

12th EADI General Conference
**Global Governance for
Sustainable Development**
The Need for Policy Coherence
and New Partnerships



**Creating Coherent Global Action:
The Case of Global Action Networks**

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Abstract

Traditionally global public policy development processes are led and dominated by inter-governmental organizations and nation states. Treaties and conventions, arising out of processes such as Conferences of the Parties, summarize the strategies; secretariats are often established for implementation. This approach to developing coherent policy action has proven problematic for a number of reasons including the diversity of perspectives and contexts, the length of time the process requires is often eclipsed by an issue's dynamics, difficulty in engaging the broad range of actors in the issue domain, weakness of government structures in many signatory nations, inadequate skills and resources, and lack of political will for implementation.

A new approach to global public issues appears to address many of these short-comings. This is a "global action network" (GAN) strategy that brings together diverse stakeholder organizations in an issue to take action globally. Today there are several dozen leading examples of this strategy, including the Forest Stewardship Council, the Global Water Partnership, the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, the Global Compact, the Microsummit Campaign and Youth Employment Systems. GAN-Net (www.gan-net.net) is a network of these organizations.

These GANs have developed a range of processes to identify actions to address their issues that are often referred to as "Global Action Plans" (GAPs). These GAPs represent an important global public policy innovation. They are multi-stakeholder consultations that mobilize energy and generate focus globally. For example,

- the Microsummit Campaign sets audacious goals (ensuring that 100 million families rise above the US\$1 a day threshold adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP), between 1990 and 2015), and supports processes to realize those goals.
- every three years the Forest Stewardship Council members meet to define goals and implementation strategies.
- every year the national affiliates of Transparency International meet to set priorities.

Through interviews and document review this paper will investigate a range of approaches to developing GAPs to define key characteristics and success factors. We also will identify specific factors (such as qualities of the issue, funding strategies, and historic idiosyncrasies) that influence the processes. The paper will conclude by reflecting upon the strengths and weaknesses of these processes in comparison to traditional processes, and how the GANs' processes might be further strengthened to realize coherent global action.

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Introduction

In this era of globalization, addressing public good challenges and opportunities increasingly requires global strategies. But how can those strategies be developed, given there is no global government? In the case of climate change, tremendous resources are being invested in the proposition that the key is to plan through leadership of national governments. However, there is an important new organizational actor in the global decision-making arena called Global Action Networks (GANs). These embody a multi-stakeholder, inter-organizational strategy organized around specific issues. For example, there is Transparency International (focused upon corruption), the Forest Stewardship Council, the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, the Climate Group, the Microcredit Summit, Youth Employment Systems, and the Global Water Partnership. There are several dozen of these, almost all initiated after the Cold War. This paper looks at the challenge of developing strategies for global public good production from their perspective.

This paper proposes a framework to look at GANs' planning processes – how they go about creating collective action strategies. The goal is to begin building a framework for a badly needed action research agenda. We start by introducing the concept of GANs and particular qualities they possess, to identify key challenges in their strategy development processes and key elements of their strategy development logic. We then take a step back to reflect upon the concept of strategy development to propose an action research agenda. The paper concludes with reference to initial steps being undertaken to advance this agenda.

GANs: A new global strategy

GANs are closely related to the concepts of international regimes (Ruggie 1975; Katzensteing 1983), global issue networks (Rischard 2001) and global public policy networks (Reinicke 1998). GANs are defined by their strategy, which is distinctive because it combines five elements. A GAN's strategy:

1. Is global and multi-level (across and beyond the local, national, regional and international levels of governance)
2. Implements interdisciplinary action-learning and reflective action
3. Builds multi-stakeholder and cross sectoral, inter-organizational networks
4. Generates systemic change through a range of non-violent, boundary-crossing and diversity-embracing activities
5. Realizes the public good in areas of global sustainability and security (Waddell and Khagram 2007; GAN-Net 2008)

By their very cross-sector and interorganizational network nature, therefore, GANs present a complex challenge to strategy development. They have to engage actors whose languages, goals and concepts are very diverse, and they must do this on a global level that has enormous challenges in terms of numbers of participants and geographical breadth. To influence these actors, GANs do not have any of the traditional authoritative powers invested in the state. Rather, they must engage them with such a voluntarily compelling proposition that the actors will commit resources, time and their good will.

