



**UNITED INSTITUTIONS
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DISCUSSION PAPER

Global Governance Reform

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global governance and
international cooperation
Here is how we get there

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Abstract

Global efforts to address our escalating global crises, including climate change, biodiversity loss, imminent ecosystem collapse and a host of other challenges, together threatening the well-being and future of humanity and the planet, are being impeded by critical governance and cooperation challenges at national, regional and global levels. Moreover, many of our current governance reforms and investments are proving to be uneven, fragmented, and inadequate in delivering the institutions, policy coherence and results that we need. In this discussion paper Stirling Dean, Chief Architect of the United Institutions and Chairman of the United Institutions Foundation, argues that it is mission critical that we put governance at the center of the global agenda and adopt a global response to strengthening cooperation inclusive of national, regional and international levels. He furthermore offers practical recommendations on how such a global response should be approached and organized.

Introduction

SOS. A young student stands in a town square holding up a banner with the international distress signal SOS and a picture of planet Earth. She is calling attention to the fact that our world and common home is in crisis. And she is not alone. She is one of millions of students demonstrating in communities across our world, demanding global change. They are rightly upset, stressed and worried, and asking the international community to get its act together and save the planet.

These children are not the first ones to stand up for change. Generations of concerned citizens, scientists and leaders have raised the issue for decades. However, to a large extent the change that we need has not come, and the situation is now critical. Here at the start of the 21st century only a couple of hundred years after the beginning of the modern age, in large part due to the social, economic, industrial, scientific and cultural evolution that we have undergone, our world is in crisis.

We are on the brink of climate catastrophe and mass extinction of species, and close to achieving collapse of many of Earth's ecosystems, all due to human activity. Alarming new reports from the United Nations on climate change¹ and biodiversity loss² point to that we are in a global emergency and that the well-being and future of humanity, wildlife and nature are all at stake.

On top of these crises, we are also facing a host of other pressing global challenges, including poverty, hunger, child mortality, inequality, gender discrimination, public health challenges, humanitarian crises, migration and refugee crises, water scarcity, food insecurity, intolerance, terrorism, violence, conflicts, pollution, deforestation and environmental degradation, among many others. All these challenges are also closely interlinked, making them very difficult to solve.

Moreover, many scientists and experts stress that we are close to running out of time and only have roughly a decade to turn things around on climate and biodiversity, among others. They emphasize that we need immediate global action to avoid catastrophic results. The world's children, calling for change, are right. We, humanity, the international community as a whole, need to act, and we need to act now.

The good news, is that the world's countries came together at the United Nations and adopted several ambitious and transformative global agendas and resolutions in 2015 and 2016, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement on climate change, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing for development and the Sustainable Peace Agenda, with the aim to tackle our global challenges and put the world on a sustainable, equitable, balanced and peaceful footing, leaving no one behind. In addition, the UN launched the Agenda for Humanity and held a World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 to improve global humanitarian action, resilience and preparedness.

These new agendas provide us with a unifying roadmap for collective global action and represent a major step in the right direction, giving us hope that we can indeed turn the tide. However, achieving the agendas is not going to be easy. It will be an immense undertaking requiring us to drastically change our ways and literally transform our world. It will also require us to implement the agendas together in a coherent and integrated manner, since lagging behind in any of the areas will hold back the achievement of all the others. As often noted, we cannot achieve sustainable development without peace or human rights, and cannot achieve peace or human rights, without sustainable development.

Central to realizing the new agendas is the need to reform and strengthen our governance structures, systems and institutions, mobilize the means of implementation of the frameworks, adopt integrated approaches, and achieve policy coherence accounting for synergies and tradeoffs across policy areas. It will also require an unprecedented level of international cooperation, partnership and collective action inclusive of all stakeholders of society at local, national, regional and global levels. Strengthening our capacity to work together, in global partnership, with shared commitment and solidarity, is critical for the road ahead.

With the adoption of the new agendas, countries and stakeholders across all sectors have also embraced the need for reform and investment and have been taking important measures to incorporate the agendas into strategies and policies, align institutions and platforms, and get themselves 'fit-for-purpose', such as the steps taken by countries to realize a 'whole of government' approach, as well as the reforms being implemented to reposition the UN development system and peacebuilding architecture. New and enhanced multi-stakeholder partnerships, working methods, tools and coordination mechanisms have also been put in place in many areas.

However, despite these measures, four years into the adoption of the agendas we are seeing that we have major implementation gaps, significant challenges remain, and we are not realizing the level of coherence, governance, institutions, cooperation and transformation that we need in many areas, both at national and international levels. In some places we are even seeing reverse progress and deteriorating conditions. This is of great concern as it is impeding our collective capacity to achieve the agendas.

