

# POLICY *dialogue* BRIEF



## Multistakeholder Coalitions Innovating or Complicating Global Governance?

### The Stakeholders of Global Governance

Throughout the past two decades, multistakeholder coalitions have proved effective tools in solving some of the world's most pressing problems. Whether it is fighting climate change, founding the International Criminal Court, or governing cyberspace, cooperative multistakeholder action provides alternative approaches to issues too complex for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), businesses, or even state governments to tackle alone. Multistakeholderism can help break through gridlock, reform and reinforce the legitimacy of institutions, fill governance gaps, and clear paths for policy change.

Multistakeholderism is not a new concept. Diverse stakeholders have been cooperating to achieve change for many decades under diverse guises. Only recently, however, has multistakeholderism grown to become a new norm in global governance. Today, multistakeholder coalitions are not only more common but have also proven successful in navigating the differing interests of multiple stakeholders, a crucial development in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent global sphere.

The Stanley Foundation, in partnership with New America and the Stimson Center, hosted twin workshops in New York City and Washington, DC, to explore the role cooperative multistakeholder action plays in global governance. These workshops gathered diverse actors from academia, government, international organizations, and civil society organizations who shed light on good practices, lessons learned, and main challenges of the first few decades of cooperative multistakeholder action. These initial discussions were guided by the following facilitation questions:

- How do multistakeholder coalitions fit into strategies for effective global governance?
- How have successful multistakeholder coalitions dealt with the challenges of governance gaps?

Co-hosted by  
**The Stanley Foundation,  
New America, and  
the Stimson Center**

**May 23, 2016  
New York, NY**

**May 25, 2016  
Washington, DC**



This brief summarizes the primary findings of the conference as interpreted by the rapporteurs, Chayenne Polimedio and Madeline Velluro; the organizer, Rei Tang; and the co-chairs, Heather Hurlburt and Richard Ponzio. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this brief. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

- What are examples of successful multistakeholderism, and where have efforts come up short?
- Are there distinct models of formal or informal coalition priority setting, management, maintenance, and accountability?
- In which functional areas (e.g., mobilization, agenda setting, advocacy, norm building, implementation, oversight/accountability) is cooperative multistakeholder action most effective?
- Can cooperative multistakeholder action build global norms in fragile states that have limited governance capacity, authoritarian states where the nonstate role is circumscribed, predatory states, or areas under contested control by extremist groups that employ violence and other criminal actions to achieve their goals?

This focus on cooperative multistakeholder action is a direct result of a heightened recognition that these coalitions are increasingly common. Therefore, a more nuanced understanding of how they work as tools for better governance is necessary. This policy dialogue brief captures the major discussion points, policy recommendations, and general conclusions from the workshop, and will serve as a guide for future work on this topic.

---

*Cooperative multistakeholder action fills crucial governance gaps and mobilizes support to realize crosscutting and sustainable solutions.*

---

### **External Legitimacy, Participation, and Accountability Challenges**

Multistakeholder coalitions have arisen as highly relevant actors in the sphere of global governance. Cooperative multistakeholder action fills crucial governance gaps and mobilizes support to realize crosscutting and sustainable solutions. However, in doing so, multistakeholderism naturally confronts a series of hurdles and challenges. These include:

- Multistakeholder coalitions often exclude de facto stakeholders.
- Multistakeholder coalitions need different actors and activities at different points in their life cycles.
- Multistakeholder coalitions struggle to mobilize and maintain the political will and financial support necessary to achieve their goals.
- The lack of clarity surrounding what multistakeholder coalitions and their relationships with more formal actors should look like undermines their achievements and growth.

Considering the informal and relatively recent roots of cooperative multistakeholder action, achieving the legitimacy necessary to affect change can be an uphill battle. Internal legitimacy can hinge on external legitimacy, and vice versa, while legitimacy can at times have an inverse relationship with multistakeholder effectiveness.

### **Legitimacy, Accountability, and Authority**

Multistakeholder coalitions are informal by nature, although some are more formal than others. They exist outside—or in fact, between—formalized institutions and structures such as state governments, businesses, and nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations. Therefore, multistakeholder

coalitions must build their legitimacy from scratch, and achieving the necessary legitimacy to affect change can be an uphill battle.

