Enabling Political Spaces
in a Multiplex World

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Summary

Ensuring peace and development faces new challenges in view of the erosion of the international liberal order. The INEF research agenda is based on the assumption that focusing on stabilising a multipolar balance of power is neither analytically nor politically sufficient for peacemaking and global development.

With the INEF research programme for the years 2026 to 2029, entitled "Enabling political spaces in a multiplex world", we want to emphasise that – despite the media's focus on the actions of state leaders – global dynamics continue to be shaped by a multitude of politically, ideologically and culturally diverse actors, institutions and practices, and should be empirically studied in all their diversity.

The concept of a multiplex world does not negate the existence of global power imbalances and hierarchies. We are taking up this concept in the INEF research programme because, in the changing order, creating global public goods cooperatively and solving shared problems constructively at the interface between development and peace remain central and continue to be decisively influenced by the ability of numerous state and non-state actors to interact – as can be seen, for example, in their ability to conclude agreements. Deliberately reversing the oft-cited "shrinking spaces," the programme focuses on "enabling spaces" in which negotiation processes and shaping joint political actions can unfold at various levels.

The research programme is being implemented in INEF's three research areas:

I. Global governance for sustainable development,

II. Human rights and regulation of the global economy, and

III. Conflict dynamics and practices of securing peace.

Further information on our projects in the individual research areas can be found on our homepage.

Enabling Political Spaces in a Multiplex World

Since its foundation in 1990, INEF's research has focused on issues at the intersection of development, peace and conflict studies. At the same time, it concentrates on how and by whom the identified problems can be addressed and managed both transnationally and globally (global governance) as well as nationally and locally. In doing so, it examines particularly the role of private and civil society actors. However, earlier ideas of global governance architectures in an increasingly complex world do not adequately reflect today's realities. Even though powerful actors seem to dominate international politics in the media, global decision-making processes now usually involve a variety of state and non-state actors. They are intertwined in hierarchical or network-like relationships. The mutual attribution of responsibilities, accountability and control is often not clearly defined, but the subject of repeated negotiation processes. We have also demonstrated this in the work of previous research programmes, drawing on examples from the subject areas we have investigated. The focus was on the concepts of "responsibility" and "contested authority" (see, for example, Ulbert/Finkenbusch/Sondermann/Debiel 2018, Scheper 2019, Mondré/Niemann/Scheper/Ulbert 2017), which are closely linked to the assumption that norms are contested and actors struggle over the meanings of norms (Wunderlich/Lucenti/Lantis/Ducci 2025).

The debate surrounding the dissolution of the liberal international order that emerged after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s and the diagnosis of a new world order in which interests are increasingly enforced unilaterally through power politics based on geopolitical considerations (see, for example, Börzel/Zürn 2021, Goddard/Krebs/Kreuder-Sonnen/Rittberger 2024, Lake/Martin/Risse 2021), only partially reflects the changed global dynamics. Global politics today is no longer characterised solely by intergovernmental exchange, but by multiple interactions, as demonstrated in particular by the importance of non-governmental and multi-stakeholder institutions, which has significantly increased since the 1990s (Union of International Associations 2022 : 44-45). Moreover, these interactions take place across a wide range of topics – beyond security and trade. If the focus is not on individual powerful states and their economic and/or military power, as in the idea of a "multipolar" world, these diverse interactions paint a different picture of "order", i.e. the structured relationships between different actors. Amitav Acharya has coined the term "multiplex order" to describe the diverse interdependent relationships between state and non-state actors in today's globalised world (Acharya 2017, Acharya/Estevadeordal/Goodman 2023, Acharya 2025). In a multiplex order, no single global hegemonic power dominates. Nevertheless, power imbalances and hierarchies continue to exist. However, instead of focusing on the (material) power of leading states, the interaction capacity of state and non-state actors is seen as the main driver and shaping factor for the creation of order. Interaction capacity is defined as "a way of looking at international systems/societies in terms of their carrying capacity for information, goods and people, and the speed, range and cost with which these things can be done" (Buzan 2023: 19). Interaction capacity, thus, has a material aspect that influences the boundaries and characteristics of every type of exchange, from trade to war to cultural relations. However, interaction is also facilitated by primary institutions such as international law and diplomacy, as well as by secondary institutions such as the banking system or organisations such as the UN system (cf. Buzan 2023: 19).