Early results also indicate that progress on the agendas and many of their goals is too slow, fragmented and insufficient^{3 4 5 6}. In real terms this means that we are not on track to stave off our global crises and challenges. If these trends continue we will not be able to halt climate change, mass extinctions or ecosystem collapse, and won't be able to achieve many of the other necessary goals within the short time that we have, with dire consequences to follow for people and planet.

The United Nations Secretary General lamented our dire situation during his remarks to the World Economic Forum in January 2019: "If I had to select one sentence to describe the state of the world, I would say we are in a world in which global challenges are more and more integrated, and responses are more and more fragmented, and if this is not reversed it is a recipe for disaster". He also noted that our global challenges can only be solved through global responses, and that the "international community has enormous difficulty, at the country level and at the global level, to respond in a global way".

So what is the problem and how can we fix it?

There is a host of complex governance and cooperation challenges holding us back, including long-standing and deep-rooted systemic and structural challenges that date back decades and that still remain entrenched. Here is a brief look of some of these issues.

For starters, our global system and many of our institutions are chronically overstretched due to the sheer number, breadth and scale of our global challenges. Meeting the immediate day-to-day demands of addressing the challenges further takes priority, making it difficult to tackle root causes, let alone to implement new ambitious frameworks.

In implementing the new agendas, countries have reported numerous difficulties including coordination challenges, logistical hurdles, implementation gaps and major capacity building needs⁷, many due to pre-existing structures and conditions. Short-term thinking and a lack of long-term planning and investment also remain challenges, holding back implementation efforts which require long-term strategies, investments and commitments⁸.

Many countries are also reporting challenges in achieving integrated approaches and policy coherence, accounting for synergies and tradeoffs between policy areas, a prerequisite for systems change^{9 10 11 12}. These difficulties are being encountered both within and across the agendas. Moreover, while there is growing knowledge on the interlinkages between the goals and across the agendas, there are still gaps and blind spots¹³. According to the UN Secretary General's 2019 special report on progress on the 2030 Agenda, institutions, governance and skill sets also 'have not yet adapted to translate this nexus information into effective whole-of government and whole-of-society approaches and cross-sectoral action aligned with the 2030 Agenda'¹⁴.

A major obstacle in achieving integrated approaches is also that many of our systems, structures, processes and institutions operate in silos in isolation from each other. There is also a prevailing silo thinking¹⁵. One key example is that development, peacebuilding and humanitarian efforts are often carried out in silos¹⁶. As stated in the Report of the Secretary-General on the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review 'bridging the divides and strengthening the synergies across the development, humanitarian and peacebuilding

nexus is critical to realize and sustain peace and development gains'. Concerted efforts and advances have been made in breaking these silos, but progress is slow¹⁷.

In the areas where we are lagging behind, whether that be at national or international levels, it is imperative that we accelerate and scale-up efforts to change mindsets; strengthen relations and connectivity across policy areas, and establish coherent governance approaches and institutional arrangements that enable systemic and sustained cross-sectoral collaboration and integration. We also need to strengthen working methods, competencies and institutional cultures in this regard, akin to measures being undertaken at the United Nations¹⁸.

Hand in hand with integration and breaking silos is the central need for inclusion of all stakeholders of society, including those at risk of being left behind. This requires inclusive, participatory and representative governance and transparent and accountable institutions at all levels. Progress has been achieved in many countries, but lack of inclusion and participation continue to persist in many areas, presenting barriers to realizing rights and achieving the level of stakeholder input, coherence, co-creation, decision-making and sustainability that the agendas call for.

For example, gender inequality in governance including inclusion and participation of women in decision making remains a significant global challenge¹⁹. None of our agendas or development goals can be achieved without gender equality and the full participation of women in all aspects of society including governance. The shrinking civic space in many countries around the world is another major problem, which stands in direct opposition to the goals of the 2030 Agenda.

On the positive side, per an independent review of the Voluntary National Reviews at the UN High Level Political Forum on sustainable development, 'formal inclusion of non-state actors in governance arrangements has shown a marked improvement, shifting from a commitment to engage non-state actors, to now actually including them'. However the report also notes that 'there are still relatively few examples of formal processes and mechanisms that have been established to allow for more widespread and regular engagement with stakeholders outside of governance mechanisms'²⁰.

