



Personal Contribution to the Helsinki Process

**My views on what the Helsinki Group should stand for:  
Accelerated Global Problem-solving**

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From where I sit, the objective of the Helsinki Group process for the coming 2-3 years should be to actively push for the prompt exploration and adoption of new methodologies aimed at faster and better global problem-solving on our increasingly small and beleaguered planet.

### **1. Context: Addressing a Central Issue of Our Times**

Two big forces of change---the considerable population increase on an already stretched planet and an entirely different new world economy---are producing a big step-increase in the rate of change and in complexity of global affairs, and will do so even more dramatically over the decades to come.

Those two exponential forces put existing human institutions (nations states, governments, ministries, international institutions, any large hierarchy), which evolve only slowly and linearly, under massive pressure---and tend to overwhelm them. This has several negative consequences, the main one of which is the non-resolution of some twenty urgent global problems. Roughly a third of these have to do with how we share our planet (burning environmental issues); another third of which relate to how we share our humanity (urgent economic and social issues requiring a worldwide coalition for their effective solution); with a final third having to do with how we share our rulebook (important regulatory challenges urgently requiring a minimum critical mass of global rules to prevent free-riding and other negative consequences). See a sample list of these issues in [Annex 1](#) to this note.

Many of these global problems are make or break for all of us. Yet they all have technically and politically achievable solutions---even if those seem hard to achieve in the current set-up. The cost of solving these problems is affordable (2% of world GDP or so), and is far smaller than the eventually massive cost of leaving them unattended. And on closer examination, it appears that we cannot wait 30,40 or 50 years to solve them, but must solve them during the next twenty years.

Yet the current international system, which has four otherwise useful parts, has not produced solutions to these global issues, and is unlikely to do so in this twenty year frame:

- Treaties and conventions are slow and often un-enforced, and limited in their coverage.
- Big UN conferences raise awareness about problems, but do not bring about detailed action plans for solving them.
- G8, G20 and other such groupings of key countries are too reactive, off-and-on and superficial to be able to tackle burning long-term planetary issues in depth.
- And the world's 45-odd multilateral institutions, while doing useful work, are for various reasons not in a position to take them on and solve them on their own, while often being small and weak in relation to the sheer magnitude of the issues.

More generally, on our shrinking and ever more complex planet, there is an increasingly threatening disconnect between the territoriality and short-term electoral cycles of the nation states, and the non-territoriality and long-term nature of urgent global issues. This is a, perhaps the central issue of our times---and the one that the Helsinki Group effort should try to address.

## **2. Accelerated Global Problem-solving: an Illustration**

There is one type of solution to this conundrum that will *not* work: to remedy this disconnect by setting up a *world government* that would sit on top of the nation states and push them to behave in a more planet-minding way. Such a world government would sink under its own complexity and overload, and may in any case not be a realistic proposition.

A second, more promising category of solutions would be *issue-by-issue approaches* designed to put nation states and their politicians under more pressure to act with a planetary perspective---even in the absence of a world government.

For illustration purposes, here is one example of these issue-by-issue approaches. Imagine setting up---for each of the twenty or so urgent global issues---permanent tri-sector networks (grouping government, civil society and business experts highly familiar with the topic in question, and called, for instance, Global Issues Networks or GINs).

Those GINs would be convened by a multilateral institution (merely in a facilitator role) and would then go through three phases. First, using a specific methodology (Too long to describe in this note), they would take the problem in question apart and derive the vision of its worldwide set of solutions. Based on this, they would then emit very detailed norms and standards designed to coax nation states and other players into the direction of this set of solutions. In a final phase, these networks, which would be flexible creatures and in no way new institutions of the traditional kind, would become like observatories and rating agencies that would establish league tables and rate all nation states (and other major players) against the norms and standards, and name-and-shame those that are violating them.

The power of the GINs would spring from their ability to concentrate the world's best experts from government, business and civil society intensely and for many years on an issue; from its use of a methodology which would make demands on them as global citizens rather than as representatives of the entity that sent them; and from the sheer existence of some twenty GINs using by and large the same methodology and interacting between themselves. Indeed, with some twenty GINs, multi-issues ratings and league tables of nation states could be produced, and provide all of mankind for the first time---and in a very solemn naming-and-shaming way---a detailed picture of which nation states are good global citizens and which are not.

