

Complex Global Shocks, Emergency Platforms, and United Nations Reform

By Peter J. Hoffman

About the Author

Peter J. Hoffman is Associate Professor and Director of the United Nations Summer Study (UNSS) program in the Julien J. Studley Graduate Programs in International Affairs at The New School. His research focuses primarily on the United Nations, global governance, and humanitarian action. Peter has been a consultant for numerous non-governmental organizations and think tanks, including the Fund for Peace, the Stanley Foundation, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, and the Open Society Foundations.

In this policy brief he combines decades of academic and policy experience to present a case for how the UN could practically and effectively utilize a tool such as the proposed Emergency Platform to tackle our planet's increasing vulnerability to global shocks.

Global Governance Innovation Network Policy Brief Series

This series provides a platform for leading and up-and-coming authors' thinking on major contemporary global governance challenges with a view to stimulating and influencing policy debates. This Global Governance Innovation Network (GGIN) Policy Brief represents the perspective of the author alone and not necessarily the views of the Stimson Center or other cosponsoring partner institutions of the Global Governance Innovation Network. This GGIN Policy Brief was funded by the Stockholm-based Global Challenges Foundation, which has not played an editorial role or necessarily endorses the conclusions reached by the author.

Editorial Team

Joris Larik (series editor), Richard Ponzio (project lead), Henrietta Skareng (associate editor and GGIN Youth Fellow), Nudhara Yusuf (GGIN Executive Coordinator).

About the Global Governance Innovation Network

The Global Governance Innovation Network brings world class scholarship together with international policy-making to address fundamental global governance challenges, threats, and opportunities. Research focuses on the development of institutional, policy, legal, operational, and normative improvements in the international global governance architecture. GGIN is a collaborative project of the Stimson Center, Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS), Plataforma CIPÓ, Leiden University, the Savannah Center for Diplomacy, Democracy, and Development, the Council on Energy, Environment & Water, and the Global Institute for Strategic Research.

About Stimson

The Stimson Center promotes international security and shared prosperity through applied research and independent analysis, global engagement, and policy innovation. For more than three decades, Stimson has been a leading voice on urgent global issues. Founded in the twilight years of the Cold War, the Stimson Center pioneered practical new steps toward stability and security in an uncertain world. Today, as changes in power and technology usher in a challenging new era, Stimson is at the forefront: Engaging new voices, generating innovative ideas and analysis, and building solutions to promote international security, prosperity, and justice. Stimson's Global Governance, Justice & Security Program aims to advance more capable global and regional institutions to better cope with existing and emerging global challenges, and to create new opportunities through effective multilateral action, including with the global business community and civil society.

About International Affairs at The New School

Grounded on a commitment to building a more just and inclusive world order, the Julien J. Studley Graduate Programs in International Affairs produces rich and rigorous social scientific scholarship as well as provides critical perspectives and practical skills in training the next generation of international affairs professionals. More at [SGPIA](#).

Cover photo: Waheedullah Jahesh/Shutterstock

STIMSON

 **Global Governance
Innovation Network**

THE NEW SCHOOL
**INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS**

 **Global
Challenges
Foundation**

Complex Global Shocks, Emergency Platforms, and United Nations Reform

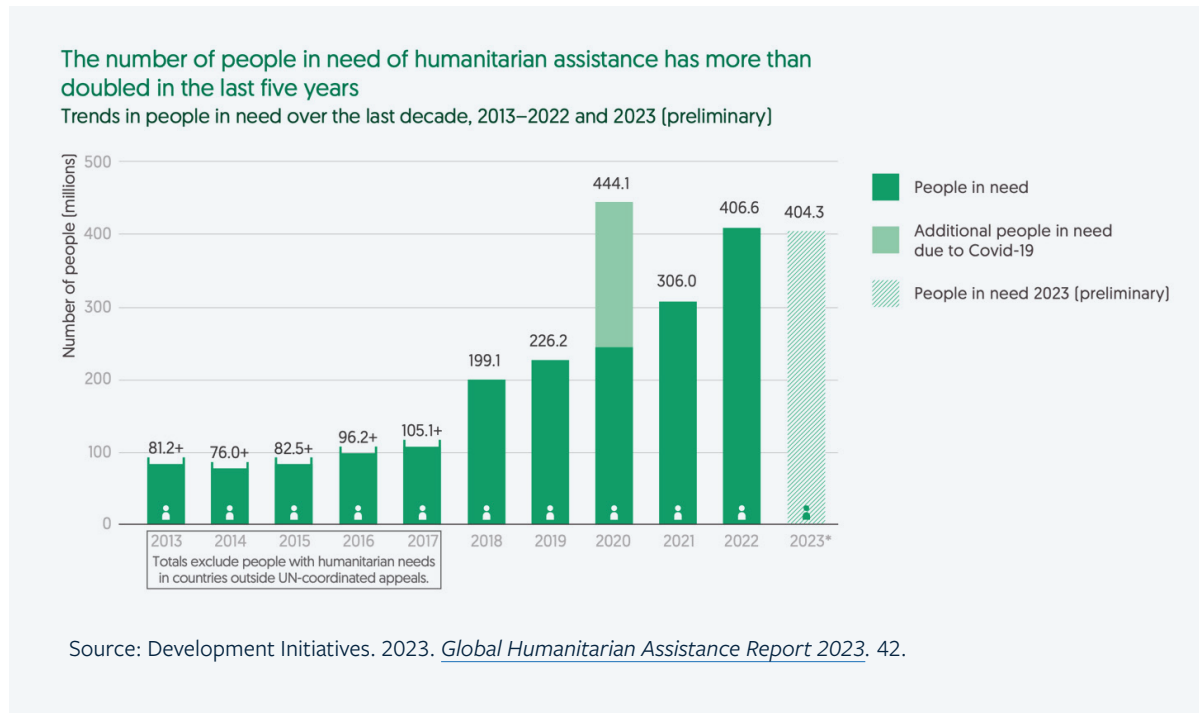
By Peter J. Hoffman

This GGIN Policy Brief outlines the need for and mechanics of the Emergency Platform tool proposed by the United Nations, examines the contours of debates around the EP, and considers the politics and prospects for the establishment of emergency platforms.

