

Policy Brief

Building Resilient Global Governance for an Era of Recurring Crises

Benjamin Faude
and Kenneth W. Abbott



UNU
CPR



GGI | Global
Governance
Innovation

About the Authors

Benjamin Faude is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Glasgow. Before joining Glasgow, he worked at the London School of Economics and Political Science, the WZB Berlin Social Science Center, and Newcastle University. He also held visiting positions at the University of California, Berkeley, and Vrije Universiteit Brussels. In addition, Dr Faude has taught at the University of Bamberg, Free University Berlin, and Charles University in Prague. He holds a PhD from the University of Bamberg (Germany) and a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice from the University of Glasgow. Dr Faude's research examines how institutional complexity shapes the prospects of effective and legitimate global governance in a changing world.

Kenneth W. Abbott is Jack E. Brown Chair in Law Emeritus and Professor of Global Studies Emeritus at Arizona State University (ASU). His research focuses on the interdisciplinary study of international institutions, international law and international relations. He studies a wide range of public and private institutions, in fields including environmental protection and sustainability, global health, corruption, emerging technologies and international trade. Before joining ASU, Professor Abbott taught for over 25 years at Northwestern University, where he held the Elizabeth Froehling Horner Chair and served as director of the university-wide Center for International and Comparative Studies.

Disclaimer

This brief is an output of the Global Governance Innovation Platform initiative. The views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United Nations University.

ISBN: 978-92-808-6680-3 © United Nations University 2026.

All content (text, visualizations, graphics), except where otherwise specified or attributed, is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike IGO license (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO). Using, reposting and citing this content is allowed without prior permission.

Citation: Benjamin Faude and Kenneth W. Abbott, "Building Resilient Global Governance for an Era of Recurring Crises", GGI Platform Policy Brief (New York, United Nations University, 2026).



Executive Summary

Transnational crises are becoming a recurring condition of global governance, pressuring governance institutions to respond even as they make collective action more difficult. This policy brief asks how global governance can be made resilient to the shocks of crises. We argue that resilience depends not on the features of any single institution, but on the ability of webs of interconnected governance arrangements to absorb shocks, adapt and innovate, and prepare for future crises. Drawing on the concept of hybrid institutional complexes, we identify the importance of institutional diversity – especially a balance of robust and flexible institutions – strong connections across institutions, and actors who can mobilize and recombine institutional resources. The experiences of the Global Financial Crisis and COVID-19 illustrate how these factors can strengthen – or constrain – collective crisis responses. The central policy implication is to build diverse, interconnected governance arrangements before crises occur, while promoting the leadership, innovation and learning needed to respond when they do.

Key insights and recommendations

- **Prioritize resilience.** Strengthen the capacity of international institutions to absorb shocks, adapt to changing circumstances and prepare for future crises.
- **Foster institutional diversity.** Avoid over-reliance on a few formal institutions. Diverse institutional landscapes provide a broader range of resources and capabilities during crises.
- **Balance robustness and flexibility.** Robust institutions provide stability and reinforce commitments; flexible institutions enable rapid adaptation and innovation. Resilient governance requires both.
- **Strengthen institutional connections.** Build relationships and coordination mechanisms across diverse institutions before crises occur, so that resources can be mobilized quickly when they do.
- **Invest in leadership and bricolage.** Cultivate leaders and “bricoleurs” who can mobilize, connect and recombine institutional resources for innovative crisis responses.
- **Build institutional learning and preparedness.** Translate lessons from crises into institutional reforms and preparedness measures to reduce vulnerability to future shocks.

Challenge

Transnational crises are no longer exceptional disruptions to global governance. They are becoming a persistent condition of international cooperation. From the Global Financial Crisis and Eurozone crisis to the SARS outbreak and COVID-19 pandemic, international institutions of all kinds – from formal intergovernmental bodies to non-governmental organizations – must increasingly maintain essential functions and rapidly adopt crisis responses while confronting shocks that disrupt established ways of working. Transnational crises create a strong need for collective action: individual States cannot address them effectively, because they cross national borders. Yet the same characteristics of crises that generate this demand (threat, urgency and uncertainty) also make effective cooperation particularly difficult.

