

Is the UN fit for the ambitious new Sustainable Development Agenda?

New study highlights private funding and corporate influence in the United Nations

New York City, 22 September 2015. More than a hundred Heads of State and Government will gather in New York this week to adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This agenda is intended to make the UN ‘fit for purpose’, but it is important to ask, ‘whose purpose will it be fit for’?

A new study from Global Policy Forum warns that the United Nations is embarking on a new era of selective multilateralism, shaped by intergovernmental policy impasses and a growing reliance on corporate-led solutions to global problems.

[Download full report here \(PDF, 2.5 MB\):](https://www.globalpolicy.org/images/pdfs/images/pdfs/Fit_for_whose_purpose_online.pdf)

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The changing funding patterns of the UN and its funds, programmes and specialized agencies reflect these alarming trends. Key features are the growing gap between the scale of global problems and the (financial) capacity of the UN to solve them; the growing share of non-core contributions and earmarked trust funds in UN finance; increased reliance on the corporate sector; and the outsourcing of funding and decision-making to exclusive global partnerships.

“Funding of all UN system-wide activities is around US\$40 billion per year. While this may seem to be a substantial sum, in reality it is smaller than the budget of New York City, less than a quarter of the budget of the European Union, and only 2.3 per cent of the world’s military expenditures,” said Jens Martens, co-author of the study. He added: “As the World Bank calls on the global community to move from ‘Billions’ to ‘Trillions’ to meet the investment needs of the Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations still has to calculate in terms of ‘Millions’.”

Barbara Adams, co-author of the study said: “Member States have failed to provide reliable funding to the UN system at a level sufficient to enable it to fulfill the mandates they have given it. Many Member States, particularly the large donors, pursue a dual approach of calling for greater coherence in UN development activities while at the same time increasing their use of earmarked funding, which furthers fragmentation.” She added: “This pick- and- choose dynamic, together with ongoing financial constraints, has opened the space for corporate sector engagement. Increasingly the UN is promoting market-based approaches and multi-stakeholder partnerships as the *business model* for solving global problems. Driven by a belief that engaging the more economically powerful is essential to maintaining the relevance of the UN, this practice has harmful consequences for democratic governance and general public support, as it aligns more with power centres and away from the less powerful.”

Fit for Whose Purpose? Private Funding and Corporate Influence in the United Nations, released today, gives a comprehensive overview of current UN funding trends and ends with a summary of findings and policy recommendations to counter the new ‘business model’ of global governance and to make the United Nations really ‘fit for purpose’, fit for the purpose of a democratic and inclusive global governance. Detailed and specific, the demands range from adopting measures to limit earmarked funding as a percentage of total funding, to strengthening the rules and tools governing engagement with the business sector, and to establishing an intergovernmental framework for partnership accountability.

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Private funding and corporate influence in the United Nations**

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For single chapters, see [here](#).

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Comments on “Fit for Whose Purpose?”

“Follow the money” is the recipe for good investigative journalism and Fit for Whose Purpose does precisely that for the institution created to defend global public goods. Digging into the numbers behind the funding of the United Nations, Adams and Martens uncover a trail that leads to corporate interests having a disproportionate say over the bodies that write global rules. This book shows how Big Tobacco, Big Soda, Big Pharma and Big Alcohol end up prevailing and how corporate philanthropy and private-public-partnerships twist the international agenda without governments overseeing, but it also clearly spells out some practical ways to prevent it and rescue a citizens-based multilateralism.

Roberto Bissio
Coordinator of Social Watch

This is a thoroughly researched study that brings together the authors' long personal and professional involvement in the United Nations with their insightful analysis and strong recommendations. It is timely indeed as our global challenges urgently need a United Nations that is faithful to multilateralism and the values enshrined in its founding Charter. The authors make an irrefutable case that “We the peoples” and the responsibilities of governments cannot be replaced by a corporate agenda governed by corporate interests. It rings the alarm for governments and civil society to regain ownership of the UN.

Chee Yoke Ling
Director of Programmes, Third World Network

Using specific cases, this study illustrates the adverse impact of decades of the “zero growth doctrine” in the regular budget of the UN on its ability to fulfil its international mandates. Without core funding, UN managers scramble to design activities and accept projects of interest to private companies. This stance facilitates the creation of agencies and decisions that sustain the magnanimity of donors by giving them undue control over the setting of norms and standards. This has been distorting UN priorities. This inhibits the UN from being fit for the purpose of serving its real constituents.

Manuel (Butch) Montes
Senior Advisor, Finance and Development, South Centre

A most timely study that ought to concern all those who believe in the United Nations as a global public good. As an inter-governmental organization, the UN needs to preserve its own independence—financial as well as political. UN relations with the corporate sector deserve to be scrutinized and made more transparent so that important public functions do not risk becoming compromised by private interests. Many parliamentarians are unaware of the deterioration of UN funding highlighted in this well-researched report. I hope it will catch their attention.

Alessandro Motter
Senior Advisor, Inter-Parliamentary Union

*“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.” (Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass).*

This incisive and thoroughly researched report shows how the United Nations has become rather Humpty Dumpty’ish in its use of the word ‘partnerships’. By sanitizing the deep inroads that the private sector has made into global governance and agenda-setting, and already weakened by unstable financing, the UN runs the risk of becoming unfit for any purpose other than alignment to private corporate agendas as governance and democracy are fragmented, and become ever less transparent and accountable.

Gita Sen
General Coordinator, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)