Just to give a better feel for GANs, it is useful to understand that these are not large entities by traditional measures. The average staff complement of 17 GANs covered by a 2006 survey was 25; annual operating budgets started at \$0.63 million and averaged \$9.9 million. However, removing the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, an outlier in terms of staff and annual operating budget sizes, these averages became 18 staff and budgets of \$4.2 million. (Waddell, White et al. 2006) Nevertheless, GANs’ influence increasingly permeates all corners of business, government and civil society because of their network-based, interorganizational strategy.

To understand the GAN strategy development challenge, it is important to appreciate that they really operate at four levels: organizational, partnership, network and system. GANs are organizations in that they are legal entities that must operate within the laws of a nation where they are constituted (a problematic proposition for a generator of global public goods). From this perspective they have the trappings of traditional organizations, almost always being incorporated as a non-governmental organization (non-profit). Therefore, at this level the challenge of strategy development appears relatively traditional, involving a Board, a staff leader with some title such as “executive director”, and staff members organized by some hierarchy and combination of geography, stakeholder and task.

However, GANs’ core work is carried out through partnerships. In these partnerships the GANs typically act as a convener of stakeholder organizations operating in a GAN’s particular issue domain (Trist 1983) – corruption, water, forests, youth, poverty. One of the intricacies is that when a GAN is most successful, these stakeholder organizations perceive themselves as “owners” of the GAN (sometimes reflected in formal membership structures). Table 1 attempts to pull apart some of these complexities of level, and the words organization, partnership, network and system will be applied in this paper in the sense given in the Table.

The concept of partnership as used here involves agreement about a defined set of actions that each party will play in a specific geography or relationship to accomplish a relatively

Table 1: Organizing Levels of GANs				
(Expanded from (Waddell and Khagram 2007))				
	Organization	Partnership	Network	System
Number of Legally Distinct Organizations	One	Small to Modest	Global Sum of Partnerships	All stakeholders in the issue domain
Organizing Structure	Hierarchical	Spoke and wheel	Multi-hub	Diffuse
Operating Logic	Administering/Managing	Coordination	Coherence	Diverse Self-Consciousness
Operating Focus	Organization	Task	Task Relationship	Dispersed
Participation	Closed	Highly controlled	Loosely controlled	Definitional

narrowly defined task – this often equates to people’s use of the term “multi-stakeholder partnership”. For example, organizations working with the Global Water Partnership agree upon a set of actions to build “integrated water resource management” capacity in a specific country. In the Global Reporting Initiative, a set of organizations agree to work together to develop a framework for measuring organizational environment-economic-social impact in a specific industry, say the financial industry. The GANs provide a defined space where

participants can coordinate as peers their actions to realize their partnership goals (and support independent goals).

The power of these very specific task-focused partnerships arises out of the connections that form between them to create the GAN network level. Taken as a whole, the partnerships represent a complex network. At the network level, the GANs' operating focus is to ensure coherence between the collective whole of the partnerships. To have influence upon an issue globally, such a large number of organizations must be engaged in partnership activity that a GAN cannot reasonably aspire for "coordination"; rather, the drive is for "coherence" – movement collectively in a specific direction to address an issue. GANs identify highly strategic partnership actions to influence an issue domain to move in a certain direction. This requires comfort with a great deal of ambiguity, as specific partnerships will advance at different rates. Core functions of the GAN in their issue domains are to:

1. identify the strategic intervention from a global perspective,
2. support the convening spaces to form partnerships,
3. speed advancement by facilitating the sharing of lessons about how to advance, and
4. encourage partnerships to press on with determination by presenting examples of successful partnerships.

Key indicators of a GAN's success are (1) its network meaningfully engages a continually increasing number of organizations in its issue domain, and (2) organizations that are not involved in its network are changing their actions in ways that integrate the network knowledge, standards and values, and (3) the movement of broad measurement indicators for the GAN's in the desired direction. This represents the "global issue system" that the GAN is aiming to shift. It is not necessary for the network to engage every organization in an issue system, or even anything like a majority of organizations in an issue system (indeed, some posit 5-10% as being sufficient (Gladwell 2002)). The GAN aims to create a compelling vortex in the issue system that draws others into it. When a GAN is successful, organizations operating outside a GAN's standards will be thought of as "illegitimate" by others in the system, and denied opportunities necessary for organizational success.