However, the disputes over the liberal international order, which will not be maintained in its old form (Goddard/Krebs/Kreuder-Sonnen/Rittberger 2025), are increasingly undermining multilateral institutions, above all the UN system. As a result, calls for reform or restructuring are growing louder, especially from

countries in the Global South, which are pushing for greater representation and participation (Schoeman/Alden 2024 : 191). This is also happening against the backdrop of the number of unresolved cross-border and global problems not decreasing. This is also reflected in the slow progress and, in some cases, even setbacks in the joint implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), some of which, such as the fight against hunger, will definitely not be achieved by 2030 (Sachs/Lafortune/ Fuller/Iablonovski 2025 : 11).

An essential feature of multiplexity is "multiscalarity", i.e. problems exist and interact at multiple levels that transcend clearly defined geographical areas. As a result, the concept of multiplexity describes an international order with a greater diversity of interdependent relationships (Acharya/Estevadeordal/ Goodman 2023: 2341, 2344). However, the concept of a multiplex order leaves a number of questions unanswered. In international relations, "order" is traditionally equated with predictability and stability. Multiplexity does not automatically lead to predictability and stability, however, as the analytical focus here shifts to the process of ordering and transformation. A certain degree of openness and uncertainty is necessary in a multiplex order, as concepts, especially normative ones, are constantly being reinter-preted in negotiation processes and, not least, through practices on the ground.

Another open question is that of the interaction capacity of the actors involved. The degree of interaction capacity is closely linked to the possibility of creating spaces in which the validity of rules can be debated and in which responsibilities and the exercise of authority are continuously negotiated. However, these spaces do not represent "enabling spaces" for all actors, especially when huge differences in the inter-ests and values of those involved lead to blockages in action. Due to inequalities between and within states, individual actors often do not gain access to these spaces or are marginalised within them. How-ever, access to enabling spaces can also empower actors who tend to promote violence and social divisions or hinder necessary transformation processes.

The new INEF research programme will therefore examine two aspects that are relevant to shaping the dynamic, multiplex order in more detail:

1. How can **avenues and opportunities for action** be opened up so that **global public goods** can be created more effectively through joint efforts and **shared problems** can be addressed con-structively in such a way that human livelihoods are not (further) destroyed, but conflicts are dealt with constructively and inequalities are reduced? This would require changes to existing paradigms (such as "development", "economic growth" and also "peacebuilding") that open up new perspectives for action and thus also lead to changes in practices. At the same time, it is more necessary than ever to elucidate the dynamic interactions between "development", "peace" and "security" and to demonstrate their practical relevance.

2. In order to tackle long-term and complex problems, we need **spaces for negotiation, creativity and participation** at all levels of action and across all levels, enabling us to develop unorthodox or new perspectives and approaches. From a democratic and sustainability policy perspective, the creation of what we call enabling spaces does not aim for maximum inclusivity. Our interest lies in suitable institutional arenas that allow the participation of those actors whose interests, knowledge and value conflicts are particularly relevant for dealing with long-term and complex problems. In such **spaces for negotiation and creation**, common interests can be defined, but there can also be contestation over different values (Wiener 2014, 2018). Deliberately reversing the oft-cited "shrinking spaces" for civil society participation, both in autocratic

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(Toepler/Zimmer/Fröhlich/Obuch 2020) and liberal democratic systems (Strachwitz/Toepler 2022), we therefore want to focus our research on **"enabling spaces"** in which negotiation processes and the debate on joint political actions can unfold at various levels. However, these enabling spaces will not open up solely through formal political reforms, nor will they automatically provide access to all those affected by political measures. With our research, we want to contribute to a better understanding of the conditions (such as capacity development, networking and trust-building) under which civil society actors at all levels (global, national, local) can recognise and use these spaces in the first place. The decisive factors here will be who has access to which spaces, by what means and with what objectives they operate in them. Digital transformation and other technological developments play a central role here. They can act as a barrier if they lead to further centralisation of power and greater exclusivity of knowledge, but they can also help to create new spaces and enable more diverse groups of actors to gain effective access to knowledge and arenas for negotiation.

