Cepei

Rebuilding trust in multilateralism: An urgent call to Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean

June 2025

Executive summary

Multilateralism is in crisis, and fragmentation and mistrust between states mark the international environment. For decades, bilateral donors have been a cornerstone of international assistance, funding projects in health, agriculture, education, governance, and climate resilience across the Global South. Driven by the realignment of world power dynamics and the political relations between States, we are witnessing policy shifts of several major funders towards transactional diplomacy and domestic prioritization, which raises urgent questions about the future of multilateralism.

This situation weakens multilateral forums' ability to generate consensus among countries and translate agreed-upon commitments into concrete actions and results.

Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean (LAC) face similar challenges stemming from historical trajectories marked by structural asymmetries, repeated non-compliance with international agreements, and spaces for negotiation on global governance perceived as exclusive or ineffective.

This paper examines the dynamics of trust and distrust in both regions visa-á-vis multilateralism to understand the current phenomenon better and identify critical factors that feed or erode it.

We understand trust as a mutual relationship between those who govern and those they govern. This makes them expect the actions of others to be guided by shared values. Trust is, therefore, a social and not an individual phenomenon.

From that perception, our comparative analysis and exchanges with relevant actors during the UN regional forums on sustainable development in Uganda and Chile in 2025, and as an observer at the annual meetings of the UN Regional Collaborative Platforms (RCPs) in both regions, advances practical recommendations to strengthen the legitimacy, inclusiveness, and effectiveness of regional and global multilateral system. These include the following:

- Promote accountability mechanisms that generate sustained trust.
- Establish regional coordination spaces that articulate common priorities vis-à-vis the global multilateral system.
- Promote a political culture of trust based on transparency, coherence of the UN Development System, and the fulfillment of Member States' commitments.
- Strengthen the meaningful participation of development stakeholders in negotiation and reform processes.

This analysis seeks to contribute to constructing a more resilient and legitimate regional and global governance framework, capable of responding to contemporary challenges through trusting relationships between diverse actors with increasingly divergent interests.

Historical and political context of trust in regional and global governance

Analyzing the dynamics of trust in dialogue and governance processes in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean requires placing them in a broader historical and geopolitical framework. Both regions have historically occupied marginal positions in the international system, which has conditioned their insertion in the multilateral system and persistent perceptions of exclusion in global decision-making.

The current crisis of multilateralism is clearly expressed in the financial fragility of the United Nations system, the stagnation in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and the increasing levels of confrontation between global powers. In this context, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean face a double challenge: their untapped opportunity and capacity for global influence and the need to articulate common positions to have a collective impact. This exclusion is interpreted, in Africa, as a prolongation of its colonial procrastination within a racialized narrative of the world order; and in Latin America and the Caribbean, as a structural part of a hierarchical and unequal international system.

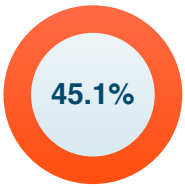
Despite having a combined membership of 87 countries in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and a significant presence in the Group of 77, the two regions show differences in their regional governance architecture and limited institutional exchanges. In Africa, the African Union (AU) constitutes an institutionalized space for political dialogue, albeit with less than optimal participation of non-state actors. In contrast, Latin America and the Caribbean present a marked institutional fragmentation, with multiple integration processes coexisting without effective coordination. ECLAC, although active, has not been able to consolidate itself as a strategic forum for joint positioning at the global level. Several governments perceive the Organization of American States (OAS) as a politicized space influenced by powers from the north of the continent.

The United Nations regional economic and social commissions —the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Economic and Social Commission for Africa (ECA)— play a relevant technical role, but are not seldom used as platforms for political coordination. In both cases, bilateral ties and ideological affinities between governments tend to be the main facilitators of common positions, limiting the institutionalization of regional trust.

Finally, although there are no institutionalized mechanisms for bi-regional dialogue between Africa and LAC, such as those both regions have with China or the European Union, establishing an ECLAC-AU forum has gained traction in recent years. Its eventual realization, informally planned for 2026, could mark a turning point in interregional cooperation and open new opportunities to rebuild trusting relations in an increasingly uncertain global context.