Too often when disasters strike, structural impediments as well as inadequate political will and resources deadlock and disable the United Nations (UN) from coherently and effectively responding. Recent worldwide shocks with extraordinary humanitarian impacts, notably the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), the cost-of-living crisis (2022–), and Russia’s resurgent invasion of Ukraine (2022–) have prompted calls for the Organization to play a more pronounced role in coordinating aid at the same time as other demands for UN reform have looked to confront injustices in its structure and operations. In September 2021, Secretary-General (SG) António Guterres released *Our Common Agenda*, a package of recommendations to reinvigorate and contemporize the UN that would be realized in the September 2024 signing of the Pact for the Future and includes a proposal for “the Emergency Platform” (EP) to tackle responding to global shocks. The EP would be innovative as a vehicle directed by the Secretary-General that releases existing resources and coordinates a division of labor beyond Member States and UN agencies, incorporating a wider range of actors and capabilities. Since the SG initially sketched the EP, the idea has taken shape over the course of several rounds of negotiations and iterations of the Pact for the Future and is now known as “emergency platforms.” This memo begins, first, by outlining the need for and mechanics of the EP tool. Second, it examines the contours of debates around the EP, enumerating criticisms that have often informed revisions in the Pact for the Future drafting process. Finally, it considers the politics and prospects for the establishment of emergency platforms. The Summit of the Future will produce an agreement, but three challenges that will determine the impact of emergency platforms will remain: trigger protocols and authority, resource commitments, and the multilateral environment. Furthermore, a review of emergency platforms processes will also be needed to track performance—not only in coherence and cooperation in responding to shocks but in determinations of what constitutes a designated “complex global shock.”

I. Introduction: What are Complex Global Shocks?

In recent years, a surge in the number and intensity of emergencies—life-threatening crises demanding immediate action—has incited interest in developing new humanitarian response tools. In 2013, just over 80 million people worldwide needed humanitarian assistance, by 2018 this number had over doubled to almost 200 million, by 2022, this figure had doubled again to over 406 million.¹



The COVID-19 pandemic afflicted hundreds of millions of people and significantly contributed to the jump in numbers as well as underscored the dearth of a central international mechanism for coordinating relief or developing a vaccine. It also casts light on a peculiar form of emergency that has a relatively sudden worldwide span, a global shock. Furthermore, once global cooperation against COVID-19 launched, its results were skewed, with rich countries benefiting far more than poor ones. This experience has precipitated a long-brewing pall that looms over the United Nations (UN), the international organization charged with addressing global public goods through multilateral cooperation. With the world riddled with a wide range of growing crises—from wars to pandemics; from human rights under siege to burgeoning inequality; from nationalism to xenophobia and racism—increasingly there is seemingly resentment toward the UN as representative of an unjust world order that favors the powerful at the very juncture when its premise of multilateralism is needed more than ever. As illustrated by *A Breakthrough for the Planet* released in 2022 by the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, demands for international law and a rule-based order that is responsive to contemporary needs are ubiquitous, invoking values that have come to spotlight frustrations, such as equity, inclusivity, accountability, responsibility, and resilience.²

Reforming the UN to be more principled and more effective is nothing new. During the 1990s, the UN championed the norm of “human security,” pushing the consideration of aspects beyond exclusively military matters and embracing public health and other key elements in building peace.³ Over the past twenty-five years, notably starting in 2000 with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and in 2015 the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the conversation around the development agenda was refined to better tackle inequality, foster human rights, and cement peace. Reflecting on the current background of disasters and a recognition that the existing architecture is deficient, in September 2021, UN Secretary-General António Guterres put forward *Our Common Agenda* (OCA), a series of proposals to re-tool the UN to meet the challenges of today, and which in September 2022 received support from the UN General Assembly for consideration.⁴ One proposal focuses on “complex global shocks”—sudden catastrophes that have wide ranging impacts and require measures beyond the capacities of states—and advocates for the establishment of “the Emergency Platform” (EP) as a new vehicle to automatically convene to coordinate multisectoral responses.

In September 2024, the UN will hold the *Summit of the Future* where Guterres hopes Member States will affirm commitments to an array of new initiatives through the formal signing of a Pact for the Future, including on the EP.⁵ To get to that, there have been and are negotiations, with drafts of the *Pact* reflecting how the EP idea is to be fleshed out. On January 26, 2024, the Zero Draft was released and spurred negotiations until April. On May 14, “Rev 1” was released by Germany and Namibia, the Co-facilitators of the *Summit*, where emergency platforms were Action 49. July 17th’s “Rev2” listed emergency platforms as Action 55, and the most recent draft, “Rev 3” released on August 27 has the proposal as Action 57.

This memo analyzes the evolving concept and features of emergency platforms, why it is possible, what will account for its success and failures, and why it matters. It makes four arguments: First, the need for humanitarian assistance has created political momentum for the development of emergency platforms. Some type of coordination mechanism will be agreed to. Second, the emerging political compromise in defining emergency platforms has produced a narrow or modest blueprint for the type of crises the initiative will respond to. The new mechanism is an advance but may be selectively deployed. Third, success of emergency platforms will be contingent upon political will to support the Secretary-General-led triggering and the UN system broadly as well as the financial resources to meet response commitments. Regardless of the design of emergency platforms, external factors, particularly funding gaps and a perception that the initiative is piecemeal, will determine its impact. Fourth, emergency platforms should be monitored and evaluated to foster transparency and accountability. There is work to be done in developing a means for reviewing the performance of emergency platforms.

II. Rationale and Proposal:

How to Address Complex Global Shocks

The notion of the Emergency Platform emerged in reaction to the paltry performance of global institutions to respond to worldwide events that undermine humanitarian conditions and progress on development. The EP is a coordination and coherence tool to equitably mitigate the global humanitarian ripple of a vast crisis, it does not have the aim, authority, or ability to solve the underlying drivers or root causes of the crisis. It is to address a very specific type of emergency in terms of scale and severity, a “complex global shock.”

Three recent episodes were formative in defining “complex global shock.”

