But a common horizon is emerging. Twenty years ago, the world entered a long transition phase which has since played out with successive, intermingled, and combined crises. Rio+20 marks a stage. In the turbulence zone we are experiencing in the history of the first years of the twentieth century, we have the opportunity of opening doors and windows to new civilizations based on plurality and solidarity. Of course the future is unpredictable, and it will probably be different than any we can imagine. But another world is visible on the horizon. To get past this turbulence zone, and face and defeat Gramsci's monsters, we need to be able to count on solid platforms that will let us make the path by walking. This is the sense of the thoughts we have wanted to place in your hands.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed and exhaustive presentation of our proposals for a fair and democratic world governance, you can refer to the Proposal Paper developed for the June 2012 Peoples' Summit, available on the FnWG Web site at <http://www.world-governance.org/spip.php?article799&lang=en> and on the Web site of the World Social Forum thematic groups at <http://dialogos2012.org/novo/index.php/pt/forum/88-texto-base/256-texto-base>