**Global inequality, climate justice and multilateralism**

**Mauro Bossi SJ, Naples, 15 July 2025**

I have entitled this speech “Global inequality, climate justice and multilateralism”. This title summarises the perspective I am proposing: global inequality is both the context and the cause of the problems we are currently facing; climate justice is the ethical and political horizon towards which we want to strive; and dialogue and collaboration between nations within the framework of international institutions is the means and the path to take.

The climate crisis is closely linked to global inequality. Contrary to widespread belief, the environmental crisis is not a problem of relations between humanity in general (the species Homo sapiens) and nature. Rather, it is the result of power relations within human societies. There is a clear difference between certain social groups that benefit from the overexploitation of natural resources and other groups that suffer the consequences. Therefore, we must first reject this generalised blame of humanity, which serves to hide conflicts, inequalities and different responsibilities.

Several United Nations conferences (the Rio Conference in 1992, the Paris Climate Conference in 2015) have recognised the principle of " common but differentiated responsibilities", based on the fact that the degradation of natural environments, the overexploitation of resources and climate change have been caused by the most developed countries and that the most serious consequences are for developing countries.

Pope Francis' magisterium has pointed this out very clearly. The conviction underlying his teaching on integral ecology is that there is a close relationship between the climate and environmental crisis and global inequalities. The first chapter of the encyclical Laudato si' is devoted to global inequalities. I will read an excerpt from it.

51: “Inequality affects not only individuals, but also entire countries, and forces us to think about an ethics of international relations. There is, in fact, a real “ecological debt”, particularly between the North and the South, linked to trade imbalances, with consequences in the ecological sphere, and also linked to the disproportionate use of natural resources, historically practised by certain countries. [...] The warming caused by the enormous consumption of certain rich countries has repercussions on the poorest regions of the earth, especially in Africa, where rising temperatures combined with drought are wreaking havoc on crop yields. Added to this is the damage caused by the export of solid waste and toxic liquids to developing countries.

52: Developed countries must contribute to paying off this debt by significantly limiting their consumption of non-renewable energy and providing resources to the countries most in need to support sustainable development policies and programmes. The poorest regions and countries have fewer opportunities to adopt new models to reduce the impact of human activities on the environment because they lack the training to develop the necessary processes and cannot afford the costs. That is why we must remain clear that there are diverse responsibilities in climate change.”

So how can the international community, whose organisation is based on the central role of nation states, take care of a global common good such as the climate? The answer to this question can be found in what might be called ‘climate multilateralism’, i.e. the efforts made by UN institutions since the 1980s to address the consequences of climate change caused by human activity. Since then, the fight against climate change has been the focal point of multilateral dialogues on the environment and development. It has highlighted both the difficulties and contradictions, as well as the opportunities.

Today, this system, based on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) approved in 1992 in Rio at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, is being called into question because of the reliability of the results obtained. Indeed, efforts under the Convention have not been sufficient to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to the extent necessary. At the same time, the deterioration of international relations is having a very negative effect on climate diplomacy.

We must therefore look back at the history of climate multilateralism to understand its most critical elements and the opportunities to be seized. In 1992, the Cold War had just ended. Concerns about a possible nuclear conflict between the superpowers were receding, and the international community was able to turn its attention to other issues, such as the environment and development. The bipolar world was becoming multipolar: a wave of optimism spread among diplomats, facilitating dialogue and the adoption of joint commitments. The creation of the UNFCCC was the expression of a very different context from that which had marked the establishment of other international organisations in the post-war period, such as the United Nations Security Council, whose members were the victors of the Second World War, or the World Bank, which was dependent on American leadership. What characterises the UNFCCC is the aspiration to democratise international relations. It is a system in which all parties have the same decision-making power, even though it is well known that some countries exert greater influence because of their economic and political power. The Conferences of the Parties (which bring together all signatories, 197 countries plus the European Union) follow rules designed to ensure equality. Decisions are taken not by majority vote but by consensus, which means that a decision is approved when no one objects to it. The organising country, which plays an essential political role, is chosen in turn from among the continents. The presidency has an organisational and political role, with the ability to guide the work, mediate, organise multi-stakeholder dialogues and encourage alliances, but it can also sometimes act in a non-constructive manner, as happened in 2024 at COP29 in Baku, where the Azerbaijani presidency took a strongly opposed stance to the European Union from the outset.

During the Conferences, the parties organise themselves into negotiating groups that share common objectives and establish a political line; some of these groups are global (the main one being the G77 plus China) and others are regional (e.g. the African negotiating group or the Arab group).

This approach makes it possible to join forces around common projects involving several parties and ensures greater strength, even for states that have little diplomatic weight on their own. Let us take three examples.

1. First, the G77: formed in 1967 by countries that were not allied with the United States or the Soviet bloc, it found in China (which is not formally a member) a leader with sufficient negotiating power with the West. The G77's main demand is to distinguish between the historical responsibilities of industrialised countries for greenhouse gas emissions and those of developing countries, which must be guaranteed the financial resources necessary for development free from dependence on fossil fuels, without falling back into debt. The quantitative measurement of these financial flows and how to activate them have been the main points of disagreement at recent COPs.

