

GP Workshop

# **The Role of Civil Society in Strengthening Multilateralism**

Follow-up

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### **About the Global Perspectives Initiative (GPI)**

The Global Perspectives Initiative supports the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to make the world a fairer and safer place by 2030. GPI brings together stakeholders from politics, business, media and society, discusses various approaches to sustainable global development, and motivates people to act. As a non-profit and neutral platform, the initiative gives rise to new ideas, raises awareness about the opportunities and challenges around the concept of a global society and thereby shapes the public discourse in Germany.

### **About the GP Workshop**

On 13th December 2018, the Global Perspectives Initiative, Stiftung Mercator and Robert Bosch Stiftung hosted a workshop on the potentials and possible impacts of civil society in strengthening and defending multilateralism. It was held in the premises of the Robert Bosch Foundation. The following paragraphs summarise debating points, discussion outcomes and proposed ideas for action.

### **About Stiftung Mercator**

Stiftung Mercator is a private and independent foundation. Through its work it strives for a society characterised by openness to the world, solidarity and equal opportunities. In this context it concentrates on strengthening Europe, increasing the educational success of disadvantaged children and young people, especially those of migrant origin, improving the quality and impact of cultural education, driving forward climate change mitigation and promoting science and humanities. Stiftung Mercator symbolises the connection between academic expertise and practical project experience. As one of Germany's leading foundations, it is active both nationally and internationally. Stiftung Mercator feels a strong sense of loyalty to the Ruhr region, the home of the founding family and the foundation's headquarters.

### **About Robert Bosch Foundation**

The Robert Bosch Stiftung GmbH is one of Europe's largest foundations associated with a private company. In its charitable work, it addresses social issues at an early stage and develops exemplary solutions. For this purpose, it plans and implements its own projects. Additionally, it supports third-party initiatives that have similar goals. The Robert Bosch Stiftung is active in the areas of health, science, society, education and international relations. Moreover, in the coming years, the foundation will increasingly focus its activities on three areas: *Migration, Integration and Inclusion, Social Cohesion in Germany and Europe* and *Sustainable Living Spaces*. Since it was established in 1964, the Robert Bosch Stiftung has invested around 1.6 billion euros in charitable work.

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We would like to thank our long-term partners for the excellent cooperation.

# GP Workshop

## The Role of Civil Society in Strengthening Multilateralism

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### SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

As the current multilateral institutions struggle to adapt to the new requirements and transform their rigid structures, their power wanes. Yet, multilateral agreements from 2015 onwards, including the SDGs, inherit flexible and transparent structures. They may serve as a genuine fundament to build on. The workshop discussion touched on ideas to reinvigorate the multilateral system by empowering existing platforms, extend their outreach by involving civil society organisations and thereby develop a generation that rediscovers the virtues of multilateral organisations.

#### 1. Making multilateralism an onsite experience for policy makers

It is essential to involve political decision makers more intensively in the activities of the multilateral system. This may include taking them to crises areas to experience and learn from practiced ways of collaboration between the various interest groups. This allows politicians to develop a sense of understanding on how the multilateral system works within the changing political landscape. They may learn about the structures, the interrelatedness of stakeholders and organisations, and how the impact of multilateral engagement is corresponding to the overarching goals. Experience sharing and an in-depth exchange of knowledge may additionally underline the added value of multilateral cooperation. Live encounters with the multilateral system, its concept and purposes can turn politicians into advocates and therefore help to gain more long-term support.

Politicians must experience the new multilateral system as it operates.

“All politics is internal.”  
*Peter Fischer-Bollin* on the link between personal benefit and advocacy.

#### 2. Adopting simple language and communication

As words have the power to shape realities, thoughts and perceptions, language plays a crucial role in the positioning efforts of multilateral organisations. They must communicate in a language that all members of society can understand and relate to. Only then, the multilateral system may stimulate and connect fresh thinking about multilateral innovation, their advantages and their mandatory nature. The workshop participants noted that traditional organisations lack simple and comprehensive wording, which is currently rather academic and complex. Hence, it would fail to connect to broader audiences and to win supporters for their engagement. As civil society is set out to play a dominant role in shaping the new era of multilateralism, it has to address audiences beyond academics and build communicative bridges. Formal language in multilateral organisations may lead to distorted perceptions such as being part of an elite and non-transparent system. This could undermine the credibility of those institutions further and hence the impact of their work.

Communication must reduce complexity in order to connect to broader audiences.