This could then give rise to powerful reputation and sanction effects: consumers, companies, pension funds and even other governments could sanction the rogue states (in an expanded sense) that the ratings identify; and, even more important,

the voters in those rogue states would become better informed and thus more able to judge the global citizenship behaviour of their own government, and act upon that knowledge during the next elections or in other ways. One hope would be that this system may even provide voters with a second way to judge aspiring political candidates, by equipping them to ask them global questions besides local ones; and that “new politics”---whereby one is first a global citizen, second a national one, and third only a local one---may gradually emerge as future generations as they get the hang and make use of the GIN approach and information.

There are other such issue-by-issue approaches, such as the more traditional idea of setting up multiple (merely inter-governmental) G20s---one for each of the twenty or so urgent global problems, always with a G8 core, and with the composition of the twelve other countries depending on the topic. This would also increase the pressure on nation-states, but in an arguably more traditional and less powerful way than GINs would.

### **3. The Global Governance Debate: Where Accelerated Global Problem-solving Fits in**

There is a broader context to these ideas. Besides the Helsinki Group process, there are several international taskforces and brainstorming efforts currently underway to re-think what is often called “global governance”. Actually, more than a dozen such exercises are currently going on under that or related headings. From that experience, one can tentatively distinguish four tracks---here is a simplified description of them.

#### *Track 1: The “Global Public Goods Track”*

This first track sees the global governance challenge mostly as resulting from *market failure*, that is, from “global public goods” being undersupplied. (That is, the global problems such as those referred to above and listed in Annex 1 are labelled, in economist jargon, as global public goods). That track then seeks to resolve the undersupply issue mostly by searching for new sources of finance (e.g. global taxes). The main shortcomings of this track are its premature insistence that money is the issue (rather than finding solutions to the problems in the first place) and that it has been mired in ultimately unhelpful technical jargon. This track has the largest literature, and is the oldest and most populated one, but---even after several years---does not seem to be creating much traction with world leaders. One of the (better, most useful) examples of this track: French-Swedish Task Force on International Public Goods; and the work done by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

#### *Track 2: The “Reform-the-Institutions Track”*

This second track sees the global governance challenges we’re facing mostly as resulting from the *failure of existing international institutions* (UN, IMF, World Bank, WTO...). It seeks to resolve this failure through reforming those institutions, by making them either more effective or more open to poor country voices. Its main shortcoming of this track is that it fails to realize that international institutions are only a small part of the global governance challenge, and that many of the reform

proposals are in fact *de minimis* in the light of the daunting size of the world's most urgent global problems. Example of this track: many aspects of the UN Reform Panel which recently reported to Kofi Annan belong to this way of thinking. And in recent years, many protesters and politicians have been prone to fall into that track--failing to see that the biggest problem we confront is not just the malfunctioning of the world's smallish international institutions, but more ominously the very behavior of the planet's 200 or so nation-states and of their politicians in the face of a new generation of inherently global issues (see track four below).

### *Track 3: The "Give-Globalisation-a-Human-Face Track"*

This third track sees the global governance challenge mostly as a *failure to balance economic forces of globalisation* with sufficiently strong social and sustainable development counter-measures, and seeks to resolve this failure through the formulation and recommendation of such balancing measures. Its main shortcomings of this track lie in its reliance on partial (if not false) diagnosis, and in its tendency to come out mostly with un-actionable and overly general exhortations---many of which have been heard many times before. Example: the Task Force and Report chaired by the ILO's Juan Somavia on the Social Dimensions of Globalisation.

### *Track 4: The "Accelerated Global Problem-solving Track"*

This fourth track sees the global governance challenge mostly as a *failure of nation states themselves*, whose territorial instincts and short-term electoral cycles do not sit well with the new generation of burning global problems we're suddenly facing---indeed, these global problems are the opposite: they are non-territorial, and long-term.