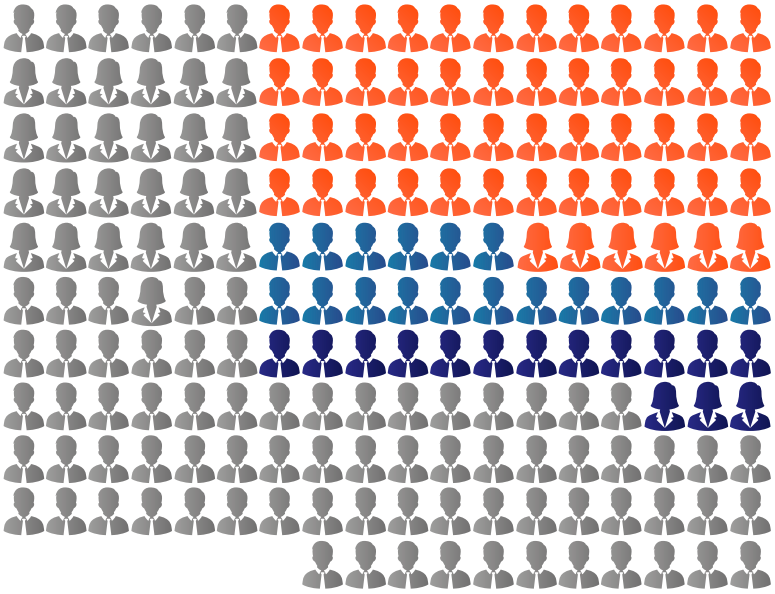
African Countries **(54)**

Latin America and the Caribbean Countries **(33)**



The African Group and GRULAC account for **87** out of **193 votes** in the UN General Assembly, representing approximately **45.1%** of the total votes.

United Nations General Assembly Member States



Women representation is based on data from the report Women in Multilateralism 2025, published by WGL Voices

Eroding trust due to unsustainable financing

Heavy reliance on external funding, particularly from Western countries, has raised concerns over interference and sustainability in development efforts in both regions. When financing is perceived to come with political conditions or misaligned priorities, it weakens national ownership and erodes public trust. Moreover, dependence on volatile donor commitments leaves programs vulnerable to sudden shifts, undermining long-term planning.

As funding priorities in the Global North shift—due to domestic pressures, geopolitical tensions, and new global crises—countries in both regions must urgently rethink their financing strategies for their development policies. This includes reducing dependence on external aid, tapping into domestic and regional resources, and strengthening partnerships with local philanthropies, development financial institutions (DFIs), and the private sector. A more autonomous and diversified funding base is perceived as essential to protect policy space, foster stability, and ensure that development agendas are resilient and rooted in local priorities.

Positioning and participation of development actors in multilateral fora: Tensions in trust-building

Trust building in regional governance platforms in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean is deeply conditioned by the configuration of actors involved in decision-making processes. One of the key findings derived from the multi-stakeholder dialogues held in April 2025 in both regions is that, although non-state actors participate, it remains subject to political frameworks defined by governments and varies significantly according to national and regional situations and balances of power.

Emerging regional powers and leadership in contexts of mistrust

Strong presidential-centered systems in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean strongly condition regional leadership, which means that both the effectiveness of regional platforms and the levels of trust between actors depend, to a large extent, on the political profile of certain countries.

When regional interests prevail, these powers act as engines of integration and cooperation. However, if national or transregional interests prevail, the region may be instrumentalized or relegated, generating mistrust and affecting leadership legitimacy. These tensions are manifested, among other areas, in: representation in global forums, where national and regional positions are confused; influence in the definition of regional agendas according to national interests; and conflict resolution, where leadership may be perceived as partial.

To sustain their leadership, these countries often use mechanisms and tools such as investment in economic cooperation and openness, fulfillment of regional commitments, and coherence between their global positions and regional actions. These strategies reinforce the perception of commitment to the collective interest but require constant balancing to avoid the erosion of trust.