“We are stuck with a language that is very UN-like. Let alone the word ‘multilateralism’.”  
*Gerry Salole*

#### 3. Igniting political campaigns and learning from experts

The long-term success of multilateral systems relies, amongst other factors, on the backing of the public. While language plays an essential role, the way messages and contents are conveyed and transported is similarly important. The workshop participants

“To win public debates, one should consider a genuine political campaign approach.”  
*Michael Werz*

noted, that it would require a genuine political campaign approach to reach citizens in the digital age. As a result, multilateral institutions must draw from the in-depth expertise and knowledge of leading campaign strategists and best practice examples on how public debates can be won. Micro-targeting tactics will become as vital as grassroots campaigning or third-party-endorsement.

#### **4. Educating communication professionals**

The majority of communication professionals in multilateral institutions orientate their working methods, language and communication tactics along established pattern. In the light of new technologies, their competencies and skills need to be adjusted. Trainings for communications personnel can help to improve the institutional outreach. Trainings may involve political campaign leaders, media representatives and political framing experts among others.

#### **5. Engaging the silent minorities and majorities**

Any public-awareness campaign profits from loud, visible and publicly supportive majorities. However, historical developments have disclosed the severe consequences of ignoring silent parts of society. These will have to be discovered and their demands given voice and attention. Taking global issues to the state level and beyond large cities will be decisive for finding and engaging those silent citizens. At the same time, it is important to recognise that no person and no campaign can speak up for everybody likewise.

#### **6. Exploring the common ground**

While in the past, multilateral institutions have focused on ideology-driven target groups, they missed to build connections to those who do not adhere to particular beliefs. To engage these groups, common ground must be explored and used. Once an area of shared interest or topic is discovered, interpersonal relationships are facilitated which allow to bridge to further, yet unpopular topics.

#### **7. Initiate long-term anticipatory planning**

Players of the new multilateral system must be ahead of the game in order to mobilise communities and to counter opposing forces. This requires foreseeing targets, agenda topics and potential messaging of antagonists. The planning time frame must be extended and potential future developments should be regularly mapped. This can improve the crisis preparedness of multilateral projects or institutions. Organisations should develop counter narratives, framing and messaging approaches and ultimately link them to their own strategic planning. Engaging civil society in crisis situations would additionally require further financial resources.

#### **8. Developing the courage for change**

Large transformation processes require political will and the courage to be an integral part of this change. The workshop participants discussed that German foundations need to adapt more effectively in order to defend and redesign the multilateral system. Their strong inside orientation would pose a weakness and hurdle to develop and follow a mission that is based on a big overarching picture. Foundations should instead be working towards becoming bolder and more courageous, in particular when circumstances become more complicated. They are more than just a platform: they are key drivers of the system and its transformation.

As communication approaches change, skills and competencies have to adapt.

Campaigns must identify invisible allies and mobilise them.

Common ground must be used to connect people with yet disfavoured topics.

Long-term planning and knowing the agenda of opponents will be crucial to success.

The role of the civil society should be to educate people to use strong narratives.

German foundations must acknowledge their potential role in driving the new multilateral system.

## **Conclusion**

Defending and strengthening multilateralism in a new era requires collective commitment and action in new scales. At the core of a system that builds on the successes from 2015 lies inclusiveness. As current multilateral players lack legitimacy and comprehensive strategies, collective action must include the civil society, NGOs, the business sector and other interest groups. To increase the political backing, politicians must experience the virtues of multilateralism and understand the structures of the system. Communication should be an integral part of the overarching strategy. Participants advocated for 40 percent of the overall budget flowing into marketing and communication activities. Enhancing communication includes training professionals, monitoring the activities of opponents and crafting counter narratives as part of the institutional crisis preparedness. The simplification of language will be key, as will be involving digital influencers and online networks. Strategic planning must involve loud majorities as well as silent minorities. In combination with offline activities, this may contribute to taking conversations away from the capitals. It is crucial to build on a common ground with those who are questioning multilateralism. Advocating for multilateralism should be considered as leading a political campaign to strengthen the leverage effect. Finally, we must reconfigure the notion what real public debates are and how they are being led. This is essential to initiate sustainable discussions and to establish an open-minded, unprejudiced debating culture.

## ADDENDUM

### I. Inside perspectives

#### ***I.I. The Paris Peace Forum — A Multilateral Project to Promote Peace***

*Ronja Scheler*, Program Director of the [Paris Peace Forum](#), shared her insights on creating and implementing this new multilateral forum. While the impulse for the Paris Peace Forum came from the French administration, it is an independent platform financed by international donors and NGOs. According to the forum, it “brings together all actors of global governance to strengthen multilateralism and international cooperation”. The forum was designed to discover practical solutions to international challenges. It touches on the areas peace and security, environment, development, new technologies and inclusive economy. All participants shared the notion that multilateral solutions have to be the responses to global issues.

