

Governance Innovations to Protect Our Planet

An Experts Roundtable in Support of *Our Common Agenda*, 18 February 2022

Observations from the (Interim) Work of the Climate Governance Commission

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Introduction: Why *Global* Climate Governance?

In the *Our Common Agenda* Report,² the UN Secretary-General describes our current, shared planetary predicament as the greatest challenge since the Second World War:

“We are at an inflection point in history... humanity faces a stark and urgent choice: a breakdown or a breakthrough... The disastrous effects of a changing climate – famine, floods, fires and extreme heat – threaten our very existence... Humanity’s welfare – and indeed, humanity’s very future – depend on solidarity and working together as a global family to achieve common goals.”³

Indeed, Canadian thinker Seth Klein has suggested that we view our efforts to address the climate crisis as akin to waging “A Good War,” learning from the lessons of the Second World War, by analogy, to understand the political, social and economic mobilisation necessary in the face of a grave existential threat.⁴ Some of the key questions Klein asks include:

“What did the marshaling of all our economic and human resources look like during the Second World War, and what might a similar deployment look like today? How was it paid for? What kind of leadership did it require? How was public support and national unity secured? What did we do for returning soldiers, and are there lessons for just transition for fossil fuel workers today? What was/is the role of Indigenous people and youth, then and now? And what are the war’s cautionary tales, the warnings of things that brought us shame, that we do not wish to repeat?”⁵

Klein’s analysis takes a Canadian national focus, whereas a systematic global focus on these questions is required, also with an inquiry into the novel nature of our current shared challenges. And, as the Secretary-General notes, such efforts must be firmly grounded in global solidarity—we must work together as a “global family.” As our shared global governance represents the key

¹ More information on the Climate Governance Commission (CGC) can be found here: <https://globalchallenges.org/initiatives/partnerships/climate-governance-commission/>.

² United Nations (2021) ‘Our Common Agenda. Report of the Secretary General’, *United Nations* (hereinafter, “OCA Report”). Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/un75/common-agenda>.

³ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴ Seth Klein (2020), *A Good War*. Toronto: ECW Press.

⁵ Ibid. See: <https://www.sethklein.ca/book>.

frameworks for global solidarity and cooperation, innovative new perspectives, deploying new levels of collective wisdom and ingenuity, will be required tackle current existential planetary risks. The Climate Governance Commission (CGC) seeks to be pioneering in this respect, aiming to “fill a crucial gap in confronting the global climate emergency by developing, proposing and building partnerships that promote feasible, high impact global governance solutions for urgent and effective climate action to limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C or less.”⁶

Our core global institutions and contemporary global governance approaches are – in fact – still largely responding to the last world war, rather than mobilizing and being fit for purpose to address the truly unparalleled ecological threats we confront, based on objective science (see below).⁷ Further, since the initiation of the CGC (with an initial 2019 strategy session in Seoul at the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI), headed by Ban Ki Moon) and the wide-ranging expert and stakeholder consultations conducted since then, it has indeed been clear that policy communities are still largely taking a perspective from the nation-state “looking up” to the international. Taking the global perspective of the planetary (and the underlying planetary science) as the starting vantage point is a significant – and badly needed – shift in perspective.

The CGC Interim Report, *Governing Our Climate Future: Interim Report of the Climate Governance Commission* (October 2021) explored a wide range of global governance innovation proposals across various thematic areas implicated in the climate challenge, addressing a range of Klein’s questions; for example, the mobilization of sufficient levels of global finance, facilitating the necessary labour markets transitions at scale, notions of security, legal accountability, international institutional reform, among others.⁸ Proposals were grouped under the following categories:

- 1) Global Economic and Development Dimensions
- 2) Strengthening International Law
 - a. Enhanced Use of Existing Institutions and New Legal Institutions
 - b. New Legal Paradigms
- 3) Using Existing Architecture, Reformed and New Institutions
- 4) “Bottom-Up Pathways”

Some of the proposals set out in the Interim Report are new or relatively new, some are of an older vintage and are well-studied in the academic and policy literature (for example, proposals and arguments on the need for a global environment agency). They include a scope of global governance innovation proposals that could theoretically be implemented in the nearer or longer-

⁶ See: <https://globalchallenges.org/initiatives/partnerships/climate-governance-commission/>.

⁷ Indeed, the UN Charter itself has remained unreformed for 76 years, despite its Art. 109(3) which provided for a Charter review conference within 10 years of adoption. For comprehensive proposals on an update of our core global governance architecture, see: Lopez-Claros, A., Dahl, A. and Groff, M. (2020) *Global Governance and the Emergence of Global Institutions for the 21st Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available at: [doi:10.1017/9781108569293](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108569293).