Analyzing Strategy in GANs: A proposed approach

The Relationship Between Strategy and Structure

Chandler noted that structure should be driven by strategy. (Chandler 1992) This observation has been modified slightly to point out that there is a more complex relationship between the two (Hall and Saias 1980), but nevertheless the point is generally accepted. Chandler's view is further reinforced by Mintzberg's emphasis upon strategy as patterns in a stream of decisions – either intended or historic. (Mintzberg 1978) Patterns of actions build up into processes that form relationships between activities and people – and eventually institutions. The degree of formality of these institutions is dependent upon several factors including the cycle time and pace of repetitive the tasks of the organization, the degree of task complexity, and the need for hierarchy and control to accomplish the work. These observations have led to a range of organizational strategies. (Mintzberg and Lampel 1999)

The proposition that there should be alignment between strategy and structure suggests that once we understand organizations' structures we can better understand how well they are suited to realize their goals by comparing it with a formal description of a theoretically powerful strategy. There is a large caveat to this approach. Since strategy is much more dynamic and emergent than structure, there tends to be a lag between the two – structures representing an historic understanding of strategy, when the current and emerging strategy might well require something quite different. Moreover, power and other issues can also give rise to dysfunction in the relationship between formal structure and processes reflecting

strategy – it must be realized that this strategy-structure analysis does not say anything about strategy or structure being *optimal* or ideal in any sense.

Mintzberg gets at some of these issues with Table 2. He notes that rarely do enacted strategies equate to deliberate plans. Intervening events and learning affect deliberate plans, and therefore strategies are adapting – in his words, they are “emergent”. As well, he notes that strategy must work at two levels: a tactical level that is more specific and conducive to action steps and deliberate plans, and a broad level that is more vague, generalized and associated with vision statements.

Table 2:
Four Processes of Strategy Formulation
 ((Mintzberg 2007), p. 10)

		Strategy Process as	
		Deliberate Plan	Emergent Plan
Strategy Content as	Tangible Positions	Strategic Planning	Strategic Venturing
	Broad Perspective	Strategic Visioning	Strategic Learning

This perspective is useful in thinking about processes of strategy development of GANs.

Traditional analysis would lead to looking at the formal organizational structures and such things as governance, decision-making and task implementation. This is useful, but there is the real problem of the delay between structural development in response to emergent strategy. Social network analysis (SNA) is an increasingly popular tool that addresses this issue by analyzing patterns of *current* relationships between individuals and organizations. It discloses the existence of relationships and flows often hidden by organizational charts and formal relationships; it identifies such things as relationships in the way work *actually* gets done, centrality of actors, bridging actors, and directionality of relationship. However, SNA is relatively modest in its description – it is limited in its capacity to analyze the quality of the relationships and what is actually being exchanged.

For analysis of GANs there is, moreover, simply the problem of scale – we are talking about global systems with literally thousands of actors. How can the data for such systems be gathered, organized and analyzed?

All these issues were all part of a project in 2002-3 undertaken to analyze the structure of the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD) from the perspective of a GAN strategy. This was approached by analyzing the network relationships within two sub-domains that ICTSD focuses upon: agriculture and intellectual property rights.

The methodology applied for this analysis is called Value Network Analysis[®] (VNA), a sophisticated version of SNA that not only describes the existence of relationships and the structure of an issue domain, but also the tangibles and intangibles that are exchanged between actors in the domain. (Allee 2000) Tangibles are goods, services, revenue – the traditional value chain of all contractual or mandated activities that directly generate or deal with revenue. Intangibles are comprised of knowledge (strategic information, collaborative design, planning knowledge, process knowledge, policy development, etc.) and benefits or favors (benefits that go beyond actual service such as exchanging business contacts, image enhancement, recognition, co-branding opportunities etc.) Together these help to comprehensively define actual *value creation roles* of actors in a system, rather than formal descriptions of jobs and missions or simply the existence of relationships.

For a variety of reasons the ICTSD investigation itself did not produce the quality of description aimed for – mainly because the software and data-gathering strategies were

inadequate. However, the work between this paper's author and the founder of the VNA methodology, Verna Allee, produced a framework for thinking about GANs' strategic patterns in the form of a network typology. This typology reflects a theoretical description of patterns of actions – that is to say, strategic processes.