Threat refers to the seriousness of the challenges confronting decision-makers; *urgency* to the pressure to act quickly; and *uncertainty* to limited knowledge about the causes, consequences and effects of the crisis and of different policy choices.¹ Together, these conditions place exceptional pressures on governance institutions. Decision-makers must take consequential decisions rapidly and without reliable information, as the speed of the institutional response shapes the ultimate severity of a crisis.²

Crisis pressures often undermine collective action. During crises, governments tend to prioritize immediate

national interests and pursue unilateral policies instead of collective solutions. Threat and urgency favour measures that can be implemented quickly and at low cost, while uncertainty increases the appeal of familiar, low-risk options. As a result, States often settle for solutions that are merely “good enough”, limiting the ambition of collective crisis responses.

These challenges are compounded by broader political transformations. A changing distribution of global power reduces the political fit between existing international institutions and contemporary geopolitical realities. And the rise of authoritarian populism fuels opposition to globalization and its institutions, weakening the domestic political foundations on which existing governance arrangements were built.

Together, repeated transnational crises and a less supportive political environment create a fundamental challenge for global governance. International institutions must respond to demanding crises under political conditions that make collective action difficult. Their ability to do so depends on their members and supporters, from national governments to private foundations, providing the necessary resources and support. A key policy question, then, is how to ensure that governance arrangements can continue to function effectively, adapt to changing circumstances and prepare for the future under the stress of crisis conditions.

1 Philipp Lipsky, “COVID-19 and the Politics of Crisis”, *International Organization*, vol. 74, S1 (2020), pp. E98–E127.

2 Ibid, p. 16.

Approach

In our recent article, we apply the idea of resilience to analyse governance responses to crises.³ Resilience refers to the ability of a system to continue performing its core functions while experiencing shocks and disruption.⁴ For international institutions, this means the ability to respond and adapt to the exceptional pressures of crises while still performing their assigned functions.⁵ Resilience goes beyond mere institutional survival: a resilient governance arrangement continues to govern while adapting to changing circumstances.

Adaptation is particularly important during crises, when decision-makers face strong pressure to act quickly. Resilient governance arrangements must be able to make timely adjustments to new realities and, where necessary, develop new ways of addressing emerging challenges.⁶ The capacity to adapt and innovate is therefore central to resilient governance.

Contemporary global governance increasingly operates through webs of diverse institutions and actors, extending beyond governments and intergovernmental organizations. While formal intergovernmental organisations (FIGOs) dominated the post-Second World War system, a wide range of alternative governance forms have proliferated since the 1990s.⁷ These include informal intergovernmental organizations, transgovernmental networks, transnational public-private partnerships, associations of subnational governments and private transnational regulatory organizations.

As a result, contemporary global governance increasingly operates through hybrid institutional complexes (HICs): combinations of different types of public, private, transnational and international institutions that address common problems.⁸ These diverse institutional arrangements can provide important sources of resilience, but only if their varied capacities can be effectively mobilized and combined.

-
- 3 Benjamin Faude and Kenneth W. Abbott, "Does the System Work? Transnational Crises and the Resilience of Global Governance", *International Studies Review*, vol 20, viaf020 (2025).
 - 4 C.S. Holling and Lance H. Gunderson, "Resilience and Adaptive cycles." In *Panarchy: Understanding Transformation in Human and Natural Systems*, Lance H. Gunderson and C. S. Holling, eds. (Washington, DC, Island Press, 2002), p. 50.
 - 5 Paul Dragos Aligica and Vlad Tarko, "Institutional Resilience and Economic Systems. Lessons from Elinor Ostrom's Work", *Comparative Economic Studies*, vol. 56, No. 1 (2014), p. 56.
 - 6 Oran Young, *Grand Challenges to Planetary Governance. Global Order in Turbulent Times* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar), p. 93; Paul Dragos Aligica and Vlad Tarko, "Institutional Resilience and Economic Systems. Lessons from Elinor Ostrom's Work", p. 57.
 - 7 Joost Pauwelyn, Ramses Wessel, and Jan Wouters, *Informal International Lawmaking* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012).
 - 8 Kenneth W. Abbott and Benjamin Faude, "Hybrid Institutional Complexes in Global Governance", *Review of International Organizations*, vol. 17, No. 4 (2022), pp. 263-291.