These two aspects are addressed in the **three research areas** of INEF

I. Global governance for sustainable development,

II. Human rights and regulation of the global economy, and

III. Conflict dynamics and practices of securing peace

and will be examined using selected issue areas and research questions.

We focus on **the** following **cross-cutting themes** across all three research areas:

- Firstly, the **interrelationships between development, peace and security** are relevant to our research. Identifying these interrelationships and elaborating on their **interfaces** and **mechanisms** is an overarching goal of the research conducted at INEF.

- Secondly, we want **to identify** the political spaces of negotiation and co-creation that we refer to as **"enabling spaces"** and **analyse** the **actors** operating within them, the **practices** that are emerging and **the dynamics** at work.

- Thirdly, this should also help to determine possible **factors influencing social transformation**, particularly with regard to **transferring and contesting norms** across different groups of actors and levels of action.

Research Area I: Global Governance for Sustainable Development

Even if the UN Sustainable Development Goals are not likely to be implemented by 2030 as originally planned, they remain the normative frame of reference to which most states refer. This is because the associated objectives for equitable and socially, ecologically and economically "sustainable" development continue to be widely shared and serve as a reference point for joint efforts to create and protect global public goods. However, the international institutions that have been instrumental in implementing the SDGs to date, above all those of the UN system, have been significantly weakened in the wake of the current power politics characterised by unilateral interests, particularly those of the former "liberal hegemon" USA. The associated structures of global governance are therefore changing. Regardless of this, the (global) pressure of problems, reflected in the shortcomings of SDG implementation, remains. The question therefore arises as to the structures and constellations within which multilateral cooperation can be maintained and what contribution it can still make to global sustainable development.

One answer, which suggests above all the idea of a multiplex world order, is the stronger regionalisation of multilateral cooperation, including and above all beyond the existing institutions, which are more strongly characterised by geographical affiliations. Regional structures of cooperation can also continue to support global institutions and processes, whether in improving health care, maintaining functioning food systems or peacekeeping. Against this backdrop, in this research area we also engage with the conceptual discussion on development and explore the interfaces between "development", "peace" and "security". This raises the question of how, in times of declining resources and an emphasis on national interests, development policy as a policy area can be designed in such a way that not only the values and objectives associated with the SDGs are considered, but also the problems addressed by them are effectively tackled.

This area of research therefore examines, among other things, how digital transformation can contribute to the implementation of the SDGs by 2030 and beyond. The focus is on how digital transformation can create spaces in the sense of "enabling spaces" outlined above, in which negotiation processes become possible and problems can be dealt with creatively. One focus here is on the question of how civil society actors can be (better) integrated into multi- and transnational political processes, which is usually referred to as "meaningful engagement" of states and multilateral organisations with civil society actors. One topic area in which this kind of research has already been conducted at INEF is global health.

Interests do not develop independently of underlying values. Conversely, this means that interests can also change when underlying values change. One area in which this is particularly evident is that of gender concepts and associated roles. As controversial as "gender" may be in national and international discussions at present, the close connection between the role of women and their contribution to (economic) development and sustainable peace, for example, is well documented empirically. The study of the mechanisms and processes of multiscale norm appropriation and its translation into social practices, which takes place in feedback loops, thus also contributes to a better understanding of global norm contestations and their significance for multilateral cooperation and sustainable development.

Research Area II: Human Rights and Regulation of the Global Economy

Global value creation processes are at the centre of current debates on social justice and prosperity, ecological sustainability and democratic participation. These processes intensify conflicts surrounding the socio-ecological transformation of the global economy and the importance of human rights as a normative and political reference point for economic activity.

This research area examines how human rights, sustainability discourses and economic regulation mutually condition, overlap and challenge each other. New national supply chain laws and the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) are just two important examples that mark a significant change in the regulatory landscape: Human rights and environmental due diligence obligations are becoming part of legal regulation with extraterritorial effects, based on international soft law. This process remains highly controversial, as evidenced by the extensive watering down of the originally ambitious EU CSDDD. Its implementation in national laws over the next few years will set the course for further developments. These processes are opening up new opportunities in Europe, for example through regulatory complaint procedures against companies that fail to comply with their due diligence obligations. So far, we know little about the changes they will bring in countries outside Europe where a large part of production takes place, such as raw material extraction, plantation and factory work. At the same time, the new regulations also give rise to ambiguities and conflicts – e.g. between transformative demands and established regulatory practices, between formally universal legal norms and conflicting transnational implementation practices, or between global sustainability goals and the competitive imperatives of the global economy.