Lack of meaningful dialogue, debate and consultation among stakeholders also continues to be a significant obstacle. Meetings and forums at all levels, including at the United Nations²¹, often lack the level of in-depth, systemic and sustained dialogue, knowledge exchange, problem solving and decision making that we require to tackle the problems we face. Due to various constraints discussions are often reduced to a series of short canned statements and interventions that inherently only scratch the surface of the issues being addressed, and as a result don't amount to true meaningful engagement and collaboration.

Institutions and mechanisms at all levels need to ensure that they have coherent and effective meeting frameworks, engagement formats, tools and resources that provide stakeholders with the capacity to fully participate and collaborate with each other. On a related note we also have to invest in the skills and capacity of stakeholders to participate and engage with each other in a meaningful and sustained manner.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships bringing together stakeholders to address specific challenges are seen as critical to the achievement of the new agendas, and numerous partnerships have been established at the national, regional and the global levels over the last couple of decades, with some having a substantial impact.

However, research aggregated by the international Civil Society Center also show a host of common challenges that face many partnerships including, lack of organizational capacity, resources and transparency, partnerships with limited measurable outputs, and marginalization of key stakeholders, in particular ‘major groups’²². Furthermore, there is often a lack of connectivity between partnerships, even among those working in the same area.

Financing is a key challenge as well. Our global systems and institutions are chronically underfunded across all areas including sustainable development, peace and security, human rights, climate action and humanitarian assistance. In adopting the 2030 Agenda and the Addis Agenda governments agreed on the need for significant increase in financing²³, but mobilizing sufficient funds remains a major challenge²⁴. According to the 2019 UN Financing for Development Report ‘investments that are critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals remain underfunded and parts of the multilateral system are under strain’.

Moreover, development cooperation continues to be insufficient to meet demand. Only a handful of countries are delivering on the official development assistance (ODA) target of 0.7 percent of gross national income (GNI). The way financing is provided also presents a problem in many cases. Implementing the agendas among others requires unrestricted core funding, and pooled financing mechanisms to support integrated measures, but a majority of funding continues to be earmarked for specific projects and single issue interventions, often preventing integrated and joined up programming. Competing priorities coupled with insufficient available financing also perpetuate competition for resources among stakeholders, as opposed to collaboration.

Another key challenge is that while most of the focus on the implementation of the agendas rightly is at the national and local level, we are often lacking in our capacity, attention and efforts to address critical transboundary and international level dimensions^{25 26 27}, without which we cannot fully meet the goals. Moreover, countries report that there is a need for better effectiveness and coherence of international assistance to national implementation efforts²⁸.

We are also paying far too little attention to the need to strengthen our overarching global governance system, global multilateral system and international architecture, even though there have been important reforms to individual institutions such as the repositioning of the United Nations.

Our current systems, structures and institutions at the global level were largely built for the circumstances of the last century, but many are outdated and haven’t been upgraded and adequately equipped for the complex interlinked challenges, political realities and multipolarity of today’s world^{29 30}, and for the integrated requirements of our new global frameworks. Furthermore, many don’t adequately account for the much larger set of stakeholder groups engaged at the global level. Lack of connectivity, integration, alignment

and cooperation across governance structures, institutions, sectors and policy areas remain significant challenges, in this regard.

We are also facing new threats to multilateralism and international cooperation, in the form of nationalism, isolationism, protectionism, populism, escalating tensions and lack of trust between nations. These negative trends stem from a host of factors such as globalization, growing inequalities within and between nations, economic uncertainties, marginalization, migration, conflicts, shifting power relations, and changing demographics, among others.

However, none of these issues can be addressed without multilateralism and international cooperation. The trends are thus counterproductive and in direct reverse to where we need to go, and instead result in more fragmentation, uncertainty, disconnect and disintegration. It is therefore essential that we take measures to address the underlying causes, and work to rebuild and strengthen relations, bridges, cooperation, solidarity and trust among stakeholders, at all levels.

There are furthermore additional pressing global challenges that lie outside the scope of the new agendas including nuclear weapons, increased military spending, deadlocked multilateral disarmament negotiations and a deteriorating international security environment, that are not being adequately addressed, in part due to difficulties of governance and lack of international cooperation on these matters.³¹

Last but not least, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that all these governance challenges are interconnected, requiring integrated solutions. If our reforms and investments are implemented in a fragmented and uncoordinated manner across policy areas, agendas and institutions, and don't join up, many of the problems will continue to persist.