Section 1 ●●●●

Understanding Resilient Governance

Governance arrangements are resilient when they exhibit three crucial capacities: they can absorb shocks, adapt through innovation and build capacity for future crises.

First, they can absorb. Resilient governance arrangements can maintain their core functions under pressure. Crises create strong incentives for governments to abandon established rules and pursue their interests unilaterally. Resilient arrangements can continue to perform essential governance functions, such as securing compliance with agreed rules, even when incentives to defect increase. Resilient arrangements have *absorptive capacity*: they can withstand shocks without abandoning their core functions.

Second, they can adapt. Resilient governance arrangements can develop new responses to emerging problems. Transnational crises often create urgent cooperation challenges that existing institutions and programmes were not designed to address. During a health crisis, for example, governance institutions may need to develop new mechanisms for producing, purchasing and distributing vaccines; during a financial crisis, they may need to mobilize new sources of financing for hard-hit countries. Addressing such problems requires cooperation among diverse actors, including States, businesses and civil society organizations. Yet all of these

actors may have strong incentives to free ride and pursue unilateral strategies.

Resilience therefore also depends on the ability of governance arrangements to adapt and innovate quickly when existing institutions prove inadequate.⁹ Innovation involves developing new institutional arrangements, primarily by recombining existing institutions and resources in novel ways.¹⁰ This process, called “innovation by bricolage”, allows governance actors to develop new collaborative responses without having to build entirely new institutions from scratch.¹¹ Resilient governance arrangements have *adaptive capacity*.

Third, they can prepare. Crises expose weaknesses and vulnerabilities in governance arrangements. These experiences can strengthen resilience if they encourage governance actors to learn from the crisis, modify institutions, improve preparedness and introduce anticipatory measures.¹² This longer-term dimension of resilience reduces vulnerability to future shocks.

A governance arrangement may possess one of these capacities but remain vulnerable on others, so strengthening resilience requires attention to all three. How then can governance institutions build the capacities essential to resilience?

9 Paul Dragos Aligica and Vlad Tarko, “Institutional Resilience and Economic Systems. Lessons from Elinor Ostrom’s Work”, p. 57.

10 Guillaume Beaumier, Marielle Papin and Jean-Frederic Morin, “A Combinational Theory of Institutional Invention”, *International Theory*, vol. 16, No. 1 (2024), pp. 50–76.

11 Nikhil Kalyanpur and Abraham Newman, “Form over Function in Finance: International Institutional Design by Bricolage”, *Review of International Political Economy*, vol 24, No. 3 (2017), pp. 363–92.

12 Serhiy Y. Ponomarov and Mary C. Holcomb, “Understanding the Concept of Supply Chain Resilience”, *Internal Journal of Logistics Management*, vol 20, No. 1 (2009), p. 128.

Section 2 ●●●●

Enhancing the Resilience of Global Governance

We identify two sets of building blocks that can strengthen resilience: one involves structures, the other actors. Structurally, resilience depends on institutional diversity, particularly a balanced combination of robust and flexible institutions. In terms of actors, resilience depends on the presence of leaders and “bricoleurs” who can mobilize institutional resources and develop innovative responses to crises.

