

Global Governance Spotlight

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sef:

Improving Responses to Global Shocks – Recommendations for the “Our Common Agenda” process

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The Covid-19 pandemic is the most universal acute emergency to date, spreading around the globe in a very short time. The global health emergency has quickly been followed by an economic, food and development crisis. The pandemic highlights a number of serious shortcomings. It shows that neither the global community nor most states and societies are prepared to respond rapidly and effectively to such crisis situations, although the pandemic was not entirely unexpected. The major negative impacts of such a shock event could thus have been avoided. Rather, it is the underlying weak structures, misguided narratives and negative long-term developments that reduce the resilience of societies to such events. Given the scale of human suffering and the vast material and immaterial resources that have to be mustered to mitigate the worst consequences of such a global shock event, the central question is: How can the global community position itself to be better prepared in the future, and to be able to respond appropriately in the event of an unexpected disaster?

The Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), António Guterres, has provided some initial answers to this question in his report “Our Common Agenda”, published in September 2021. In September/October 2021, the Development and Peace Foundation (sef:) and the Institute for Development and Peace (INEF) at the University of Duisburg-Essen convened leading experts in an online dialogue series to identify ways to strengthen the ability of politics to prevent and react to global shocks in global solidarity. Some of their key findings are summarised in this paper.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines global shocks as “major rapid-onset events” with “severely disruptive consequences” on at least two continents (OECD 2011). They can be caused, for example, by international financial crises, pandemics, large-scale natural disasters, global terrorist attacks, cyber security failure or armed conflicts between major powers. The frequency and intensity of global shocks are likely to increase in the future if the international community and individual states do not prepare themselves better and also address the underlying causes. In addition to the high degree of global interconnectedness and global division of labour, it is long-term challenges such as global inequality, climate change, loss of natural livelihoods and biodiversity, concentration of digital power and the rise of authoritarian regimes that promote global shocks and amplify their negative impact.

The challenge is to shape a process of transformation with deep and fundamental changes. This involves the structures and principles of international cooperation, the handling of different types of knowledge and also the narratives and mindsets guiding action at all levels of politics. Furthermore, this transformation is about redesigning the existing relations between the so-called Global North and Global South.

Reimagining global governance

For many years, there has been a debate about the need to reform the global system of governance,

above all the UN system. The challenges are manifold; they range from the lack of representativeness of the UN system, which still reflects the geopolitical balance of power at the end of World War II, to the insufficient willingness of many states to put the long-term global common good above short-term national interests. As a result, the authority and capacity of international institutions suffer. Strengthening them and improving the quality of their work is one of the UN Secretary-General’s concerns in “Our Common Agenda”. Other proposals aim to set up new governance structures and mechanisms to better prepare the world for crisis events (such as the proposed Emergency Platform for Complex Crises or a periodic Strategic Foresight and Global Risk Report) and to address the underlying causes (such as a High-level Advisory Board on improved governance of global public goods).

An important task for the Emergency Response Platform could be to bring all relevant actors at the international level together to define common goals and take over the task of coordination. In addition, to avoid aftershocks, a body is needed that countries can turn to in order to make clear what (negative) effects certain measures have on other countries. At present, however, the Platform is not intended to become a permanent body or institution such as the Global Resilience Council proposed by the Foundation for Global Governance and Sustainability (FOGGS). Instead, it would only be triggered “in crises of sufficient scale and magnitude” to “bring together leaders from Member States, the United Nations system, key country groupings, international financial institutions, regional bodies, civil society, the private sector, subject-specific industries or research bodies and other experts” (UN Secretary General 2021, p. 65). This ad hoc form of cooperation could prove to be a major disadvantage, especially in situations where prompt action is required, due to the lack of well-established procedures and trust-building.

While better coordination is of great importance, it should be kept in mind that there is never a one-size-fits-all solution. There is a variety of institutions, policy approaches and locally adapted instruments which can be made use of. Flexibility in implementation is key; measures and instruments always need to be contextualised. Investment in capacity-building is therefore needed at all levels.

Very often global governance arrangements are criticised for their “silo mentality”, i.e. the neat compartmentalisation of policy-making and problem-solving. A common recommendation is to break down the silos. However, important competences and structures would then be lost. What seems to be more promising is to make the silos interact with one another in a professional way. This only works if they learn to think beyond the boundaries of institutions or departments. Furthermore, there is a need for a jointly agreed objective.

Besides creating new institutions and experimenting with different forms of governance, trust is a key governance asset in times of crisis. Trust in leaders rests on their honesty and courage to act. Trust in institutions is based on their legitimacy and the accountability mechanisms that are put in place. Governance institutions are looked upon as being legitimate when they are effective (not just efficient). However, structures and processes are also considered legitimate by being as inclusive as possible. Inclusivity means providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalised. At UN level, this is also equated with the principle of leaving no one behind. This gives an important role to civil society actors and communities and grants them the role of accountability-takers. However, the reference to civil society institutions, especially in acute crises, must not be misused to distract from the responsibility and necessary leadership of state and intergovernmental institutions.

Considering different types and sources of knowledge

During crises, policy-makers often need to rely on “knowledge in the making” to come to informed decisions. But what type of knowledge is relevant, and who is producing it? Here, the coronavirus pandemic serves as an interesting example. At the beginning, it was predominantly epidemiologists and virologists that policy-makers and the public turned to. However, when the social and economic effects of the pandemic came to the fore, experts from other disciplines were also consulted, and it became obvious that different academic disciplines had to be taken into account. But is this the only kind of knowledge that contributes to tackling a crisis?