- ▶ The Global Financial Crisis (2008–2009)
- ▶ COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022)
- ▶ Food security from war against Ukraine (2022–)

Aside from the enormous number of people harmed and at risk, all three of these crises possess two distinctive attributes: First, the extensive scope of their impacts is rooted in interdependence. Global connections enable a crisis in one country or region to metastasize, spreading first- and second-order harms far beyond the source. Second, the most vulnerable populations are hit hardest; those who have the fewest capacities to cope with a crisis bear the highest costs. This is particularly evident in setbacks of least developed countries to meeting the SDGs seen in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.⁶

Significant armed conflicts with sizable humanitarian impacts have also brought attention to deficiencies in global responses both in terms of inadequate emergency relief and efforts to end the wars. In Sudan, 25 million are in need, and 11 million internally displaced (the world’s largest IDP population). In Myanmar, 18.6 million are in need. In Yemen, 18.2 million. And in Gaza, over 2 million. However, while these are horrendous situations—in many instances war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law have been committed—their impacts may be more territorially confined and thereby may not constitute “complex global shocks.” They are nonetheless an important backdrop in discussions on reforming the international humanitarian system and the UN.

Moreover, in instances where complex global shocks do occur, global counters have far too often been muddled, negligible, diffuse, and disproportionate. In terms of authority, within the UN system there may be multiple agencies spanning different sectors, each with jurisdiction and a role to play, but without effective overarching coordination and coherence among them. The SDGs may have fostered integrating work on development across the Organization, but none of the SDGs refers to humanitarian action. Furthermore, crises recognized as threats to international peace and security that are brought to the UN Security Council also may not elicit a response as they may fall victim to the political interests of a veto wielded by one of the Permanent Five members (China, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and the United States). As to capacities, there are frequently too few resources available to address massive emergencies—for example, there are regularly shortfalls in funding for humanitarian aid.⁷ On top of that,

even in cases where the resources have been mustered, they are delivered far too slowly and unevenly.⁸ The upshot is that organizational fragmentation, political deadlocks, a dearth of funding, and unequal distribution have hampered or distorted responses and subverted the UN.

The intrinsic problem of complex global shocks is not that the world does not know about their potential to inflict damage or is incapable of predicting them, it is in the speed and effectiveness of response. Indeed, there are instruments that can anticipate shocks, such as the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction's Sendai Framework for Disaster Reduction.⁹ And, another proposal within *Our Common Agenda* suggests enhancing capacities through the establishment of a *Strategic Foresight and Global Risk Report* as a component of a Futures Laboratory.¹⁰ Alongside forecasting capabilities, it is also crucial to build out response mechanisms in the event disasters are not averted. For example, the COVAX facility formed in response to COVID-19 was a multistakeholder effort to develop and distribute vaccines.¹¹ Similarly, the April 2022 Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy, and Finance assembled by the Secretary-General coordinated a response to the cost-of-living crisis.

Reflecting on previous disasters, the Emergency Platform would be attuned to responding to a variety of potential shocks: climate and environmental events; pandemics; biological agents; upheavals in global flows of peoples, goods, and finance; disruptions in cyberspace and digital connectivity; disruptive outer space events; and destabilizing “black swan” (i.e., unprecedented) occurrences. When risks have not been averted and dangerous shocks materialize, the proposed Emergency Platform would respond to help manage the impacts of risks.

BOX 1: EMERGENCY PLATFORM PROPOSAL IN OUR COMMON AGENDA

Para 101: ...establish an Emergency Platform to respond to complex global crises. The platform would not be a new permanent or standing body or institution. It would be triggered automatically in crises of sufficient scale and magnitude, regardless of the type or nature of the crisis involved. Once activated, it would 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. The terms of reference would set out the modalities and criteria for the activation of the platform, including the scale and scope of the crisis; funding and financing; the identification of relevant actors who would form part of it; the support that it would be expected to provide; and the criteria for its deactivation. Other key components could include mechanisms for surge capacity; focal points and protocols to promote interoperability with existing crisis-specific response arrangements; regular exercises to test efficacy and identify and fill gaps; and the identification of a set of tools to make the international system crisis-ready. The platform would allow the convening role of the Secretary-General to be maximized in the face of crises with global reach.

Source: United Nations. 2021. *Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General*. Sep. 10. New York, NY. Para 101.

As can be seen from the phrasing of the proposal in *Our Common Agenda* (see Box 1), the Emergency Platform is not a standing body, it is a set of protocols that feature the convening role of the Secretary-General; it is to galvanize action across and beyond the UN system. The core principles that permeate the EP are, first, to be flexible and agile. Given a variety in the kinds of shocks, the EP would tailor the capacities deployed, drawing as necessary on humanitarian, development and peace and security actors and resources. Second, to devise collective responses that foreground equity and solidarity through an inclusive and interdisciplinary process. The EP would be both multi-sectoral and multistakeholder driven, to incorporate governments, international and non-governmental organizations, civil society, and the private sector as partners. Third, to secure concrete commitments. By making pledges transparent, the EP would advance donor accountability. Fourth, to be additive, not a replacement. The EP would align with existing mechanisms, not supplant them.

The convening role of the Emergency Platform is its main contribution. The decision-making power of when to stand up the EP in response to a complex global shock resides with the Secretary-General but it is made in consultation with several other key actors:

- ▶ The President of the UN General Assembly
- ▶ The President of the UN Security Council
- ▶ Relevant national authorities and regional organizations
- ▶ Relevant UN entities, international financial institutions, and multilateral institutions

Deliberations over launching the EP will not hinge on quantitative metrics but rather be geared toward a qualitative analysis of the situation. Four factors will be considered in evaluating a crisis as a “complex global shock”:

- ▶ *Severity of a crisis*: Primary and secondary impacts in terms of people affected, economic toll, and environmental costs.
- ▶ *Reach of a crisis*: Numbers of people, countries, and regions damaged.
- ▶ *Complexity of a crisis*: Multidimensional and multisectoral dimensions.
- ▶ *Existing mechanism adequacy*: Sufficiency of sector-specific tools.

If triggered, the EP would then initiate coordination among UN bodies and other contributing actors. Once activated, it organizes an inclusive process to engage and deliver aid—Box 2 enumerates the steps in the process.