This typology draws from the five definitional strategic dimensions of GANs presented at the beginning of this paper. It proposes that GANs' activities, thought about in terms of these strategies, can be summarized as follows:

Knowledge Development: This reflects the definition strategy of interdisciplinary action learning. It refers to the activity that transforms data into information, into knowledge, into tasks, into vision and into wisdom-in-action. This particular perspective draws particularly heavily from Allee's own work on the management of knowledge among others' (Ackoff 1989; Allee 1997). This is the activity of GANs that aims to produce broadly understood – consensual – knowledge amongst diverse stakeholders globally. This requires looking at an issue from numerous perspectives and finding frames that can integrate and resonate with the various perspectives, so that diverse people can take meaningful action in their own sphere of work.

Change: This reflects the systemic change component of GANs' definitional strategy. GANs work in global issues systems with a complex interplay between three *orders* of change (Bartunek and Moch 1987) that are connected to single-, double- and triple-loop learning. (Argyris 1976; Nielsen 1993) They are distinguished by the fact that to address their issue effectively requires an unusually profound shift. Think about South Africa's shift from apartheid, but done globally where everyone is immersed in an apartheid system. That shift forced realignment and deep reorganizing in political, economic and social systems that is still going on. This is the type of challenge arising with climate change, for example. For people to undertake this order of change voluntarily requires a very difficult degree of self-reflection, openness and a clearly understood motivation (threat).

Therefore, GANs do not simply seek change that scales up and aggregates some successful behavior that is widely accepted as appropriate. This is first order change based in single-loop learning. Nor do they just aim for change that can be considered "reform" – where agreement has emerged from a subset of stakeholders that is large enough to impose its will upon others, about the type of change that is necessary to address an issue. In this situation the task is more around implementing (enforcing) a known solution amongst the greater world. Rather, GANs have only some relatively hazy ideas about what must be done to realize the change that is founded in two core ideas: that the change must meaningfully engage all the stakeholders in an issue system if it is to be realized, and that the change is actually transformational.

By transformational is meant that to address the issue, there will have to be fundamental shifts in the way the stakeholders interact and that stakeholders must be able to explore together entirely new ways of thinking. (Pruitt and Waddell 2005; Waddell 2007) This is what Scharmer refers to as leading from the future as it emerges (Scharmer 2007) and interestingly ties to Mintzberg's concept of "emergent learning".

However, there is an inter-play between these three different types of change. GANs are distinguished by the fact their work includes all three: transformation, reform and scaling up. As the transformation emerges from the partnership activities, GANs must nurture it until it takes place amongst a large enough group of system stakeholders that reform becomes possible; it is then necessary to build sufficient acceptance by organizations that they take on the challenge of scaling up. GANs must focus in particular upon the transformation and reform parts; once the challenge becomes scaling up, the boundary between network and system dissolves so other actors can take the lead.

Levels of Action: This overlaps with the systemic change and represents the cross-sectoral definitional elements of GANs’ strategy. Typically Americans focus upon individual leadership and the capacity of specific people to move mountains...if they have the right qualities and understanding. Europeans on the other hand tend to focus upon institutional structures and norms, saying that individuals are near helpless in a complexity of confining existing power relationships.

Of course both of these are correct – you need both individuals to shift perspectives and gain new skills, and you need new organizations, laws, structures and norms to reflect and include those new capacities and skills.

For the issues that GANs are addressing, we need societal learning and change. (Waddell 2005) This means engaging across the matrix presented below in Table 3. This emphasizes the need for engagement across the three sectors of business, government and civil society. If the change that is needed is at the societal level, then all the major actors in society must be engaged (the GANs logic and theory of change does not provide for strategies involving violence).

Table 3 The Societal Learning and Change Challenge Matrix (Waddell 2005. p. 13)			
Societal	Political Systems	Economic Systems	Social Systems
Sectoral	The State Sector	The Market Sector	The Social Sector
Organizational	Government agencies	Businesses	Community-based Orgs.
Individual	Mentally centered	Physically centered	Emotionally centered

Global to Local: GANs’ strategy is defined as including the element of global and multi-level. This means creating robust exchanges and relationships across and beyond the local, national, regional and international levels of governance. This involves a fundamental challenge to the Westphalian concept of nation state, and evolution of the concept of global citizen. Of course moving from an *inter*-national mental model for world governance to a global model for governance that embraces the global diversity of culture, interests and perspectives is a big challenge. But that is a fundamental challenge that is inherent to GANs very existence.