In Africa, regional integration is rapidly shifting, and the role of the African Union as an institution of power and politics is changing. An important opportunity for leveling up civil society engagement lies in the AU Economic, Social, and Cultural Council, which seeks to actively engage civil society in the AU's processes and work.

Regional leadership in both regions is constantly tested for legitimacy. Its sustainability depends not only on the relative power of the States but also on their ability to act as consensus builders, prioritizing regional cohesion over their particular agendas. Trust, therefore, is not a starting point but a political resource that regional powers must build and constantly renew through concrete and consistent actions.

Networked governance and power dynamics

Participation mechanisms based on networked and decentralized governance schemes have been institutionalized in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. However, these mechanisms produce internal tensions. A critical example is the perceived "capture of discourse" by international civil society organizations (INGOs) and funders with a strong regional presence. Although a significant proportion of their spokespersons are local, their influence is sometimes seen as a form of external meddling that erodes the confidence of smaller or autonomous actors.

In this sense, a paradox is observed: while civil society organizations demand transparency and balance in their relationship with the States, they often replicate internally the logic of exclusion and concentration of power, without establishing solid bridges of horizontal dialogue among themselves. This fragmentation also weakens the possibility of creating coherent collective agendas for governments and regional organizations.

Civil society, academia, think-tanks: Limited and unequal participation

The participation of organized civil society continues to be limited and vulnerable to changes in governments' political will. Although there is a minimum assured openness, this can be expanded or restricted depending on the political context. In this framework, think tanks and universities act as differentiated but integrated actors through civil society, sharing their limitations of access and influence in decision-making spaces. The critical evidence they generate from research and analysis is hardly consumed by or reflected in the work of civil society. Similarly, the aggregate of the work of civil society is hardly reflected in the policy outcomes of think tanks and research institutions.

A recurrent source of distrust for these actors is the perception that the countries' external financial dependence conditions regional policies and weakens the transparency of the processes. This not only affects the legitimacy of the dialogue between governments and civil society, but also the trust between social organizations themselves.

It should be noted, however, that civil society in both regions is not homogeneous. There are profound asymmetries regarding technical capacities, development visions, resources, and access to networks of influence. In the face of these differences, thematic regional coalitions (economic, environmental, human rights, gender, etc.) have been established to overcome fragmentation, with leaderships that vary according to issues and situations. The regional sustainable development forums of the United Nations have been relevant platforms where these coalitions seek to articulate diverse voices. However, their effectiveness continues to be limited by internal divisions.

The private sector: Indirect presence and perception of disproportionate influence

The private sector adopts a mainly indirect advocacy strategy, focused on influencing governments rather than direct participation in regional platforms. However, its involvement has grown through business networks, industrial, or chambers of commerce that participate in processes such as regional sustainable development forums. Although less visible, this presence generates strong misgivings on the part of civil society organizations, denouncing the disproportionate weight of business in defining public policies and regional agendas.

The lack of coordination between civil society and the private sector hinders the establishment of alliances that could strengthen inclusive governance: mutual distrust between these sectors weakens the possibility of formulating common strategies in the face of shared challenges.

Policy recommendations

Strengthening confidence in regional and interregional multilateral policy dialogue platforms between Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean requires a multifaceted and sustained approach along four interdependent strategic axes:

Axis 1: Inclusion and effective representation

- Promote capacity building in advocacy and negotiation for actors without financial backing.
- Ensure representation of marginalized groups and small countries through vulnerability mapping, advisory councils, and support funds.
- Expand virtual participation through digital platforms and training programs.
- Establish formal mechanisms for multi-sectoral consultation to define agendas.

Axis 2: Transparency and accountability

- Promote communication campaigns that explain the impact of the multilateral system.
- Implement open portals for monitoring commitments, publish open repositories of documents and decisions with AI support to facilitate multilingual access to decisions taken in multilateral forums.
- Periodically measure citizen confidence in multilateral platforms with joint indicators between Africa and LAC.