In recent years, during negotiations, the greatest tension has been between China, which has acquired a leading role in the Global South, partly due to its political and economic influence over developing countries, industrialised countries, which are pressing for China to also shoulder the financial burden within the UN framework (and not only through bilateral agreements with other states), and developing countries, which have a historical distrust of the West due to significant delays and inefficiencies in climate financing, as well as other older reasons. This tension is blocking efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, as EU proposals to set ambitious mitigation targets regularly face opposition from developing countries, which are unwilling to reduce their emissions in the absence of concrete financial commitments from the West.

1. African countries have drawn strength from teamwork, even outside the G77. Constant dialogue between governments has enabled them to present a common line in negotiating forums and achieve certain objectives, such as the Loss and Damage Fund approved in Glasgow in 2021.
2. Small island states in the Pacific are dramatically exposed to sea level rise and, as a result, are among the strongest advocates for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in order to limit climate change. United within the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), they have found an ally in the EU on mitigation, but, as members of the G77, they also support the latter's claims against industrialised countries. The speeches of their representatives in the assembly, asking that their countries not be allowed to be swallowed up by the ocean, are intended to guide the ethical compass of the international community, which has so far failed to respond appropriately to these dramatic appeals.

If it is possible to speak of ‘democratisation’ among states within the UNFCCC, a similar argument can be made for the participation of non-state actors, i.e. representatives of civil society and productive sectors.

The presence of non-governmental organisations, local bodies and indigenous peoples' associations at conferences has grown over the years, reaching thousands of accredited actors, giving rise to what is known as the “bandwagoning” effect: given that climate change affects all levels of society across the board, it involves actors concerned with specific issues, from biodiversity protection to gender equality, food systems to health. COPs thus become a place where social groups motivated to build a fairer future converge and engage in dialogue.

Since COP28 in Dubai (2023), there has also been the Faith Pavilion, which welcomes religiously inspired organisations. These opportunities promote mutual understanding, the exchange of experiences and the building of alliances; a kind of ‘multilateralism from below’ is taking shape, which is also promoted by Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation Laudate Deum (2023). Over the years, the presence of lobbyists and representatives of the fossil fuel industry has also increased, raising concerns about their influence on the negotiation processes. However, this presence is at least official, visible and regulated. In addition, lobbyists, as well as NGOs, participate in external spaces but do not have access to the negotiating rooms, which are reserved for delegates from the parties.

The UNFCCC system reflects the reality of a world that has changed profoundly since the era of bipolarity: the rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), the just demands of the Global South, and the involvement of civil society have reached points of no return. On the other hand, climate change is a global problem that recognises neither states nor borders, making unilateral solutions unfeasible and requiring multilateral dialogue; however, the ups and downs of the COPs on climate reveal some of the trends in current multilateralism, with elements that strengthen or weaken it. What are these elements? What have we learned from the COPs of recent years?

1. Firstly, no stable geopolitical relationship defines the negotiations in a single direction: alliances are variable, results-oriented and subject to national political upheavals. This requires negotiators to be able to keep several fronts open and avoid bloc confrontations. The success of a COP is also measured by how mutual concessions manage to produce a balance that allows for new joint commitments.
2. Secondly, multilateralism is effective and appreciated if it can produce tangible results in the short and medium term. Climate finance is one example: negotiations under the UNFCCC are useful if they succeed in mobilising adequate financial flows; if not, it is more reliable for developing countries to pursue bilateral cooperation with certain countries, especially China.
3. A third aspect concerns the relationship between states' internal political events and their international commitments. Within the United Nations system, there are states with very different forms of government. China, for example, has an authoritarian government, which it is difficult to say represents its citizens. Without being accountable to the electorate, it can pursue certain long-term policies, and in negotiations this makes it a more predictable interlocutor, at least in the medium term. Democracies, on the other hand, have the ability to quickly reorient their governments' choices. One example is the United States, which has entered and exited the Paris Agreement four times in ten years, undermining its credibility and putting climate diplomacy under considerable strain. In the EU, too, the rise of political parties critical of climate commitments could well weaken Europe's negotiating position.

Finally, it is clear that dialogue between states is increasingly supported by what I have called ‘bottom-up’ multilateralism, i.e. by extensive cooperation and the involvement of local authorities, businesses, civil society organisations and the scientific community. The integration of these two channels reflects greater transparency and a broader and more articulated representation of the parties that make up society.

Are climate negotiations the place where we can rebuild dialogue between nations in a fair and inclusive manner? My answer is that we have no alternative but to take care of the climate, a global common good, and thus ensure a liveable future for those who come after us. But addressing the climate crisis is not only a necessity, it is also an opportunity to strengthen a more democratic multilateral system and prevent conflicts. It seems to me that this is an opportunity not to be missed.

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