This research area examines these policies of regulation and compliance along transnational value chains as multiscale and conflictual processes: Actors from government, business, trade unions, international organisations and civil society negotiate the rules of the global economy, interpret international and national norms, and implement them in practice in hybridly regulated contexts at various levels, e.g. through laws, institutionalised dialogue formats, standardisation, certification, reporting and monitoring regimes, legal actions and regulatory complaints, campaigns and industrial action.

Our research draws on the idea of a sociological and empirically based examination of law from a transnational perspective: legal norms often only acquire their concrete meaning through social practices (e.g. in companies, public authorities, trade unions or courts), which in turn are shaped by power relations, interests and cultural patterns of interpretation. We are particularly interested in fundamental labour rights, intersectional inequalities in global value chains, and the strategies of workers, trade unions and other collective actors who advocate for social rights, fair working conditions and environmental justice, thereby continually attempting to create new spaces for transnational solidarity and participation. There, the focus is on the question of how and under what conditions enabling spaces for political and civil society participation actually open up or close down. This involves institutionalised forms of participation, such as multi-stakeholder initiatives, legal action and complaint procedures, corporate, public and hybrid regulatory processes, as well as transnational forms of political mobilisation, particularly through trade unions and social movements.

Research Area III: Conflict Dynamics and Practices of Securing Peace

The current global political situation is shaking the foundations of international peace and security orders. Geopolitical power shifts, the weakening and dismantling of multilateral institutions, and the increasing disregard for norms of international law signal a profound erosion of the rules-based international order. Debates about the validity of global norms have long since given way to open breaches of norms, causing formerly universal principles – such as territorial integrity or the protection of civilians – to lose their binding force. At the same time, social polarisation, autocratisation, and perceived double standards on the part of Western states are weakening trust in international cooperation. Responsibilities and power to act in matters of security and conflict management are increasingly shifting to regional organisations, ad hoc coalitions, and non-state and hybrid actors, while new technologies are transforming the dynamics of violence and pushing traditional instruments of conflict management to their limits.

Against this backdrop, the research area is pursuing two analytical approaches: On the one hand, it is tracing the conflict dynamics resulting from these developments and disputes. Examples include shifts in meaning due to contestation processes and the introduction of alternative concepts of order in the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. Second, we examine how the developments outlined above affect instruments of ensuring peace, including arms control measures, non-proliferation and disarmament of nuclear weapons, peace missions, non-military intervention practices, peacebuilding measures, and gender-transformative approaches.

The focus is on a multiscale approach that examines the interrelationships and interaction processes between institutions, norms and heterogeneous constellations of actors. Particular attention is paid to the role of actors from the Global South – in addition to states, these include civil society organisations and local stakeholders, as well as marginalised groups whose forms of knowledge and practices are often ignored in global negotiations. In our research, we show that securing peace is not only shaped by formal, intergovernmental institutions such as the UN or multilateral treaties, but also by civil society initiatives, local mediation processes, religious movements and informal networks. We examine this, for example, on the basis of non-military intervention practices by the African Union and Regional Economic Communities, which focus on strengthening local networks and structures, or by looking at the role of civil society and marginalised actors in shaping the global nuclear order.

In addition, we also examine the factors that can contribute to the prevention, regulation and transformation of conflict dynamics. Special attention is paid to the political opportunities outlined above, which we examine in terms of their potential for both mobilising and regulating violence. This can be seen, for example, in the field of nuclear verification: the collapse of formal arms control treaties makes it difficult to obtain reliable information about state nuclear programmes. At the same time, alternative paths are opening up, for example through involving societal actors in monitoring of nuclear programmes ("societal verification") or by considering regional verification approaches. Another example from our research is the ambivalent role of religious and civil society actors, who can act both as agents of peace and as mobilisers of violence. We are investigating the conditions under which the latter occurs in the context of the ideological mobilisation of Islamist rebel groups.

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