No proponents of this track advocate the creation of a world government---for essentially the same reasons as were given in Section 2 above. But some proponents are looking for substitutes in the form of *global contraptions* floating on top of the nation states---for example, the expansion of the G8 to more countries; its transformation into a G8 of Regions; or the creation of an Economic and Social Security Council next to the traditional UN Security Council. Let's call that type of ideas *sub-track 4A*, merely for the purposes of this note.

Other proponents of this fourth track however do not believe that these new 4A-type contraptions are the answer, because, like the world government idea they are somehow substituting for, they are too broad and too likely to be overwhelmed by their fixing-all-the-issues complexity.

Instead, these other proponents seek to resolve the nation state failure issue by advocating *new issue-by-issue mechanisms* that could put the nation states themselves under pressure to act less selfishly and with a longer-term planetary perspective than they do now when it comes to the two dozen or so most urgent global problems. The Global Issues Networks (GINs) ideas given as an illustration in Section 2 of this note are precisely part of this train of thought, which one could label as *sub-track 4B*.

The main shortcoming of the fourth track, whether in its 4A or 4B version, is that it requires more lateral out-of-the-box thinking than is common in academic and political circles, especially when it comes to 4B type ideas. Even though it has a long intellectual history going back to the Bretton-Woods debates after WW2, this fourth track is in that sense the more novel one among the four (for instance, the GIN methodology hinted at above builds on many recent innovations, including lessons from Internet self-regulation and from the ratings business).

That being said, this novelty can turn into an asset more than a liability---the premium the fourth track places on creativity and lateral thinking, especially in the case of the 4B sub-track, has actually made its influence grow over the recent period. Because imagination is what we most sorely lack at this critical juncture.

So in the context of these four tracks, the Helsinki Group process, should, in my opinion focus on the fourth, and especially, although not exclusively, on its sub-track 4B, that is, that dealing with new, innovative issue-by-issue mechanisms like the GINs or the multiple G20s.

But needless to say, this should not prevent the Helsinki Group process from also keeping an eye and an open-mind on the other three tracks---and on the whole gamut of global governance-related brainstormings and task forces that are ongoing: actually, the Helsinki Group's future platform role (see below) could include an observatory and tracking function spanning all of these.

At any rate, the best way for the Helsinki Group, whose main asset is its wide and open-minded membership, to make itself useful or even indispensable would be to function over the next 2-3 years as the *pre-eminent open-source platform for this type of thinking*. That is, for thinking at the level of the *generic methodological breakthroughs* that we so badly need if we're going to solve the pressing global problems on an increasingly unbalanced, unsustainable and dangerous planet before it's too late.

And there are indeed *many ways* in which the Helsinki Group could creatively structure this platform role---with many individual targets and constituencies that it could aim at in an organized way (I have not written up that part to keep this note brief and general).

By contrast, I do not see much potential for the Helsinki Group *by itself* to produce more detailed suggestions and recommendations on some of the twenty or so issues, or on clusters thereof. Why? Because the Group has neither the set-up nor the capacity to do more than dabble at that level of detail, and because it may even discredit itself by being all over the map and into many smallish details, with no critical mass of thinking. This would also betray the early thinking behind the creation of the Helsinki Group, which was to focus on "new approaches to global problem-solving".

Now *that* was, and still is, a worthwhile cause for the Group.

**Annex 1:** A list of Global Problems

## ANNEX 1

### **20 years, 20 issues**

#### Sharing our Planet: Issues involving the global commons

- Global warming
- Biodiversity and ecosystem losses
- Fisheries depletion
- Deforestation
- Water deficits
- Maritime safety and pollution

#### Sharing our humanity: Issues whose size and urgency requires a global commitment

- Massive step-up in the fight against poverty
- Peace-keeping, conflict prevention
- Education for all
- Global infectious diseases
- Digital divide
- Natural disaster prevention and mitigation

#### Sharing our rulebook: Issues needing a global regulatory approach

- Re-inventing taxation
- Biotechnology rules
- Global financial architecture
- Illegal drugs
- Trade, investment and competition rules
- Intellectual property rights
- E-commerce rules
- International labor and migration rules

Source: J.F.Rischar, High Noon: 20 Global Problems, 20 Years to Solve Them, Basic Books, NY 2002.

There are other such lists, for example: Inge Kaul et al., Providing Global Public Goods, Oxford, 2003.