To answer this question, it is worth reflecting on why some countries and regions were not hit as hard by the health effects of the pandemic as others. Obviously, factors such as societies’ experience in dealing with epidemics and awareness of the positive effect of basic sanitation measures, such as hand washing, mask wearing and social distancing, played a significant role – societal knowledge that has been lost in the highly technologised health systems of Europe and North America.

As a matter of fact, there is a plurality of knowledge to make use of in policy-making, and therefore there should be no prior hierarchies of privileged knowledge or disciplines. In the end, responding to a crisis and accommodating long-term goals with short-term measures rests on mutual and adaptive learning by all actors involved – and again, knowledge needs to be contextualised. Therefore, feedback loops should be installed throughout the whole process of producing, communicating and using knowledge.

In times of crisis, the communication of knowledge is of paramount importance. The challenge, both for experts and for policy-makers, lies in managing expectations of what can be achieved within a certain timeframe. Therefore, the language used – also in a literal sense, since in many countries several different languages are spoken within the population – and the vocabulary employed are crucial factors for gaining support, even for unpopular measures. Above all, scientists should make transparent how the knowledge that is fed into the policy process was produced – and where its limits lie. Policy-makers, too, must justify why certain information was used as a basis for their decision-making. And finally, scientists and policy-makers alike must be honest when adapting their recommendations and policy measures to newly established facts.

Changing narratives and mindsets

The relations between the so-called Global North and the Global South are still fraught with imbalances on many levels which play out as “dynamic divergence” in all areas of international cooperation. We are far away from a level playing field, especially since a new era of geopolitical power shifts is under way, with China and the USA struggling to reshape and reinvigorate the dominant narratives on how to develop best in terms of political systems and economic approaches. Moreover, the coronavirus pandemic not only highlights existing inequalities in the international system, especially with respect to the distribution of vaccines or the availability of financial resources – including unequal access to the Special Drawing Rights of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It also demonstrates that development cooperation is still dominated by a mindset of “charity” from the rich countries towards poor countries: North-South relations are firmly framed in terms of donor and recipient – this is the message enshrined in the COVAX initiative.

However, resorting to the human rights framework, which has been developed for decades within the United Nations system, as a reference point for international cooperation can make a difference: the human rights approach frames individuals as rights holders and states as duty bearers. Thus, for instance, to implement the right to health, charitable acts by the rich – as symbolised by the distribution of the Covid-19 vaccines – are not appropriate or sufficient. In the coronavirus pandemic, it has become obvious that we share vulnerabilities on a global scale and that we live in a globalised world characterised by a myriad of interdependencies. Mutual interests and shared vulnerabilities are fertile ground on which global solidarity instead of “charity” could grow. In addition, the coronavirus pandemic teaches us that the existing division of countries along the lines of geography or economic performance blinds us to who

is affected most by a crisis and what individual states can contribute to solving it – in true mutual solidarity and openness to learning from each other.

The human rights approach also lends itself to re-framing the role of large corporate actors which have become disproportionately influential in many global policy processes. This is evident not only in global vaccine production and distribution, but also, among other things, in the influence of the big players in the agri-food sector. States should keep in mind that they are accountable to their citizens and not to corporations. Putting human well-being at the centre also means changing the development narrative to focus on long-term conservation of natural livelihood bases and mitigation of climate change, rather than maximisation of power and profit.

This goes hand in hand with changing the orientation of political actors away from efficiency. For too long now, the mantra of efficiency came at the expense of the effectiveness of policy measures and the resilience of societies. If societies are to become more resilient to future shocks, they must build up a strong social infrastructure. Basic supplies of food, water, energy, education and health services, among other things, must be available on a regional and local basis. This might be less efficient from an economic point of view, but is essential for human well-being during crises.

The way ahead

Global shocks can only be prevented and tackled through cooperation – within and between nations at all levels of policy-making. The online dialogue series hosted by sef: and INEF in September/October 2021 produced a number of recommendations for better preparation for and more sustainable action in global shock situations, which are also relevant for the further UN process on “Our Common Agenda”, e.g. with regard to the proposed Emergency Platform, the future engagement with subnational authorities, civil society and the private sector, the proposed High-level Advisory Board and the re-establishment of the Secretary-General’s Scientific Advisory Board. They are briefly summarised below:

- Governance measures always need to be adapted to local contexts – also during global emergencies. Objectives should be agreed on globally; how they are best achieved depends on local conditions and, accordingly, should remain flexible.
- A challenge at all levels of politics is the “silo mentality” of individual institutions. While they should be maintained with their individual capacities, processes of meta-governance should be established that enable better interaction between individual institutions, especially in acute crisis

situations. At the global level, this role could be taken over by the proposed Emergency Platform.

- Informed decision-making by policy-makers should always take into account as many different scientific disciplines as possible. It should, however, not rely on scientific expertise alone. Other sources of information, such as traditional or indigenous knowledge, are equally relevant for tackling a crisis.
- Transparent and open communication of knowledge and knowledge gaps and an honest perspective on acute crisis situations are central to gaining the trust and support of the public.
- Mutual and adaptive learning by all actors involved, including policy-makers and researchers, is essential for a successful response to a global shock. Built-in feedback loops therefore have a key role to play.
- Mindsets and narratives have to be redirected from efficiency towards effectiveness, i.e. the (long-term) impact of a policy measure on the stakeholders. To improve the resilience of societies, it is crucial to build up local social infrastructure even if this comes at the expense of efficiency.
- States should keep in mind that they are accountable to their citizens – and not to large corporations. The development narrative has to change towards sustainability.
- In future, international cooperation should be more explicitly based on the human rights approach. In a similar vein, the dominant frame of

charity in development cooperation should be replaced by global solidarity, which is based on mutual give and take and recognises and values the diverse contributions made by individual states to common progress.

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Further reading

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