This is by no means an exhaustive list and there are many other governance challenges that need to be addressed. However, those mentioned here suffice to illustrate the scale and complexity of the problem. Together, these challenges impede progress on all issues including climate change, biodiversity loss, poverty, gender inequality, education, public health, environmental degradation, conflicts, terrorism, intolerance, humanitarian crises, corruption, crime and human rights abuses, no matter how hard we work. It is therefore mission critical that we tackle these issues, in order for us to be able to achieve the results we need.

A lack of action and failure to address them will likely lead to inter alia continued challenges in achieving the level of governance, coherence, cooperation, global partnership and collective action required to realize the agendas; persistent fragmentation, incoherent development, lack of coordination and inefficiencies; limited progress in achieving the paradigm shift to systemic change; and continued challenges and slow progress in the achievement of the goals and targets of the agendas.

The children demonstrating around the world rightly call on us to get our act together and to act now. This includes putting in place the governance systems, policies, institutions, resources and mindsets that we need in order for us to be able work better together, everywhere.

The way forward: A global response

So how do we get there? How do we address these collective governance challenges and get us working as a global team?

First off, it is important that institutions, mechanisms and stakeholders at all levels continue their individual reforms and efforts. These measures continue to be critical. However, given our pressing global crises and our system-wide governance challenges, we urgently need to focus attention, raise the level of ambition and enhance our collective efforts. The international community as a whole needs to put these governance challenges at the center of the global and national agendas and address them head on in a more coherent and forward looking manner. We cannot rely on siloed and fragmented responses, and random evolution of the system. As noted by the UN Secretary General, global challenges can only be achieved by global responses.

To this end, we need to adopt a proactive and coordinated global response inclusive of national, regional and global levels. Moreover, we need a response that takes a systemic and transformative approach accounting for the needs of the system as a whole, and that achieves system-wide coherence across all key governance issues. We also need a unifying and inclusive response that galvanizes political will and that empowers and brings together stakeholders across sectors to collectively address systemic challenges and gaps, connect and leverage efforts, and develop coherent and integrated solutions. Adopting a global response should also serve to help rebuild trust, accountability and shared commitment, and help establish a spirit of global solidarity, partnership and teamwork.

Governments called for a similar holistic strategy with the Addis Ababa Action Agenda for financing for development affirming that “a systemic, integrated and transformative approach is needed for the system-wide cross cutting issues and areas.” The Addis Agenda also affirms that achieving the 2030 Agenda “will require an equally ambitious, comprehensive, holistic and transformative approach with respect to the means of implementation, combining different means of implementation and integrating the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development [...] underpinned by effective, accountable and inclusive institutions, sound policies and good governance at all levels.” The Agenda for Humanity in the same spirit calls for stakeholders to work towards collective outcomes. The United Nations also took a systemic approach in looking at the long-term positioning of the UN development system and peacebuilding architecture.

Many of our systemic and structural governance challenges can also be addressed by approaching and mobilizing the means of implementation of the agendas in a systemic and integrated manner. Taking an integrated view of the agendas³² shows that there is a host of cross-cutting and systemic means of implementation and related reforms and investments that work across the frameworks, encompassing many of the measures we need to be looking at including inter alia, strengthening governance, capacity, integration, policy coherence, alignment, strategic relations, cooperation, coordination, connectivity, inclusion, participation, multi-stakeholder engagement, partnerships, and collective outcomes.

Recommendations

A global response to address our governance and cooperation challenges should be based on the following criteria, *inter alia*:

- The global response should take a systemic and transformative approach addressing needs of the system as a whole, inclusive of local, national, regional and international levels.
- The systemic approach should be guided by and be aligned with the new global agendas and draw upon their goals, targets and means of implementation. It should account for the interlinkages between the agendas and their respective means of implementation, with special focus on systemic cross-cutting means of implementation. It should also aim to integrate governance requirements within and across the development, peace and security, human rights and humanitarian pillars.
- The response should put people at the center, with special emphasis on leaving no one behind, and be grounded in the universal declaration of human rights.
- The response should seek to build upon, complement and connect reforms, investments and other efforts at institutional, local, national, regional and international levels. It should also seek to leverage the input, capacity and comparative advantages of institutions and mechanisms across sectors, with a view to integrate and scale up system-wide efforts.
- In adopting a global response, it will be imperative that governance reforms and investments be responsive to local, national, regional and international contexts, while at the same time be closely aligned with the new global frameworks and consistent with relevant international rules and commitments.
- Cohesive government led strategies should serve as the basis for national level governance reform and investments. The global response should adhere to the principle of respecting national policy space, leadership and priorities, in the same manner as the 2030 agenda. It will further be critical that regional and international support to national efforts is coherent, coordinated and aligned with national priorities, and that it is complementary, supporting national efforts when needed.
- At the international level the global response should be led by United Nations member states and the UN system. The process should be fully inclusive of all relevant stakeholders groups, at national, regional and international levels, across the development, peace and security, humanitarian and human rights sectors, and across the public, private and civil sectors.
- The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) should be tasked with providing political leadership and guidance, negotiating the scope and modalities of the global response, and should establish an open working group on global governance reform akin to the open working group on the sustainable development goals.
- The UN Secretary General should appoint a high-level panel on global governance reform that would be responsible for bringing stakeholders together to advance system-wide

knowledge, understanding, consultations, discussions, thinking, problem solving, proposals and recommendations; and to provide substantive inputs to the UNGA open working group.

