



WIKI n°11: The Veil of Universalism

In principle, the objectives of global governance are intended to apply universally, without geographic restrictions. However, this rhetoric is rooted in the universalist assumptions of the liberal world order³⁵. While it underscores the centrality of universalizing language, the universal aspirations of global governance are frequently undermined by persistent normative conflicts that shape political practices.

Indeed, although universal aspirations have been reflected in various practices, their achievements remain structurally limited. For example, to ensure inclusivity, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) evolved into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), structured around a detailed action plan comprising 17 goals, 169 targets, and over 200 indicators.

However, the immense task of defining these goals continues to divide proponents of international solidarity and those emphasizing national responsibility. In essence, universality is constrained by a debate over whether compliance should be mandatory or voluntary.

References to universality in global public policies often obscure the political nature of their objectives and the practical challenges hindering the real-world application of universal values. To a considerable extent, appeals to universal aspirations reflect a desire to enhance the legitimacy of the existing international order and mobilize governments and the public.

Despite increasing challenges that necessitate greater recognition of cultural diversity, the narrative of universality has profoundly influenced global governance in recent decades. Universal aspirations have thus informed a wide range of global policies.

In the global economy, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) justify their market-oriented policies by asserting that these measures best ensure the prosperity of all nations. On the social front, institutions such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) have invoked principles such as "education for all" and "decent work for all."

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Similarly, in environmental negotiations, global policies are often defended on the basis of intergenerational equity. Across these domains, universal aspirations enable actors to maintain the illusion of apolitical action.