BOX 2: EMERGENCY PLATFORM: PROCESS FOR RESPONDING TO COMPLEX GLOBAL SHOCKS

- ▶ *Assessment*: Collecting information on the scale, reach, complexity, and existing mechanisms.
- ▶ *Consultation*: Secretary-General receives inputs from President of the General Assembly, President of Security Council, relevant national or regional authorities, and relevant multilateral entities.
- ▶ *Activation*: After convening, a task team of technical experts is assembled.
- ▶ *Engagement*: Multisectoral network of Member States, UN system, international financial institutions, civil society, and the private sector.
- ▶ *Delivery*: High-level political leadership informed by equity and solidarity deploys a coherent, networked multilateral response in providing data, analysis, and accountability.

Source: United Nations Secretary-General. 2023. [“Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 2: Strengthening the International Response to Complex Global Shocks—An Emergency Platform.”](#) March. 21.

The Emergency Platform is innovative in two ways. First, it establishes a procedure for predictable, rapid responses by giving the Secretary-General standing authority to establish the EP. Having a pathway for timely coordination is efficient and builds confidence in UN leadership. Second, the comprehensive scope of actors integrated into the work of the EP broadens decision-making and potentially increases available resources. The assembled network will boost coherence and effectiveness, and its greater inclusivity will strengthen equity and solidarity.

Most Member States value the idea of the EP and have backed exploring development, although some have expressed reservations and sought greater clarity.¹² The basis for an emerging political consensus supporting the EP is an acknowledgement that risks of a shock are growing, that the most vulnerable are harmed, existing mechanisms are insubstantial, and that a new international tool that does not replicate or infringe upon current UN organs and programs is necessary.

III. Controversies and Criticisms: Debates on Responding to Complex Global Shocks

The need to grapple with complex global shocks is undisputed, nevertheless the proposal for the Emergency Platform has provoked debates and discussion. Some criticisms are aimed at seeking greater clarity about, or changing, specific facets; others are intrinsic indictments of the premise of the EP, while others are more general about the UN. This section identifies and explains major frictions and specific pronouncements. It should be observed that there has been widespread support for the EP and that more focus has been placed on what the EP would do and how rather than absolute opposition. The list below summarizes the array of critiques and concerns from multiple perspectives, but note that in some instances they are contradictory.

Definition and Indicators

The delineation of “complex global shock” and the consultative process on convening only serves the Global North.

What is a “complex global shock” and what is measured to determine its occurrence? The phrase is intended to distinguish a certain type of emergency from other crises. The SG has denoted, “a complex global shock can be broadly understood as an event with severely disruptive consequences for a significant proportion of the global population that leads to second impacts across multiple sectors.”¹³ In essence, it is differentiating in terms of magnitude and speed of onset of consequences as well as the nature of actors and resources needed to address them. The prototypical examples cited are COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022) and the global cost of living crisis (2022-). The debate on the definition centers on how its narrow understanding of crises deemed worthy of responding to reiterates inequalities because to reach the designated threshold is only possible when rich states are harmed. This is illustrated by the debt crisis or recent soaring inflation, which have wrought extensive and disproportionate damage in the Global South relative to effects in donor countries where they originated. In other words, some, especially G77 states and China, are likely to contend that “complex global shock” is essentially a code for great power interests, and that this template necessitates assembling global resources only in the service of the influential.

Data inputs must be sensitive to threats to impacted populations.

Relatedly indicators—measures to trigger action—are controversial. The SG has intentionally not put forward specific quantitative criteria arguing that such data can be misleading and problematic. As such, the SG has called for a consultative procedure with a qualitative framing. By contrast, some espouse the need for set metrics as a tripwire to avoid politicizing the process. Furthermore, Global South states have expressed worry over meaningful participation in establishing indicators and the process presented in the EP proposal. Terms like “civil society,” “multistakeholder participation,” and “networked multilateralism” are perceived by some as catering to organizations and businesses that have ties to the Global North. Other critiques point to the need for focused indicators that can discern vulnerabilities of some populations that do not register in aggregate national data.

Activation and Authority

The Emergency Platform must respect sovereignty.

Aside from the technical classification of a “complex global shock,” the judgment to activate the Emergency Platform is viewed by many as a political one. The EP proposal establishes the Secretary-General as ultimately having decision-making power. Certain Global South countries have strongly underscored that the EP must follow the UN Charter, especially prohibitions against violating sovereignty or intervening in the internal affairs of Member States. That is to say, the interests of states that host afflicted populations must be respected.

The Emergency Platform is redundant with existing coordination.

In discussion on this proposal, some observers note that operational agencies carry out and coordinate action and, therefore, rather than being additive, the Emergency Platform needlessly duplicates existing architecture. The EP does not change the division of labor among UN bodies, it adds yet another administrative and political layer on the organizational chart.

The Emergency Platform is unnecessary as the Secretary-General already has authority to respond to complex global shocks, and if the current set up does not permit this, it will require a Charter amendment.

There are also worries as to how the EP structures the role of the SG. On the one hand, some argue that the EP is unnecessary as the SG already possesses this authority—the visibility of the SG’s bully pulpit and role of the position in the United Nations.¹⁴ This view maintains that the EP would dilute the power of the SG and add additional bureaucratic hurdles for what the SG is already charged to do.

The Emergency Platform must have sunset provisions.

To prevent concern over the dangers of a “permanent emergency” that could be seen as an endless commitment and diversion from other urgent shocks, the Emergency Platform must have a clear process for deactivation. This should include an “exit strategy” that does not create additional shocks by the sudden withdrawal of resources as well as a plan for transitioning to other UN bodies to spearhead efforts.

Responses and Resources

Effective, acceptable responses are not clear for many kinds of shocks, there is a need for various types of platforms (not a single Emergency Platform).

Different kinds of shocks create different sets of needs and therefore demand different sorts of responses. In discussion on the proposal, critics have declared that no single instrument is sufficiently versatile to address any shock, and that a different platform should be uniquely crafted. Some shocks may be rooted in economic crises, some may require humanitarian assistance; others may require force to protect vulnerable populations in addition to humanitarian assistance. The argument is that one Emergency Platform cannot be comprehensive or sufficiently “flexible” and “agile” to address every kind of shock.

The Emergency Platform must avoid “mission creep.”