- The UN high level panel should be tasked with conducting a comprehensive global multi-level view, assessment and mapping of existing governance structures, systems, frameworks, mechanisms, partnerships, institutions, policies and functions within the overarching global ecosystem and the international architecture; identify synergies, tradeoffs, opportunities, challenges and gaps; assess existing reforms, investments, capacity building needs and resource requirements; review past and new proposals for governance reform; seek to identify what additional reforms and interventions need to be made, and aim to develop coherent and integrated recommendations and strategies to achieve them.
- The United Nations General Assembly working group, with input from the UN high level panel as well as other relevant sources at national, regional and international levels, should aim to produce a strategic global governance framework with integrated goals, targets, indicators and means of implementation, aligned with the new global agendas.
- UN member states and the UN should also seek to establish a cohesive enabling environment and financing to implement the global governance framework, integrated with strategies and implementation efforts of the global agendas, at national, regional and international levels.
- Central to establishing the global response, it will be imperative to ensure that stakeholders across all sectors of society are called upon, supported, enabled and empowered to own the response and reform process individually and collectively, and that they are afforded adequate opportunity to address challenges and co-develop solutions in a responsive, inclusive and united manner.
- The UN Secretary General's proposed global consultation on multilateralism on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the United Nations in 2020 could be a good first step in this direction. It will hopefully rekindle interest and generate a dialogue about the governance systems and structures we need to have in moving forward, and could serve as a useful launchpad towards galvanizing political will, engagement and momentum, and establishing a coherent global response, as proposed here.

Questions we should be asking ourselves

In adopting a global response it is imperative that we engage in inclusive, systemic and sustained dialogue about these issues, and ask ourselves a host of important questions, including inter alia:

How can we promote greater shared commitment, collective action and solidarity? How can we build greater trust and stronger strategic partnerships between stakeholders and across sectors? How can we increase coherence, cooperation and coordination? How do we strengthen inclusion and participation? What measures do we need to take to increase accountability and transparency? How do we make our governance systems and institutions more responsive to all citizens?

Additional questions include, what are the short term and long term requirements? What are the risks? How do we measure results? How do we best incentivize donors? How do we co-create a more agile and results driven enabling environment? How do we ensure sustainability? How can we accelerate progress and achieve results at scale?

These are only a few examples, and many more questions need to be asked. It is out of asking some of these questions that we will start to see where we need to invest, where we can improve performance, where we can change our thinking, and how to best achieve our objectives. It is out of the answers to these questions that we can start to co-create a road map, build our strategies, and implement the necessary tools to help us move forward.

Investing in governance and cooperation at the global level

A global response should support and enable the international community to become more coherent, connected and integrated, and strengthen our collective capacity to address global challenges and realize the agendas at the local, national, regional and global levels.

In support of achieving these goals, the UI Foundation is continuing to move forward with the development of the United Institutions (UI), a planned new global institution and coordination mechanism being established to help address the need to modernize the international architecture and strengthen international cooperation and collective action.

The United Institutions is a strategic infrastructure investment aimed at building out the institutional framework at the global level, and will be the first-ever permanent world forum for multi-stakeholder cooperation on sustainable development, climate change, peace and security, humanitarian assistance and human rights between organizations in the international community from the public, private and civil sectors. The platform is being developed to complement existing governance structures and mechanisms including the United Nations, intergovernmental organizations, regional organizations and multi-stakeholder partnerships.

The United Institutions, which will be co-created and implemented inclusive of stakeholders across all sectors, is further aimed at enabling stakeholders to address many of our governance requirements and challenges, including those addressed in this paper. As such the new world forum is intended to serve as an integral part of the modern international architecture and global governance system, that a global response should help us achieve.

For a big picture overview of the United Institutions visit www.unitedinstitutions.org

Stirling Dean is the Chief Architect of the United Institutions and Chairman of the United Institutions Foundation.

Endnotes

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