

# Bringing the world's international organisations to heel



Instead of bewailing the “democratic deficits” of the EU, UN, IMF and World Bank, we should invest in expanding our toolkit for holding them to greater account, says **Thorsten Benner**, who argues that for international institutions to respond only to their member governments is neither politically satisfactory nor practically workable

Governance is going global, and so too are the many issues surrounding legitimacy. International organisations like the EU, the UN, the IMF and the World Bank, are all coming under fire for operating “democratic deficits”, and this is a clear reflection of the way their growing importance to the daily lives of citizens is seen on both the Left and Right as unchecked by democratic controls.

Critics on the Right, especially in the US and the UK, have conjured up images of an unaccountable technocracy that is trampling underfoot democratic sovereignty. One conservative columnist in the US, David Brooks, has warned his readers that multilateral organisations like the UN can never be legitimate because “they look like meetings of unelected elites, of technocrats who make decisions in secret and who rely upon intentionally impenetrable language, who settle differences through arcane fudges”. He went on to warn that “Americans, like most peoples, will never surrender even

a bit of their national democracy for the sake of multilateral technocracy”. The right-wing sovereignists’ conclusion is to put the genie of global interdependence back into the bottle of the nation state – in other words to delegate no authority to international organisations. But in reality this would lead to a dangerous governance vacuum.

On the Left, critics are demanding that international organisation should be controlled by a sort of ideal global participatory democracy, including a global parliament. But such calls for global populism are Utopian. They offer no help in addressing the accountability deficits of international organisations. That said, concerns about their lack of accountability are real enough, and if left unattended, they risk further undermining the legitimacy of some of our key international organisations.

To address these concerns, we need to be more measured in our analysis, and more creative in our remedies. This means that

we should not try to measure international organisations against a textbook version of participatory democracy that in any case is non-existent in even the most perfect of national democracies. Nor should we be prisoners of an ideal of direct participatory democracy when thinking about how to improve the accountability of international organisations. Instead, we should follow a pragmatic approach that is both creative and principled. Accountability, not direct democracy should be the cornerstone of our efforts.

The main channel of international organisations' accountability is toward their principals, the governments and parliaments of their member states. This is the form of accountability conceived at the Bretton Woods conference in New Hampshire in 1944 and at the San Francisco conference that launched the UN the following year. But it would be seriously wrong to think that accountability to national bureaucrats and parliamentarians is today still sufficient.

International organisations have become far too complex to rely solely on overworked national bureaucrats to hold them to account. It is also a system that puts at a disadvantage poorer member states that cannot afford legions of civil servants, relying on members of parliament is even less promising. Although every effort should be made to involve national parliamentarians in backstopping the activities of international organisations, it is unrealistic to think that there could be any significant increase in the level and the quality of their involvement, given the many competing issues on their agendas.

The bottom line is that we need to broaden our instruments with regard to five crucial elements of the accountability equation: the accountability holdee, the accountability holder, information on the actions, standards for evaluating the actions, and both positive and negative sanctions.

Who should we hold accountable? The simple answer might be the EU, the UN, the World Bank or the IMF. But how about more precise targeting? It would make sense to zoom in closer and target programmes and activities as well as the leadership, or the member states most responsible for specific actions (or inaction). This would also presuppose clearer accountability relationships. Member states need to provide international bureaucracies like the UN with adequate resources and give them discretion to take effective action – and in return they can demand accountability. Right now, accountability relationships are often unclear, and that creates a fertile breeding ground for the “politics of blame avoidance” when things go wrong. The UN's Oil-For-Food Programme in Iraq offers a first class example of such finger-pointing. Some saw the managers in the UN Secretariat as the culprits, others pointed to negligent oversight by the UN Security Council, and yet others to Saddam and his corrupt business partners in the West. If the division of labour is unclear so that everybody is to some degree responsible, in the end nobody will be held accountable.

Who, then, should be able to hold international organisations to account? The traditional answer has been only their member states. But a more modern understanding of accountability would add a number of other internal and external

stakeholders to the list: the staff of the organisations, outside interest groups and even the general public.

Staff members of the major international organisations are a critical part of the equation. Not only should they be held to account for their performance but they should also find themselves in a conducive environment for exerting the roles of supervisor actors. This would include protection from sanctions for staff who bring inappropriate conduct of peers and superiors to the attention of the organisation and the public. Sad to say, it took a long time for the UN Secretariat to institutionalise protection for whistleblowers. As recent cases show, this new policy still awaits full implementation across the whole UN system. In addition, international organisations should invest in professionalising their independent internal oversight offices.

Which standards should we apply to international organisations? A basic aim of accountability is to protect against abuses of power, especially those that go against basic standards of human rights and international law, to say nothing of the values enshrined in the international organisation's own charters. A better yardstick would be to measure the performance of international organisations against their declared goals and promises – in some cases concrete goals for specific programmes, in others broader objectives like the Millennium Development Goals. Potential sanctions could range from public naming and shaming and peer pressure to withholding funding and criminal liability.

The precise details of an accountability system need to be tailored to each

international organisation and its activities. Different activities might well be judged according to different criteria. In all cases, we need to be clear about the standards applied and be strategic in our choice of accountability systems. Just layering accountability demands and being unclear about their precise meaning only leads to what Yale University political scientist Jonathan Koppell has called "multiple accountabilities disorder", MAD syndrome. MAD only increases the costs of accountability and the frustration of all parties involved. At the same time, we should not reduce accountability to a blame game of finger-pointing. Accountability should create incentives and space for learning and improvement.

Targeted efforts to broaden our concepts and practice of holding international organisations to account would have at least one extremely useful side-effect. An expanded accountability toolkit could also be applied to the multitude of other actors that play increasingly important roles in global governance; these include transnational advocacy groups, service-providing NGOs, multinational corporations, foundations operating with billion euro budgets as well as public-private partnerships. All of them have expanded their spheres of influence in global public policymaking – and should be held to account for their performances. Applying the expanded accountability toolbox to all of these players would move the debate from ranting and raving about the "democratic deficit" to an altogether more productive level. □

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