

The Other World Wide Web: Global Public Policy Networks

by Wolfgang H. Reinicke

Whining is a central feature of the debate on how best to meet the challenges of globalization. Traditional political institutions, we are told, are ever less capable of dealing with all the problems that lie ahead. The nation-state? *Passé*. International organizations? A story of failure rather than success. There are few newspaper or journal contributions that do not leave us with a certain sense of helplessness. Is this a form of millennial depression?

By concentrating on these old and well-worn stories, we may be missing a quiet revolution. Equating political change with political institutions masks a simple truth: Individuals and groups, not bureaucracies or formal institutions, drive innovation and learning. Change is a bottom-up process, not a top-down steering committee.

The advent of global public policy networks is a case in point. These networks are loose alliances of government agencies, international organizations, corporations, and elements of civil society such as nongovernmental organizations, professional associations, or religious groups that join together to achieve what none can accomplish on its own. Surveys by the World Bank in 1999 identified some 50 dif-

WOLFGANG H. REINICKE is a senior partner in the World Bank's Corporate Strategy Group and director of the U.N. Vision Project on Global Public Policy Networks (www.globalpublicpolicy.net). The author thanks the project's research team, in particular Thorsten Benner and Jan Martin Witte, and his colleagues at the World Bank for assistance with this article.

ferent global public policy networks, ranging in focus from crime to fisheries and public health. From the World Commission on Dams to the Roll Back Malaria initiative, these mostly new groupings thrive in a borderless environment and capitalize on technological innovation—the very conditions that hamper policy makers in traditional institutions. Perhaps most important, global public policy networks give once ignored groups from civil society a greater voice, thus narrowing the participatory gap and “democratic deficit” for which international decision making is often criticized. Although their objectives and budgets are still relatively modest, their record of success holds the promise not only of untangling a knot of global problems, but of improving the principles and methods of global governance.

BUREAUCRATIC GROWING PAINS

Most global public policy networks have emerged over the last decade, experimenting with new ways to gather knowledge and disseminate information on specific issues. As public policy becomes increasingly influenced by global conditions, formal policy-making institutions—national legislatures, government agencies, and multilateral institutions, among others—often lack the scope, speed, and contacts to acquire and use crucial information needed to formulate effective policy.

First, growing social and economic integration around the world has extended the geographic scope of public policy far beyond national borders. As a result, decision makers must struggle to understand and respond to complex new challenges whose origins may lie far beyond their jurisdictions. The environmental arena offers some classic instances. For example, the release of chlorofluorocarbons in any one nation contributes to ozone depletion and ultimately to global warming, which affects all countries. Trapped by the territoriality of their power, policy makers in traditional settings often have little choice but to address the symptoms rather than the causes of public problems.

Second, the frenetic pace of technological change has drastically reduced the amount of time that policy makers have to develop new competencies or make key decisions. Regulators often find themselves playing “catch up” with the private sector, placing a premium on timely information about new developments in the markets they oversee. Recall the sudden and precipitous collapse of the Barings Group, a major U.K. bank, in early 1995. A once venerable financial institution, Barings

was crippled by a lone trader's gamble on the direction of Japanese stock prices and interest rates. Yet financial regulators—traditionally focused on credit risk—were ill-equipped to assess or cope with the potential downside of technological advances in the financial services industry. In particular, regulators did not foresee how the use of innovative products such as derivatives—financial instruments whose value reflects that of other underlying assets—could lead to the abrupt Barings debacle.

Third, in addition to geographic and time constraints, policy makers must tackle more and more issues that cut across areas of bureaucratic or disciplinary expertise. An issue such as international trade policy can have profound economic, ecological, and security effects, all of which must be considered in the course of a policy debate. Although the intersection between international trade and domestic labor concerns, for example, is widely acknowledged, it remains highly contentious. Consider the bitter debates over the North American Free Trade Agreement in the early 1990s. Who had the expertise to develop policy dealing with international trade and workers' rights? The Mexican Congress? The Office of the U.S. Trade Representative? The International Labour Organization? None of the above? Reactions to the recent World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle only emphasize the extent to which trade policy has become a lightning rod for issues ranging from human rights to environmental degradation. This broadening of policy debates challenges the focus and structure of typical national or multilateral bureaucracies.