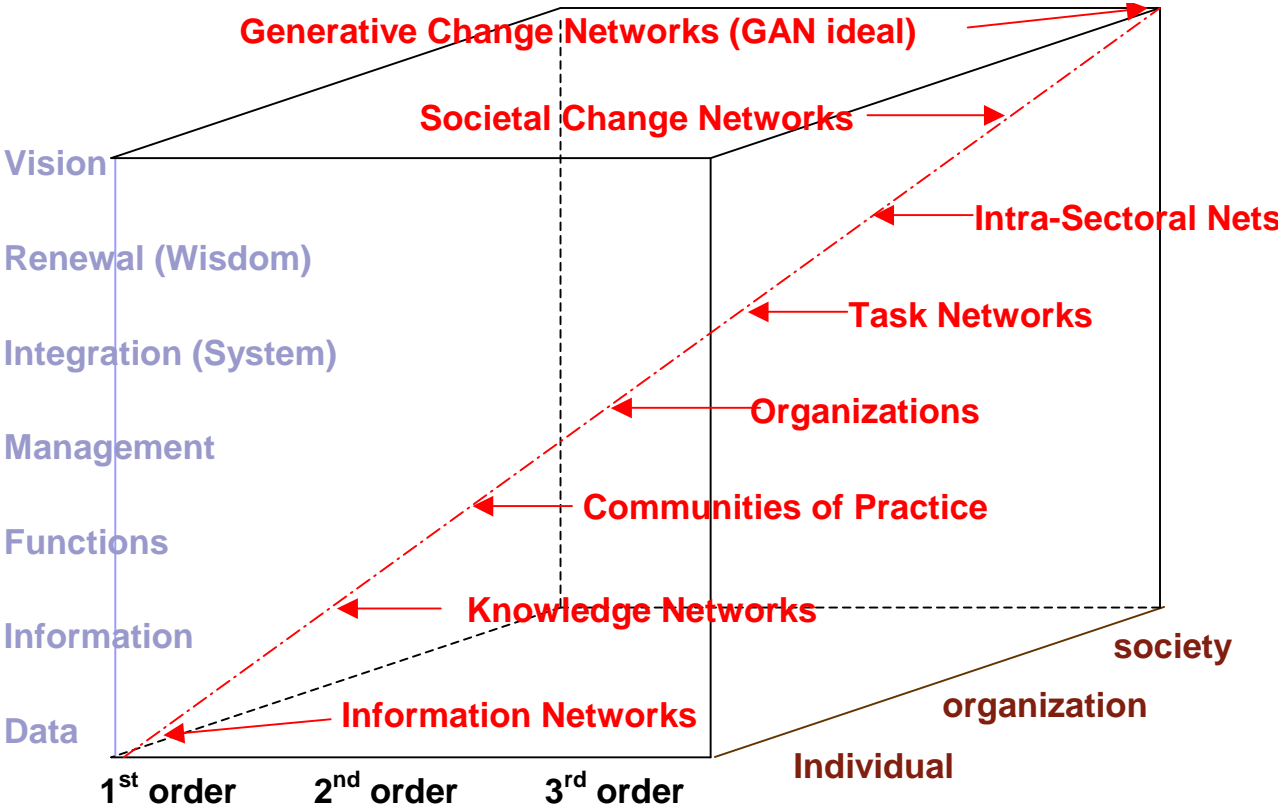
Three of these five dimensions are integrated into the model presented in Figure 1 in an attempt at creating a visual summary. This global dimension is represented by the explanation that the activity will have to occur at local to global levels; the public good element of GANs strategy is thought of as an underlying premise that is an integral part of their missions.