⁸ *Governing our Climate Future: Interim Report of the Climate Governance Commission* (hereinafter, “Interim Report”), 2021, is available here: <https://globalchallenges.org/governing-our-climate-future/>.

term,⁹ and the Interim Report and the work of the CGC itself has sought to build a powerful, multi-faceted and global “community of practice” that is invested and may already be working on the implementation of many of the proposals featured. Most of the individual global governance innovation proposals highlighted in the Interim Report, if implemented, could alone be transformative to the global climate action landscape.¹⁰

Risk Perception/Tolerance and What the Science is Telling Us

It is still unclear that general publics around the world, and policy- and decision-makers – even those involved in climate policy – understand the levels of risk we are currently running in relation to our shared ecological challenges. A Global Challenges Foundation *Global Catastrophic Risks Report* draws the following comparison between our risk tolerance in international aviation versus in relation to international ecological safety:

“After years of effort and considerable resources devoted to airplane safety, we have reached a point where 27 planes crash on average every year. If dying in a flight accident was as likely as a 3°C global temperature increase, then the number of people dying in airplanes every year would be 15,000,000.”¹¹

In the Foreword to the CGC Interim Report, noted climate and planetary scientist Johan Rockström summarizes our current predicament – including the global governance gap – in the following terms:

“Humanity is in a dire fix. We are rapidly running out of global carbon space to have any chance of reaching a safe landing zone for the world on a planet with a climate system holding the “well-below 2 degrees Celsius” global warming line. The IPCC AR6 report shows we have reached the warmest temperature on Earth in the last 100,000 years, and that we are being hit by the consequences harder and more often than was earlier expected. Risks of irreversible changes and tipping points can no longer be excluded. At 1.5 degrees Celsius we are very likely committing all future generations to at least two metres of sea level rise. *We must admit that 50 years of global governance efforts for climate and ecological safety have so far not generated the sustainable transformation required. New ideas are urgently needed* (emphasis added).”¹²

⁹ Ibid. For example, the “Bottom-Up Pathways” proposals (e.g., mechanism to scale up and diffuse national governance mechanisms like Climate Councils and key “vital policies” across nations, at scale) and various proposals under existing international architecture (e.g., better connection trade and climate regimes), would theoretically be implementable on a shorter scale horizon than, e.g., establishing a new credible and effective global environment agency.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Global Catastrophic Risks 2018*, Global Challenges Foundation, p. 24, available here: <https://globalchallenges.org/wp-content/uploads/GCF-Annual-report-2018-1.pdf>.

¹² Johan Rockström, Professor Earth System Science, University of Potsdam, and Director Potsdam Institute Climate Impact Research (PIK). Interim Report, p. 6.

As Rockström notes, recent extreme weather events and planetary Earth System data have shown – alarmingly – that predicted changes are happening much more rapidly than scientists had previously expected, defying “worst-case climate models.”¹³ Planetary (systems) science is advancing fast,¹⁴ but often only to show us how badly we have likely already marred our collective future, and also how much we do not know, for example, about interacting planetary system tipping points, and risks of moving into calamitous “hothouse earth” scenarios.¹⁵

Conclusion: Planetary Urgency and Need for Governance Paradigm Shifts

The difficulties of multilateral collective action and resistance to strong global (climate) governance is well known, and as such the CGC Interim Report diagnoses this as a key international climate action gap:

“The climate governance gap: To bridge the climate policy gap, and ensure effective climate policies at a global scale, purposeful and functional governance mechanisms at a global level are urgently needed. Currently, existing governance structures are not up to the task.”¹⁶

The grave and unprecedented concrete circumstances – representing a challenge that humanity has never before faced – beg a series of paradigm shifts in the ways we think about our collective future and our quintessentially global planetary climate and related ecological crises. One of the fundamental paradigm shifts needed in our thinking is about the possibilities of global climate and planetary ecological governance.

Princeton academic Anne-Marie Slaughter diagnosed more than a decade ago the “globalization paradox” where we, as an international community, are in profound need of more global governance, but harbour a deep fear of it.¹⁷ Such an aversion, given what is at stake, is irrational, yet entrenched – and deeply ill-suited to current planetary crisis conditions. Part of the solution is greater awareness and clear-sighted discussion among policy communities of this blind spot and related psychological or conceptual barriers, as well as building communities of practice and advocacy which can bring a new kind of thinking about global governance innovation to light, and see through high impact steps forward in improving our shared governance.¹⁸ The OCA Report, in our view, is one innovative contribution to these dialogues and to this community of practice,

¹³ See, for example see: *Canadian inferno: northern heat exceeds worst-case climate models: Scientists fear heat domes in North America and Siberia indicate a new dimension to the global crisis* <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/02/canadian-inferno-northern-heat-exceeds-worst-case-climate-models>.

¹⁴ See for example, the work of Common Home of Humanity, suggesting international legal and governance shifts based on a contemporary scientific understanding of the “Earth System” and deeply interwoven/interacting Planetary Boundaries: <https://www.commonhomeofhumanity.org/>.

¹⁵ Steffen, W., Rockström, J., et al. (2018) ‘Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene’, *PNAS*, Vol. 115(33), pp. 8252-8259. Available at: [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1810141115](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1810141115).

¹⁶ Interim Report, p. 8.

¹⁷ Slaughter, A-M. 2004. *A New World Order*. Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, Princeton University Press.

¹⁸ We would see such civil society platforms as Together First, C4UN, among others, as vital collaborators and interlocutors in this field. See, respectively: <https://together1st.org/>; <https://c4unwn.org/>.

setting forth a number of potentially-bold proposals. It is hoped that yet greater “radical collaboration” can evolve and inspire the work of the UN Secretary-General’s High Level Advisory Board (HLAB) on Effective Multilateralism and deliberations at a 2023 Summit of the Future, as well as across the range of international venues concerned with our global ecological future.