Complex global shocks often have intricate causality and extensive symptoms, both of which may be far beyond the goal of addressing the immediate impacts as well as the capacities available. In the search for complete solutions, the Emergency Platform must not stray into the jurisdiction of other UN bodies or evolve expansive mandates and functions.

Without additional funding, the Emergency Platform will not make a difference.

The Emergency Platform is merely a convening process, it does not call for additional funding, and thus will not fundamentally amplify its capacity to confront complex global shocks. This criticism suggests that the EP is more of a political public relations exercise than a substantial commitment to provide resources to those impacted by shocks.

Resource commitments to the Emergency Platform should reflect responsibilities for shocks.

Some G77 countries assert that an actor or actors that cause a complex global shock should provide resources to manage the impacts. From armed conflicts to more subtle drivers, such as carbon emissions, drivers should be factored into the size of resource contributions. Without an incentive structure that encourages responsible behavior, actors will have little impetus to refrain from behavior that produces shocks.

Evaluation and Accountability

The Emergency Platform must provide after action reports to the General Assembly.

Previous criticisms of the humanitarian system have argued that it is manipulated to aid allies rather than deployed equitably. Upon completion of responding to a complex global shock, the Emergency Platform must brief the General Assembly. A thorough review of the EP's work is necessary to learn lessons and establish transparency.

The Emergency Platform needs clear accountability procedures.

The reliance on multi-sectoral actors creates uncertain lines of accountability. Member States and UN bodies are bound by international law, including international humanitarian law, but the formal liability of private sector or civil society actors is not clear. Given concerns over multistakeholder processes that potentially create pockets of impunity, a code of conduct for, along with legal commitments by, participating parties is necessary.

Management and Mitigation

The Emergency Platform is a piecemeal approach to risk.

Fundamentally, the Emergency Platform is limited in its goals, it coordinates responses to the repercussions of risks manifesting into dangers, but it does not attend to the risk itself. The EP manages

and mitigates consequences, it does not solve the root causes of suffering. The modest ambition of the EP is critiqued for merely sustaining a world that accepts risk, and which may mollify political pressures to change dynamics that create risk.

Communication and Narrative

The Emergency Platform must have a strategic communication element that foregrounds people, not politics.

A popular narrative of the United Nations is that the Organization is steeped in politics, and especially is under the influence of great powers. The Emergency Platform must have a communication strategy that “humanitarianizes” its work, it must show that its net effect is to bolster human security. The humanitarian impacts of complex global shocks and of the EP itself must be documented and disseminated. The Secretary-General must have a visible role in signaling distinctive challenges and extraordinary efforts of specific shocks—that the invocation of the EP is an exceptional step that can only be orchestrated by the UN and that it achieves humanitarian outcomes.

IV. Context and Compromise: Shifting Language and Refining Parameters of Complex Global Shock Responses

With *Our Common Agenda* laying the groundwork for discussions of the Emergency Platform, starting in 2023 advocacy and negotiations began to develop the concept and consider the substance of an international agreement to realize it. Discussions of the Emergency Platform, like other UN reform proposals being considered for the Pact for the Future, have reached a fevered pitch in 2024 with the release of a series of drafts of the agreement. The shifting language regarding the Emergency Platform is refining the parameters under which it will operate, signifying where points of consensus are emerging.

In January, the Zero Draft was released. In paragraphs 131-133 an “Emergency Platform” is devised as responding to global shocks with a coherent multidimensional response but not a standing institution or body, and that the “Platform” will respect sovereignty and be primarily complementary to existing architecture (see Box 3).

BOX 3: THE EMERGENCY PLATFORM PROPOSAL—ZERO DRAFT

[5.7 Identifying and addressing complex global shocks]

131. We commit to improving the international response to complex global shocks of significant scale and severity, guided by the principles of equity, solidarity and partnership.

132. We therefore encourage the Secretary-General to develop a set of protocols and convene and operationalize an Emergency Platform in the event of such a shock that has an impact on multiple regions of the world and requires a coherent, coordinated and multidimensional response. We note that an Emergency Platform would not be a standing institution or body.

133. We emphasize that the decision to convene an Emergency Platform in response to a complex global shock and the work of an Emergency Platform must fully respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of States. We also emphasize that the decision to convene an Emergency Platform would support and complement the response of United Nations principal organs mandated to respond to crises, and that the convening of an Emergency Platform would not affect the mandated role of any intergovernmental body.

Source: United Nations. 2024. [*Pact for the Future: Zero Draft*](#). January 26.

In May, Revision 1 was released, under the heading Action 49 was a proposal for “emergency platforms.” The text includes some subtle but important distinctions. First, note the lower case and plural designation. This is to accentuate that these would not be formal standing bodies, and the plural indicates that a new platform would be created for each crisis and would not be part of a singular entity. This allows flexibility in formulation and operationalization of platforms—“respond to a range of different complex global shocks.” It may also lend itself to selectivity, however, another important contribution is that the proposal roots development of platforms within the principles of “equity, solidarity, and partnership.” The commitment to this agenda is also seen in this draft in that it defines “complex global shock” as having both “consequences for a significant proportion of the global population” and a “disproportionate impact on the poorest and most vulnerable.” Lastly, note that like the Zero Draft, the Revision 1 stresses the importance of complementing UN organs, but unlike the Zero Draft, Revision 1 does not specify sovereignty, though it does reference respecting the Charter’s purposes and principles (see Box 4).

BOX 4: EMERGENCY PLATFORMS PROPOSAL—REV. 1

Action 49. We will strengthen the international response to complex global shocks.

60. We recognize the need for a more coherent, coordinated and multidimensional international response to complex global shocks. Complex global shocks are events that have severely disruptive and adverse consequences for a significant proportion of the global population, and that lead to impacts across multiple sectors, requiring a multidimensional and multistakeholder response. They have a disproportionate impact on the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world and usually have disastrous consequences for sustainable development and prosperity. The principles of equity, solidarity and partnership will guide our future responses to complex global shocks, with full respect to the Charter, including its purposes and principles. We commit to uphold the Secretary-General's role to, *inter alia*, convene Member States, coordinate the whole multilateral system, and engage with relevant stakeholders in response to crises. We request the Secretary-General to:

- (a) Convene and operationalize emergency platforms in response to future complex global shocks.
- (b) Develop protocols for convening and operationalizing emergency platforms, recognizing the need for flexible approaches to respond to a range of different complex global shocks, in consultation with Member States.
- (c) Ensure that an emergency platform would not be a standing institution or entity and would be convened for a finite period.
- (d) Ensure that the convening of an emergency platform supports and complements the response of United Nations' principal organs and specialized agencies mandated to respond to crises, and that it should not affect the mandated role of any intergovernmental body or duplicate ongoing intergovernmental processes.

