



The Future of Collective Action on Global Challenges

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Global challenges requiring collective action are those issues, problems, or threats that impact a large portion of humankind and compel action by multiple actors: for example, avoiding the use of nuclear weapons, mitigating climate change, and preventing mass violence and atrocities. For the majority of our lifetimes, these challenges have been perceived to be the responsibility of national governments working together under bilateral or multilateral frameworks—either of their own accord through agreements or treaties or with the aid of an institution that exists to facilitate multilateral processes, such as the United Nations and its organs.

Multilateral frameworks have failed in their attempts to develop, enforce, and sustain durable solutions to certain global challenges fast enough to effectively address the growing consequences those challenges create. The pace at which these frameworks adapt will not speed up anytime soon, owing in large part to the decline of the liberal international order. Whether temporary or permanent, the decline is the result of a surge in authoritarian and nationalist expression; or an evolving set of societal values that places increasing primacy on diversity, equity, and inclusion; or still (and most likely), the acute polarizing effect of these two simultaneous and relatively rapid movements in Western thinking and reality. Given this slowdown, perceptions of who is

responsible for solving many global challenges are shifting to new kinds of self-organizing collectives that may or may not include national governments. These emerging groups of stakeholders are catalyzing multilateral frameworks through their collective actions on certain issues and, in many cases, identifying and implementing solutions themselves.

At its 50th Global Issues Conference, held April 3–5, 2019, in Tarrytown, New York, the Stanley Center for Peace and Security brought together a diverse group of innovators and thinkers working on some of the world's greatest global challenges. Organizers asked them to consider which global challenges could benefit from the growing demand for collective action, what collective action requires, and how it can be enhanced. The group of journalists, engineers, activists, entrepreneurs, academics, and humanitarians identified both usual and unexpected opportunities for collective action, each requiring contextual understanding and application, a bottom-up approach, and accountability. Members of the group agreed that while collective action does not require universal participation, a unified global vision respectful and inclusive of all human situations could serve as a guiding star. And by empowering individuals and new institutions to act, that star would be less obscured by the clouds of international politics and nationalist



ambitions that currently impede global progression. What follows are the themes that emerged and the key takeaways that stemmed from small- and full-group discussions at the conference.

Diverse Perspectives Lead to Surprising Results

Prior to attending the conference, participants were asked to think about the most significant global challenges facing the world today, whether enough societal demand for collective action exists to address those challenges, and which actors should or could play a critical role in networking together to address them. At the conference, participants shared their thoughts and named issues along a wide spectrum, with climate change being a near-universal suggestion. Other ideas of global issues ripe for collective action included cybersecurity, global health, economic development, identity-based violence, the proliferation and/or use of weapons of mass destruction, and dozens more. But when asked to rank order the universe of suggestions, the group selected four unusual opportunities, perhaps owing to participants' diverse and varied sectoral backgrounds and the wide-ranging perceptions each participant had of the existing state of international institutions (which included those actively working with those institutions, or working to modify their functionality and arrangements, or harboring desires to see them "blown up" and recreated for the 21st century and beyond). Artificial intelligence (AI), alienation and social isolation, antidemocratic populism/resurgence of authoritarianism, and attitudes toward capitalism/economic inequality were highest ranked as the issues most primed, in demand, and equipped with the capacity of a range of stakeholders to tackle some form of collective action.

The results were surprising to the group itself. For example, many participants admitted knowing little about the mechanics of artificial intelligence, but when the built-in biases resulting from its development by human engineers were explained by those with a better understanding of AI, the case for AI's inclusion was made. This example—and others like it—led participants to identify inherent value in working on things their backgrounds do not traditionally suggest they "should" be working on. Through discussion, a (perhaps subconscious) reason emerged for why the diverse group ultimately selected each of the "big four" global issues:

- Individual perspectives on the same issue (and in the same setting) can have completely different interpretations.
- The ways those perspectives come to be understood is through increased empathy, opportunities for exposure, and open-minded reception to inclusivity.
- With that newfound understanding, the means to connect people for the purpose of pursuing collective action can begin.

- Through that connection of new perspectives and varied skill sets, new, creative solutions not yet identified can emerge, and, importantly, the underlying causes of those global challenges can be better understood.
- So long as those involved in the collective have a hand in defining the action's rules of engagement and maintain space for and flexibility in the application of those rules in varied geographies, cultures, contexts, and by actors at all levels of governance and civil society, the action can be sustained and succeed.
- This pattern applies to all platforms for collective action.

