



Policy Memo

DATE: November 7, 2016

SUBJECT: A Multistakeholder Governance Agenda: What Are the Opportunities?

In the last two decades, multistakeholder approaches have made a significant impact on global governance challenges. Yet the proliferation of multistakeholder coalitions and initiatives has been paralleled by the growth in global public skepticism about the efficacy and legitimacy of cross-border governance of any kind.

The goal of the roundtable was to explore the emerging linkages in cooperative multistakeholder action among sectors such as human rights, Internet freedom, and climate change. The participants deliberated on whether or not multistakeholder initiatives are converging around certain venues and challenges and to what extent they are part of the solution to the global crisis of institutional legitimacy. The roundtable concluded with an assessment of what lessons can be drawn and what models can be replicated.

Some of these ideas included:

- The need to develop a taxonomy for the different types of multistakeholder coalitions based on the purposes and goals they serve.
- The value of producing a series of case studies where multistakeholderism has been identified as a way to look for patterns and transferrable techniques.
- The opportunity to develop and implement multisectorial multistakeholder accountability around the Sustainable Development Goals.
- The need to find better ways to share and learn from existing rules and guidebooks on how to do multistakeholderism.

On October 26–28, 2016, experts and policymakers from academia, government, international organizations, and civil society gathered at the Airlie Center outside Washington, DC, to participate in the Stanley Foundation's [57th annual Strategy for Peace Conference](#). This year's conference featured autonomous roundtables where experts focused on policy ideas, challenges, and recommendations in four key global issue areas: climate change, genocide prevention, nuclear security, and global governance.

This policy memo captures the major discussion points and policy recommendations from the roundtable "A Multistakeholder Governance Agenda: What Are the Opportunities?" chaired by Heather Hurlburt, director of the New Models of Policy Change project at New America. Chayenne Polimédo served as the rapporteur. A more detailed policy dialogue brief is forthcoming.

An Assessment of the Current State of Multistakeholderism

Decisions at the global level are increasingly being made by a plethora of networked actors who, based on their interests and knowledge, are often working in spaces that used to be reserved for sovereign nations. Multistakeholder approaches have changed the way states and nonstate actors think about organizing to deal with problems. Multistakeholderism is still evolving, so looking at new developments in this form of coalition building is helpful in understanding where the trend lines suggest it will go next.

The question is not whether multistakeholderism is a phenomenon but how to improve the ways in which stakeholders engage in these coalition efforts, and build on existing partnerships in order to make them more democratic, inclusive, and ensure that the role they play in global governance is a positive one. To answer that question, it is key to determine if there are areas and certain issues for which this approach is better suited, when it should be used, and the role it has to play in being a conduit for creating spaces for actors who otherwise would not have a voice in issues that are pertinent to them.

The Challenge of Trust and Legitimacy

The rise of multistakeholder coalitions and initiatives has paralleled a long-term trend in diminished public trust in institutions of all kinds. Although public faith in government and private institutions has rebounded following the 2007–08 Great Recession, what has emerged in its place is a trust gap, as elites now place much higher trust in governance of all kinds than do general publics worldwide. Generational attitudes and rising inequality play key roles. This tension is aggravated, in the face of global challenges, by the mismatch between those who want to help solve issues in global governance and the mechanisms that are in place to carry solutions forward and promote and facilitate their participation.

But there are reasons for optimism: The United Nations and global governance are seen positively when the public believes nonstate actors are helping the rest of the world. This favorable view is an entry point for multistakeholderism, as long as it lives up to its ideal of preserving and/or furthering democratic governance ideals.

Roundtable participants identified multistakeholderism as a force for good in highly elite environments and in those where broader publics play a key role. Examples of the former include the Internet governance community, where this coalition model is perceived to be embedded in the community's DNA—since the Internet itself emerged as a result of a network of tech, military, and other experts coming together. The People's Climate March in 2014 was a groundbreaking example of connecting different actors, from traditional policy circles as well as grassroots communities, who identified themselves as part of the fabric of social change and joined forces to mobilize around an issue. When done right (in terms of funding, support, and timing), multistakeholderism can be a force of change when other approaches have stagnated.

Multistakeholder processes rely on mechanisms that help bring solutions to the fore. But just looking for different solutions is not enough; it is becoming increasingly clear that processes perceived as being for elites only pose risks for legitimacy and effectiveness.

Multisectorial Multistakeholderism: The Future of Global Governance?

Stovepiped responses continue to be one of the main obstacles to international cooperation on key interrelated challenges. Some have argued for developing explicit linkages in cooperative multistakeholder action around other issues such as human rights, corruption, Internet freedom, and corporate social responsibility in extractive and agriculture sectors, and climate change, since, from a democratic governance point of view, crosscutting partnerships tend to be more inclusive than vertical ones. Indeed, this is occurring among major UN multistakeholder partnerships, which are developing habits of consultation and coordination among themselves. On the issue of ending child marriage, for example, numerous partnerships working on the root causes and solution elements are now beginning to coordinate around efforts to find solutions for the issue.

What is happening in other forums, however, appears to be a trend toward broader partnerships and coordination to solve complex, or “wicked,” problems without the convening power of a formalized coalition. Actors participate as themselves, not as coordinated members of a given multistakeholder effort. Oftentimes, coordination efforts that are successful at the local level are harder to replicate at the global level.