Some participants at the workshops discussed how external legitimacy of collective multistakeholder action is tied to effectiveness. If a multistakeholder coalition is proving effective in advocating its agenda or governing its target area, this builds its legitimacy in the eyes of external actors by default. Ironically, while proven effectiveness can often boost coalition legitimacy, most collective multistakeholder action requires a certain amount of external legitimacy in order to be effective. This paradox demonstrates the delicate and complex balance multistakeholders must strike. Furthermore, some workshop participants articulated the inherent conflict that arises between legitimacy and effectiveness. In the pursuit of external legitimacy, some multistakeholder coalitions have neglected efforts aimed at increasing effectiveness.

According to workshop participants, the legitimacy of cooperative multistakeholder action is directly tied to accountability. Considering that multistakeholder coalitions frequently fill governance gaps, their own accountability is most often internally enforced. Answers to questions such as “Who is in charge?” and “How are decisions made?” can be unclear or even unknown. Without formal monitoring structures in place to inform stakeholders and the external community of how any given multistakeholder coalition operates, room remains for corruption, nepotism, and manipulation. This lack of accountability can hamper a multistakeholder coalition’s internal operations and external legitimacy.

Another challenge faced by cooperative multistakeholder action is determining what types of coalitions work, not only under the guidance of which stakeholders but also for what types of constituencies. A typology of cooperative multistakeholder action has not been developed; neither has a mapping of constituencies. Additionally, institutions perceive their roles differently and understand their roles in spaces of governance according to their worldviews. Defining multistakeholders’ roles and communicating those to all coalition partners has been a challenge in ensuring the legitimacy of cooperative multistakeholder action.

Cooperative multistakeholder action is not made up of essentially fabricated coalitions. At times, they are organic associations of actors who come together not necessarily as a result of a shared intent to form a coalition but because of a shared advocacy goal. Sometimes cooperative multistakeholder action is simply a new name for movement building. Oftentimes engagement with governments is not a sought-out element of these coalitions. Rather, it is a natural consequence of the type of conversations, goals, and challenges that multistakeholders face and must find ways to overcome.

While multistakeholder coalitions often fill gaps in formal processes or fields, the nexus at which these coalitions meet formalized state, private, or nongovernmental actors remains unclear. The newness and abstractness of cooperative multistakeholder action leaves a gap in understanding what makes a multistakeholder actor a legitimate one and what cooperative multistakeholder action should look like. Most importantly, however, is the challenge in determining under which circumstances cooperative multistakeholder action is the ideal approach to global governance, mediation, and policy entrepreneurship.

---

*The legitimacy of cooperative multistakeholder action is directly tied to accountability.*

---

## Representation, Issue Framing, and Funding

Cooperative multistakeholder action engages a diverse plethora of actors from civil society, the private sector, NGOs, and local and national governments. This julienne salad of stakeholders in some ways defines the comparative advantage of multistakeholderism. Broad and diverse membership helps to garner widespread support and global buy-in as well as engage those who have the power to affect change at any number of levels. Yet a diversity of actors can also mean conflicting interests or perspectives, and the resulting bureaucracy and decision-making processes are often slow and drawn out.

Moreover, multistakeholder coalitions often forget to include, or consciously and actively exclude, *de facto* stakeholders that have a stake regardless of their willingness to participate in collective action. Examples include the disinterest of certain governments in engaging on social responsibility in extractive industries, or the hesitancy of humanitarian actors to cooperate with militaries and peacekeepers in conflict zones. These *de facto* stakeholders often yield a great deal of power and influence, and cannot be ignored or circumvented. In this vein, multistakeholder actors will need to learn how to interact with those unwilling to engage in cooperative multistakeholder activity. This means helping activists, policy NGOs, intergovernmental organizations, civil society, governments, and businesses to better understand each other. Sometimes conveners must search for unseen stakeholders in hybrid governance platforms—for example, indigenous people, minorities, remote geographic areas, sectarian representation, and women.

---

*Sometimes conveners must search for unseen stakeholders in hybrid governance platforms—for example, indigenous people, minorities, remote geographic areas, sectarian representation, and women.*

---

Cooperative multistakeholder action can serve various functions at different points in the policy cycle, or ANIME process: agenda setting, negotiation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Multistakeholder coalitions are created, renewed, reframed, merged, enlarged, or shrunk throughout the course of their lives, and these transitions often require different key stakeholders and activities. The types of actors and activities involved shift significantly from the agenda- and norm-setting phases to the implementation phase, and again into the monitoring and evaluation phases. Multistakeholder coalitions tackle each of these phases as they come, often reinventing the wheel and sacrificing stakeholder and donor momentum in order to do so.