Axis 3: Regional and interregional cooperation and solidarity

- Analyze emerging points of convergence and divergence from multilateral processes and identify opportunities for development stakeholders across Africa and LAC to close the gaps for greater impact.
- Promote technical programs for South-South and Triangular cooperation with the support of the United Nations system.
- Develop knowledge networks and joint policy laboratories around priorities defined by CELAC and the AU.
- Enhance the value of the Caribbean's role as a bridge for dialogue between Africa, Latin America, and vice versa.

Axis 4: Orient the leadership of regional powers towards confidence-building

- Regional powers have the opportunity and responsibility to lead inter-regional processes.
- Use global forums (G20, BRICS) to include the bi-regional dialogue agenda.
- Recognize the leadership of soft power countries to strengthen their international advocacy capacity.

Conclusions

Our work exposes structural challenges and options for action to strengthen trust within and between Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. We have identified five critical elements that hinder progress in this direction:

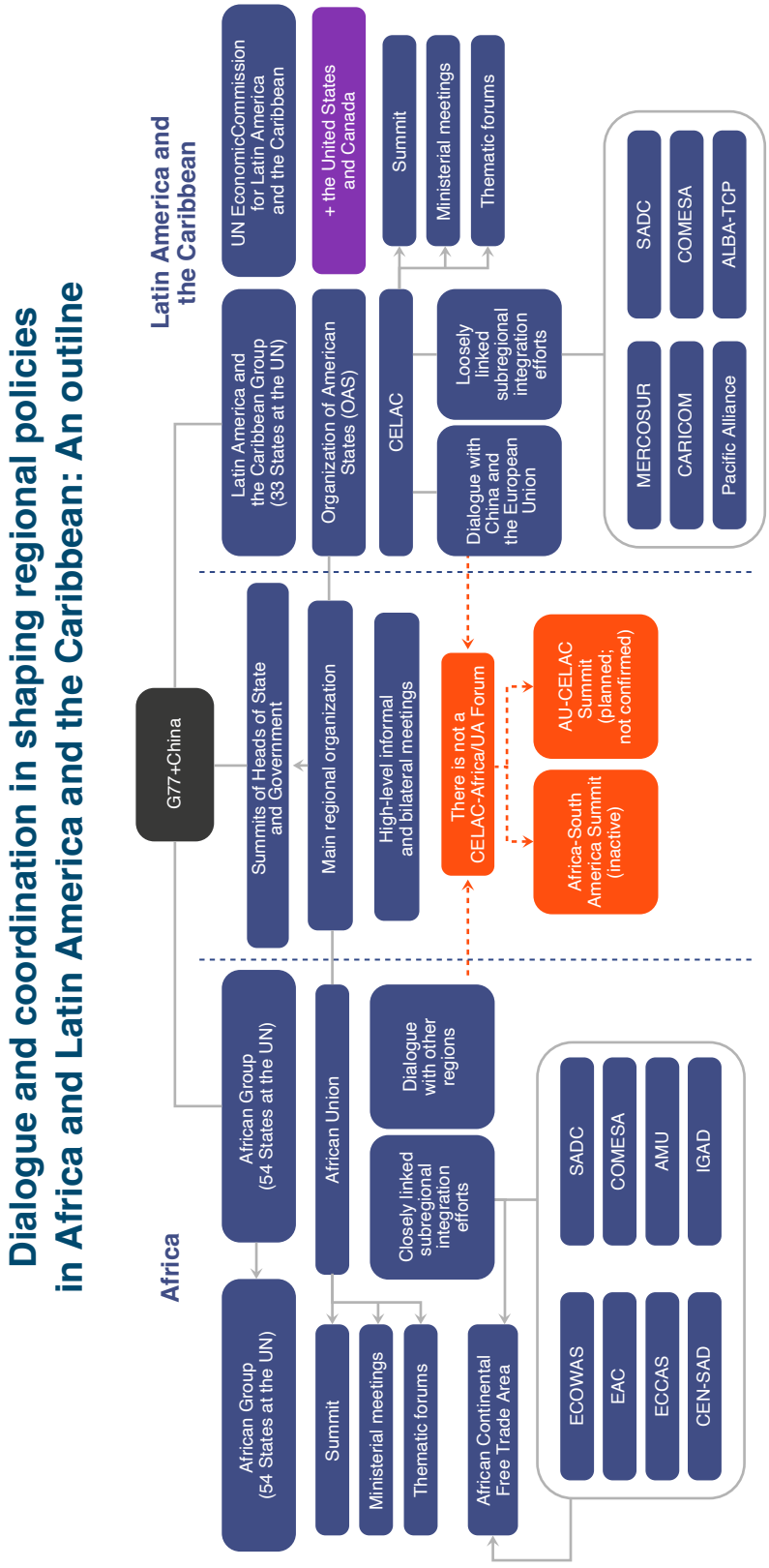
1. The erosion of trust within and between member states and civil society compromises the effectiveness and legitimacy of regional processes.
2. Significant institutional asymmetries exist: Africa has the AU, while LAC lacks a robust regional body.
3. The participation of non-governmental actors is limited and dependent on the political situation.
4. Regional powers face tensions between national, group, and regional interests, which affect their legitimacy.
5. Dependence on external financing generates distrust due to the perception of interference and sustainability of the system.