Global governance is more resilient when a HIC contains a balanced mix of robust and flexible institutions, with each type of institution performing governance tasks that correspond to its respective strengths. Robust institutions provide *absorptive capacity*: they can maintain credible commitments and steer actor behaviour under the stress of crisis. Flexible institutions provide *adaptive capacity*: they can adjust quickly to changing circumstances and develop new responses to emerging problems.¹³

The difference between robust and flexible institutions lies both in how they implement actor commitments and how easily their commitments and procedures can be changed. Robust institutions typically rely on legally binding commitments backed by arrangements that limit defection by their members. They also have decision-making procedures that impede institutional change, such as supermajority or unanimity requirements. These features allow institutions to establish and maintain durable, credible commitments, but they also make adaptation more difficult.

FIGOs generally provide the greatest robustness in global governance. Treaty-based commitments can sustain relatively deep and stable cooperation, while demanding decision-making procedures protect existing arrangements from rapid change. FIGOs are well placed to absorb crisis-induced stress and preserve existing rules, but it can be difficult for them to adapt to new problems created by crises.

Newer types of informal institutions, such as transgovernmental networks, informal intergovernmental organizations, transnational public–private partnerships and private transnational regulatory organizations provide greater flexibility. They typically rely on non-binding agreements, informal decision-making and less demanding procedures, allowing actors to modify policies and procedures more easily. Actors can use flexible institutions to experiment, learn and adjust existing arrangements. They can also rapidly create new flexible institutions when crises occur.

Here too, however, flexibility comes with a trade-off. Institutions that can easily change their rules have less capacity to establish and maintain deep and credible commitments, especially when actors have strong incentives to defect. In other words, flexible institutions strengthen adaptive capacity but weaken absorptive capacity.

Rather than choosing between robust and flexible institutions, resilience requires an appropriate combination of both. A HIC that is overly dependent on robust institutions will struggle to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, while one dominated by flexible institutions will struggle to sustain cooperation under severe stress. Institutional diversity is most valuable when robust and flexible institutions perform complementary governance tasks in a coordinated manner. Institutional density – the presence of multiple, diverse institutions with strong connections between them – further enhances these benefits by increasing the range of institutional resources available for crisis responses.

Institutional structures alone, however, do not guarantee resilient governance. Actors also matter, because they determine how effectively institutional resources are mobilized and utilized during a crisis. HICs are more resilient when they include actors willing and able

13 Oran Young, *Grand Challenges to Planetary Governance. Global Order in Turbulent Times* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar), p. 6.

to provide leadership and engage in “innovation by bricolage”.

Leadership helps actors overcome collective action problems during crises. *Intellectual leaders* shape how governance actors understand emerging problems and identify possible solutions. *Entrepreneurial leaders* engage in negotiation and coalition-building to develop mutually acceptable collective arrangements.¹⁴ Both forms of leadership are important for launching new programmes, adapting existing arrangements and mobilizing cooperation under pressure.

Bricoleurs play a complementary role by turning available institutional resources into practical innovations. Innovation by bricolage involves recombining existing institutions, and individual elements of those institutions, to create novel arrangements.¹⁵ This approach is

particularly valuable during crises, when high uncertainty makes it difficult for actors to identify and pursue optimal solutions. Rather than designing entirely new institutions from scratch, bricoleurs identify and recombine existing features to address emerging cooperation problems.

The ability of bricoleurs to innovate depends on the institutional diversity and density of the surrounding HIC. The greater the range of institutions and institutional resources available, and the stronger the connections between them, the easier it is for bricoleurs to construct innovative responses. To be effective, however, bricoleurs need imagination, creativity, willingness to experiment and knowledge of the institutional resources available to them. Relationships developed through previous interactions are particularly valuable, because they facilitate consultation and collaboration.

Section 3 ●●●●

Global Governance Resilience in Practice

Two case studies illustrate how the features we have described shape the resilience of governance arrangements during crises.

The 2007-2009 Global Financial Crisis was the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Yet the WTO still enforced trade rules, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) provided massive liquidity. A central bank network greatly expanded currency swaps. Group of 20 states created the G20 Leaders Forum, which coordinated stimulative national policies and pressed for increased IMF resources and additional

Special Drawing Rights. To reduce future vulnerability, the Leaders Forum initiated regulatory reforms, notably the Basel III standards for banks, and established the Financial Stability Board (FSB) to coordinate them, while the IMF initiated precautionary lending mechanisms.