#### ***I.II. The Global Compact on Migration – Lessons on Populist Headwinds***

*Anne Koch*, scientist at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), was intensively involved in the drafting process of the Global Compact on Migration (GCM). Though the process was considered a state-of-the-art approach of inclusiveness and transparency, media interest as well as political attention in Germany remained low. This neglect prepared the ground for populist forces, which mobilised and antagonised the compact, leading to fundamental misjudgements among the public. It was only when public debates increased the political pressure that Germany finally adopted a common approach. While the compact represents a milestone to manage migration on a global level, the lessons learned particularly lie in widening the audience in communication processes and involving one-on-one-discussions. Moreover, developing counter-narratives in advance helps to debunk weak arguments and myths.

### **II. Reframing Multilateralism in a New Era**

In December 2018, GPI in cooperation with the Center for American Progress published a [policy paper](#) on multilateralism in a new era. The following paragraphs deliver a brief outline.

#### **The crisis of multilateralism**

Foreign global policy seems to be taking a sharp turn: the multilateral rules-based order is increasingly being replaced by bilateral deals. Despite the considerable development of multilateral institutions and agreements since the end of the Second World War (WWII), changing global power dynamics and structures of the world economy challenge the legitimacy and the efficiency of the current international system. The global leadership crisis marked by polarisation, isolationism and fragmentation threatens universal values and the principles our world is based on. Global challenges like climate change, migration, natural disasters, terrorism or conflict cannot be addressed by national governments or institutions acting by themselves. In a deeply interconnected world, it needs collaborative action among governments, international organisations, NGOs and civil society to live up to the threats we are facing.

“The underlying idea of the Paris Peace Forum was not the absence of war. But that to maintain and sustain peace, it requires international collaboration.”  
*Ronja Scheler*

Communication of multilateral projects must be proactive and forward-thinking. It must include broad audiences from the very first minute onward.

The global leadership crisis prevents us from dealing with urgent global challenges.

### **The historical background of multilateralism**

*Michael Werz*, Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress, provided an historical overview on how the crisis of multilateralism came about. His research paper reveals that the multilateral structures and institutions we know today are the result of three waves of institution building: the first occurred during WWII, the second in the early Cold War period and the last in the wake of the Cold War. All institutions were designed to solve or to address the problems and challenges of their time. The Atlantic Charter adopted in 1941 inspired many of the international agreements that followed the war. Adherent was the Declaration of the United Nations which later set the basis for the UN. In 1948, developments cumulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – a remarkable moment in history. At the same time several multilateral institutions and agreements were established: the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and later on the NATO, the WTO and the EU.

Multilateral institutions were designed to solve the challenges of their time.

### **An increasing lack of legitimacy**

Many multilateral institutions failed to establish a reputable international position and perception. Instead, institutions like the EU or the WTO continue to experience persisting legitimacy problems. “We overlooked a number of things at the end of the Cold War that we came to learn in a very hard way”, *Michael Werz* commented and added: “The notion was that the Western society was superior given that they won the Cold War”. Moreover, multilateral organisations had turned into bureaucratic, non-transparent machineries. They were structurally not made to be institutions of immediate response. This, however, is a precondition to counter the challenges of this fast-paced world. Multilateral organisations forfeited their flexibility and overextended themselves. “We have moved to times where we have to learn to play a three-dimensional chess game to tackle the complexity of the issues”, *Werz* said.

The challenges and the settings have changed. Multilateral institutions were not able to adopt at a fast pace.

### **The new era of multilateralism is the era of civil society**

The post-2008 crises overshadowed the emergence of a new form of multilateralism. It addresses new challenges and manages to encompass not only traditional security and economic institutions. Although governments and international institutions remain the driving forces, for the first time a large number of actors from philanthropy, civil society and the private sector were involved in political decision-making. The UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Iran Deal, the Paris Climate Accord and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (Gavi) were developed during this time. These achievements ground on common goals and frameworks for pragmatic action rather than on legal obligations bound to rigid structures. This new approach will most likely prove to be the future of multilateralism outperforming former formal agreements.

Multilateral institutions of the new era ground on flexible structures and broad collaboration.

### **The role of civil society in defending multilateralism**

Despite these positive political achievements, multilateralism is not a predetermined outcome, but rather constantly challenged by seismic political shifts. “Today’s challenges are presidents pulling out of multilateral agreements, thus weakening global governance”, *Michael Werz* noted. He highlighted that the biggest advantage of these new multilateral organisations, their flexibility, would also

Multilateralism is under constant threat. Forces of civil society play a crucial role in defending the system.

pose their greatest weakness. As right-wing populists ascend, foundations and NGOs can play a critical role in defending the newly emerged mechanisms. They can raise awareness, draw attention to opportunities and communicate the added value of multilateral projects. National civil society groups must rediscover the importance of creating alliances across national boundaries to uphold human rights, democracy and liberal values. These structures of cooperation should be resilient and redundant enough to defy nationalism in international politics.

## **PUBLISHING INFORMATION**

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