The United Nations has traditionally been the default convener in most instances of multisectorial multistakeholderism, but not all issues fit the UN-led facilitation model. In that case, regional organizations, other nongovernmental institutions, individuals with specific moral authority, or even governments themselves can serve as conveners.

The biggest challenges in multisectorial multistakeholderism lie in the realms of coordination and accountability. While strong leadership is necessary, the convener also ought to be able to distribute its power and ensure that participants are cognizant that while there is not a single voice with authority, all actors in the coalition are equally responsible.

Sometimes these coalitions thrive under the leadership of conveners who are invested in the outcomes of the coalition efforts, but neutral conveners also have a role to play in successfully bringing together competing interests. If participants of the coalitions perceive each other as competing over the outcome of the coalitional effort, then a neutral convener is probably ideal. But if actors already have a coherent vision and are working toward a mutual, established goal, then an invested convener is best suited for the task of honoring all the voices and mobilizing participants.

Key Observations

1. Multistakeholderism and Democracy

- Don't confuse the two.
- At its best, multistakeholderism:
 - Opens spaces for representation and legitimacy.
 - Brings top-down and bottom-up together.
 - Makes space for those not at the table, through report backs and facilitated conversations.

- Consider how multistakeholderism relates to social contract, another avenue toward goals that Westerners describe as democracy and justice.

2. Multistakeholderism and Governance

- Some participants believed multistakeholderism must lead to governance, but the solution to governance does not necessarily need to be public sector-institutionalized in order to be valid.
- The need exists for development of taxonomy on:
 - Different forms of governance.
 - Different forms of multistakeholderism.
 - The various ways governance and multistakeholderism interact.
- Long-term versus short-term approaches to multistakeholderism and governance should be explored.

3. Multisectorial Multistakeholderism

- The People’s Climate March is a good example of a success story.
- Sustainable Development Goals are a good case study for how to enforce multisectorial multistakeholder accountability.
- The potential for multistakeholder processes of data-driven accountability is enormous.
 - There is a younger generation in institutions that is comfortable with information sharing.
 - There is a need to harness instincts and technology that are available.
 - The private sector has already figured out the power of big data. Why aren’t we doing the same thing with public goods?
- How do early warning systems connect across sectors?
- Private, for-profit entities have played critical roles in multistakeholderism to date, but outcomes are mixed across sectors.
 - Agriculture and natural resources have shown a great deal of interest in engagement with other stakeholders on food security issues, for example.
 - In Africa, global businesses have engaged, while regional ones—the continent’s engines of growth—have been more reticent.
 - The depth of business engagement, as well as forum shopping and so-called forum fatigue, are important variables.

4. Techniques of Multistakeholderism

- Practitioners and advocates can share and learn from existing rules and guidebooks.
 - *The MSP Guide—How to Design and Facilitate Multistakeholder Partnerships*, www.mspsguide.org.
 - *Multistakeholder Initiatives: A strategic Guide for Civil Society Organizations*, <https://www.somo.nl/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Multi-stakeholder-initiatives.pdf>.
 - *The Social Contract in Situations of Conflict and Fragility/Concept Note*, <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/conflict-prevention/the-social-contract-in-situations-of-conflict-and-fragility.html>.

- The degree to which actors trust each other impinges upon whether or not multistakeholderism can be democratic.
- Complex communication is one of the most underestimated capacities of multistakeholderism processes.
- The role of the convener is neutral/nonthreatening versus most significant/powerful.
- Convenings and publications are important tools for drawing conclusions and recommendations—share techniques that carry across cases; not all are *sui generis*.

Looking Ahead

Beyond further exploration of the observations listed above, the discussion about the genesis of the 2014 People’s Climate March, the thinking behind the coalition, and how elites and grassroots movements came together at a unique and pivotal moment to successfully enact change was one of the most interesting and productive moments of the roundtable. Participants acknowledged that the best way to understand and replicate multistakeholderism is through a deep dive into case studies of other multistakeholder coalitions that have already been identified. Understanding what can be planned and predicted about any given multistakeholder coalition in global governance, and what is *sui generis*, is crucial.

Potential case studies include:

- Coalitions that have succeeded in reducing “democratic deficits.”
- Genesis: Who convenes, with what authority and/or neutrality?
- Driving goal/purpose: Is the coalition for problem solving, advocacy/mobilization, consensus building, norm setting, etc.?
- Degree of inclusivity.
 - Important to have a “minimum engage-and-consult” approach.
 - Who decides who is in or out?
- Relationship of multistakeholder processes to formal government structures.
- Impact of entry points of participation at different stages:
 - Inception (problem solving).
 - Consolidation (treaty, law, agreement).
 - Implementation, monitoring, enforcement.
 - Accountability.
- Forms of “backbone” support to multistakeholderism.
- Transparency and communication.
- Comparing Global South-led initiatives to outside initiatives in the Global South.

The analysis and recommendations included in this policy memo do not necessarily reflect the views of the Stanley Foundation or any of the conference participants but rather draw on the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

For further information, please contact Jennifer Smyser at the Stanley Foundation, 563-264-1500 or jsmyser@stanleyfoundation.org.

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