Put simply, humans must be at the center of collective-action opportunities in order to best address global challenges. Setting aside the "big four" while remaining mindful of the effective collective-action prerequisite of diversity, equity, and inclusion, group discussion shifted to the needs for operationalization.

Finding the Best Platform Requires Context: Individuals, Governments, Institutions

Collective action can occur in places well outside of multilateral institutions, the traditionally thought-of origin for collective solutions for global challenges. Financial and retail markets, online discourse, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), media, social institutions, electoral politics, referenda, and grassroots movements at large are the platforms and vessels that could be populated and filled with participants at all levels to act effectively.

To choose the best platform or vessel, an important question is whether those already charged with acting on global challenges understand that although short-term self-interest may make the collective-action problem worse (or at the very least unchanged), it is in everyone's long-term self-interest to work collaboratively toward a solution. If a critical mass of government parties to a multilateral institution are stuck on self-interest, or the institution cannot or will not include a human-centered component due to its own self-interest in preservation (whereby the impediment is not one of political will but a lack of flexibility and responsiveness), a new platform, such as one or more of those above, must be considered if the global challenge is to be addressed.

In pursuing new platforms outside of reluctant governments, those subscribing to the new platform should remain vigilant of the tendency for authoritarian regimes to see those action vessels as threats and/or illegitimate—and attempt to do them harm. One suggestion for mitigating this potential danger is to organize the collective outside of an institution (such as the United Nations) and then link it back later to add legitimacy and increase the likelihood of international attention and protection.

Pitfalls for existing—and emerging—platforms are not limited to a recognition of self-interest and ability to set it aside.



Buy-in at the Base Is Essential (and Requires Rules)

Utilizing a human-centered approach to identify the global challenge, remaining inclusive in designing solutions, and navigating the selection of the best platform(s) have been identified as prerequisites for successful collective action. Another such requirement is support from a base, whether a national citizenry, volunteers at the grassroots, voters on a referendum, or private sector actors in a financial market. Attracting that base support for the collective action or set of collective actions is made possible by political identification with a movement, shared perception of the urgency of a global challenge, and direct or indirect impact by the challenge's manifest symptoms. To sustain the base of support, formal or informal rules must govern and certain conditions must be met. Among them are:

- Organized and recognized leadership.
- Shared definitions of the grievances and their underlying causes.
- A collective identity.
- Resilience to external challenges—including the mainstream.
- Effective tools for advocacy.
- The proper allocation of roles for those participating in the collective.
- The ability to exchange curated information.
- Norms that build trust.
- Intentionality.
- A mentality of cooperation, with minimal internal competition.
- Activated energy and will.
- Identified entry points into the change process.

These rules and conditions must be defined and subscribed to by the collective base to ensure adherence and continuity. However, the rules and conditions must remain flexible for the variety of contexts in which they are applied. Cultural variation across and within sectors and geographies must be considered in design—and just as importantly in practice. In other words, the same rules of the game, played according to what is contextually appropriate, can create a sustained movement toward a shared desired outcome.

For collective action taking place outside of institutions (in movements, for instance), once the base is organized and operationalizing its own solutions, a bottom-up approach can be used to motivate institutional adoption, codification, and proliferation of those actions, making the solutions also top-down. In that

transfer, one potentially major pitfall exists: human-centered policy design processes are unfamiliar to many policymakers, and, similarly, acting inside of a traditional policy system is unfamiliar to many activist movements. That mutual lack of understanding may lead institutions to adopt solution sets that stand in contrast (or direct opposition) to those sought by the base. To protect against that situation, movements must consider and strategize for what comes after they are invited into the “halls of power”—and policymakers must be trained to listen to and incorporate the input of those affected by global challenges into real solutions.

Whether collective action takes a bottom-up, top-down, or mutual approach, the rules and conditions stated above imply that tightened command and control of the collective can mitigate misalignment of cultures or intent—so long as individual actors are allowed to perform their roles and share in a unified statement of success indicators. But with so many actors and contexts, who is accountable for those indicators?

Accountability (in Moderation) Is Essential Too

Accountability is an integral part of the design of the collective, be it a movement, institution, market, or something else. If rules are derived by consensus, and distributed decision making affords flexibility in the application of those rules, a formal system can ensure the flexibility does not reach a breaking point. The makeup of the collective and sector(s) it seeks to influence will indicate the level of formality and which actors will be responsible for accountability.