Overcoming these challenges requires concerted action by the different actors:

- **Regional multilateral platforms:** review their processes to ensure sustainable financial management and guarantee inclusion, accountability, and interoperable work and data production methodologies.
- **Governments:** prioritize multilateralism and regionalism in their national agendas.
- **Civil society and academia:** generate representative, realistic, and evidence-based proposals.
- **Private sector:** contribute to promoting innovation and fostering technical and management capacities, within a transparency framework.
- **Philanthropies:** tap into local resources and philanthropies in the face of dwindling resources from the Global North.
- **Media:** Transparently report on reform debates and decisions to elevate public understanding of multilateralism, expose imbalances in global governance, and hold institutions accountable. Strengthen media freedom and journalistic integrity to ensure an informed and engaged global public.

Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean have the opportunity to demonstrate that regional multilateralism can be an engine for sustainable development and effective diplomatic action. Trust, though fragile, can be built through inclusive institutions, accountable leadership, and sustained cooperation.

Appendix



References:
Africa: ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African States; SADC: Southern African Development Community; EAC: East African Community: COMESA: Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa; ECCAS: Economic Community of Central African States; AMU: Arab Maghreb Union; SEN-SAD: Community of Sahel-Saharan States; IGAD: Intergovernmental Authority on Development. Latin America and the Caribbean: CELAC: Community of Latin American and Caribbean States; MERCOSUR: Southern Common Market; SICA: Central American Integration System; CARICOM: Caribbean CommunityALBA-TCP: Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America

Acknowledgments

This policy brief was authored by Philipp Schönrock, Director of Cepei, and Dr. Javier Surasky, Research Associate at Cepei. Editorial support was provided by Alexandra Roldán.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), which enabled travel and field research in both regions. We also thank the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) for facilitating stakeholder engagement and research during the UN Regional Forums on Sustainable Development held in Chile and Uganda, and Sightsavers for supporting the participation of civil society organizations.

We thank the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Economic and Social Commission for Africa (ECA) for collaborating with us to convene diverse stakeholders during the regional forums' multistakeholder consultations.

We sincerely thank Florence Syevuo (SDG Kenya Forum) and Carole Osero-Ageng'o (Co-Chair 2024 UNCSC) for their vital role in mobilizing African stakeholders and for providing thoughtful input and feedback while drafting this document.

For more information:
direccion@cepei.org

With the support of: german cooperation DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENARBEIT

IDRC · CRDI International Development Research Centre Centre de recherches pour le développement international
Canada

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In collaboration with:

SDGs KENYA FORUM
Coalition for Sustainable Development