The lack of major political will and commitment is one of the biggest challenges cooperative multistakeholder action faces. States are not always welcoming to stakeholders' efforts. But unilateral action is becoming increasingly harder and more costly, thus forcing states to be more willing to engage with other actors. By the same token, international institutions are also being asked to do more with fewer resources, so they, too, are faced with the need to welcome other stakeholders into their efforts. Authoritarian states may be easier to engage by framing the issue as a technical challenge or operational risk.

Finally, the lack of funding, which is often tied to limited political will, is an issue that cooperative multistakeholder action also grapples with, since funding is a crucial determinant of these coalitions' sustainability. Overall, it is still unclear what roles governments, businesses, foundations, and civil society organizations ought to play in forming and maintaining these multistakeholder coalitions and which issue types are more appropriate for each body. Determining who should be the lead or primary funder

is a question that is often tied to legitimacy and efficacy; government funding can serve as the seal of approval for a coalition, but if a particular initiative targets business behavior, it is more likely to be successful if it has buy-in from the business community. Some entities tend to prefer to fund more-salient issues, while others are more open to obscure ones.

## The Craft of Cooperative Multistakeholder Action in Global Governance

Despite facing significant challenges, multistakeholder coalitions have managed to substantially impact a number of global spheres. Workshop participants articulated a number of good practices and lessons learned that serve as the beginning of a more strategic and systematic approach to maximizing the utility of collective multistakeholder action. These lessons include:

- Trust building and role awareness across participating stakeholders are crucial first steps in any cooperative multistakeholder action.
- Successful multistakeholder coalitions create room for dissent and disagreement.
- Financial and administrative transparency are key to demonstrating accountability and securing external legitimacy.
- Multistakeholder coalitions should systematically catalog changes in policy and practice in order to better articulate and track the impact of their achievements.
- As technology becomes increasingly present in spaces of global governance, it is still unclear when and how these tools should be used, and when they are not ideal for dealing with complex governance challenges.

---

*The fostering of stakeholders' understanding of each others' roles is a crucial component of success.*

---

### Getting to the Table

Based on examples of coalitions that were and have continued to be successful, the advancement of a specific policy goal is directly linked to the creation of functional informal ties that allow all actors to disagree well. There is a period of trust building that prepares the ground for ensuing conversations and negotiations between these actors with competing interests. As a natural consequence of competing interests, stakeholders tend not to be in agreement at first. They have to break down stereotyping barriers and be open to listening to ideas that they might not agree with. After some level of mutual trust is established, a productive and safe environment where disagreement can take place is built.

The fostering of stakeholders' understanding of each others' roles is a crucial component of success. Clear delimitations of actors' goals ensures that even when certain actors appear resistant or inflexible, all interlocutors are treated as legitimate ones. The development of interpersonal and intercultural communication skills works best if it is framed as an opportunity for members to pick up new skills rather than as a punitive exercise.

Stakeholders' willingness to participate more or less in coalitions also depends on where in the coalition process the conversation is.



Cooperative multistakeholder action goes through a life cycle that begins with the framing of the issue and ends with the successful enforcement of established norms. In between are series of processes that may involve more or fewer stakeholders. This and other factors beg for a process-oriented approach to these coalitions so that stakeholders can more efficiently and more clearly engage with each other as well as with the rest of the international community.

Part of building trust is allowing adequate room for disagreement. Considering the breadth of actors that cooperative multistakeholder action engages, previous successes demonstrate the importance of creating room for dissent among various stakeholders. Decentralized power structures, mitigated by context-specific policing measures such as membership criteria or limiting who has the authority to speak for the coalition, help to create room for disagreement while building commitment and buy-in from the stakeholders involved.

---

*Multistakeholder coalitions should systematically catalog changes in policy and practice, such as changes in military manuals or city bylaws, in order to better articulate the impact of their achievements.*

---

### Transparency, Monitoring, and Evaluation

Because the legitimacy of multistakeholderism hinges on accountability, which is often internally enforced, external transparency is critical. Only through transparent financial and administrative operations can multistakeholder coalitions prove their internal accountability and thereby solidify their legitimacy in the eyes of the external community. In some instances, transparency and accountability can be achieved through third party monitors, but this tool will not be an appropriate approach in all cases of multistakeholderism.

