

## **DEMOCRATISING GLOBAL GOVERNANCE: BOTTOM-TOP AGENDA**

During the past five years, several scholars, activists and statesmen have been drawing our attention to a variety of democratic deficits in Global Governance. A wide range of critiques, and a diversity of pragmatic and visionary solutions have been offered in this regard. Several consultations and conferences have been held to discuss these concerns; several commissions and task-forces have offered their analysis and recommendations in this direction. Forum International Montreal (FIM), a civil society platform promoting stronger civil society voice (specially from the south) to deepen multilateralism, convened two such global conferences on the theme of Democratising Global Governance in Montreal—October 2002 and May 2005. These conferences brought together different streams of work in this expansive field to share emerging lessons and identify appropriate strategies from the vantage point of civil society.

### The Top Agenda

The debates during these Conferences, and their changing tenor over the three years time period between the first and the second, seems to suggest that the problematique of global governance has to be viewed with a bi-focal lens---bottom-top. From the Top, a major question is about the absence of any “hierarchy of commitments” on global agreements. Since the establishment of the United Nations system 60 years ago, a number of treaties, protocols, conventions and agreements have been signed by member states. The UN Declaration of Human Rights is one of the fundamental commitments by member states to protect and advance human rights of all peoples. Significant agreements and policy frameworks have been created through the United Nations on issues of poverty eradication, rights of the child, gender justice, reproductive health, lifelong learning, environmental protection, rights of indigenous peoples, etc. But the progress on implementation of these agreements and commitments has been rather disappointing across the board.

Simultaneously, Bretton Woods Institutions—the World Bank and IMF—have been launching their own programmes of structural adjustment and market liberalization, which bind countries of the south to time-bound policy reforms. The lending conditionalities attached to these agreements are closely and regularly monitored by the experts from these institutions. As a result, the compliance of these agreements has been rather more visibly enforced on the recipient governments. The policy frames and attendant conditionalities of BWIs do not take into account the commitments and treaties of the UN system; in fact, many a times, they tend to undermine and subvert those commitments and agreements.

A more fiercely monitored new global mechanism is WTO; its regulatory framework and procedure for ensuring compliance operates efficiently, swiftly

and summarily. Thus WTO agreements have more teeth than those from the UN system. In recent years, a variety of bilateral and regional trade agreements have added further incoherence to the commitments made under different trade regimes. Informal regional alliances (like APEC and ASEM), special agreements (like Cotonou agreement between EU and ACP countries) and informal clubs (like G8) tend to further complicate these matters.

One of the consequences of the above institutional and operating arrangements at the global level is that trade and finance related agreements are easing out human rights, social development and environment related commitments. Acknowledging the confusion and chaos caused by such a maze of institutional arrangements at regional and global levels, it is essential that some universal consensus is evolved over the “hierarchy of commitments”. The Top approach, therefore, needs to start from the very Top of the hierarchy---in essence, a hierarchy of global public goods, universally respected and provided for by global public institutions. It can thus be argued that at the Top are Human Rights; followed by social justice and human development rights; followed by environmental and ecological rights; then trade and finance rights. This pecking order, evolved during the above FIM conferences, tends to privilege basic human rights over trade and finance commitments and agreements; they also tend to privilege ecological agenda over trade and finance agenda. In this sense, the essential TOP agenda is to promote the “hierarchy of commitments” as the building block of global democratic governance.

### The Bottom Agenda

The history of social transformation suggests that major reforms do not happen from the Top alone. Bottom actions are crucial bedrock for such transformations. The Bottom agenda in this context of democratising global governance is to deepen democratic governance at national and local levels.

Democratic governance in many countries is facing several deficits. In “old” democracies, there has been an increasing disaffection with formal politics and electoral mechanism. In “new” democracies, the institutional frames are yet to stabilize. In all democracies, electoral politics has become hostage to organized interest groups, largely disconnected with the daily concerns of ordinary folks. The national governments are being run by a few ministers (generally finance, trade, home and foreign ministers, along with the Prime Minister or President); a handful of “loyal” civil servants forms the inner coterie of advisors to these ministers. Parliaments and Senates have become mere “rubber stamps” for decisions taken by this coterie. Most elected parliamentarians, even those from the ruling parties, remain mere spectators---back-benchers—in this system. Ordinary citizens feel distanced and alienated from this system of democratic governance.

Inefficiencies in public services and widespread corruption (by siphoning off public resources for private good) have resulted in further loss of public trust in governmental institutions and officials in most countries today. The unscrupulous disregard for laws by many politicians and bureaucrats—and their “near & dear “ ones---has undermined the sanctity of taxation and legal regimes in most countries; ordinary citizens are convinced, that “some are more equal than others” even in a democracy. Thus there has developed a growing sense of apathy, disaffection and anger among ordinary citizens towards formal democratic institutions. Many of them have become more active in the informal political processes of social mobilizations, dissent, protest and reconstruction.

The national governments in most countries have marginalized local and regional governments in spheres of governance. National governments have appropriated to themselves the policy making role nationally and internationally. Weak regional, provincial and local governments in many countries have caused further erosion of credibility of democratic institutions in the eyes of ordinary citizens. In several locations, these regional (like in Catalonia) and provincial (like in Quebec) and local (like in Porto Alegre) spheres of governance are resisting and challenging national governments in respect of erosion of their governance mandates. This form of democratic deficit has become a major challenge for deepening democratic governance within nation-states.

The tyranny of vocal majority in democratic decision-making tends to marginalize minority perspectives, voices and cultures. Dominant ethnic, religious, linguistic, geographic or caste coalitions can monopolize political discourse and power, at the exclusion of minorities. This has become even more pronounced as “minor majorities” are put together to win elections---with less than 20% of all electorate as the solid vote-bank. In present context, most countries are comprising of a wide variety of diversity; this multi-ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural population can not be democratically governed by a unitary, mono political class in any society today. This causes further disaffection of a majority of minorities with the present system of democratic governance.

Despite such fundamental democratic deficits in national governance, the link between the national and the global has been further controlled by a small minority. The foreign ministry represents the country in UN system; the finance ministry in Bretton Woods Institutions; the trade ministry in WTO. Most agreements signed at global level are not discussed in national or provincial parliaments. World Bank and IMF assistance/loan contracts are approved by finance minister and prime minister (along with a handful of senior officials), and are not publicly disclosed to either elected representatives or general public. Local governments, in whose constitutional jurisdiction fall many social development agendas (like MDGs), are not even informed, let alone consulted. As a result, national representations in forum of global governance remain singularly “undemocratic”. Such monopolistic control over representation to institutions of global governance undermines their democratic potential.

Thus, deepening democratic processes at national and sub-national spheres of governance is essential to deepen democratic governance at global levels. Unless processes of decision-making for provisions of public goods are further democratized, and some of the above-mentioned democratic deficits adequately addressed, at national and sub-national levels, demands for addressing democratic deficits in global governance will remain unresponded to. This is the Bottom agenda, that needs to be pursued in conjunction with, and parallel to, the Top agenda for democratizing global governance.

It was interesting to note that most delegates to the FIM conference in May 2005 seemed to acknowledge that their own efforts in democratizing global governance were falling short of expectations because of the disconnect with simultaneous processes and efforts at democratizing national and sub-national governance. It is towards this synergy between global and local governance that future calls and actions for democratization must simultaneously aim at. Thus, civil society actions aimed at democratizing global governance from the Top should focus on establishing a “hierarchy of commitments” around a hierarchy of global public goods. And, such civil society actions must, of necessity, connect organically with those civil society actions aimed at democratizing national and sub-national governance at the Bottom.

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