

Future of Institutions

DIALOGUE SUMMARY

Title/topic:

Impact hubs

Organizers:

New America

Key takeaways:

This Dialogue explored the prospects for new multi-stakeholder institutions that could strengthen global cooperation, sustainable development, and public problem-solving. The focal point of the discussion was the “impact hub” model – an issue-specific institution that sits at the center of a set of actors working on a particular Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) or global problem. These actors may extend beyond state actors to include subnational governments, civil society organizations, businesses, universities, and other global actors. The impact hub orchestrates, drives, and de-conflicts their collective efforts toward common, clearly measurable goals and outcomes. An impact hub might be an existing international or regional organization, a coalition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), a new secretariat within the United Nations (UN) system, or a public-private partnership.

Discussion of real-world models of impact hub-like institutions elucidated many insights and solutions related to issue areas, structure, participants, reach, process, funding, and incentives. The understanding that emerged was that there is no single, standard model for an impact hub. Nonetheless, there are general principles and best practices to consider.

Moreover, Dialogue participants emphasized a need to consider “power” when designing an impact hub: the distribution of power among and within global governance institutions; the challenges preventing involvement by the powerless; and how impact hubs can fit into and alter the dynamics of state-based geopolitical competition.

The challenge(s):

Global governance is outdated and ineffectual. The institutions that comprise the post-war international order – the UN, World Trade Organization (WTO), World Bank, and others – are suffering from distrust and ineffectiveness (i.e., in delivering global public goods, generating collective action to solve wicked problems, and furthering development goals). At such time when we are facing existential planetary threats, there is an urgent need for global cooperation.

As the Dialogue progressed, a common theme underlying impact hubs became apparent – power asymmetries. One participant suggested that the fundamental sin of the international system is its decades-long concentration and entrenchment of power in the top nation-states post-World War II. If we are going to have international institutions that are both effective and legitimate, then we must reapportion power within global governing institutions in a way that aligns with the reality of

the world today. This means a greater array of nation-states, corporations, civil society, communities, and individuals must have increasing reach and influence over global affairs.

Insights for the Future of Institutions:

In examining the impact hub model and real-world examples of multi-stakeholder, partnership-based institutions, several insights surfaced:

One approach does not fit all. Under certain conditions and for certain issues, a hub-based global institution that brings together a variety of actors can be valuable. Inviting non-state actors to the Paris Agreement, for instance, has helped catalyze action, commitments, and innovation. But, in other cases, it can worsen problems. For instance, involving private security contractors in the provision of global security has often been counterproductive. The question to explore is, for which issues and under which conditions could the creation of global hubs strengthen multilateralism?

One structure does not fit all. Impact hubs can adopt different structures. This structure should emerge sequentially and pragmatically based on what works to deliver impact (i.e., institution-driven positive changes in the lives of people on the ground). Depending on the issue, participants, and circumstances, it may even make sense to have multiple hubs.

We must be clear-eyed about power dynamics and incentives. Global institutions created top-down are by nature elite structures, which makes it difficult to meaningfully engage the less connected, less powerful, poorer individuals. In part, this is a question about incentives and defining a value proposition (e.g., money, exposure, peer pressure) for participation. This is equally important when it comes to governments. Working with or through governments is often inevitable. In such a collaboration, institutions are bound to focus on issues that the government has deemed interesting and important. Similarly, corporations are expected to play an increasingly large role in global public problem-solving; yet, corporate incentives are short-term, whereas policy goals are typically long-term. Overall, institutions must have guardrails that steer action away from self-interest and towards collective interest.

The conditions under which bottom-up movements persist and formalize into permanent global institutions must be understood. Existing global governance institutions are top-down, whereby governments, funders, or other powerful actors create these institutions. While most grassroots movements fizzle out, some do not. Successful institutions which are formed from the bottom-up are more likely to both deliver results and empower individuals and communities.

Solutions:

This Dialogue revealed promising ideas regarding principles and design features of impact hubs and similar global governance institutions. Although these principles and features may not pertain to all conditions, they serve as useful best practices:

- Choose issue areas with a simple mission and a narrow, finite, shared goal. For instance, “ending slavery” is preferable to “safeguarding freedom.”
- Have a clear theory of change.
- Have a small, nimble, independent secretariat that can steer the institution’s work.
- Acknowledge that steering or leading does not mean directing and controlling, rather guiding the actors towards a common goal.
- Share accountability among partners. Centralized, ideally independent, funding is important. Partners should provide financial or in-kind contributions.

- Avoid becoming spread too thin. When states are involved, do not strive to include every country; however, a geographic balance is important for global institutions.
- Start small, build credibility by showing results, and then scale up. This is the Diffusion of Innovation Theory: find the innovators and early adopters, work with them to demonstrate impact, and use that success to attract others.
- Leverage bottom-up institutions. A grassroots movement which scales and formalizes into a permanent institution can be an answer to the power and inclusivity problem.
- Map the landscape as a first step, to identify allies in the space. An [example](#) from the climate space, courtesy of Tom Hale.
- Treat hubs as aggregation platforms. Rather than implementing or delivering a solution, focus instead on empowering and connecting those on the ground who are already tackling that problem.

Real-world hubs discussed in the Dialogue:

- [Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies](#) (SDG 16+)
- [Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance](#) (vaccines)
- [Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet](#) (renewable energy transition)
- [Grow Asia](#) (sustainable smallholder agriculture in Southeast Asia)
- [Community Solutions](#) (homelessness in the US)
- [Agroecological farming movement in India](#)

Participants:

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- Alison Eskesen, Community Investment Management
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- Rosanne Haggerty, Community Solutions
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- Anne-Marie Slaughter, New America
- Eliane Ubalijoro, Future Earth