Source: United Nations. 2024. [*Revision 1 of the Pact for the Future*](#). May 14.

On July 17, Revision 2 was published, including the proposal for emergency platforms as Action 55, and saw several new pieces of language (see Box 5). First, in the first sentence of paragraph 79 it emphasizes the “central role of the United Nations,” identifying the unique position of the Organization to respond to complex global shocks. Second, in the fourth sentence, in addition to the principles of “equity, solidarity, and partnership,” are “national ownership and consent” as a way of making explicit that emergency platforms would not be imposed—another formula for restating respect for sovereignty. Similarly, in the same sentence, full respect is given not only to the Charter but also now references “international law,” which is the Global South's preferred verbiage and principle over the more Western promoted “rules-based order.” Third, Revision 2 states directly that emergency platforms would not impede the role of the Security Council. However, the main revision is to consolidate the language on set up and take down of emergency platforms into provision (a), and again stating that they are “finite” entities.

BOX 5: EMERGENCY PLATFORMS PROPOSAL—REV. 2

Action 55. We will strengthen the international response to complex global shocks.

79. We recognize the need for a more coherent, cooperative, coordinated and multidimensional international response to complex global shocks and the central role of the United Nations in this regard. Complex global shocks are events that have severely disruptive and adverse consequences for a significant proportion of countries and the global population, and that lead to impacts across multiple sectors, requiring a multidimensional multistakeholder, and whole-of-society response. They have a disproportionate impact on the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world and usually have disastrous consequences for sustainable development and prosperity. The principles of national ownership and consent, equity, solidarity and partnership will guide our future responses to complex global shocks, with full respect for international law and the Charter, including its purposes and principles, and existing mandates for United Nations intergovernmental bodies and processes, United Nations' system entities, and specialized agencies. We will uphold the Secretary-General's role to, inter alia, convene Member States, coordinate the whole multilateral system, and engage with relevant stakeholders in response to crises. We request the Secretary-General to:

- (a) Develop, in consultation with Member States, protocols for convening and operationalizing emergency platforms based on flexible approaches to respond to a range of different complex global shocks, including criteria for triggering and phasing out emergency platforms, ensuring that emergency platforms are convened for a finite period and will not be a standing institution or entity.
- (b) Ensure that the convening of emergency platforms supports and complements the response of United Nations' principal organs, relevant United Nations entities and specialized agencies mandated to respond to crises, and that it will not affect or interfere with the mandated role of any United Nations' system entities, specialized agencies, intergovernmental body or duplicate ongoing intergovernmental processes, including the mandated role of the Security Council in the maintenance of international peace and security.

Source: United Nations. 2024. *Revision 2 of the Pact for the Future*. July 17.

On August 27, Rev 3 was released, and the emergency platforms proposal, now rechristened as Action 57, has a few significant changes in phraseology and show the state and direction for consensus. First, in reaction to previous expressed concerns as to defining the conditions under which emergency platforms would be organized, Rev 3 specifies that armed conflicts do not necessarily automatically qualify as “complex global shocks.” The language acknowledges the potential for this but clearly indicates that such situations will not inevitably result in the formation of an emergency platform. Second, the coordination angle has some additional stress though Rev 3 softens the role of the Secretary-General. A few new passages reference more bodies and actors that engage in coordination and stipulate that emergency platforms will not influence or impact them. Moreover, in a spot where in Rev 2 it called for the Secretary-

General to “coordinate the whole...” in Rev 3 it is formulated as “promote the coordination of the whole,” a slight shift that suggests supporting efforts of emergency platforms more than leading them. Lastly, in Rev 2 one of the specific asks was for the Secretary-General to: “Develop, in consultation with Member States, protocols....” By contrast, Rev 3 implies that the protocols have been developed, as this passage now reads: “Present for the consideration of Member States protocols...”

BOX 6: EMERGENCY PLATFORMS PROPOSAL—REV 3

Action 57. We will strengthen the international response to complex global shocks.

85. We recognize the need for a more coherent, cooperative, coordinated and multidimensional international response to complex global shocks and the central role of the United Nations in this regard. Complex global shocks are events that have severely disruptive and adverse consequences for a significant proportion of countries and the global population, and that lead to impacts across multiple sectors, requiring a multidimensional multistakeholder, and whole-of-government, whole-of-society response. Complex global shocks have a disproportionate impact on the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world and usually have disastrous consequences for sustainable development and prosperity. An armed conflict does not by itself constitute a complex global shock, but conflict could, in some cases, lead to impacts across multiple sectors. The principles of national ownership and consent, equity, solidarity and cooperation will guide our future responses to complex global shocks, with full respect for international law, including the Charter and its purposes and principles, and existing mandates for United Nations intergovernmental bodies and processes, United Nations’ system entities, and specialized agencies. We will uphold the Secretary-General’s role to, inter alia, convene Member States, promote the coordination of the whole multilateral system, and engage with relevant stakeholders in response to crises. We request the Secretary-General to:

- (a) Present for the consideration of Member States protocols for convening and operationalizing emergency platforms based on flexible approaches to respond to a range of different complex global shocks, including criteria for triggering and phasing out emergency platforms, ensuring that emergency platforms are convened for a finite period and will not be a standing institution or entity.
- (b) Ensure that the convening of emergency platforms supports and complements the response of United Nations’ principal organs, relevant United Nations entities, United Nations-coordination entities and mechanisms, and specialized agencies mandated to respond to emergencies, and that it will not affect or interfere with the mandated role of any United Nations’ system entities, coordination entities, mechanisms or specialized agencies, intergovernmental body or duplicate ongoing intergovernmental processes, including the mandated role of the Security Council in the maintenance of international peace and security and with full respect for the United Nations’ mandated coordination role in response to humanitarian emergencies.

