

Reimagining global solidarity: It's time to embrace politics



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We stand at a critical crossroads. In a world where crises no longer confine themselves to borders, the interconnected nature of our challenges demands unprecedented global cooperation. But, trust in political leadership and institutions is eroding. Widespread discontent has recently led to historic political shifts worldwide, signalling a tremendous demand for change. Will we respond effectively to regain public confidence – or will we succumb to the temptation to play it safe, stick to what we know, and avoid taking risks to do things differently? I think we must embrace risk and develop better ways to problem-solve together. That means embracing politics.

Despite being an inherently political institution, the United Nations is not a place where we like to talk about politics – at least explicitly. And yet politics – which determines how our societies are governed, what the rules are for making decisions, and who determines the rules – plays a major role in how we manage problems together. Those of us focused on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), addressing climate change, or any number of global challenges must reexamine the state of our politics and figure out how to harness it to deliver results for people.

Our collective failure to act has destabilised domestic politics and eroded the foundations of global governance. As a result, we are witnessing increasing suspicion and mistrust of those in power, the decline of long-established institutions, and the rise of populist movements that offer simplistic, regressive solutions to complex global challenges.

In 2024, about half the world held national elections, and so far, these elections have been marked by widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo, as voters reacted to economic inequality, rising costs of living, and the perception that leaders are out of touch with ordinary people's realities. Economic strains have made the perceived costs of the green transition⁵¹ less politically palatable, weakening the position of progressive governments and driving a return to unsustainable energy sources. These trends have fuelled a belief that global cooperation and solidarity could make us worse off – a fear that many politicians exploit to their advantage.

Countries across the world are dealing with rising debt, as politicians propose tax cuts or increased government spending to gain electoral support.

Geopolitical tensions and security concerns are prompting governments to spend more money on defence and less on social programmes or sustainable development.

But the real danger to global stability lies not in the loss of power by political incumbents but in how we interpret their losses. Did politicians lose support because their constituents want them to focus solely on national interests and withdraw from the globe? Or because they failed to address transnational problems that have domestic consequences, including making people worse off? Extraordinary times demand extraordinary actions. What if politicians chose to invest in global cooperation and solidarity? Perhaps one day this could win elections.

At these crossroads, the UN Summit of the Future taking place among heads of state and government this September offers a blueprint for renewing global governance – how we work together, on what issues, and who gets to help determine the rules – which are essentially political questions. Importantly, it will help determine whether we move towards a more equitable and collaborative global order or retreat into narrow, nationalistic agendas that further fracture our shared future. In sum, this Summit is important for achieving the SDGs and paving the way for rebalancing political power. History shows us that moments of crisis can become occasions of opportunity. The last significant wave of global governance reform emerged from global conflict when political moods had shifted and people viewed humanity more expansively. After division and devastation, they were ready to collaborate.

Today, we may be on the brink of another such moment. Urgency demands us to think of politics not as a source of division and cynicism but as a way to solve problems – to bring more actors in, unite, and inspire hope in a way that shifts power to those bearing the brunt of global crises. Giving people a voice so they can take part in making collective choices is what politics is about – and if we do it meaningfully, we will secure better outcomes that can lead to transformative change.

That's what "Leaving No One Behind" has to mean as 2030 approaches. We can't achieve the SDGs without taking into account the desire of the public for a different kind of politics. Instead, we must respond to public discontent by changing how we make decisions and who we give power to

and include in decision-making – by confronting politics head on because we know it can deliver positive change.

Recent successes in multilateralism may offer a blueprint for moving forward. Political alliances between states, NGOs and think tanks have proven to be powerful drivers of change, capable of building political support for the necessary bold reforms. They have achieved advances such as the Sustainable Development Goals, Paris Climate Agreement, Global Plastics Treaty, High Seas Treaty and, most recently, the UN framework convention on global tax cooperation. These breakthroughs demonstrate that multilateralism can deliver for people and planet even amid global division. They show potential for improved global solidarity when we practice a different kind of politics – when states and civil society work together.

We must learn from and build on these successes. NGOs and think tanks can work in coalition with champion governments to make it clear that a lowest common denominator outcome is unacceptable – and they can do so in a few ways.

First, they can provide operational support to states that may lack the capacity, staff or expertise to fully engage in complex negotiations, elevating their positions within international forums, ensuring their interests are better represented. Second, NGOs and think tanks can use their public influence to mobilise grassroots support for the negotiating positions of champion states, strengthening their bargaining power and underscoring the legitimacy of their demands. Third, NGOs and think tanks can facilitate informal dialogues by providing neutral spaces, ideas and technical expertise to help overcome difficult negotiations and develop evidence-informed policies. In doing so, these groups make progressive outcomes more likely and in doing so, improve global solidarity.

Achieving systemic reform will require difficult decisions that governments won't be able to make alone. Civil society must channel the global public's demand for change to pressure governments and multilateral institutions to adopt meaningful reforms. We must respond to public discontent by embracing politics to change how we make decisions and who we give power to – to give voice to those most affected and work together to deliver for people. The time for unprecedented action is now.