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Is 'Good-Enough' Global Governance Good Enough?

While informal and ad hoc approaches have contributed to global problem-solving, they're not effective at managing the spread of advanced weaponry and other security-related problems, or so argues Thomas Weiss. To deal with these issues, he believes that we still need international institutions 'with teeth'.

By Thomas G. Weiss for ISN

Academics and policy analysts are struggling to understand let alone address international security challenges related to weapons proliferation, climate change, terrorism, pandemics, and financial uncertainties. All manner of trans-boundary problems plague a planet composed of sovereign states that recognize no overriding authority. As a celebrated academic title put it, we have brought the state "back in." Of course, states never left, except in a few imaginations. But the landscape of international relations has changed dramatically with the addition of the G20 and the European Union, myriad nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), transnational corporations (TNCs), and a host of regional organizations, not to mention transnational gangs, terrorist groups and private security providers.

Analysts such as Tufts University's Dan Drezner and the Council on Foreign Relations' Stewart Patrick appear satisfied with the sum of these alternative arrangements and dismiss the universal-membership United Nations as hopeless. All that we can hope for, apparently, is a multilateral sprawl, which constitutes "good-enough global governance."

Alas, that is not and will not be the case without a revitalized United Nations as an integral component of a future world order. We are kidding ourselves to be infatuated with various types of mini-lateralisms, or what the *Human Development Report 2013* calls "collective pluralism."

The value of a functioning Security Council was demonstrated in legitimizing and authorizing action to halt Colonel Gadhafi's murderous designs on Benghazi. The reverse could be said about Syria, namely, that the costs of having a malfunctioning Security Council were evident. But even here, when the politics were right and the need arose for a face-saving way to dispose of Bashir al-Assad's chemical weapons, the universal UN was called upon to authorize and work with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

Whatever a reader's judgment about its current or possible future impact, she or he should keep in mind that global governance is a second- or third-best surrogate for authority and enforcement.

However useful in explaining complex trans-boundary phenomena as well as fledgling international collaboration, it lacks prescriptive power. If global problems require global solutions, we also require strengthened intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), especially the UN system.

Before eyes glaze over at the very thought of endeavoring to make the “reform proof” United Nations fit for purpose, it is worth reflecting upon two puzzling features that distinguish current from earlier thinking about collective responses to transnational problems. The first is the dramatically different perspective of many contemporary international relations specialists. Their predecessors interpreted advances in international organization and law not simply as moves in the right direction and more effective than unilateral efforts and the law of the jungle. They also observed the march of history and foresaw a growing web of IGOs and public international law as helpful steps in a stumbling yet inexorable (and unfinished) journey toward authoritative arrangements for the world.

Paradoxically, during most of the twentieth century when states actually could address or attenuate pressing problems, the idea of overarching authority and even world government at least remained on the fringes of acceptable analyses. Now, when states visibly cannot tackle an ever-growing number of life-threatening menaces, such authority is unimaginable; and world government is so beyond the pale that a proponent would be placed in an asylum. In fact, many observers look askance at and even deride the idea of more muscular intergovernmental organizations.

The second puzzling feature is that earlier conceptual efforts emphasized the state while grudgingly admitting the capabilities of other actors, in particular IGOs. Now that both civil society and market-oriented groups have become prominent fixtures (*vis-à-vis* states) in international society, the United Nations and other IGOs are increasingly seen as part of an antiquated state-centered paradigm. Although the recognition of the comparative advantages of a range of contributors has been helpful, it has also resulted in an immodest and unrealistic ‘standing ovation’ for these non-state actors.

Burgeoning numbers of NGOs and TNCs have resources and energy, to be sure, but why have we gone so overboard in our enthusiasm? In particular, why are more robust IGOs an afterthought, if even a thought at all? How can this be the case in a world so obviously lacking institutional machinery to address the inherent problems of globalization, to provide global public goods, and to address serious security challenges?

We should be clear. Local and national jurisdictions remain crucial for local and national problem-solving. Subsidiarity dictates using the lowest level of problem-solving that works. There is more order, stability, and predictability in international politics than the idea of an ‘anarchic’ international system might lead us to believe.

Yet global problems require global solutions. The current generation of universal-membership IGOs is so meager and so atomized that we need to do more than throw up our collective hands and hope for the best from the growing hordes of norm entrepreneurs, activists crossing borders, epistemic communities, profit-seeking corporations, and transnational social networks.

This is not to put too fine a point on it. Non-state actors can make and have made important and even essential contributions to global problem-solving. But they can do little to safely manage geopolitical competition or control the spread of advanced new weapons – let alone eliminate poverty, fix climate change, ensure macroeconomic stability, agree on international standards, or halt mass atrocities. In fact, polycentric approaches can exacerbate fragmentation and become a distraction because they cannot by themselves fill global governance gaps. While decentralized institutional innovations give the impression of movement in the right direction, increasing the number and diversity of actors could, in fact, be counterproductive.

It is not more voices but what they say that matters. The more-the-merrier is poor policy guidance. Contenting ourselves with good-enough global governance condemns the responses to future security crises to the whims of unpredictable and inconsistent voices.

The downside to date of thinking about good-enough global governance is mindlessly applauding the creation of what amounts to a “Global Tea Party” and downplaying the actual consequences of ad hoc responses. While the private sector can complement the public sector and be essential, it simply cannot do everything better than the public sector. Mini- and multi- lateralisms are helpful developments in many ways, but their limitations should be obvious as well. Without more robust IGOs, especially universal ones, and elements of supranational regulatory power, states and their citizens will not reap the benefits of trade and globalization, discover nonviolent ways to meet their security challenges, or address environmental deterioration.

No one really knows what the future holds. Without a long-term vision, however, we are obliged to accept the contours of our unacceptable world order, including the feeble organizations that constitute the contemporary UN system. Indeed, we require a three-pronged strategy in the decades ahead: the continued evolution and expansion of the formidable amount of practical global governance that already exists; the harnessing of political and economic possibilities opened by the communications revolution that began late in the last century; and the recommitment by states to a fundamental re-vamping and strengthening of the United Nations.

International order has been built and rebuilt on numerous occasions; and yesterday’s institutions all too often are ill-equipped to tackle today’s problems. Will the next generation of multilateral organizations arise as a result of unnecessary and unspeakable tragedies—as the League of Nations or the United Nations arose phoenix-like from the ashes of the twentieth century’s world wars and the Congress of Vienna from the Napoleonic wars? Or could such institutions result from the more deliberate construction of an institutional edifice around more modest functional bases?

Contemplating the former option is not soothing even if history informs us that such tragedies are the customary currency for global institutional reforms. This inveterate optimist is betting on the human capacity for learning and adapting to prevent suffering on a scale that could well dwarf the twentieth century’s catastrophic wars.

The need for intergovernmental organizations with teeth is too often shortchanged in thinking about global problem-solving. Perhaps they have always been too few in number and arrived too late on the scene and with too little punch. But in the second decade of the twenty-first century, addressing our collective-action problems requires, at a minimum, rebuilding or creating more robust IGOs—most clearly in the UN system but at the regional level as well—with wider scope, more resources, and additional authority.

We ignore at our peril a clear message: good-enough global governance is not good enough.

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