

Future of Institutions

DIALOGUE SUMMARY

Title/topic:

Post-Global Governance: New Planetary Institutions for the Climate

Organizers:

Berggruen Institute

Key takeaways:

This Dialogue sought to develop ideas for reformed, reimagined, and/or entirely new institutions of governance that can cope with the planetary scope and scale of climate change. The goal was to focus not on policies, but on innovative institutional architectures that might give human beings a better chance at stabilizing Earth's climate. How can we build institutions to govern the climate at the scale of the planet? What could effective, responsive, and accountable planetary institutions look like? How might they operate? How might they gain legitimacy?

The challenge(s):

Climate change is a fundamentally planetary problem: it emerges from a holistic vision of the planet as consisting of an almost infinitely complex, interlaced, and nested array of dynamically-interacting biological, chemical, energetic, and geological systems. This sense of the planetary, developed by Earth system scientists, biologists, and philosophers of science, reveals an interdependent whole that did not emerge from the intentional work of humans. As a result, climate change and other planetary phenomena cannot be managed by the fragmented system of politics now dominant on Earth (i.e., sovereign nation-states and the subnational and multilateral, global institutions to which they delegate authority). Even global institutions dedicated to managing climate change (i.e., the Paris Agreement) respond not to the planet or the climate, but to their nation-state members. This mismatch between the scale of the problem and the scale of institutions tasked with addressing the problem is proving catastrophic.

Insights for the Future of Institutions:

When organizing this Dialogue, we assumed that the conversation would focus on climate change mitigation (efforts to reduce the greenhouse gases that cause climate change). But Dialogue participants quickly made clear that this scope was insufficient on two levels:

- *Climate institutions that address mitigation alone cannot succeed.* Ignoring adaptation, losses and damages, climate financing, etc., leads to misguided institutional design that will hamper institutional effectiveness. One participant forcefully pointed out our blind spot: "Focusing on mitigation is a typical perspective of the Global North, where rich countries and people who live in them see Armageddon approaching. But Armageddon is already here in the developing world."
- *Considering climate change in isolation from other issues (e.g., biodiversity and poverty) is difficult and ineffectual.* Participants thought of these problems as connected and sought to design institutions with the wherewithal to think and act comprehensively. One participant explained that a problem only comprehensible through complex science is unlikely to be

governable by hierarchical bureaucracies with traditional, linear decision-making processes; indeed, attempts to rigidly control a complex system usually produce unintended consequences as individuals in the system “work around” these controls.

Applying an institutional lens to climate change revealed how the problem is not that our existing institutions have merely implemented the wrong policies, but rather that our existing institutions are structurally incapable of addressing the [planetary scale] challenges we face. Much more effort therefore needs to go into identifying new institutions (i.e., structures) that are fit for purpose. This work should focus on imagining the radically new institutions that we need, as well as the practical pathways to achieving them. At the same time, Dialogue participants emphasized that we should not limit our imaginations to what seems currently feasible. Under conditions of rapid change or crisis, the Overton Window may rapidly shift. In these circumstances, having blue-sky ideas at hand may be invaluable.

The Dialogue identified two gaps in the institutional ecosystem for climate governance and action, which is currently dominated by nation-states:

- *Global or planetary scale.* Weaknesses and failures of the existing UN System (most relevantly, the UNFCCC) left participants interested in a more robust planetary institutional arrangement.
- *Local level.* Institutions exist but generally lack the authority and resources to act sufficiently on behalf of residents and communities. Ideas like planetary institutions with ecological focuses or planet-wide redistribution toward local communities that participants floated could help to address those two gaps.

Solutions:

Applying an institutional lens to the problem of planetary climate change reveals the deficiency of the present institutional architecture of global governance. When pushed to think beyond new policies to address climate action, and instead to consider new institutions for climate governance, Dialogue participants displayed immense creativity in thinking beyond the status quo. When tasked with envisioning new institutions, Dialogue participants started with the *scope* of the problem and then considered the proper *scale* at which to tackle it, rather than trying to squeeze solutions into existing institutions which were not designed to tackle a problem of such scale.

The three presenters offered novel institutional models built from a state-of-the-art understanding of the dynamics of climate change’s causes and effects. They are:

- *“Planetary Stewardship Council”*: The Planetary Stewardship Council would focus explicitly on governing climate “tipping points” to prevent catastrophic climatic cascades. The Council would make deliberate, active interventions in the functioning of the Earth System rather than merely passively reducing the human footprint. Operating at the planetary scale, the Council mission would be to steer Spaceship Earth toward a curative path.
- *“Multispecies Planetary Governance”*: A system of governance that includes the interests of more-than-human living beings would radically transform the nature of politics. Two specific institutions would help to instantiate this multispecies governance:
 - *Ecoregion Assemblies* for each of the Earth’s fifteen major biomes would legislate biome-wide environmental standards. The Assemblies would be made up of representatives from national governments, indigenous peoples, and democratically elected proxies for human and non-human stakeholders.
 - *Earth System Council (ESC)* would be a new United Nations (UN) body with binding authority responsible for the protection and security of global environment and earth system.

The ESC would not have authority to enforce laws via sanctions or force — authority which is given the UN Security Council by Chapter VII of the UN Charter — though it could refer egregious crimes against the Earth to the UN Security Council for more dramatic enforcement.

- *“Planetary Redistribution”*: Central to both climate mitigation and adaptation are distributional questions. Any institutional response must be able to redistribute the resources necessary to address the causes and impacts of climate change. An institution for planetary redistribution would appropriate resources from national governments (e.g., via corporate profit expropriation, wealth taxes, or state-level mandatory contributions) and redistribute them to less well-off states and to sub-national institutions. It should promote robust action at the local level, where communities, local government institutions, non-state actors, and movements need the resources to address the problems caused by a changing climate. This multiscale architecture opens the possibility for the kinds of distributional responses that are immediately necessary for front-line communities. Currently, such responses are prevented by the state’s tendency to operate at the schedule of the elites.

These three proposals are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they are highly complementary. The proposals share critical contrasts with the existing institutional order:

- *They take seriously the fact that politics takes place on a planet*. Conditions on Earth both enable life and constrain life, but modern politics tries to ignore or deny our inescapably planetary condition. These proposals recognize Earth’s life-giving and life-constraining character, offering institutions that work with, rather than against, the planet. They suggest that we must integrate human institutions and planet Earth in some way, whether making Earth system processes (e.g., climate tipping points) the explicit object of governance or shaping institutions to ecosystemic features (e.g., biome-level governance).
- *They challenge the hegemony of the nation-state*, the primary institutional vehicle for governance today. Though these proposals do not reject the nation-state, they argue that adequate responses to climate change require dethroning the nation-state from its position of supremacy so that institutions at other scales (i.e., planetary or local) can govern effectively.
- *They are ambitious ideas for new institutions*. Creativity can flow when we are not bound to think in terms of mere tweaks to the status quo but are instead given the space to rethink the fundamental constitution of systems for governing collective life.

In addition to the three new institutions, ideas about institutions and the process of institutional design merit mention:

- Creating political institutions that address and act on behalf of the interests of non-humans.
- Coordinating actions of local (i.e., subnational) institutions, including both governmental and non-state actors.
- Identifying points where existing institutions can be reformed towards the holistic, planetary perspective taken by the presenters.
- Engaging with the Global South from the start of the process of institutional design and redesign.
- Investing in better planetary-level listening and information-gathering and information-sharing systems, as distinct from governance per se.
- Building self-regulating Information Technology Enabled Systems (ITES) that rely more on technology than on humans.

Participants:

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