NETWORK SOLUTIONS

Global public policy networks are helping policy makers meet these new challenges. Their broad membership allows them to tap information and expertise from a variety of backgrounds, providing them with a more complete picture of particular policy issues and giving voice to previously unheard groups. By connecting groups that might not otherwise deal with one another, they also promote learning and collaboration. Health workers at a Peruvian NGO, World Bank consultants in Washington, researchers at a private French laboratory—each may hold part of an innovative mechanism to prevent cholera outbreaks. Global public policy networks help bring them together. Moreover, the networks' typically nonhierarchical organization allows them to acquire, process, and disseminate new knowledge more rapidly than mainstream policy

bureaucracies. These characteristics give networks a particular advantage in three essential areas of global policy making: managing knowledge, overcoming market and intergovernmental coordination failures, and broadening participation.

Managing Knowledge

Global public policy networks have already proved their importance by consolidating relevant knowledge and disseminating it on a global scale. Consider the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). One of the oldest (founded in 1971) and most respected global policy networks, the CGIAR coordinates and helps finance the work of 16 independent agricultural research centers around the world. Its members meet twice a year to exchange views and discuss research agendas. Over the years, the centers forming part of this network have produced groundbreaking agricultural innovations. The International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines, for example, began to develop a new rice plant in 1989 that is expected to far surpass the typical production plateaus of even today's high-yield varieties. Currently undergoing further refinements, this "super rice" is expected to be in the fields by 2003. Other global public policy networks fulfilling similar roles in their respective fields include the Global Water Partnership—a network made up of governments, multilateral agencies, development banks, NGOs, and research organizations seeking to promote sustainable water management practices—and the Clean Air Initiative in Latin America.

But when public policy outcomes are at stake, agreeing on the "correct" knowledge can be a messy business. Financial regulation, environmental protection, and public health standards, for instance, have all become matters of significant transnational debate. A global public policy network can sort through conflicting perspectives, help hammer out a consensus, and translate that consensus into actions its members will be more inclined to support and implement. The value of a consensus-building network rests not on its ability to offer quick solutions, but on its creation of an environment that enables parties in conflict to reach an eventual agreement. Often such networks arise out of a crisis or stalemate, when those in conflict realize that no group can resolve the issue alone. The World Commission on Dams is a good example.

In the early 1990s, the construction of dams became one of the most conflict-ridden issues in the development community. The breakdown of dialogue between NGOs, the private sector, and international orga-

nizations such as the World Bank was imposing considerable costs on all parties. Dam construction contracts for private developers were drying up, NGOs were devoting considerable resources to sustain campaigns against large dams, and the World Bank was facing increasing difficulty in supporting related loans in the face of growing public pressure. This set of circumstances prompted the World Conservation Union (an environmental policy network made up of scientists, governments, and NGOs) and a small group of World Bank staff to experiment with a more inclusive forum for negotiations. An informal workshop in 1997 brought champions and critics of large dams together for an initial dialogue. A year later, the World Commission on Dams (wcd) was born. The wcd has a two-year mandate ending in June 2000 to spur the development of new standards for dam construction worldwide. To fulfill this goal, the commission is compiling detailed case studies of 15 large dams from Norway to Pakistan to South Africa to the United States and is assessing their performance and impact on local and regional development. A broader survey of 150 dams is also in the works. The commission has conducted regional consultations in Brazil and Sri Lanka to solicit feedback on dams from interested groups and individuals. All significant aspects of the wcd (membership, structure, and finance) are trisectoral in nature—that is, they involve governments, international organizations, and private groups. Although many observers doubted that the commission's work would extend beyond one meeting, today the wcd is recognized as an innovative response to a thorny global policy issue.

Correcting Market and Intergovernmental Failures

Trisectoral networks also provide a valuable public service by supporting the creation and deepening of markets that would otherwise likely not develop and by remedying the weaknesses and failures of existing private and public arrangements. Microlending networks, for example, help correct credit market failures by documenting and disseminating best practices on lending to the poor. The Microcredit Summit, held in Washington, D.C., in early 1997, brought together some 2,900 people from 137 countries and 1,500 organizations to discuss mechanisms for expanding credit for self-employment and other financial and business services to the world's poorest families. The meeting also launched an ambitious "global fulfillment campaign" to provide an additional 100 million poor families with access to credit by 2005. To promote the exchange of best practices, the network

has established “microcredit summit councils” for different sectors, including international financial institutions, NGOs, governments, and educational and religious organizations.

Similarly, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)—a network connecting environmental NGOs, private firms, governments, and professional associations—is helping develop uniform standards for assessing the environmental impact of private corporations. Although many firms are voluntarily producing and releasing such assessments, each employs its own indicators and measurements, making it virtually impossible for investors, environmentalists, or consumers to compare reports and make informed decisions. Established in 1997, the GRI plans to complete its “corporate environmental sustainability” guidelines by the end of 1999.