Resilience factors explain this relatively strong performance. The global finance HIC includes a balanced mix of robust and flexible institutions, although all are State-based. Strong connections among them led to an effective division of labour, coordinated by the G20 Leaders Forum and FSB. Officials of governments

14 Oran R. Young, “Political Leadership and Regime Formation: On the Development of Institutions in International Society”, *International Organization*, vol. 45, No. 3 (1991), pp. 281–308.

15 Nikhil Kalyanpur and Abraham Newman, “Form over Function in Finance: International Institutional Design by Bricolage”; Guillaume Beaumier, Marielle Papin and Jean-Frederic Morin, “A Combinational Theory of Institutional Invention”.

and central banks, FIGOs and standard-setting bodies exerted leadership and used bricolage to create new mechanisms.

COVID-19 appeared in December 2019, creating a major health crisis. The World Health Organization (WHO) attempted to implement its International Health Regulations (IHR), declaring a public health emergency of international concern. But without enforcement capacity, States frequently ignored its guidance. National governments initiated vaccine development programmes, but most were strongly unilateral, limiting vaccine access to national populations.

Four non-State and hybrid organizations, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and GAVI–The Vaccine Alliance, jumpstarted governance innovation through bricolage. They created the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-A), a broad public-private partnership. COVAX, its vaccine programme, aimed to produce vaccines and ensure equitable global distribution. But COVAX failed to reach its goals due to “vaccine

nationalism”: major States hoarded vaccines and limited sharing with low-income countries. For the future, the WHO adopted modest improvements to the IHR. It also developed a relatively weak Pandemic Agreement, which has yet to enter into force, as negotiations on its Pathogen Access and Benefit-Sharing annex remain ongoing.

Resilience factors again explain this mixed record. Leadership in the global health HIC was uneven. The WHO, for example, could not enforce its rules, although it participated in ACT-A and adopted IHR reforms. Non-State and hybrid organizations provided intellectual and entrepreneurial leadership and established innovative arrangements. Structurally, the global health HIC is highly diverse, dense and interconnected, facilitating innovation by bricolage. But flexible institutions like GAVI dominate the HIC numerically, and they dominated the COVID-19 response. Thus, while the HIC’s adaptive capacity proved impressive, it lacked the absorptive capacity of robust institutions and could not overcome unilateral national policies.

Section 4 ●●●

Applying Resilience Insights

Our argument points to a central policy implication: resilient global governance requires both diverse institutions and actors with the capacity to mobilize that diversity. Robust institutions provide the stability needed to absorb shocks; flexible institutions provide scope for adaptation; leaders and bricoleurs connect those resources and turn them into effective collective crisis responses.

Strengthening resilience, then, means not only preserving existing institutions, but also actively building these essential capacities. Governance actors of all kinds can contribute: the staff of FIGOs and other transnational

institutions, national governments and government agencies, and private actors, including non-governmental organizations, foundations and business groups, all have roles to play. These actors should actively foster diverse institutional landscapes in their areas of operation; build strong relationships and connections between institutions of different kinds; cultivate and train individuals and organizations within and around those institutions who are capable of innovating when crises hit; and establish systems for learning from crisis experiences and implementing appropriate preventive measures.

About the GGI Platform

The Global Governance Innovation Platform helps UN Member States design new multilateral institutions and reform existing ones. Through interactive mapping and data visualization, we identify and showcase innovative governance models and mechanisms that can be adapted to address urgent global challenges and collective action problems.

About UNU-CPR

The United Nations University Centre for Policy Research is a think tank within the United Nations that carries out policy-focused research and capacity-building on issues of strategic interest and importance to the UN and its Member States. The Centre prioritizes urgent policy needs requiring innovative, practical solutions oriented toward immediate implementation and sustainability over the long term.