

Getting from here to there: practical actions to transform global governance

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The UN is struggling to address today's most pressing challenges, notably climate change. But we cannot afford to waste time designing the perfect international system – we need better solutions now. So what practical actions could be taken right away to strengthen and transform global governance? We need to overcome four big hurdles that have prevented change in the past – a lack of trust, collaboration and strategy, and insufficient focus on the problems we are trying to solve – by creating a genuinely risk-based agenda for reform, supported by strategies for implementation and multi-stakeholder collaboration which could, over time, become the foundation of a truly global partnership to tackle the challenges we face.

The aims of the United Nations have always stood in tension with the realpolitik compromises that led to its creation in 1945. When the political climate has permitted, the UN has been able to make progress on peace, development and human rights. But this progress has remained partial at best, and subject to the vagaries of governments. It is now seriously under threat.

Today, a confluence of crises – political, economic and social – is fuelling conflict and instability across the globe, exacerbated by long-term risks like climate change and weapons proliferation. Globalisation has increased our vulnerability to shocks and reduced the ability of governments to address traditionally domestic problems, like job creation and fiscal balances, which increasingly have a global dimension. As a result, many leaders are turning inwards, too preoccupied with problems at home to invest in multilateral solutions.

Heavily constrained and under-resourced, the UN is struggling to deal with this grim picture. Yet while we clearly need new and better solutions, we cannot simply walk away from our current system. This would threaten the hard-won gains of the past seventy years, and the lives of those – particularly in conflict zones – for whom the UN remains a lifeline.

So how do we proceed? We need to strengthen and transform our international system. It is not a lack of solutions that has impeded progress. What we need is cohesion, coordination and will. Our aim is to foster a truly global partnership to manage global risks and global commons – one that better reflects today’s power distribution, as power moves to the global South, but also to businesses, cities, communities and civil society organisations.

By analysing previous efforts at global governance reform, we have identified four key stumbling blocks:

- **Insufficient grounding in global risks.** Reform processes often ignore risks that big powers do not wish to address (climate change has been a notable example) or risks that are insufficiently understood by politicians, or considered too difficult (the glaring deficit in cyber governance is one result of this problem). The long lag time between the identification of risk, the creation of proposals, their negotiation and (usually partial) implementation, also means that we tend to put in place solutions that reflect past and not current, let alone future, realities.
- **Lack of strategic approach.** There are multiple routes to address risks but stakeholders rarely advocate a broad menu of solutions. Change-resistant states focus narrowly on tweaks to the existing system. So too do UN officials who are wary of the political hurdles involved in bigger reforms. External stakeholders are prone to adopting “all-or-nothing” approaches that ignore current realities, or solutions that may work in theory but are unlikely to be acceptable to governments. This leads to entrenched positions in negotiations and a lack of options for compromise.
- **Lack of collaboration.** For the most part, stakeholder collaboration is partial, ad hoc and temporary. States typically have short-term agendas that prioritise national interests and group loyalties over long-term systemic change. They have also been reluctant to consult other stakeholders on their vision for global governance. Meanwhile, businesses and civil society have limited ways to influence reform processes, and tend to concentrate on particular issues.
- **Lack of trust.** Unsurprisingly, reform tends to progress at moments of unity – the immediate post-Cold War period, for instance, or the 2005

World Summit, which saw stakeholders work together on initiatives such as Make Poverty History. Today, cooperation is at a low-point. But the adoption of the global agreements on climate change and sustainable development in 2015 showed that progress is possible, even at a fractious time in international affairs.

To address these complex challenges, we need mechanisms to identify a range of solutions, support strategic approaches, foster multi-stakeholder collaboration, and build trust. We plan to contribute to this process in four ways.

1. Creating a risk-based agenda.

We will create an online portal to serve as the first-ever public, multi-stakeholder platform for global governance innovation. Taking global risks as our starting point, we will aggregate the most promising solutions, based on their ability to address the risk(s) in question, their feasibility/likelihood of implementation and the level of stakeholder support – gleaned through online and physical meetings and other tools. Crucially, the portal will be flexible, with solutions changing to reflect the evolving risk profile and political climate. The end product will present a spectrum of approaches for each risk – some quick fixes, others more ambitious, long-term solutions – that can be used to produce a priority agenda for governments, and to support campaigning by civil society and other actors.

2. Crafting reform strategies.

We are developing implementation strategies for reform proposals, with a view to building momentum for change in general, as well as identifying pathways for progress on specific initiatives, taking into account factors such as the necessary institutional and legal requirements. We recognise that progress is unlikely to be linear, requiring several approaches to be pursued in

parallel and at different speeds. Those strategies will be paired with the solutions featured on the portal to assist stakeholders in making decisions on how, when and where to take forward proposals, and who is best-placed to do so.

3. Fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration.

We will build a broad-based coalition of stakeholders committed to global governance innovation. To support this effort, we will conduct detailed mapping of existing networks and current/future stakeholders, and articulate different ‘smart coalition’ models. This will be accompanied by recommendations on how to engage citizens in this effort, as well as a framework for how these constituencies can work together on short-, medium- and long-term efforts to renew global governance. As a first step towards concrete engagement, we will harness the informal global network sparked by the New Shape Process and connect this community with existing initiatives on global governance reform, such as the UN2020 coalition, the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group and the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency grouping of states.

4. Building trust through shared values.

While collaboration can build trust organically, we plan to complement this – and to engage a wider public audience – by promoting the values and principles that are essential for a rules-based global order, international leadership, a sense of global identity and citizenship, and the solidarity necessary to tackle global risks. Those values must be versatile enough to frame multiple reform ideas, have international resonance, despite global diversity, and be grounded in existing international norms. This work will inspire a number of tools to support global governance reform, notably a succinct statement on foundational values and principles, offering the world an alternative,

positive, interconnected vision for humanity that counters the rise of violent extremism, nativism, and xenophobia. Other outputs include a global citizen 'sign on' statement and a voluntary declaration for states on responsible multilateralism.

The Paris Peace Forum this November will serve as a launch pad for our initiative, after which we will focus on the UN's 75th anniversary in 2020 as a key milestone for progress. We believe there is a real opportunity, despite and because of the challenges we face, to build a truly global partnership to address catastrophic risks and, in the process, change the way we do global governance forever.

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