Source: United Nations. 2024. [Revision 3 of the Pact for the Future](#). August 27.

The changes in text over the span of these four drafts show efforts to address the continued concern that the construction of emergency platforms could be selective and subject to manipulation—i.e., only being deployed when the wealthy, powerful states wanted or that it would have an interventionary quality. The current language reflects compromises that appeal to various stakeholders. Countries that want no real change, particularly with regards to commitments, see that the proposal does not require additional resources or a new agency. Countries with fears about sovereignty see provisions that any platform would be in consultation with Member States, including where emergency platforms would deploy. UN agencies see language about platforms as complements but as not impacting their work. The private sector sees a vehicle for it to more formally collaborate with the UN. In sum the current draft creates a pathway for developing emergency platforms for complex global shocks and thus bringing in new stakeholders and capacities. However, while Revision 2 carves out greater authority for the Secretary-General to coordinate multidimensional, multisectoral responses it does not set specific responses, nor does it guarantee or provide additional resources. But in Rev 3 the role of Secretary-General is slightly downgraded in promoting coordination rather than directly coordinating, and in this version emergency platforms are deferential to other coordinating bodies and mechanisms.

V. Strategy and Outlook: The Politics of Emergency Platforms

The proposal for emergency platforms does not appear in a vacuum, the political context has serious consequences for its likelihood to be implemented and feasibility to operate, but despite that there are opportunities to build out an architecture that advances human security. This section assesses the atmosphere in which deliberations over emergency platforms are taking place, identifying three core challenges, and considering strategies to forge consensus and establish emergency panels.

Challenges

The first challenge is the authority of triggering and sunseting emergency platforms. In convening emergency panels, the Secretary-General will have this power. Beyond marshaling the resources of the UN system, the support of Member States and the private sector will be essential in realizing emergency platforms. Will the central role of the UN in this area be recognized and will the Secretary-General be empowered to coordinate multidimensional, multisectoral humanitarian action? Follow up to the Pact for the Future will need to explore criteria used by the Secretary-General to determine a “complex global shock” and the emergency platform response.

A second related challenge is resources. What is promised is not adequate, and what is actually delivered is substantially less. There have been and remain significant funding gaps in UN-coordinated humanitarian work. Data from the past decade show that routinely between 35-45 percent of funding requirements are unmet.¹⁵

Despite funding to appeals rising by 40% in 2022 and coverage increasing, the rapid growth in requirements meant the funding shortfall by volume was larger than ever

Funding and unmet requirements, UN-coordinated appeals, 2013–2023



Source: Development Initiatives. 2023. [Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023](#). 30.

Furthermore, although the emergency platform references national authorities and ownership, it does not specifically address issues of localization. The 2016 promise at the World Humanitarian Summit that 25 percent of humanitarian aid would be channeled through local and national actors by 2020 was never met. In fact, in recent years it peaked at 4.5 percent of aid flows and has steadily declined to less than half of that.¹⁶

Funding to local and national actors as a share of total humanitarian assistance remained very small in 2022
Proportion and total volumes of direct and indirect funding to local and national actors, 2017–2022



Source: Development Initiatives based on UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking Service (FTS) and UN country based pooled funds (CBPFs).

Notes: Local and national actors include all local, national or local/national NGOs, determined by internal organisation coding. Southern international NGOs, which receive funding to operate within the country they are headquartered in, are included as national actors. Red Cross Red Crescent (RCRC) national societies that received international humanitarian assistance to respond to domestic crises are included in local and national actors. Similarly, international funding to national governments is considered as funding to national actors only when contributing to the domestic crisis response. Funding is shown only for flows that reported with information on the recipient organisation. Data is in constant 2021 prices.

Source: Development Initiatives. 2023. *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023*. 73.

If instituting emergency platforms is merely about lines on the organizational chart but there are no resources or they are configured to maintain power imbalances, change will not be meaningful. Even a more effective, responsive, inclusive coordinating mechanism will be hampered by inadequate financing. Will governments and the private sector provide resources to emergency platforms? However, with a new international commitment and the multistakeholder dimension to emergency platforms creates a potential opportunity to receive more funds from donors and access new ones.

The third challenge regards the multilateral environment—the political space in which international agreements and cooperation are achieved. This is a difficult historical moment; cascading crises have set the world on edge. The COVID-19 pandemic has not fully abated and its effects are still felt. The resulting economic crisis spurred inflation and debt, wiping out years of development gains. Russia's invasion of Ukraine escalated tensions between great powers and have also been a factor in rising food

insecurity. Several regional conflicts have widened and worsened. Gaza is experiencing genocide and the humanitarian reverberations across the Middle East are growing. A spate of weather-related disasters, generating both floods and droughts, have underscored the worsening climate crisis. At the same time as these economic, ecological, and military fueled disasters have unfolded, there is an international political catastrophe in the confidence people around the world have in the United Nations—an inability to address Gaza, Ukraine, and climate change illustrate fractures in international cooperation and have rattled confidence in the Organization.

What began as a crisis of globalization has yielded a crisis for global institutions. However, it should be noted that despite serious reservations in the performance of international organizations, there is durable support for globalism; most critiques target the ineffectiveness and inefficiency of bureaucracy and leadership, not the values of cooperation and solidarity.¹⁷ Cutting across the divides that haunt the United Nations—great powers, race and colonialism, North-South, governments vs. civil society and private sector, intergenerational—the underlying demand is for inclusive, responsible governance and the politics of establishing emergency platforms should be viewed against that backdrop. The Summit for the Future will present a remarkable package of reforms, in addition to the Pact for the Future, the *Declaration on Future Generations* and the *Global Digital Compact* will also be under consideration. The success of emergency platforms will also hinge on the success of these other reforms in addressing risks, building peaceful states, and promoting sustainable development that curtails the number of people vulnerable to complex global shocks and in affirming the central role of the UN in providing responses.

What's Next?