Public-private partnerships allow for accountability because the disparate actors with shared interests can challenge each other when necessary, although levels of influence and checks on the other's actions need to have parity. Open-government partnerships require citizen and/or institutional oversight as governments may use their participation as an excuse to put the global issue off the table—treating their (inactive) participation as a substantial-enough contribution to the collective solution. NGOs and movements taking part in collective action must make their intentions and responsibility structures clear to outsiders in order to ensure their access to policymakers and the subsequent incorporation of their ideas into policy.

Government-NGO partnerships are trending toward too much oversight by governments. After 2008 and continuing today, pressure to show taxpayers that money is spent appropriately has led to an overcorrection, paradoxically making grant funds less effective because such a large portion must be spent on monitoring, evaluation, and reporting. This same self-defeating phenomenon is also practiced by many multilateral institutions—perhaps contributing to the pivot away from those institutions and toward other collective-action platforms.

Compounding the problem with NGOs and institutions that rely on donor governments, normative, objective measurements are often less politically valued than easier-to-attain (and



easier-to-interpret and easier-to-inflate) quantitative measures, leading donors to defund organizations that are making valuable contributions to global challenges but are unable to demonstrate those contributions numerically. Meanwhile, wealthier organizations can spend more money on messaging their contributions to retain their funding despite their actual achievements. To mitigate these challenges, governments and multilateral institutional funders should consider taking on higher levels of risk and recalibrate their results-oriented approach, which only leads to an aversion to do what needs to be done for the sake of progress. Otherwise, the actual levels of results (versus the perceived levels of results) will become increasingly apparent and frustrating and continue to fuel other collective-action platforms.

“Collective” in “Collective Action” Does Not Always Mean Everyone

The fundamental need for diverse perspectives in collective-action rulemaking, implementation, and results attainment was referenced several times throughout this discussion. The importance of allowing context-specific application of collective solutions is also clear. And while not every global challenge requires global participation, collective action on those challenges must consider the unintended global impact of solutions on others outside the collective if they are to be responsible.

Remembering that global challenges are those issues, problems, or threats that impact a large portion of humankind, where those countries, organizations, institutions, and individuals not impacted are able, they should show solidarity with those who are. As they do so, they must consider their intentions and do no harm. A mentality of “I will speak for you because I will be listened to” breaks down the rules and conditions required for effective collective action before it has an opportunity to take root. While “weakened” or “inferior” groups need those in power, those in power need to consider the individual with empathy.

A Guiding Star for Collective Action

As the discussion revisited the four issues identified at the beginning of the conference (AI, alienation and social isolation, antidemocratic populism/resurgence of authoritarianism, and attitudes toward capitalism/economic inequality), many participants agreed that each of the four share at least one common reason for being among the global challenges most in need of collective action: a lack of empathy on the part of a sufficient number of individuals to address them. A major cause of that missing or eroded empathy is the relatively recent retrenchment of American government leadership from multilateral processes begun in the days following 9/11, galvanized by the current political environment, and made contagious among allies.

Following this pattern of withdrawal in which the values of Western civilization (such as protecting dissent and giving voice to the voiceless) are no longer as actively espoused around the world, and to course correct the receding levels of empathy accompanying that retrenchment, a bigger universal vision—or guiding star—is necessary to help define humanity’s common purpose and motivate the collective actions necessary to meet the global challenges of the 21st and 22nd centuries. If Western values served that role (rightly or wrongly) and are no longer doing so, what replaces them? And what kinds of platforms or institutions will be designed to tackle the challenges with that new global vision in mind?

Whatever that vision may be, it must be defined in a manner similar to collective-action design: keeping individuals—not self-interest—at the center, remaining inclusive, and being equipped with the freedom to choose the best platforms for getting to that vision rather than constrained by preexisting norms inconsiderate of context or carried forward without good cause. Shared definitions, values, and ideas will start the conversation and bring the aspirational vision into focus—which could very well be agency plus empathy itself. Broad goals, human narratives that are not oversimplified, and helping the like-minded understand they are not alone can ensure the kind of buy-in to a global vision—and the collective actions that serve it—which best enhances the human condition.

This Readout and Recommendations summarizes the primary findings of the workshop as interpreted by the organizers. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this publication. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.



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Affiliations are listed for identification purposes only. Participants attended as individuals rather than as representatives of their governments or organizations.



About Us

The Stanley Center for Peace and Security partners with people, organizations, and the greater global community to drive policy progress in three issue areas—mitigating climate change, avoiding the use of nuclear weapons, and preventing mass violence and atrocities. The center was created in 1956 and maintains its independence while developing forums for diverse perspectives and ideas. To learn more about our recent publications and upcoming events, please visit stanleycenter.org.