Monitoring and evaluating cooperative multistakeholder action poses a challenge. Measuring the impact of “norm creation” or “policy reform” is not as straightforward as measuring economic or even social impact at the local level. As one participant stated, “It is difficult to measure the dog that doesn’t bark.” Multistakeholder coalitions should systematically catalog changes in policy and practice, such as changes in military manuals or city bylaws, in order to better articulate the impact of their achievements.

Epistemic networks of consensus can provide common pictures of cause and effect that, in turn, can strengthen accountability and evaluation. Epistemic networks with consensus about the effects of action can help provide direction when framing the issue, as well as whether that issue is ripe for a coalition to take it on. Some examples of epistemic networks of consensus include the private sector joining epistemic consensus with the Sustainable Development Goals, the scientific and technical assessments leading up to the Paris Climate Agreement, and Track 2 processes of the Iran nuclear deal negotiations.

### The Role of Technology

Tech tools can be used to leverage cooperative multistakeholder action and make it more effective and legitimate by providing deeper and more-complex insights into governance issues with the help of data. Additionally, technology can be a useful tool in making these coalitions more effective and transparent, ensuring that more people are involved in these coalition cycles. Technology, however, must not be understood as the sole means for improving cooperative multistakeholder action. Instead, it ought to be complementary to multistakeholderism.

## Next Steps

Workshop discussions provided important insights into the current state of collective multistakeholder action. Nevertheless, many unanswered questions remain. When is collective multistakeholder action the right approach, and when is it not? What is the most appropriate scope: national? regional? international? What is the ideal mix of actors? How can stakeholder roles be successfully defined and their relative expertise best applied? What are the indicators of success, and how can legitimacy be established? What is the potential of technology to replace governance structures, and what are its limitations?

The ultimate goal of these consultations will be to produce a guide or handbook to those looking to utilize collective multistakeholder action as a tool for change. Workshop participants identified a number of elements that would prove useful in providing a better understanding of multistakeholderism. These included:

- A typology of the various types of collective multistakeholder action and their uses.
- A taxonomy of the various stages of the multistakeholder coalition life cycle and the relevant actors and skills needed at each stage.
- A toolkit for those looking to build a multistakeholder coalition from scratch, as well as one for leaders of well-established coalitions looking to solidify gains or move forward.
- An understanding of when collective multistakeholder action is appropriate and when more-formal institutions should take the lead.
- Explanations of cooperative multistakeholder action to key global governance constituencies, including countries, intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, multinational corporations, civil society organizations, and subnational jurisdictions.
- An examination of linkages between cooperative multistakeholder action in areas such as human rights, corruption, and Internet freedom.
- A resource guide compiling relevant theoretical literature from all related fields.

The role of multistakeholder coalitions in global governance and norm building will only continue to grow. This memo, developed from a series of workshops with key stakeholders and leaders in the field, serves as a crucial first step in building a better understanding of collective multistakeholder action, its advantages, and its challenges. The Stanley Foundation, New America, and the Stimson Center look forward to continuing this conversation and ultimately bolstering the capacity and effectiveness of multistakeholderism as it takes its place among the global governance structures of today.

---

*When is collective multistakeholder action the right approach, and when is it not?*

---

## The Stanley Foundation

The Stanley Foundation advances multilateral action to create fair, just, and lasting solutions to critical issues of peace and security. Our work is built on the belief that greater international cooperation will enhance global governance and spur global citizenship. The foundation frequently collaborates with a wide range of organizations using different forums, formats, and venues to engage policy communities. We do not make grants.

Our programming addresses profound threats to human survival where improved multilateral governance and cooperation are fundamental to transforming real-world policy. Current efforts focus on policy improvement to prevent genocide and mass atrocities, eliminate the threat of nuclear terrorism, and drive collective and long-term action on climate change. The foundation also works to promote global education in our hometown of Muscatine, Iowa, and nearby.

A private operating foundation established in 1956, the Stanley Foundation maintains a long-term, independent, and nonpartisan perspective. Our publications, multimedia resources, and a wealth of other information about programming are available at [www.stanleyfoundation.org](http://www.stanleyfoundation.org).

The Stanley Foundation encourages use of this report for educational purposes. Any part of the material may be duplicated with proper acknowledgement. Additional copies are available. This brief is available at [www.stanleyfoundation.org/resources](http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/resources).

209 Iowa Avenue  
Muscatine, IA 52761 USA  
563-264-1500  
563-264-0864 Fax  
[info@stanleyfoundation.org](mailto:info@stanleyfoundation.org)