The Pact for the Future will be signed at the Summit of the Future in September 2024. There is support from many states with Western and Northern European countries having been the most vocal. Other states from around the world have also indicated support for the idea while positing reservations and hope for refinements. The strongest critics have primarily been the G77 countries and China, but none seem to have been entirely dismissive. Shifts in language for the emergency platforms have assuaged concerns. To secure a coalition to realize emergency platforms, varied framings and reasoning appeal to different sorts of constituencies.

Although the emergency platforms proposal does not call for new funding, it will require that existing funding streams to operational UN agencies and international financial institutions continue, and eventually additional resources may be required, and therefore buy-in from donors is vital. The merits of emergency platforms that should be stressed to donors are that containing shocks will decrease the flow of refugees and migrants from affected countries, and it will build their credibility. Funding emergency platforms is not aid; it is an investment in a just world order.

For emergency platforms to play a role in assisting those suffering from risks and threats, support from those hosting the most vulnerable populations is paramount. While EPs are modest tools—they are designed to address a very specific magnitude of malady that presently has no multidisciplinary, multisectoral response mechanism—it is better than having none and is a means to attract emergency aid. Furthermore, although emergency platforms do not alter systemic power imbalances in the UN system, they bring more and new voices to the table in making decisions about responding to risk.

There is real frustration at what the UN has done and, also, at what it has not done to address disasters of all kinds. Humanitarian assistance is seen as essential for survival but in isolation from halting atrocities and other calamities, it is viewed as insufficient. That being said, there is political consensus to proceed with emergency aid in response to complex global shocks. Emergency platforms do not promise to be a panacea, it would be but one implement in a larger UN toolkit. Present opposition to emergency platforms—whether premised on the view that proposed changes are inherently cosmetic or not wanting to change the status quo—faces an altered political terrain: growing recognition of interdependency coupled with inadequate inclusivity which taken together demands a new means of humanitarian governance. Emergency platforms are necessary infrastructure for coordinated, coherent and timely responses to shock and, moreover, provide political triage to the UN as an organization under suspicion in a world in which shocks will increase. Despite some of the usual concerns over sovereignty and resources and a withered basis for cooperation amid conflicts and competition, the perfect will not be the enemy of progress: The politics of the moment nonetheless suggest that the UN is seen as an imperfect but indispensable vessel, a uniquely positioned actor, and emergency platforms fill a lacuna in the global space.

The Pact for the Future's establishment of the emergency platform protocols will require immediate follow up. The Secretary-General will need to begin organizing informational networks to evaluate situations that could produce complex global shocks. Here there is work to do in pursuing another initiative suggested in *Our Common Agenda*, a *Strategic Foresight and Global Risk Report*—the only sort of reference to this capacity is briefly listed most recently in Revision 3, paragraph 60, with a mention of strengthening “futures thinking and foresight.” Additionally, priming the pump to attract the resources necessary to prepare for and then respond to a complex global shock should be a point of emphasis—encouraging donors to meet their commitments. Lastly, to promote accountability, it will be necessary to develop a review process of operations and donor commitments to measure its performance, contextualize its impact, and learn lessons and best practices.

Emergency platforms fill a need for automatic and rapid responses to a new form of worldwide vulnerability and threats, a complex global shock. Giving the Secretary-General the authority to stand up emergency platforms and leveraging capacities beyond the UN is a vital opportunity to renew humanitarian architecture, cultivate authentic multistakeholder engagement, utilize resources more efficiently, and save millions of people, but it will require accepting its limited ambition and reforming the UN to spearhead multistakeholder, multisectoral responses to complex global shocks.

Endnotes

- ¹ Development Initiatives. 2023. *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023*. 42.
- ² High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism. 2022. *A Breakthrough People and Planet*.
- ³ Ponzio, R., Yusuf, N. and Larik, J. 2024. *Global Governance Innovation Report 2024: Advancing Human Security through a New Global Economic Governance Architecture*. June. The Stimson Center. 11-14.14.
- ⁴ United Nations. 2021. *Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General*. Sep. 10. New York, NY; United Nations. General Assembly. 2022. *Modalities for the Summit of the Future*. A/RES/76/307. September 12.
- ⁵ The Summit of the Future is scheduled for September 23-24, 2024: <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda/summit-of-the-future>. Last visited Aug. 20, 2024.
- ⁶ Sachs, J. et al. 2021. *Sustainable Development Report 2021: The Decade of Action for the Sustainable Development Goals*. June. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Sachs, J. et al. 2022. *Sustainable Development Report 2022 - From Crisis to Sustainable Development: the SDG as Roadmap to 2030 and Beyond*. June. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ⁷ From 2012-2021, the percentage of unmet humanitarian requirements was invariably over 50 percent, often 60 percent or more. Source: Development Initiatives. 2022. *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2022*. September. 36.
- ⁸ In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, only 2.3 percent of COVAX vaccines were delivered in places where OCHA operates.
- ⁹ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. 2015. *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030*.
- ¹⁰ United Nations. 2021. *Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General*. Sep. 10. New York, NY. Paras. 56 and 100.
- ¹¹ Gavi. “COVAX Facility.” Last visited Aug. 20, 2024.
- ¹² Coalition for the UN We Need. 2022. *C4UN OCA Report: 2022 General Assembly Thematic Sessions – Our Common Agenda & the Summit of the Future*. May; Summit of the Future Information Clearinghouse. 2023. *Bulletin No. 7: Highlights and Key Remarks from the Policy Brief of an Emergency Platform followed by informal consultations with Member States and Stakeholders*. March 16.
- ¹³ United Nations Secretary-General. 2023. “Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 2: Strengthening the International Response to Complex Global Shocks—An Emergency Platform.” March. 4.
- ¹⁴ Many reference the Secretary-General’s authority to convene the UN Security Council under Article 99 of the Charter.
- ¹⁵ Development Initiatives. 2023. *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023*. 30.
- ¹⁶ Development Initiatives. 2023. *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023*. 73.
- ¹⁷ Charney, C. 2023. *Global Governance Survey 2023: Finding Consensus in a Divided World*. June. The Stimson Center.

The Stimson Center promotes international security and shared prosperity through applied research and independent analysis, global engagement, and policy innovation.

STIMSON.ORG

INNOVATIVE IDEAS CHANGING THE WORLD

© Henry L. Stimson Center

STIMSON