Global public policy networks can also help implement existing international accords. The Global Environment Facility (GEF), for example, provides grants and concessional financing for environmental projects in countries seeking to adhere to international treaties on climate change, biological diversity, and ozone depletion. It also administers a small grants program for projects by NGOs and community groups. Since 1991, the GEF has funded approximately 500 projects in 120 countries, disbursing more than \$2 billion in financing. Funds provided by GEF have promoted the development of solar energy use in Argentina, the construction of port waste facilities in eastern Caribbean countries, and the protection of Indonesia’s coral reefs. Additional cofinancing for GEF projects has reached \$5 billion, with 40 percent coming from recipient countries. Administered by the World Bank, the U.N. Development Programme, and the U.N. Environment Programme, the GEF is governed by a council of 18 recipient and 14 nonrecipient nations.

The Roll Back Malaria (RBM) initiative, a policy network spearheaded by the World Health Organization (WHO), is seeking to overcome decades of limited financing and poor implementation in the fight against malaria, particularly in Africa. According to the WHO, most victims of the disease die because of poor access to health services or simply because of inadequate precautionary measures. Only a year old, the initiative is establishing partnerships among government agencies, multilateral organizations, NGOs, and the private sector to upgrade health services, intensify the use of bednetting (nets coated with insecticides), and develop vaccines as well as new drugs for those who are already infected. Although such efforts primarily appear to help developing countries,

advanced nations will also benefit from greater control over malaria. As global trade brings countries closer together, diseases will tend not to discriminate according to a country's per capita income. (A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention official was recently quoted as saying there is "no question" that malaria will penetrate the United States in the next decade.) Though it is too early to assess its full impact, the RBM represents a trisectoral effort to correct a recurrent multilateral failure.

Broadening Participation

Ultimately, trisectoral networks embody an effort to determine what is in the global public interest and how it can be achieved effectively and efficiently. To reach such a consensus, successful global public policy networks bring together groups that often work at cross purposes—typically, the NGO community versus multilateral organizations or the private sector versus government. The networks' inclusiveness lends legitimacy to ensuing policy discussions and increases the likelihood that all parties will accept the outcomes. The Global Water Partnership (GWP), for example, has created regional advisory committees in seven countries so that local organizations can contribute to the sharing of best practices on water management. For global public policy networks to maintain their credibility, broad participation is important not only in membership but in financing and structure as well. The World Commission on Dams provides a strong example of participatory practices: Its members share funding responsibilities, and all sectors participated in formulating the network's mandate and selecting its leadership.

SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL NETWORK

Global governance is not a zero-sum game. Embracing global public policy networks does not imply a "power shift" away from governments and international organizations toward civil society and the private sector. Trisectoral networks are meant to complement traditional public policy institutions, not replace them. They help governments and multilateral agencies to manage risks, take advantage of opportunities presented by technological change, be more responsive to their constituents, and promote change within bureaucracies. New networks may also emerge to help traditional policy makers address cutting-edge global challenges, such as transnational crime, money laundering, and the furious debate over biotechnology and genetically modified foods.

Mindful of these benefits, governments are throwing more weight behind global public policy networks. Led by Germany and Norway, national governments account for 40 percent of funding for the World Commission on Dams. A number of Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries strongly support the development of new vaccines for malaria and other diseases. The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency is among the principal sponsors of the Global Water Partnership, while the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations support a regional GWP network.

Multilateral organizations in particular recognize that global public policy networks provide them with the ideal means through which to reposition themselves and sharpen their missions. U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan has expressed strong support for such initiatives, and World Bank President James Wolfensohn has made connecting “coalitions for change” an explicit priority of his second term.

From the networks’ perspective, multilateral organizations are a crucial source of support. The World Health Organization played a central role in the development of the Roll Back Malaria initiative, and both the Global Water Partnership and the World Commission on Dams received strong early backing from the World Bank. The global reach and knowledge of international organizations provide a solid foundation for them to convene and facilitate new networks. Less than 10 years old in most cases, global public policy networks remain in relative infancy. They need the institutional and personal leadership that international organizations can provide.

But leadership, individual and institutional alike, can also turn into a liability. Once a network has passed the early hurdles and established itself as a powerful voice on a particular global issue, its founders must be ready to step back and recruit constituents from other sectors for leadership roles. This form of “leading from behind” has proved successful. Both the World Conservation Union and the World Bank pared back their involvement in the World Commission on Dams after its inception, thereby solidifying the network’s perceived legitimacy and impartiality. The roles of individuals and organizations in a network can change over time. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that both the World Conservation Union and the World Bank will again become formally involved once implementation of the WCD’s dam construction standards becomes the network’s principal task.