The Research Agenda

This then frames the agenda for both understanding and further developing GANs’ strategies – and thereby their structures and governance. Figure 1 proposes that GANs must be able to work effectively at the highest level of complexity of all the dimensions described above. The diagonal line through the model also attempts to suggest heuristically that if GANs are to be effective, they must in fact combine a range of *different types* of networks with *different functions*. That is to say that they must be able to create amongst diverse stakeholders in a

system, effective information networks to share data and information; they must be able to form project teams into task networks to experiment with specific ideas and implement plans; they must have communities of practice that can be spaces where practitioners and knowledge-developers (academics, consultants) can join together in sharing and developing knowledge and turning it into new capacities.

Figure 1: Network Typology
 The types are labeled on the diagonal line. Each type exists at the various geographic (and cross-geographic) levels)



How this theoretical guiding framework intersects with this papers earlier observation that GANs are organizations, partnerships, networks and global issues systems needs to be thought through further. In terms of strategy development, it is possible to speculate that these different fields (note: they are *not* geographic because a partnership may well be global) may tend to be dominated by one of the boxes in Figure 2, or one of the seven strategy types that Mintzberg has identified to summarize all strategic perspectives. (Mintzberg and Lampel 1999)

GANs are a very young type of organization that has arisen in the last 15 years. They are on the leading edge of what we know how to do, and the pressure to address critical global issues forces them to continually experiment – go beyond what we know how to do in terms of organizing global change. They hold great promise, because they contain in their strategy core elements for creating what most would consider a desirable future: peace, cooperation, collaborative knowledge development and action and peer-like relationships. They require and deserve an action research agenda that will spur their development.

To develop, GANs must learn much more about how to create effective global strategies and supportive structures that enable their five core elements to flourish. We simply do not know

enough about how to create the networks structures that are necessary. This is reflected in concepts that GANs inappropriately borrow from inter-governmental organizations like “Secretariats” that suggest a seat of decision-making and power, in contrast to the network concept of “node” which emphasizes peer-like relationships where some people who are tasked with a specific responsibility get together. The GANs are having difficulty in transitioning from a hub-and-spoke model, to a true network one that supports dispersed power and leadership globally. A large part of the problem is that we simply do not have the language and concepts necessary yet to realize GANs’ potential. One need is to build upon and creatively integrate existing appropriate knowledge – such as “adhocracy” (Mintzberg and McHugh 1985) and “learning organization” (Senge 1990) – in new ways appropriate for GANs.

An even larger need is to develop new knowledge. We need action learning experiments with GANs to do this. GAN-Net is an association of GANs that has initiated formation of a Strategy-Structure-Governance Community of Practice where this is being done. GAN-Net is experimenting with new ways to bring together knowledge-developers and the GAN practitioners. With that group, GAN-Net is initiating a research agenda to address GANs’ needs to learn new strategies and ways of organizing. There is a range of existing and emerging methodologies that can be applied to build clarity in the midst of four dimensions of GANs’ complexity:

- socially: they come from the three key organizational sectors of business, government and civil society;
- spatially: they involve actors that are local, regional and global;
- temporally: actions and desired results are separated by long periods of time;
- dynamically: the participants in the system are taking actions that impact others in the system in hard-to-predict ways.

This clearly requires bridging traditional divides between academic disciplines, in particular those which deal with power and formal structures of accountability, and those which deal with emergent and informal systems such as chaos theory, learning, change processes, SNA/VNA and systems thinking.

With Verna Allee, GAN-Net has initiated three projects to take a step to further develop understanding of the model presented in Figure 1. These are action learning projects because they work closely with practitioners to (1) further develop understanding of the model presented in Figure 1, (2) develop the VNA methodology itself so it can effectively address GANs’ scale and type of issues, (2) make serious advances in three emerging issue domains (global financial architecture, human trafficking, human atrocities).

This is a many-year agenda where we are asking the types of questions that were laid out by Katzensteing in 1983 with regards to “international regimes”:

“What accounts for the emergence of instance of rule-based cooperation in the international system? How do international institutions affect the behavior of state and non-state actors in the issue areas for which they have been created? What factors, be they located within or without the institution, determine the success and the stability of international regimes (GANs)? Is it possible to come up with non-idiosyncratic explanation for the properties of particular institutional arrangements (such as the extent to which they are formalized)?” (Katzensteing 1983)

But most importantly, the heart of the agenda is about bringing together practitioners and people asking these more academic questions to build as quickly as possible solutions to challenges that not only threaten our civilization, but life on this planet.

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