Given the demonstrated contributions of global public policy networks, governments and international organizations share an interest in ensuring their long-term financial support and in providing the seed money needed to get a network off the ground. Although such initial funding often comes from a single source, more varied sources of financial support are especially important when the network's primary purpose is to build consensus around a policy issue. To preserve the WCD's credibility, its funding is distributed among government agencies, multilateral organizations, the private corporations, and NGOs and foundations. Such strict funding arrangements are less crucial for networks focused on policy implementation. The Global Environment Facility, mainly a financing mechanism supporting intergovernmental treaties, is funded entirely by governments. Given the GEF's mandate, this single source does not undermine the network's standing.

THE STRENGTH OF WEAK TIES

Economic sociologist Mark Granovetter suggested more than 25 years ago that "those to whom we are weakly tied are more likely to move in circles different from our own and will thus have access to information different from that which we receive." Acquiring information from geographically distant and culturally diverse sources is not just politically correct hand-wringing—it is a key advantage in global public policy making. Through the "strength of weak ties," networks take maximum advantage of the tensions and differences among disparate groups. Though trisectoral networks are no panacea for all global problems—some millennial depression may yet be warranted—their emergence could represent the early skirmishes of a revolution in global public policy making.

Unfortunately, although inclusiveness may be these networks' greatest contribution to global public policy, the mere facade of inclusiveness may prove their fatal weakness. It should come as no surprise that there is a tendency for Western governments, large multinational corporations, and prominent NGOs to dominate these networks. And though their presence may fulfill the "trisectoral" requirement of a global public policy network, this dominance means that many voices remain silent. To ensure their success, global public policy networks must indeed be global. The inclusion of less powerful yet important groups from the developing world is critical not just

for designing policies but even more so for implementing them. Central governments, for example, should encourage state and local leaders—the ones likely to be involved in seeing policies through—to join the debate. A lesser-known NGO in a poor nation may hold the key to solving an ancient economic or environmental puzzle. Will we ever know? Unless global public policy networks constantly bolster their ranks with new voices, they risk becoming as sluggish as the traditional bureaucracies they now seek to help.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Because of their relatively recent emergence, global public policy networks have not been the subject of systematic analysis. The **U.N. Vision Project on Global Public Policy Networks** seeks to fill this gap by assembling the lessons learned from existing networks. Access its Web site for case studies, publications, current research papers, and Web links related to global public policy networks. The project elaborates on Wolfgang H. Reinicke's *Global Public Policy: Governing Without Government?* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), which, on the basis of three case studies (banking regulation, dual-use trade, and money laundering), argues for innovative forms of global cooperation. See the Web site of the Carnegie Endowment's **Managing Global Issues Project** for another effort at tackling the growing complexity of transnational governance.

For a discussion of the challenges facing traditional bureaucracies in a fast-changing global environment, see Christopher K. Ansell and Steven Weber's "**Organizing International Politics: Sovereignty and Open Systems**" (*International Political Science Review*, January 1999) and Maryann K. Cusimano's contributions to *Beyond Sovereignty: Issues for a Global Agenda* (Boston: Bedford, 1999). Charles Heckscher details how private firms have moved from hierarchical and unwieldy bureaucracies to more flexible and interactive organizations in "**Defining the Post-Bureaucratic Type**" in Charles Heckscher and Anne Donnellon, eds., *The Post-Bureaucratic Organization: New Perspectives On Organizational Change* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1994). Mark Granovetter's "**The Strength of Weak Ties**" (*American Journal of Sociology*, May 1973) offers a classic description of the organizational advantages of networks. Tanja A.

Börzel's "Organizing Babylon: On the Different Conceptions of Policy Networks" (*Public Administration*, Summer 1998) and Mark Thatcher's "The Development of Policy Network Analyses: From Modest Origins to Overarching Frameworks" (*Journal of Theoretical Politics*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1998) provide excellent literature reviews of the analysis of policy networks at the national and European levels.

The pioneering work of Ernst B. Haas has long emphasized that knowledge and learning are key to improving global governance. See his book *When Knowledge is Power: Three Models of Change in International Organizations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) and his work with Peter M. Haas, "Learning to Learn: Improving International Governance" (*Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, September 1995). Steve Waddell and L. David Brown analyze how locally based trisectoral networks can contribute to learning in developing countries in "Fostering Intersectoral Partnering: A Guide to Promoting Cooperation Among Governments, Business, and Civil Society Actors" (*IDR Reports*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1997).

For links to these and other relevant Web sites, as well as a comprehensive index of related FOREIGN POLICY articles, access www.foreignpolicy.com.